

E.J. SQUIRES



BOOK I

A VIKING BLOOD SAGA

WINTER SOLSTICE  
WINTER

Winter Solstice  
Winter

A Viking Blood Saga

Book 1

E. J. Squires

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Second edition April, 2015.

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ISBN: 1493596543

ISBN-13: 9781493596546

OBOOKO EDITION

For my husband, Aaron  
For my mother, Unni  
For my father, Thor  
For my children Sophie, Joseph and Thomas  
And finally for my Viking ancestors.

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## Prologue

*‘Long live the forgiving summer, and stay the deadly winter.’*

Amber rays from the setting sun kissed the majestic Bergendal Mountains, as the deep sapphire waters from the old sage ocean veined through them, like they had for millennia.

Townspeople were industriously working to increase their food storage and insulate their humble homes in preparation for the winter that was just around the autumn bend. Bergendalers were well-familiar with the preparations they needed to do before the first snowfall, for generations had gone before them, from season to season, in the same manner. Life for the northerners had been the same year after year, generation after generation, with only small variances sprinkled through the monotonously repetitive days and nights.

*‘Long live the forgiving summer, and stay the deadly winter’* the northerner’s had pleaded their Norse gods for century after century, but no such plea was ever granted, for the balance in Midgard needed to be kept.

The deceptively pure white winter was as ruthless as one’s nemesis, and though many might be granted a merciful death by her this year, many more would live to tell the tales of her

prowling, silent assassinations. Winter changed boys' hearts into men and girls' innocence into wisdom – *if* one dared to stare winter in the face and stand up to the fears she forced into each mortal's delicate heart. But winter was not here yet, only a looming promise soon to arrive.

The Northlandic Castle stood on top of a soft sloping hill in the center of the valley. A soaring square shaped impenetrable outer-wall with circular watchtowers at each corner protected the castle from possible attacks from Vik people.

From each of the watchtowers hung blue, red and gold Bergendal crest ensigns. Rectangular shaped banners displayed a red serpent dragon holding a golden torch of light in one hand and a diamond sword in the other. *Freedom, Balance and Light* were King Olav's mottos for his reign. Around the beast was one blue square, signifying Midgard's four protecting Sentinors and one brown square signifying the four corners of Midgard. Above the dragon hovered a circle half-shaded navy, half-shaded light yellow, representing the crucial balance between day and night, light and darkness, progress and rest.

Both the inside castle and the outer wall had been built out of a rare grey marble that carried a sheen and sparkled when it came in contact with sunlight, making it look lighter than it really was. Seven round, dark-grey steeples towered the skies on the inside keep, where the Sun Queen had resided for centuries.

*'Long live the deadly summer, and stay the deadly winter.'* But this coming winter would not be like other winters before. For this winter would be an eternal one, instigated by a dark being whom no one knew existed, and whose power was so consuming, that not even the gods of Midgard themselves could destroy.



# 1

## **The Northlandic Kingdom Year 1007 The Escorts**

*I do not want to do this*, Lucia thought as she led the snaking burial procession down the dark, fog-filled streets of autumnal Bergendal. Many who grieved the death of her mother, Queen Maud, reverently followed her in the midnight light parade, their hushed voices sounding like ghost whispers behind her. Others showed their respect by lining up on the sides of the streets, watching as she passed with her torch held high. Her blond hair

gleamed in the light of the flames and unmercifully lit up her tear-streaked face.

*Why did my mother have to die?*

She felt utterly alone.

Lucia's father, King Olav, had forced her to lead the town's people through the city's filthy, narrow streets, and now Lucia was doing her best to ignore the looks—unadulterated glances of pity—whenever her eyes met one of her subordinates. All she really wanted was to be left alone, not have everyone see her in this state of raw mourning.

She shivered as the biting wind gusted against her all too thin, white silk tunic. It was not the traditional dress usually worn during such a procession, but since her mother had converted to Christianity, where white symbolized purity, Lucia wanted to honor her in this way. Lucia's father had forbidden her to wear the dress, just like he had forbidden her to wear the wreath on her head. But evergreens represented everlasting life in Christianity, and even though Lucia did not share her mother's beliefs in this new, white god, or in his glorious heaven, she did believe her mother would forever live in Valhalla with the Norse deities.

Wearing this outfit also sent a strong message to her father, and the message was this: I am the only living being with sacred Aesira blood running through my veins, and when I am crowned queen on my eighteenth birthday come December, I will bow to no one's rules.

As Lucia climbed the long road toward the castle, citizens whispered sorrowfully about the tragic news they had heard earlier that day from the town crier's lips. "The Queen of The Northlandic Kingdom is dead!" he had said, weeping as he had broadcast the tragedy from farm to farm, house to house, door to door. "The Sun Queen is dead!"

Finally, at the top of the hill, Lucia stopped in the castle courtyard in front of the unlit kindling and log pyramid structure. Lifting her gaze, she saw her father standing in the southern tower's window, looking down on her. He nodded once.

She squeezed her torch in through one of the openings between the stacked wood, causing it to catch fire. Watching as it came to life, the flames crackling wild and free, the heat felt like a blanket of fire on her freezing skin. She wanted to lose herself in the blaze, let it burn away all the pain on the inside. And maybe that was the solution: throwing herself into it. Ending her life. If she died, too, she would be with her mother again and all the hurt would instantly go away. All the sorrow would be swallowed up in joy.

Without really thinking, she reached her arm out to touch the flames. The blaze soon turned hot against her palm and she winced. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder, pulling her back.

"Let us retire," Nora, her mother's old handmaiden, said with a curtsy, her kind eyes lowering to the ground. Nora had been Queen Maud's handmaiden since before Lucia was born, and Lucia could not imagine a life without her. Nora was like a nurturing grandmother, always caring, always loving Lucia, even when she deserved it least. Her nearly silver hair was usually kept in a loose braid, and the deep grooves in her face stood as proof of all the happy and sad moments she had experienced in her lifetime.

The pull of the fire vanished, and Lucia nodded. Taking Nora's arm in hers, she pressed back the tears that were threatening to well up again, and headed inside.

\* \* \*

The next morning, news came that one family's longhouse had set fire by a torch from the light procession. The flames had passed too close to the straw thatch roof, lighting it and mercilessly burning their humble home to the ground.

"The Queen is cursed," the ill-fated family had declared, spreading the rumor like a raging inferno. Neighbor to neighbor it was whispered that Queen Maud's spirit had been rejected from Valhalla, because she had been sympathetic to the new, Christian faith. In her anger, they said, she had burned the family's house down and would continue to haunt Bergendal until a proper Norse burial had been performed. She needed an escort to usher her to Valhalla, and until that happened, no one was safe.

"Did you hear what they are saying, Lucia? Did you?" Olav barged into her room red-faced with the guard who had delivered the gossip. "They say your mother is cursed. Cursed! How dare they?" His hands flailed as he spoke. "*No one* grieves the loss of Maud more than I, and *no one* will be allowed to tarnish her memory!" He clenched his large hands into tight fists like he always did when he was angry.

"What about me? I grieve her," Lucia said.

He slowly swiveled toward her, his hazel eyes alight with rage. "What did you say to me?"

"You said no one grieves the loss of Mother more than you. I grieve her, too," she said, glaring at him. She was done being the obedient daughter, constantly yielding to her father's whims.

His eyes flared, and then he picked up a vase and flung it against the wall, causing it to shatter into a thousand pieces. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she shrunk where she sat on her bed.

But he did not stop there. Next, he grabbed the goblets on the longtable and cast them to the floor, followed by another vase and anything else he could get hold of. She cupped her hands over her ears, the crashing sounds so loud it frightened her. *Has he gone mad?*

Olav had never been a loving father, and had even broken her arm in a fit of rage when she was just eight. She had hated him ever since and now with her mother gone, who would be there to protect her from his rage? She thought about Soren, her betrothed, and although she did not know him well and felt somewhat uncomfortable in his presence, she was looking forward to marrying him. Anything would be better than this.

“Father, stop...please...” she said.

Olav stormed toward her and slapped her across the cheek. His angry hand stung, and she wanted to scream at him for hurting her, but she knew better than to stand up for herself or to let emotion show on her face. It would only infuriate him more.

“The problem with you is that you think you are so important. As the future queen of the Northlandic Kingdom, you need to set your own needs aside and set the needs of your people first. Stop feeling sorry for yourself!” He ran his long fingers through his salt and pepper hair.

Lucia’s tears fell onto her silk bed sheets. “I...I am sorry, Father.” But as the words fell out of her lips, they tasted like dust and mold. Was she truly sorry? No. She had only said it because she felt guilty and because everyone, her included, would surrender his or her will to the king’s. However, now that she would be queen, she would no longer need to submit anything to him.

And she would not be silenced anymore.

“I am queen now! Get out of my chamber!” she yelled, slamming her delicate fist into the bed, puffing out her chest.

Olav stood speechless for a while, probably wondering how his daughter had the audacity to command him, the king. But then as they glared at each other, Lucia witnessed as her father's shocked and livid expression melted into a pensive one. Had he, in his grief-stricken state, not until this moment, realized he was to become her inferior? Surely, he must have remembered, although his blank stare suggested otherwise. Queen Maud had Aesira blood—the blood of the gods—running through her veins. Lucia shared that same blood, but King Olav did not. It was her fate to be queen, a fate the Norse gods had spun for her, a fate not even her father with all his might could usurp.

“You are an enigma, Lucia. One moment you are as sweet and innocent as a bird, and the next, you are like a vicious dragon, spewing fire. You need to work on your temperament before you become Queen.” He stormed out of her chamber.

*When I am queen, I will keep the temperament I prefer.*

\* \* \*

Olav summoned Lucia to the throne room later that afternoon. Even though she did not want to go, she forced herself out of bed, knowing the consequences would be severe if she rebelled against her father's commands. She was not queen yet, and so it would be wise to try and keep the peace—at least until her coronation day.

Swollen-eyed and with a numb chest, she dressed in a black linen dress and went to meet her father.

Arriving in the throne room, passing by the guards, she saw her father speaking with her Aunt Vilda and an elderly woman.

They were standing at the bottom of the throne stairwell. It was the very place her mother had fallen.

*Do not think about Mother. Do not think about Mother.*

Beams of dust-filled light shone in through the stained-glass windows, illuminating three murals on the opposite wall. She knew the murals well, but studied them anyway in hopes it would distract her.

The first mural depicted the universe as a giant ash tree, Yggdrasil, and its nine realms: Asgard, Alvheim, Vanaheim, Midgard, Muspelheim, Svartalfheim, Nivlheim, Jotunheim, and Helheim. Its branches extended high into the heavens and stood on three roots that extended into Urd's well, Mime's well and into the spring, Kverg. Three giantess Norns from Jotunheim sat spinning the threads of fate of humans and gods in front of the well of fate, Urd.

The fierce dragon, Dreadbiter, slinked below the tree and fed off dead mortals that fell his way. Sol and Mani graced the sky, one pulling the sun, one the moon, across the heavens in their chariots. The rainbow bridge Bifrost connected Asgard to Midgard, allowing the gods to access the land of the humans when they desired.

"It *must* be a Norse burial, with a *human* sacrifice, or Allfather Odin will release his wrath on Midgard," she heard the elderly woman say. "Queen Maud needs help finding her way to Valhalla."

*Mother! Mother!* Tears welled up in her eyes at the mention of her name.

The second mural depicted Ragnarok, Midgard's final battle, when most men, darkelves, dwarves, and gods would be consumed by the gulf of non-existence. The sweltering red, fiery orange and charcoal black battle scene appeared to burn on the wall. Pained faces of nameless warriors battled the armies of the

Empress of Darkness, Eiess. The three-year winter had beckoned in the wolf Skoll, who had devoured the sun, and his brother Hati, who had devoured the moon. In the corner a cock crowed, signaling that the final battle of Ragnarok had arrived.

“Maud wanted a Christian burial,” Olav said. “But I agree, Odin and Thor will not be pleased if we worship this crucified god of hers. Her dying wish, though, was to be buried outside the Bergedal Stave Church, and that wish, I will honor.”

“Olav, you must realize Maud is *dead* now, and you must be strong for her,” Vilda said, her fat-laden arms jiggling as she moved them. “She was wrong in thinking this new, feeble religion is true. You know that. I know that. All of Midgard knows that!”

Lucia wiped the tears from her face, carefully studying the third mural, hoping that would magically make her forget her mother was no more.

*She is dead. She is dead. She is dead.*

The mural depicted the new world as it would appear after Ragnarok. Only a few living beings remained and stood by a waterfall, drinking from a fresh, flowing spring. One of them, her father had said, was the Great Sentinor.

On several occasions, Olav had told Lucia that she was the Great Sentinor fated to lead the battle of Ragnarok. *I am not her*, she had always thought, every time he had mentioned it, and she certainly did not believe it now.

“In case you have not noticed, the new faith is gaining many followers, Olav,” the elderly woman said. “I have even heard the Christian Bishop claim we are *children* of this God. The curse of Odin will fall on all of Midgard if you let these blasphemers continue, and if you bury Maud in Christian soil, you will be sending a very strong message that this type of worship is condoned by you as their King!”



Vilda was panting as usual, her heavy chest moving with every breath. “And Olav, you do not want to be known as the King who failed in leading his people, and brought the wrath of the gods upon Midgard, do you?”

*Did my mother die because she betrayed Allfather Odin?* Lucia wondered.

“Lucia, come here,” Olav commanded.

Lucia dragged her feet over to the bottom of the stairwell. At the top stood two golden thrones: one for her father and one for her mother.

She had not entered the throne room since her mother had fallen, and standing here now, the memories started to come back to her. Maud had called Lucia into her chamber a few days after the accident. Lucia hardly recognized her mother with purple lips, and a pallid, sweaty face.

“I want to prepare you for the next phase in your life,” Maud had said solemnly, resting in her bed, her hands caressing her swollen, pregnant belly. “As future queen of the Northlandic Kingdom, you have a great responsibility. The Aesira Jewel will soon be in your hands, and you must protect it with your life.” Maud had closed her eyes and moaned.

*The Aesira Jewel?* “Are you all right, Mother?” Lucia had asked. “Should I go get someone for you?”

“Not now, my love. Do you remember me speaking to you about your twin sister?” Maud had asked.

“Yes.” Lucia remembered her mother telling her about her twin and how she had died at birth.

“Her name means light, just like your name does.” Maud had grabbed Lucia’s hand. “I had a disturbing vision about you, Lucia. Great forces are seeking you. You will be given a choice that will have eternal consequences for you and your family. You must follow Christ, Lucia.”

“What do you mean?” Lucia had asked. Her mother had not made much sense, and she definitely did not want to follow this White Christ if this was his way of rewarding his followers. She thought her mother’s new religion was bizarre and weak. Who could worship only one God? And she thought it was strange to believe that even a god could be all-knowing or good all the time. Lucia’s faith had many gods, more gods than she could even keep track of.

“A choice must be made by you, and you alone,” her mother had said. “That choice, Lucia, is whether to do what is right, even when you think and know you have been wronged, or to deceive and selfishly take what is not yours.”

“I will choose what is right,” Lucia had assured her. “You look unwell. Let me get Father.”

“You choose your path, Lucia. Soren is not meant for you, but for another.” Maud had closed her eyes again and moaned. “Just remember...no matter what you choose, I will never love you any less.” Her breathing had become labored. “And remember, after Ragnarok, a new world will be born, and all the others will vanish. This is...the future.” Suddenly, Maud had begun to scream. She had grabbed her stomach as her body started contracting.

“Mother! Mother!” Lucia had yelled, a rush of terror surging through her.

Everything after that had been a blur, from when she had run to get her father, to when she had arrived back at the Queen’s Chamber and seen blood everywhere. Her father had shoved her back outside and left her alone to deal with her mother’s screams reverberating in the cold corridor.

“I want to talk to my mother!” Lucia had begged. “I need to tell her something. What is happening? Please tell me.”

“Lucia, Lucia, look at me, focus,” Astrid had said, coming out into the corridor.

But Lucia had not been able to focus. She had not even been able to breathe. The only thing she had been able to do was run, run to her room and throw herself on her bed. After what seemed an eternity, Nora had finally come to her.

She had sat up from clenching her tear-soaked silk pillow. “Is she all right?” She had seen the answer in Nora’s pained face.

“Lucia!” she heard her father yell, his voice bringing her back to the present. “Sorry,” she said. *I just want to disappear into oblivion.*

Olav clutched Lucia’s elbow and guided her over to the elderly woman. “This is Ada, the angel of death. She is the country’s most gifted burial sage. I have appointed her to arrange the funeral,” he said.

Lucia twisted out of her father's painful grip.

Ada was a sturdy old woman with one deep-set, beady eye. The old wench wore a black patch over the other eye, probably to conceal an injured or missing eyeball and she dressed in layers of black and red. Around her neck she wore a string of colorful glass beads and white bones, and she smelled of smoke.

Frightened, Lucia thought Ada might be a sorceress or a demon, or quite possibly both in the form of a woman’s body.

“You will follow Ada wherever she goes while she is here,” Olav said to Lucia in his usual stern voice.

Lucia curtsied out of politeness although she wanted nothing to do with this woman. She just wanted to be left alone.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, the future queen of the Northlandic Kingdom.” Ada’s voice sounded as husky as a man’s. She shuffled over to Lucia, her crooked cane beating the floor. “Our first assignment together, Lucia, will be to select a

volunteer to usher Maud into the next life.” She turned to Olav. “When can you have the handmaidens and servants gathered?”

“I will send for them immediately,” Olav said.

\* \* \*

After the castle’s entourage arrived, Ada had the guards line them up in two rows. One row of sixty-four women mirrored the fifty-two men on the other side. All dressed in blue wool, Bergendal-crested, servant clothes, Lucia thought they looked more like soldiers. She wondered why her father had not returned with them, but then again, he had mentioned he needed to speak with the Christian Bishop.

Ada stood at the end of the ghastly silent, inward-facing rows and handed Lucia her cane. “I need a volunteer—one of Queen Maud’s handmaidens or servants to join her in the after life.” She walked down the center with her hands behind her back, looking like a ghoul in search of prey. “Surely, *someone* must have loved the queen enough to escort her back home.”

A cough echoed through the room.

*Did no one love my mother?* Lucia wondered.

“Surely *one* of you could grant the late queen this kindness when she has given so much to you.” Ada turned around at the end of the line and gestured to Queen Maud’s empty throne.

After a long pause, Astrid, one of the queen’s personal handmaidens, stepped forward. She curtsied.

Lucia gasped. *No, not Astrid!* Losing another loved one felt like salt on a raw wound, though she knew that her mother had adored the girl, and the handmaiden would make a great escort. Then, Lucia saw a second young maiden step forward from the

line. She did not recognize her. She stood about a foot lower than Astrid.

“Ragnvei and I have decided to join our beloved Queen Maud in Valhalla.” Astrid adjusted her navy scarf over her dark blond, braided hair.

“Do you concede, Ragnvei?” Ada asked.

“Yes—uh, yes I do, Your Excellency,” Ragnvei said, lifting her gaze slightly, shaking her head ‘no’. Her curly ash-brown hair fell, as she grabbed the scarf off of her head and twisted it in her hands.

Lucia could not fail to recognize the look of fear in Ragnvei’s large blue eyes. *Does she, or does she not want to be sacrificed?*

“Princess Lucia, do you accept these two women to escort your mother, the Sun Queen, Maud of the Northlandic Kingdom, to Valhalla?” Ada asked.

Lucia hesitated. If Ragnvei did not truly want to do this, it could bring on another curse.

“Your Highness?” Ada pressed in a clipped tone of voice.

“Yes,” Lucia whispered.

“What?” Ada shouted.

“Yes,” Lucia said, louder.

“Then so be it!” Ada yelled. “You will both join Queen Maud in ushering her spirit to the halls of Valhalla!”

The group of previously petrified onlookers breathed with unencumbered relief.

Ada signaled for two guards to approach her. “Take these maidens to the queen’s guest chamber where they will stay until their sacrifice and burial,” Ada said. “Stand watch outside their door, and let no one in.” She turned to the others. “It is a great omen to us all to have *two* handmaidens usher the queen’s spirit. May all here today be witness to that these young women

volunteered of their own choice to be sacrificed and buried with Queen Maud. And may the funeral preparations begin.”

## 2

### **Burial**

The next morning, before sunrise, Ada stormed into the sacrificial chamber with Lucia. Ada had filled Lucia in on the, according to her, “sacrilegious events” that had happened during the night. Ragnvei had said she wanted to be let out of her commitment in escorting Queen Maud. Apparently Gunnar, her lover, had snuck into the room through the window, bypassing the guards, and tried to talk her out of it.

“I have spoken to King Olav about Ragnvei, and I want you to know two things,” Ada said, speaking to the two handmaidens. “One, we will move ahead with the burial regardless of Ragnvei’s hesitation, and two, because of Ragnvei’s conduct, you will be sacrificed in the most painful way possible, so we can regain the gods’ favor.”

“No!” Ragnvei fell to her knees and clasped her hands together. “Please, please do not do this! Just let me go. I want to live, especially now that I know Gunnar loves me. He told me so himself.”

Ada smacked Ragnvei's hands down. "I heard he visited you last night. He should be put to death for having meddled with my sacred rituals. I will not entertain a handmaiden's wish when the doom of Midgard is at stake. There is nothing quite so dishonorable as offending the queen's precious name. Her burial is a serious matter, not one to be trifled with, or made into a mockery." She stepped closer to Ragnvei. "You do not deserve to live, you thoughtless, undisciplined, pitiful woman. You are a taker—no, a thief, defaming the queen's good name. It is actually better for you and society that you are dead."

Thinking Ada's words were a little harsh, Lucia placed her hands on Ragnvei's shoulders, and said, "However, if she will move forward with the right outlook, she will be remembered as a true hero in all the Northlandic Kingdom. Would you agree, Ada?"

Ada paused. "Well—yes," she finally said.

Ragnvei's glanced up at Lucia, her eyes turning dazed and lifeless as if she had just realized death was inescapable.

Ada huffed. "It is an honor to die this way. And remember, no virtue is higher than honor." Ada took Lucia's arm and led her into the hallway. "Now, we dress your mother," she said.

Arriving at the door to the queen's chamber, Lucia's stomach tied into knots. "May I have a minute?" she asked Ada.

"Yes, but do hurry," Ada said, squeezing through the double doors.

She did not want to go inside, did not want to face her mother's dead body, fearing the lifeless image might be all she would remember forever. She traced the intricate workmanship on the copper doors with her fingers. The wooden doorframe was carved with serpents, dragons and swirly Norse patterns, and was decorated with warriors holding their weapons, standing in their extended longships. *Southerners consider us Vik people*

*just because we share the same land.* She thought it hideous to be associated with those berserkers.

Ada stuck her head in through the door crack. “Well, come on then—”

“Yes,” Lucia said, feeling exhaustion set in. She had barely slept at all last night, afraid she would be visited by mare demons, who would fill her nights with visions of her dying mother.

Lucia entered the death chamber, and as the double doors closed behind her with a thud, she jumped. She saw her mother lying in her bed, lifeless and gray, just as she had envisioned. Every particle in her body told her to run—run far away from this horrific scene.

Ada wasted no time and began directing the servants, handmaidens, and seamstresses, stalking their every move as they scurried to and fro, attempting to fulfill the angel of death’s every request.

“Oil for the queen,” Ada said, approaching Lucia. She muttered a blessing over the small glass bottle and handed it to her. “Cover every part, and I mean every part, of your mother’s body with this.”

Lucia stiffened.

“Do it now!” Ada grabbed her by the hand and pulled her toward the corpse. “Your mother’s spirit needs to know you approve of her leaving Midgard. You must let her go, Lucia, or she will be miserable forever, wandering the realm of the humans when she should be celebrating with the gods. Think of her—not of yourself. You do want her to be happy, do you not?”

The thought of letting her mother go was like a stab to the heart. But Lucia still nodded.

Ada opened the flask and poured some of its contents into Lucia’s hands. “Like so.” She took Lucia’s hands and placed



them onto Queen Maud's cold, blue skin, rubbing the sweet-smelling oil onto it.

After a few strokes, Lucia started to feel lightheaded and queasy. "May I step out? I am feeling quite ill."

"No, no, no, no! We must finish the preparation of the body," Ada said.

Just then, Lucia vomited all over the floor and her black dress.

Ada huffed. "Am I surrounded by incapable helpers? Pull yourselves together! You—" She pointed to one of the handmaidens. "Clean this mess up." She turned to Lucia, a look of disgust on her face. "I expect you to contain yourself, you hear? Now, go change. Nora, you go with her."

Helping Lucia into the long-sleeved, floor-length, crimson gown, Nora said, "Try not to think about death, Lucia. It will all soon be over." Her voice trembled, her hands shook, and as she pinned the gold brooch onto Lucia's chest, Nora pricked her finger.

The old handmaiden said nothing even though Lucia knew it must have hurt. She was bleeding. A single drop of blood fell onto the wooden floor before Nora put the wounded finger into her mouth, preventing more blood from spilling.

Lucia gazed into the full-length mirror and noted how the dress looked blood-red against her fair skin. And then a thought popped into her mind. *It is a sign from the gods*, she thought. *I was not supposed to wear a black dress to the funeral.* All of a sudden it was crystal clear and she did not understand why she had not thought of it before.

White for purity.

Green for everlasting life.

Red for how her mother had bled to death, just like her mother's god's blood had been spilt on the cross. But more importantly, red for the Aesira blood they shared.

After Lucia was dressed, Nora said, "I can imagine, Your Majesty, that this is a very difficult time for you."

Lucia glanced at her handmaiden's reflection in the mirror.

"Whatever you need of me in the coming days and years, I am your humble servant," Nora said. "If you need me to escort your mother back to Valhalla, I will do that. If you need someone to talk to, I will be a listening ear. I will serve you with the same fervor as I served your mother."

Nora had been the most loyal of servants, and there was a reason why her mother had chosen her, although Lucia did not know why. Perhaps it was because she was wise or kind or a good friend. But then a thought came to her. Was Nora afraid she might lose her position? A woman of her age and without a family would have nothing to live for, and maybe this was her way to try and secure her position. *To take advantage of me while I am at my weakest.*

No matter what, and despite Nora's advanced age, Lucia planned to keep her on when she became queen. *Only time will tell how true Nora really is. How true any of my subordinates are.*

Maud's body was fully clothed by the time they returned to the queen's chamber. Her new burial outfit was an intricately hand-stitched dress made from the finest indigo silk. On her feet, they had placed pointy, silk slippers, embroidered with Maud's name on them.

Ada commanded a team of handmaidens and guards to lift Maud onto her deathbed. Once she had been moved, they draped the lower half of her body with silk sheets.

“Now, her hair,” Ada said. “It needs to be combed, and then these flowers need to be interlaced like so.” She showed them.

The handmaidens combed the queen's long, golden hair until it shone like strands of sunlight. Next they picked up the wicker baskets containing the white wax flowers, and intertwined them through her tresses.

Feeling braver than before, Lucia stepped closer. Dare she add a few flowers? Her mother looked so peaceful where she rested—almost appearing to be sleeping—and she thought maybe if she shook her vigorously enough, she could wake her. “Where are you now?” A single tear rolled down her cheek as she picked up a flower and secured it behind her mother’s ear. Wherever she was, she was not here.

When they finished, Ada summoned Olav.

“Your father refuses to come,” Vilda said as she entered the chamber, her large chest rising and falling with each labored breath. “And he refuses to say why.”

How could he be so cold-hearted? Yet the truth was Lucia did not know whether she was happy or relieved about the news. The less time she spent with her father, the better, although she did not enjoy Vilda’s company either. In fact, she wished her aunt would move out of the castle and stop being the leech she was. The first thing she would do after she married Soren, was to evict both her father and Vilda.

“Oh, and he told me to tell you that Soren will not be coming to the burial,” Vilda said. “He is in the Southlandic Kingdom again, fulfilling a commission.”

Lucia had only met her betrothed on a few occasions. She was glad she would not have to worry about entertaining him during the worst time of her life, especially since he had a tendency to annoy her. Whenever he would speak to her, he was too friendly, acting as if they were best friends. It was not that he

had ever acted inappropriately; he was simply a few shades too informal.

Just as the morning rays beamed through the stained-glass window and upon the corpse, Ada told everyone it was time to start the procession.

Lucia's stomach clenched in sudden desperation when she realized she would never again see her mother. If she could just keep her here a little bit longer, maybe her insides would not feel as if they were being torn apart. Just a few more minutes, and maybe she would be able to let go without feeling as if she were dying herself. Peering into her mother's eyes, she lifted her mother's cold, lifeless hand, and pressed it to her lips.

"I will never forget you. I will make you proud of me, and when we meet again, I swear to you I will murder anyone who will dare to try and keep us apart." Tears streamed down her cheeks as her shoulders rocked with silent sobs.

\* \* \*

The burial procession stood ready to start in the courtyard within the hour.

"Not a single hair must be out of place!" Ada yelled, her beady eyes searching the line-up. "The queen's spirit is waiting for us to make a mistake so she can remain here in Midgard and plague us. I am sure you would not want that blame on your heads, would you?" She encircled each wagon, each person, and each animal, as she passed them. Finally, after having checked everyone and everything, she nodded to King Olav at the front-end of the procession.

Behind the king marched Bishop Peter, who was carrying the Bergendal crest ensign. Lucia particularly loved the vivid colors: blue, red and gold. The blue square, her father had drilled into her mind, represented Midgard's four protecting Sentinors. The brown square represented the four corners of Midgard, and the red dragon holding the sword and torch signified freedom, balance, and light. The circle above the dragon's head was half-navy and half-yellow, symbolizing the balance between light and dark. Her name meant light, so she had always thought of herself as a being of light.

As they were walking down here, she had heard from Nora that Bishop Peter asked her father to be left out of the "barbaric," in his opinion, sacrificial ceremony. The bishop had said he was a man of the Christian faith and had put aside his pagan beliefs and rituals. He had also said that his conscience dictated he not involve himself in these Norse burial ceremonies.

Her father's reply had been simple: if the bishop did not concede to be part of the burial, Olav would burn down the Bergendal Stave Church and banish Christianity from being taught in Bergendal. Bishop Peter had happily complied.

"The Christian Bishop should not even be here. He is a bad omen," Ada said, coming up to Lucia.

*Was he a bad omen?* she wondered. Perhaps he was. Her mother had recently joined this cult, and she died. Did she die because she had turned her back on the true Norse gods? If that was the case, why had her father let Bishop Peter participate? Olav had never been a supporter of Christianity while his wife was alive, so why start now?

Twelve deacons lined up in two rows, stood behind Bishop Peter. Dressed in white, silk robes with red sashes around their shoulders, they fit in as much as snow would on a scorching summer's day.

Behind the deacons was Queen Maud. She lay in her four-post bed, which was set in an open cart. Thousands of white and blue flowers blanketed the dray's exterior, and four black stallions would pull the queen to her final resting place.

King Olav and Vilda rode their horses behind the queen's wagon, followed by two white oxen, which would be included as sacrifices in the grave.

Behind the oxen, fourteen horses were individually hand-led by their own handmaiden. The horses would be ridden until exhaustion, and then sliced up and thrown into the burial with the deceased.

Next came the last animal sacrifice, which were Queen Maud's seven lundehund dogs. They were believed to possess the power to guide her back to Valhalla and ensure her a prosperous journey. Nora had been given the honor of leading the yelping hounds.

Lastly, twelve of King Olav's guards stood watch outside of the escorts' wagon. To Lucia's great dismay, she was to ride with Ada, Ragnvei, and Astrid to the burial. How could it be that she, the future queen was demoted to such a place? However, no matter how much she had vocalized her disapproval to her father, he refused to let her ride up at the front with him. He said he wanted to keep her safe, and that riding in the enclosed wagon, guarded by his four strongest men, would provide that safety.

When Lucia entered the carriage, Ada handed the escorts golden goblets. She had heard of these hallucinogenic drinks and how they would allow the escorts to glance into the spirit world. Even though she desperately wanted to see her mother on the other side of the veil, she would not have taken a single sip had it been offered her. The sacred beverage was only reserved for those who would enter the kingdom of Valhalla, and she did not

desire to partake of something forbidden in fear of awakening the gods' wrath.

Within seconds, Ragnvei had swallowed the goblet's contents and pleaded for more. Ada quickly filled her cup again, a smile almost appearing on her lips.

The ride in the carriage seemed like a never-ending journey to the valley of death as Lucia tried to ignore the others. However, it was near impossible not to notice how Ragnvei, sitting directly across from her, was fidgeting like an impatient two-year old. The handmaiden clenched her hands around the goblet as beads of sweat trickled down her forehead and she kept looking out the carriage every few seconds, her eyes raking the crowd of onlookers. *Maybe she is still thinking there is a way out. The girl is a traitor.*

"Why are you not nervous?" Ragnvei finally asked Astrid, her voice slightly slurred now from the drink.

"I have been blessed by the gods with peace in my soul. I am looking forward to escorting the queen back to Valhalla and to going there myself," Astrid said, her words sounding like a chant.

"So, you are not nervous?" Ragnvei asked, clenching her fists. When Astrid did not answer, she said, "You must be nervous. Tell me. Share with me your—"

"Stop speaking!" Lucia wanted to focus on her mother—on trying to let her go—not on the cowardly handmaiden. Was that too much to ask?

Ragnvei's eyes grew large. "I am sorry, Your Highness." She lowered her head and pinched her lips together.

*Finally, a moment of peace.* She peered out the window and saw the skies lightning up in the distance. Thor was throwing his hammer again, sending a thunderstorm to Bergendal. *It must be*

*a sign that he is waiting for the queen's spirit.* That made her heart swell.

Suddenly, she heard a swooshing sound, and just as she turned her head to see what the noise was, one of the guards fell lifeless to the ground with a thud. Before the other guards rushed in front of the wagon to protect their princess, she saw an ax embedded into the dead man's cranium, half of his ear on one side and half on the other. She was able to shield her face before blood splattered onto it, but Ragnvei was not so fortunate. The handmaiden screamed as she tried to wipe the red liquid off her skin, smearing it in the process.

"Ragnvei!" a deep voice yelled from the crowd.

Ragnvei quieted down and her eyes searched the crowd through the wall of guards. She gasped. "Gunnar!"

Ada flung the door to the carriage open and climbed out. "Stop the procession!" Unable to spot the perpetrator, she approached the guard closest to her. "Ivar! Find whoever did this and kill him!"

"Yes, my lady." Ivar stomped off in the direction the ax had come from.

Ragnvei kept looking nervously around, and although the drink had made her eyes glazed with drunkenness, Lucia could see she was thinking hard.

Perhaps Ada had not been too harsh on the girl and knew her type. "Do not dare to try and escape, for if you do, I will imprison you and torture you every day until I become queen," Lucia said.

Ragnvei's face went ashen and she grew as still as Lucia imagined she would once her throat had been slit.

Finally, after what seemed like a lifetime, Ivar returned.

"Is he dead?" Ada asked, her voice flat and stern.



“There will be no more trouble from Gunnar today,” Ivar said, wiping blood off his longsword. “He was after the handmaiden, not the princess.” He commanded the guards to return to their stations.

Ragnvei’s face twisted with grief. “Oh Allfather, Allfather—” she repeated over and over, her body swaying back and forth, her hands bracing her chest.

Ada stepped back into the carriage and slapped Ragnvei across the face. “Be quiet, or I will kill you here and now, you coward. This is a disaster! A living maredream has descended upon us! I cannot believe the disrespect you have for the queen and for the gods.”

All of a sudden, Ragnvei’s eyebrows gathered in the center and her eyes darkened several shades. She leapt toward the door, flung it open, and fell head-first out of the wagon.

Not missing a beat, Ivar knocked the runaway unconscious with the hilt of his longsword and lifted her back into her seat. Astrid closed her eyes and started humming. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

*Why cannot Ragnvei just accept her fate?* Lucia thought as her hands wound tightly into fists. Certainly it would not do her mother any good to have an unwilling escort.

As if knowing what Lucia was thinking, Ada said, “She will comply. Do not worry.”

She doubted the Angel of Death’s prediction was correct, but there was nothing she could do to alter the situation.

The procession was finally underway again and it was not long before they arrived at the Christian stave church. The queen’s wagon rolled up next to the giant longship, which had been completely immersed into the black, rich, and newly exposed soil. Lucia could smell the fresh earth and the smoke from the torches blazing over the platform. A black tent had been

erected next to the platform, and it was the place where the escorts would be sacrificed.

Ivar lifted Ragnvei out of the carriage and he, Lucia and Astrid followed the old crone to the far western side of the cemetery where the Valhalla doorway had been erected. The crowd wandered over with them, the excitement in the air palpable as they waited for the first ceremony to begin.

Once he had laid her onto the grass, Ivar threw a bucket of water onto Ragnvei, awakening her.

Ragnvei screamed as she stood up, swiping her face dry with her hands.

“Drink,” Ada commanded her, handing her a gold, ruby-bejeweled goblet. Then, she spoke a chant while waving her hand across Ragnvei’s face. The girl froze where she stood, staring out into thin air, and after Ada had whispered something into her ear, Ragnvei inhaled deeply and drank from the goblet.

Lucia stood next to Ada, but had no idea of what had just transpired. Whatever Ada said, it must have changed the handmaiden’s mind, because now Ragnvei smiled in a trancelike state, awaiting calmly the Angel of Death’s next command.

“Valhalla is beyond that door,” Ada said, pointing to the wooden frame. “Men of Odin, servants of the most high gods, raise these escorts up so they may peer into the afterlife and see who awaits Queen Maud.”

The guards lifted both girls up high into the air, so they could peer over the doorframe.

“What do you see, oh, sanctified escorts?” Ada shouted.

“I see the dead queen’s grandparents!” Astrid sang, her eyes wide with wonder. A few mumbles could be heard from the gathering.

*My grandparents?* she thought, a bubble of excitement rising on the inside. She stepped closer to the door, hoping to catch a glimpse of them herself.

The guards lowered the girls, and Ada bid them to sip from their goblets again. They both drank more, especially Ragnvei, Lucia saw. Again, the guards lifted the women up at Ada's command.

"Now what do you see?" Ada shouted.

"I see all my relatives!" Ragnvei yelled. "I—I think I see my dead grandparents in the distance!" Her eyes squinted as she pointed toward the empty field.

The guards lowered the escorts to the ground yet again, and Ada bid them drink one last time.

*What will they see now?* she wondered. She swiped her hair away from her face, noting how the winds were picking up.

Ragnvei stepped closer to Lucia. "My hands and feet are tingling," she said, her body rocking back and forth. She laughed.

Yet a third time, the guards lifted the handmaidens up into the air. The crowd had turned deathly silent, but suddenly a female voice in the back yelled, "Valhalla! Valhalla!"

"And now, what do you see?" Ada asked.

"Valhalla, Valhalla, Valhalla," the crowd began to chant with the woman.

"I see—I see—" Astrid said. "I see Queen Maud in the after world, beckoning for us to come to her!"

"Let us go to her!" Ragnvei said, clasping her hand. "Paradise is green and beautiful." Ragnvei started to cry. "My tears are tears of joy! I yearn to reunite with the queen and feel proud that I have been selected to help her on her journey to the gods."

“She is there!” Astrid said, looking over the tall doorpost. “She looks young and healthy, and has a babe, her unborn son, in her arms!”

Even though Lucia desired nothing more than to see her mother and unborn brother, she restrained herself from climbing up the doorpost. Tears slipped down her cheeks, and her heart soared inside her bosom, realizing her mother would go home to the gods and would be waiting for her in the after life. It was a sure sign that this new religion, this new white savior was false. Her mother had come back to tell her to remain faithful to the Norse gods. Now that the escorts had seen it, she knew her faith was true.

The guards lowered the two handmaidens.

“It is time.” Ada smiled.

As Lucia, Ragnvei, and Astrid made their way over to the grave, the people cheered them on. Lucia heard a clap of thunder, and looking up into the heavens, she could see the thunderstorm approaching.

Ragnvei took Lucia’s hand in hers. “I have never felt like someone important, but now I feel like the most courageous handmaiden in all of Midgard.” She swayed and stumbled forward, singing a happy tune.

*At least Ragnvei seems at peace, but more importantly, the gods will be happy and my mother will have a new home.* Almost at her mother’s grave, she saw her father and Vilda leaning over her mother. They were crying as they held onto each other in their grief. She could not help her tears from coming now, flowing like streams of agony down her face. She let go of Ragnvei’s hand, ran up to her father, and wrapped her arms around him.

Ragnvei stopped in front of them. “I saw your queen, Your Highness, and she is more beautiful and healthy than ever. Your

baby boy was with her, and all is well,” she said. Then she looked at Lucia. “Do not mourn, fair princess. Your mother will be in Valhalla soon. We will take her there safely today.”

She nodded and gave her a hug. “Please tell her—I—uh, miss her,” she said, wiping the tears off her face.

Ada grabbed Ragnvei by the arm and continued onward to the tent. Astrid followed closely behind them, laughing, swaying, and singing as she walked toward the place she was to be sacrificed.

*Does she realize she is on her way to her death?* she thought she did. No wonder her mother had loved Astrid. She is brave and strong and true. If only all handmaidens could be like her.

Once they arrived, Ada opened the flap and signaled for the escorts to enter the tent. She looked over at Lucia and waved for her to join them.

Lucia looked up at her father. She had not thought she would actually have to participate in *this* part of the ceremony, although she would be brave if she needed to be. When she saw her father’s stern face, she knew the answer and started to walk over.

“No, wait,” Olav said, grabbing her by the arm. “Wait until I tell you.”

Ada turned to the multitude and addressed them. “Any man who desires may now enter and consummate these holy sacrifices with his seed.”

The first man rose from the crowd and walked up to the tent door. Ada allowed him to enter, and only a moment later, Lucia heard a series of moans and grunts, followed by Ragnvei screaming in pleasure. The feisty wind gusted the tent door open, and for a split second, she saw the man standing between Ragnvei’s legs. He was thrusting his hips forward, and Ragnvei was clenching his hips, her expression that of pure ecstasy.

Lucia felt her cheeks burn hot as the deepest part of her core clenched. She stared at the grass, hoping no one would notice how her body was coming to life, how she secretly desired to be the one being taken.

She had never known a man, and would not until she married Soren, although she often wondered what it would be like to be with a man in this way. This ritual happened at every burial. The seed of the man and the woman was the way into this life, and it would give Maud new life and prosperity in the world hereafter.

However, it was the first time she had witnessed this ceremony, and she did not know what to think of the intense sensation between her legs. Was it wrong? Or was this pleasurable feeling a gift from the gods telling her she was ready to give life? Was it a sign she was ready to be the mother of her people?

The man left the tent, adjusting his trousers, and vanished back into the crowd. This happened ten more times, and alternately she could hear Astrid and Ragnvei's moans. The more she heard, the more aroused she became, until she felt it almost unbearable. Was she the only one reacting like this? Everyone else appeared unaffected.

When the last man exited the tent, Ada signaled to Ivar to enter with her.

"Go now." Olav gave her a little shove.

She was relieved this part was over. Trying to forget about how she felt, she walked to the tent and entered it. The highly intoxicated handmaidens moaned and whined as their naked, ravaged bodies lay on two wooden tables. They were both beautiful with large breasts and wide hips, and for a moment, Lucia almost thought it sad that soon they would be no more. But sacrifices must be made for the good of all.

Ada said to Ivar, "Make sure you tell your guards and the men in the crowd to beat their swords and spears on their shields as loudly as they can, so the women and children do not hear the screams of the escorts. Send in your two strongest men."

Her stomach churned, fearing what was coming.

"Yes, my lady." Ivar nodded and stepped outside, a gust of wind entering the tent as he opened the flap. Two guards entered and took their spots by Astrid, one at her head, the other by her feet.

Ada picked up a rope from the tool table and handed it to the guard above Astrid's head. He wrapped it loosely around Astrid's neck and waited for Ada's signal. Ada nodded to the guard at Astrid's feet, and he gripped the handmaiden's ankles, pressing them down into the table.

"Ouuuch," Astrid squealed, her voice slurred.

She heard the hammering sound of shields and swords colliding outside.

"May you, handmaiden and chosen escort of Queen Maud, fulfill your purpose this day as we release your spirit from your physical body to usher the queen's spirit to Valhalla!" Ada's voice sounded like a mystical trance. She walked over to the tool table again and picked up a wide, triangular, iron dagger. Back at Astrid's side, Ada raised the dagger high above her head with both arms. "May it be so!" She plunged the blade into Astrid's chest.

Astrid let out a loud shriek and arched her back in pain. The guard above her head pulled the rope tightly around her neck, and her face turned red. Ada plunged the knife into Astrid's chest again and again until the sacrifice no longer moved. Blood spilt from the table onto the green grass below. Once she realized the spirit had been released, Ada looked at the lifeless sacrifice

and smiled. “Now, the other,” she said, turning her attention to Ragnvei.

Lucia had not expected it to be so vicious a ritual, but she did not want to close her eyes in fear that it would make her look like a coward. Everything she did, starting with today, must prove she was a brave queen, one her people could trust. One her people could and would revere.

“Wait! What is this?” Ada yelled. She pulled Ragnvei up by the hair. “Is this what I think it is?”

Lucia thought it looked like a small tattoo in the shape of a cross in the nape of Ragnvei’s neck. It was the same cross her mother would cling to whenever she prayed. Ragnvei was impure.

Suddenly, she felt as if the earth shifted beneath her feet. Would this mean her mother would only have one escort? But it could not be. Her mother saw two escorts lifted above the doorway to Valhalla, and she would be expecting two, not one. If only one came, did that mean her mother would wait forever to journey to the halls of the gods?

“She has agreed to be sacrificed, and she is even happy to do it now,” she said.

“No! She cannot and must not be sacrificed. The gods will never accept one who has the indelible markings of another god on her body,” Ada said.

“But my mother *must* make it to Valhalla. She needs *both* of her escorts. Think of all the things that can go wrong if she comes to haunt us or comes to haunt you,” Lucia said.

Ada gave her a stern look. “It is better this way. Ivar!” she yelled.

Ivar came back inside the tent and bowed.

“Dress this heathen. She is impure, and of no further value in this ceremony,” Ada said.



With her heart pounding against her ribs, Lucia ran out to her father and told him what happened.

Olav paused for a moment before answering. “Yes, Lucia, you are right. The queen does need to make it to Valhalla today. But the sacrifice cannot be impure, or your mother’s spirit will surely come to plague us.”

“And having her buried in Christian soil will not bring on the gods’ wrath?” Lucia’s felt her pulse in her head as she glared at her father.

Olav lifted his arm, as if he would strike her. Lucia closed her eyes, awaiting the blow, but it never came. Instead, when she opened her eyes, she saw him entering the tent.

When the crowd saw Ivar leading Ragnvei out of the tent half-dressed and alive, they jeered.

Olav stepped forward. “We have found the sacrifice to be impure. We cannot sacrifice a Christian to our gods, now can we?”

*Hypocrite*, Lucia thought.

“Nay!” The crowd yelled, and then grew silent.

“Queen Maud has Astrid with her now. And knowing *my* queen, she could get to Valhalla all by herself, even if she were blindfolded and gagged!”

The crowd laughed.

“But, the gods would be even more pleased if we had another escort, one of you perhaps?” Olav said.

The crowd hushed; uneasy eyes glanced around.

Quietly, one maiden walked up to the platform. “I will go!” she declared. “I lost my family to the Vik people. I have nothing to live for here in Midgard, and I have been looking forward to the day when I can die with honor and join my family in Valhalla!” She knelt before Olav.

“Do you accept her offer?” Ada asked Lucia and Olav.

“Yes!” Olav said.

“Yes,” Lucia said, feeling pressured into accepting a secondary sacrifice.

The crowd roared. A faint chant started in the back and waived its way to the front of the crowd. “Sacrifice her! Sacrifice her! Sacrifice her!”

Ada fetched the dagger from the tent and lifted it into the air for all to see.

“Sacrifice her! Sacrifice her!” The chant grew louder and louder.

Grabbing the young maiden by her red hair, Ada sliced her throat. As the new escort collapsed to the ground, the Angel of Death released her hair and gestured to the guards to come pick her up.

“*Now*, we bury the queen!” Ada yelled.

The horses, oxen, and dogs were sacrificed and placed in the burial ship with Maud. On the bottom of the ship, they laid her crown, her royal jewels, brooches, hairpins, necklaces and rings, her most loved dresses, and her bone-carved combs. King Olav also included four of Maud’s five sleighs, her carved four-wheel wooden cart, and her favorite copper chests.

To Lucia’s great relief, before throwing dirt onto the corpse, they covered Queen Maud’s face with sheets of silk. As Olav rejoined Lucia and Vilda on the platform, reverence filled the air.

Ada spoke first. “In life, she was a queen worthy of praise and admiration, a wife, a friend, and the mother to all. Maud will be remembered by us as a generous, kind, and great Monarch. In death, she will advance even further and go ahead of her family to prepare a home for them on the other, better side.

“Now, we lay her body to rest and to sleep forever. Her spirit continues eternally beyond the grave. May her family find peace in her absence and look forward to the day when they will meet

her again. For life is not the beginning, nor is it the end. Death is not a beginning, nor the end, but a continuation of the eternities we have always been part of. When you look at the Auroras in the sky, remember your ancestors, remember the spirits yet to be born, for they are there, always watching, always existing, and always a part of your journey. Now, pray with me.”

Silence permeated the somber crowd, and it was then Lucia felt the first cold drop of rain on her cheek.

“Allfather, Odin, we release Queen Maud’s spirit unto you this day,” Ada prayed. “We thank you for the time we had her here. We thank you for the memories we have had with her that we cherish in our hearts, even more precious than gold. Allfather in Valhalla, we ask: give Queen Maud rest, health, and peace with you. And may we always remember her, as we remember you and all the gods, in our hearts and memories eternally.”

King Olav invited Bishop Peter to say a prayer as well. He was a tall, slender man with a long face and a tall forehead. His eyelids looked halfway shut, and Lucia thought maybe they had become like that because he spent all his time praying with his eyes shut. Was her father truly sympathetic to this new religion? He had never been before. She hoped it was a mere act of granting her mother’s last wish.

Lucia noticed the disapproving glances the crowd gave as the man of this foreign god spoke his blasphemous words. His prayer was short, but it had offended many, especially her. And if it were true that the gods had caused her mother to die because she worshipped this new god, she would do everything in her power to destroy any man woman or child who swore their allegiance to this wicked cause.

The clouds were quickly moving in, threatening to release their raindrops and fill the sunken burial ship. As the king’s

guards started throwing dirt, rocks, and soil into the ship, little by little, the onlookers disappeared into their houses and farms.

Lucia could not prevent the tears from coming, but she did not care. These were the last moments she would have with her mother here in Midgard.

“I have thought for days of what I might say to you, Olav, but there are no healing words strong enough to lessen your pain,” Vilda said to Olav.

“I believe you of all people are probably the only one who truly understands,” Olav replied.

*What about me?* she thought.

“I am surprised you buried her in Christian soil,” Vilda said. “And that you used her inscription on the runestone, too.”

“Some things need not be justified, Vilda. Not even to you,” Olav said with a steely gaze.

Vilda grew silent, but Lucia could see anger brewing in her aunt’s navy eyes.

As the rain began to descend more heavily, they remained still, resolute, and immobile, waiting loyally to the end until the entire grave was covered with earth.

Once the last pile of dirt had been flung over the great queen, twenty-four stones were laid down in the shape of a longship, marking the outer borders of the grave. The longship’s dragonhead and tail protruded from the ground and a large runestone was set atop the burial.

Lucia read it out loud:

*King Olav had this stone erected in memory of his wife*

*Queen Maud who died in childbirth.*

*May God and God’s Mother help the souls of Queen Maud  
and her unborn son.*

*Inside this grave the Beloved Blessed Queen Maud rests.*

*Concealed she'll remain, and to us buried ever after.  
The King Olav, in Holy rituals,  
his Northern Queen, his Jewel, he released and freed  
with Sacred sacrificial rituals.  
Consecrated are these writing for her.  
For Jesus is the Savior and one Redeemer and Elect  
Sanctified, Hallowed Being.  
Having been born of Mary and the Father, pre-mortally  
Chosen and Destined to live for all mortals  
every one so victorious, their lives end.  
Yet thankfully these sorrowful tears will vanish.  
And conquer, Jesus will, the Devil and Destroyer.  
Mournful are All, and all are crying with hidden faces buried  
inside their palms.  
Bergendal city Christian church.*

A deep red serpent border curved around the edges of the runestone, framing the inscription. The triangular Valknut symbol representing pre-life, mortality, and the afterlife was engraved on the stone's top and on the back. Queen Maud had written the inscription herself immediately after she fell and had demanded Olav put it on her gravestone.

But what no one knew was that the inscription carried a secret, and whoever deciphered it would be led to the most powerful object in all the nine realms.

## Outcast

*Today I will die.*

Ailia stirred in her sleep, trying to awaken herself from this recurring maredream she had come to fear even more than the most ruthless barbarian.

Helpless to stop the events from unfolding, she carefully peeled back the distressed linen curtain of the humble two-room longhouse, and glanced out the window.

*It is just a dream.*

A trail of black smoke followed the Surtorians, the Empress of Darkness's, agents. The dark, billowing clouds transformed Whiteheim's normally peaceful surroundings to a battlefield of ashes and bones.

Empress Eiess' longships had arrived at the harbor right after dawn, and she would burn the city to the ground unless Ailia surrendered herself. No one but Ailia's family knew who Ailia was, and most did not even know that such an evil being as the Empress of Darkness existed.

*Eiess found us again.*

*No, it is but a dream!*

Ailia had been hiding out in Whiteheim with her husband, mother and daughter for the past few months, but now it became clear to her, that no matter where they hid in Midgard, Eiess would track them down.

“They’re almost here! You must leave! Leave now, with Freydis before the Surtorians find us!” Ailia yelled to her mother, Edna. Ailia’s heart hammered like rhythmic thunder, as if it was threatening to burst through her chest.

“Oh, may the gods be merciful today!” she whispered. Her husband should have been back by now, and without him here, they had little chance of survival.

Suddenly, Ailia woke up with a gasp. It was still dark in the longhouse, but she could hear her aunt, Unni, working in the kitchen. She breathed a sigh of relief, realizing she had awoken before the worst had come to her. However, she could not quite shake the thoughts and feelings she always had after this maredream. And even though it had ended so abruptly, it had a little more earthly weight to it than the other times she had dreamt it.

*I must keep myself hidden from The Empress of Darkness. I need to find this man who was my husband, so we can... What was it they needed to do? It had seemed so utterly important just a moment ago. The feeling of urgency began to dwindle as the details faded away.*

She shook her head to try and get any remnants of the frightful vision out of her mind. The fear of a horrible empress pursuing her always seemed to be the hardest feeling to shake, even though she knew it was not real.

Ailia flung the heavy reindeer fur off her slender body and sat up in bed. Her white underdress had bunched up to her hips, so

when she rose, she wiggled her body until the skirt fell back down to her ankles where it belonged.

She went to the wooden basin, splashed some water on her face, and patted her skin dry with the frayed linen towel. After she had pulled on her pea-green, wool overtunic, she threw the rust red wool shawl over her narrow shoulders. Fall was officially here and in the past few weeks the mornings and evenings had turned unreasonably cold, so she needed to bundle up inside as well as outside. The brutal northern winter was approaching all too quickly.

“What would you have me do?” Ailia asked, entering the small kitchen. As always, the room was stocked with pots, pans, ladles and various types of fruits and vegetables. She grabbed her white work scarf and secured her waist-length auburn hair with it.

“Good morning,” Unni said. Her strawberry-blond, gray-streaked hair was also tied up in a scarf. “The carrots need cleaning.” She pointed to a heap of the dirt-covered vegetables on the oak countertop.

Unni looked much better after having gained some weight over the summer. She had become terribly thin last winter when their food storage ran out a month before the last of the snow melted. But as spring turned into summer and summer surrendered to fall, yielding a bounteous harvest, Unni’s cheeks grew rosier, her breasts became fuller, and her smile returned.

“Yes, Aunt Unni,” Ailia said, picking up the first carrot.

“I couldn’t have asked for a sweeter girl than you.” She hugged Ailia generously, like she always did at the start of a new day.

‘Fiery, but too kind,’ were the words Uncle Brander frequently used to describe her. “Ailia needs to stand up for herself more,” he had also said once. She had hated how he had



said that because she felt he was calling her naïve, and being naïve was the same as being obtuse—at least as far as Ailia was concerned.

“Do you think I am naïve?” Ailia asked.

“Heavens, girl. Where did that question come from all of a sudden?” Unni asked.

“Uncle Brander says I’m fiery, but too kind.” Ailia frowned.

“You are kind, not naïve, and just the right amount of kind. And the fiery side of you helps balance you out.”

Ailia smiled. She could always count on Unni to know what to say to make her feel better.

“But remember, we love you no matter what,” Unni said.

Ailia sat down and started to clean the carrots. The hearth’s flames burned eagerly in the center of the floor, heating the chilly room and warming her cold body.

“Where is Sigrid?” Ailia asked. Usually their thrall was up by now, busy cleaning.

Brander and Unni had bought Sigrid from a group of Nomads when she was twelve years old, and years before Ailia had been adopted. Although Sigrid was their thrall, they treated her more like a family member, allowing her to sleep inside the longhouse, eat at their table, and even speak at will. Sigrid had never married, probably due to her limp leg and labored gait caused by her left leg being significantly shorter than the other. Ailia thought Sigrid would make a wonderful wife and mother, being the caring person she was. Perhaps it was God’s will she be nothing more than a slave girl, just as it was God’s will Ailia’s never know her birth parents.

“I sent her out to fetch some more water for the stew,” Unni said, glancing up at Ailia.

As Ailia kept working in silence, her thoughts wandered back to the maredream. Why had she started having them the day she

turned seventeen? Was God punishing her for something she had done or failed to do? Were the old gods punishing her for betraying them and investigating the Christian faith? Was she going mad? The last thought frightened her more than she dared to admit.

Unni started placing potatoes into a wicker basket. “You look worried. Is everything all right?”

Ailia sighed. “I had a maredream again last night.”

“The same one you have had before?” Unni asked as she wiped the sweat off of her forehead and onto her ivory linen sleeve.

“Yes,” Ailia said. “Thankfully I woke up before the worst of it this time.”

“Describe it to me. Sometimes God sends us messages in times of great need.”

Ailia hesitated for a moment. She had expected the dream to vanish on its own, and fearing she would be branded insane, she had never shared the entire dream with anyone. However, it had not disappeared, but only become more frightening with time.

“I am afraid if I share it with you, you might think I have gone mad,” Ailia said.

Unni laughed a little. “Your uncle and I have known you ever since you were brought to us by Ivar on a winter solstice day seventeen years ago,” she said. “Indeed, you are a special girl. But never have I seen a speck of madness in you.”

Perhaps Unni could help decipher its meaning.

“All right.” Ailia picked up another carrot and sighed deeply. She recounted the dream, and after she had done so, said, “It’s so terrifying that I wake up trembling.”

“You’re still trembling,” Unni said, chopping the vegetables for the stew. “Make sure you get all the dirt off the carrots. Was that the whole dream?”

“Yes,” Ailia said, trying to stop her hands from shaking.

“And do you die at the end every time?”

“Yes,” Ailia said, pausing from cleaning the carrots. “Except for today when I woke up early.”

“Keep cleaning. You are thinking too much on the dream. Today is the Late Summer Festival and if this stew is not ready in the next two hours, we will be the laughing-stock of the town,” Unni said slightly mockingly. “We need to have the festival meal prepared before the day starts. I don’t want to be cooking in this kitchen when we could be listening to stories or participating in the festivities. And Uncle Brander gets home soon and he’ll want breakfast right away.”

Ailia picked up her pace again and continued. “I actually did not know the empress’ name until this last time. Her name is Eiess.”

“Interesting,” Unni said.

“She always tells me how glad she is to have finally found me and that now I only have one more life to live.” Ailia sighed.

“Hmmm...”

“Have *you* ever heard of Eiess?” Ailia asked, watching her aunt’s expression carefully.

“No.” Unni wiped her hands on her rough linen apron. “Potatoes next,” she prompted.

Ailia started cleaning the potatoes, pondering on another unusual dream. “Iluxia told me I have lived before.” She held her breath, worried what Unni might say, worried she might have shared too much.

“Who?” Unni raised an eyebrow.

“The leader of the lightelves, Iluxia. He told me in a dream a few weeks ago.”

The dream where Ailia had met Iluxia had fortunately not been a frightening one. She had spoken to him outside the

Alvheim entrance—one of the other eight realms she knew little of—and had told her she needed to hurry and realize who she was. It confused Ailia more than anything, because recently she had started believing more in the Christian faith. And the Christians didn't believe in nine realms. Only one heaven and one hell.

“Who I am?” Ailia had asked, thinking she was just a girl living in Bergendal, trying to do her best in fulfilling her duties as a peasant and in honoring her family.

Iluxia had smiled. “You have a grand purpose in life, Ailia. Much grander than just being a peasant,” he had said. “And although you might not have a complete recollection of it, I do not believe I am mistaking when I say your spirit senses this is not your first life.”

How did he know? He was right, of course, but it shocked her. Something told her she had lived before, although it made no sense. She had wanted to find out what he meant and what he knew, but she had woken up before she could ask.

Unni smiled. “But our new faith tells us that humans live only once and that is it. You know that, Ailia.”

Ailia did not know what to believe and she remained silent for a long time. Finally she said, “I hope I never dream of Eieess again. Just thinking of her makes me feel as if I'm going to die at any moment.” She moved on to cleaning the next gnarly potato.

“Will you fetch me the ladle over there?” Unni asked, pointing toward it.

Ailia went over and picked it up. Perhaps Unni did not understand how vivid these dreams were and that is why she so easily dismissed them. “These dreams are not like other dreams. They are visions revealing I have a very important purpose in life.”

“We all have an important purpose,” Unni said. “And to please God is the most important.”

Ailia smiled. “I know. But there’s something more to these dreams, something I cannot explain.”

“Maybe you’re having them because of the Vik attack,” Unni said.

“Maybe,” Ailia replied. The Vik people had recently raided Bergendal. Fortunately the city was the largest in the Northlandic Kingdom and the king’s guard had managed to fight them off before they plundered too much and caused grievous damage. “I cannot say those attacks have not affected me.” But Ailia knew Unni was not grasping what she was trying to explain. And how could she? There was no way she could describe to her aunt exactly what she had seen or what she had felt.

“And with Queen Maud’s funeral yesterday, the mare demons have certainly been active around here,” Unni said. “Those mare demons...” She shook her head and huffed. “I wish they would just leave us alone.”

Unni had always said that maredreams came from mare demons whispering frightening words and conveying evil thoughts into peoples’ ears while they were sleeping. Ailia doubted the mare demons were to blame for her dreams.

“How did Queen Maud die exactly?” Ailia asked, dumping her carrots into the stew. No one had really spoken of it, and the only thing Ailia had heard was that all the neighbors were saying that unless the queen received a proper Norse burial, her spirit would continue to haunt Bergendal and be cursed forever. She felt sorry for the queen, the king, and especially for princess Lucia. People should show more concern instead of spreading lies about the deceased.

“I heard she fell down a set of stairs, and since she was expecting a child, it had been so much worse,” Unni said.

“You met her once, didn’t you?” Ailia asked as she sat down on a wooden stool Brander had just finished making.

“Yes,” Unni said, stirring the pot. “She came to our farm exactly one year to the day after you had been brought to our doorstep. She said she had lost one of her dogs, and asked to search our farmlands for him. After some time, she knocked on our front door again. I brought you out with me because you had started crying the moment the queen arrived and would not stop no matter what I did. She asked if she could hold you and I said yes. Even after all these years I remember the keen look in her eyes as she cradled you in her arms.”

Ailia had heard this story so many times but never grew tired of hearing it. “And then what?”

“The queen asked me when you were born. I told her the gods had blessed us and that a guard had brought you to us on winter solstice day. She said her daughter, Princess Lucia, was born on the exact same day and that she was looking for a friend for Lucia. Yet, she never returned.”

“I don’t remember meeting her at all,” Ailia said.

Unni added the potatoes to the cauldron. “Of course you don’t. You were only a one-year-old then. That was the only time I ever met her. She seemed like a sad person, like she had some deep, dark hidden pain buried deep inside.”

“Why do you think she was so sad?” Ailia asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Unni said. Then she smiled mischievously. “Maybe she was worried she would never get her daughter married off!”

That was a strange thing to say, Ailia thought. “Yes, that would be something to—“ Suddenly realizing what, or rather *who* her aunt was talking about, she huffed. “You’re talking about me.”

“If you would just accept one of the suitors we have introduced you to, I would die of happiness,” Unni said with a sigh.

Lately, and to Ailia’s great dismay, their conversations always ended on this subject.

“I don’t want to get married to just anyone,” Ailia said. “I have someone special waiting for me.”

“Oh really? So you think you have a say in whom we choose for you to marry?” Unni asked, looking at Ailia, raising her right eyebrow.

Ailia leaned across the wooden counter top. “Of course I do. I will let you know when I meet him, my soul mate,” she said.

“And what do you know about soul mates?” Unni asked.

“Plenty.”

“Do enlighten me,” Unni pressed.

“For starters, I know that I have one,” Ailia said. “In my dreams, I get the distinct impression that I need to find him so we can join together to...do something important.”

Unni laughed. “Just let us know when you meet him then. We will want to be included in the dramatic marriage. But, if we find you a proper husband before then, you’ll be marrying him.”

Ailia grimaced. This past year, several suitors had tried to win her heart, but none of them had interested her in the least. Most of them had attempted to impress her with their brute behavior, showing off how great their hunting and fighting skills were. Ailia saw nothing noble with that type of conduct at all. It reminded her too much of the Vik men who had pillaged their city. She was beginning to think that she was being too particular, especially since nearly all of the young women her age in the neighboring farms had been married off years ago.

Thankfully, Unni and Brander had not forced her to marry anyone yet, but Brander had started to seem a little impatient

with Ailia and had even introduced her to three different men this last week.

\* \* \*

After all the preparations for the day had been made, and after she had eaten the late summer festival meal at Brandersgaard, Ailia was allowed to go to the festival. She had not told Unni how her friends had distanced themselves from her after she had become interested in the Christian religion, and even more so after she had hinted about her maredreams. Maybe they didn't know how to treat her, thinking she was a little crazy. And she couldn't truly blame them, since even she thought her dreams were crazy. However, she decided that these dreams were not going to prevent her from having a good time and living her life to the fullest. And if she didn't mention her dreams anymore or her fascination with Christianity, her friends would probably forget about them and everything would be back to normal.

Excited to get out of the longhouse, she slipped on her fine hunter green wool tunic and grabbed her sheep mask on the way out.

"I shall be there shortly!" Unni hollered after her.

The first place Ailia wanted to go was to the masked dance at the Fest Hall. It was the town's largest longhouse, and their communal place for meetings, governing assemblies, and festivities. It looked like a gigantic dome-covered longship with a straw thatched roof.



Ailia loved to attend dances, and she had not missed one since she had turned twelve, the age where all young maidens were allowed to participate in their first official festival.

When she arrived at the Fest Hall, fiddlers and musicians with falster pipes, lures, and drums were at the end of the hall warming up their instruments. To her surprise, the entire room was empty except for three other people. One of them was wearing a goat mask and the two others were wearing cow masks.

She sat down to wait on one of the benches that lined the eastern wall, hoping her friends would arrive soon. A small part of her feared they would oust her from their circle or ignore her completely, but she pushed the thought aside, telling herself she was being unreasonable. She had known these girls her entire life. Surely, they wouldn't discard her that easily.

Noticing how the three other attendees were glancing over at her, she smiled and waved. They turned their backs without even acknowledging her.

*Strange*, she thought. Most Bergendalers were very warm and welcoming.

“Are you the girl who’s cursing Bergendal with all these mare demons?” a young redheaded boy, wearing a dog mask asked.

“What?” Ailia said, feeling her cheeks turn hot.

“My big sister says you are a bad omen, and she says you are cursing Bergendal by bringing all these mare demons here,” the young boy continued.

Now she recognized the boy. He was one of Ailia’s friend’s younger brothers—Siri’s brother. “I am not cursing Bergendal with anything,” she said, a knot growing in her stomach. She folded her arms across her chest and frowned.

“My father says maredreams are messages from the dark realms, and that you are attracting beings from the dark realms here to Bergendal because you are a traitor to the gods. He says you are cursed.” He pointed his finger at her. “Cursed!”

“Stop that!” Ailia said, feeling her pulse rise. “You are embarrassing yourself, and you are embarrassing me!”

“You are cursed!” he yelled, still pointing his finger at her. “Cursed!”

A few others arrived and stopped to stare. Ailia thought it strange that no one came over and reprimanded the misbehaving boy or came to stand up for her. Finally, Siri came over. Her light ash brown hair was pulled up in a braided up-do.

“Is it true? Did you tell your brother I’m a bad omen?” Ailia asked her.

“I thought you knew by now, Ailia. We all believe that,” she said, stepping next to her brother. She squinted her eyes and her lips. “You are a bad omen—and cursed.”

Ailia’s mouth dropped open, but even so, it was difficult to take a breath. Finally, she managed to say, “I cannot believe how shallow you are, holding my dreams against me,” she said. “I cannot control what I dream.”

“No, you cannot. The mare demons do,” Siri said.

Ailia stared at her in disbelief.

“My father has told me to stay away from you and your new crucified god. I should have realized you are cursed sooner. I mean, even your *name* is so strange,” she said.

“My name?” She knew her name was different, but what did it have to do with her being cursed?

Ailia looked around the hall, and everyone who had arrived was intently listening in on their conversation. Even the musicians had stopped warming up their instruments and glared at her across the murky room.

“Our chieftain won’t be happy to hear about any of this,” Siri said. “He’ll be here soon, and if you stay, I’ll tell him everything you told me.”

Tears burned behind her eyes, and not wanting to continue to make a scene, she turned on her heels and headed for the exit. How could Siri have ever claimed to be her friend? How could she be this cruel? They had known each other for five years, and Ailia had worked so hard to help Siri feel welcome in Bergendal when her family moved here from another town.

“Don’t think this is over, Christian!” Siri yelled after her. “You must turn from your ways, or I will make sure you will be banned from Bergendal for good!”

She ran out the door and set her course toward the Bergendal forest—the shortcut home. She swallowed her tears back again and again as the cool autumn wind streamed across her face. Arriving at the edge of the forest, she followed the thin, snaking path, winding her way between soaring pine trees, moss-covered rocks, and fallen twigs. Sprinting as fast as her legs would carry her, she whipped the branches away as she distanced herself from the festival, wanting nothing but to leave the memory behind. She didn’t care that her lungs burned. She didn’t stop when her legs tired. She had to get away. Far, far away from the humiliation and hate.

Hopping across the narrowest part of the Bergendal River, she stepped on the black and green rocks protruding above the rushing water. She ignored the people on their way to the merriments, and she didn’t even stop when she ran into Unni. She just needed to find a quiet place to think, to clear her mind and find her balance again.

When she reached Brandersgaard, she stormed inside and slammed the door shut behind her. Leaning her back against the dense oak door, she finally allowed her body the rest.

The hearth was still burning in the center of the room, and it smelled of the delicious food Unni and she had prepared earlier. Now she noticed how her hands were freezing, and the tips of her ears numb. Winter was coming, and there would only be a few more warm days left before snow and ice would blanket the land, sending nature into a deep sleep. Northlandic winters were long, cold, and brutal, and most citizens spent the dark months indoors.

Once her heart was no longer pounding viciously in her chest, she sat down in the rocking chair by the loom, and started embroidering on the tablecloth she had almost finished. Sewing usually calmed her.

“Is everything all right?” Unni asked, coming in the front door.

“I’m sick,” Ailia said sullenly, not looking up. “Please, just go to the festival. I’ll be fine.”

Unni opened her mouth to speak and it looked as if she would try to talk Ailia into going. But then she said, “Very well. Are you sure I cannot help you with anything before I go?”

“No, I just need to rest,” Ailia said. “There will be many more festivals like this one for me to attend.” She glanced up and forced her lips to curl upward into a smile. Unni turned around and left. But something told Ailia she would not be attending any festivals for a long, long time.

She stopped sewing, let the tablecloth fall to her lap, and began to sob.

## Never love

“Join us, Ailia,” Uncle Brander urged as he walked into the living area. He was dressed only in his trousers, ready to head over to Bergendal Lake with their neighbors. His muscular arms were tan and his hairy chest and belly were as white as virgin winter snow.

Ailia, sitting in the corner by the loom, almost remarked how ridiculous he looked, but she bit her tongue, knowing whatever he’d say in return to tease her would be ten times worse. Besides, she didn’t want to give him reason to attack her when he was asking her to do something she was deathly afraid of.

For as long as Ailia could remember, she had feared water, though she didn’t know why. Uncle Brander knew this about her, but he continued to encourage her and invited her whenever he went. Being so afraid that she kept her distance from fjords and lakes, it had its downsides. She couldn’t get herself to travel by sea or go fishing and had never learned how to swim properly. She rationalized that she didn’t need to know how to swim to

become a good housewife. And becoming a good housewife—the keeper of the longhouse—is every decent Norse girl’s highest priority, so she didn’t feel bad about being a non-swimmer.

Uncle Brander was a sturdy man, one no-one would think to question his brute manhood, but she secretly wondered if he might have been a fish or sea creature in a previous life. She dared not share this with him, though, for he might tell Bishop Peter. If she were to be baptized into the new church like Unni and Brander had been, Ailia would have to accept their doctrines, and reincarnation wasn’t one of them. She found all of the Christian beliefs easy to accept—except for this one.

“Come on, Ailia,” Uncle Brander prodded again.

“No, thank you.”

“Your friends will be there,” he said.

She exhaled a sharp breath. “No, not today.” She was content to sit in her chair, intent to not look up from her needlepoint. “You know I don’t swim.” There was another reason why she wanted to stay home. She didn’t want to run into anyone who had seen what had happened at the Fest Hall with Siri. Being called out as a curse in front of everyone wasn’t something she wanted to experience again. She hadn’t told Unni or Brander about the incident yet. It would be too humiliating. “Maybe I’ll join you some other time.”

“Next week, I’ll be out hunting and then winter will be here. Besides, you are a grown woman. I thought you would be over your childish fear of the water.” Brander waited for her answer, his mammoth body as still as the mountains surrounding Bergendal.

If she refused again, she would disappoint him, and there was nothing Ailia hated more than disappointing Brander. Yet, even so, she could not make herself go.

Brander shook his head. “I have someone I’d like you to meet,” he said softly.

Surprised, she stopped working on the tablecloth and looked up. *Not one of his suitors again*, she thought. She was growing tired of the eligible—or in her opinion, ineligible—men Uncle Brander presented to her.

“Bring him over for repast,” Ailia said. “I’ll make the best stew he has ever eaten.”

Brander rolled his eyes. He knew she hated making stew and every stew she had, had turned out to be a disaster. Cooking was her main homemaking weakness.

She turned her attention back to her needlepoint. “Have no worry. Unni will help me.”

“Yeah, yeah—” Brander said, heading for the door. “I must mention this: this man is the one you’re marrying.”

She gasped and looked up at once. “What?”

“I’ve already agreed to it,” Brander said.

Ailia stood up, her embroidery falling to the floor. “What do you mean, you have already agreed to it?”

Just then, Unni walked in from the kitchen. “Did you tell her?”

Brander nodded.

“Talk to him, Aunt Unni,” Ailia pleaded. “You cannot just marry me off to someone I haven’t even met!”

Unni wiped her hands clean with a rag. “Ailia, you have a duty to us as your family to accept a suitable husband,” she said. “We have gone along with your non-interest in all the men we have brought for far too long. You are almost eighteen and well past the age of when you should be married.”

Brander took a step closer. “His name is Geir and he’s the chieftain of Solnes. His wife died three winters ago and he has been looking for a suitable wife ever since. I have known him for

a few years. He's a decent man and will be a good provider for you and your children."

Ailia felt as if her whole world was spinning, turning upside down, and falling apart.

"I expect you to be warm and welcoming when he comes over for repast," Brander said sternly.

The back of Ailia's eyes burned and a lump grew in her throat. She didn't have a choice in whether or not to accept this proposal of marriage. It was her duty to honor their final decision no matter how she felt.

"My parents chose Brander for me and we turned out happy enough," Unni said. "It's the way that it is and it is for the best."

Ailia was fuming on the inside and could not stop herself from blurting out the first thing that came to mind. "You're not even my real parents!" She regretted saying it immediately, for Unni and Brander had been nothing but kind and loving to her and had treated her like their own daughter. They had really been the only parents she had ever known since her parents had died when she was a baby.

Brander stormed out of the room and slammed the door shut without another word. Trying to control her emotions, Ailia plopped back down into her chair and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Come help me clean up in the kitchen so we can prepare repast," Unni said.

Ailia could hear her aunt's footsteps as she walked away. She had thought she might be spared from being forced to marry a stranger, but with this news, it would seem her fate would be just as any other young maiden in the Northlandic Kingdom. Fate—ha! Fate was for those who needed to find meaning in the meaningless and Ailia had never been one of those. She didn't need to add more meaning than there already was. What was



important was to do her duty. But what if that duty went against everything she believed and hoped for?

Ailia stood up and followed Unni into the kitchen. “I’m sorry for what I said about you not being my real parents,” she said hesitantly. “I do consider you my mother and Brander my father.”

“I understand Ailia; believe me, I do. When I found out my parents were marrying me off to Brander, I considered running away,” Unni said.

“Truly?” Ailia asked surprised.

“Don’t tell Brander, though. He still does not know.” Unni smiled and then sighed. “You may find it hard to believe, but I actually despised him. Of all the suitors my parents chose for me, he was the last one I wanted to marry.” She picked up a few bowls and cleaned off the tabletop with a rag.

“Why?”

“He hadn’t been very kind toward me and he seemed so haughty,” Unni said.

“Brander?” Ailia thought that was strange, because Brander seemed the most jovial and most approachable man she knew.

“Later, I found out that he was just nervous around me because he liked me so much.” Unni’s eyes crinkled at the edges as she smiled. “Marriage is much more about a partnership than a feeling, Ailia. If you marry this chieftain, you will have a great partnership. We heard that his former wife was very happy and that is what we want for you—to be happy.” She pulled out some onions and salted lamb’s meat, placing both ingredients on the tabletop.

Ailia sighed. “Of course I’ll accept the marriage proposal. I just did not think that it would happen yet.”

“It’s better to marry young. If you wait much longer, you’ll be too set in your ways.” Unni pulled out a knife and started

chopping up the meat in perfect little squares. Ailia stripped the onions of their skin, wondering what type of man this Geir was.

\* \* \*

“Ailia, I’d like to introduce you to Geir,” Brander said, arriving with the guest a few hours later.

Ailia curtsied. “Welcome to our home. Pleased to meet you,” she said, lowering her gaze. Geir was not bad to look at—average, Ailia would say—with a uniquely slender nose and small pouty lips. He was almost as tall as Brander, but much less muscular, thin even. His beard was a little too long for Ailia’s liking, but maybe once they had married she could convince him to groom it shorter.

“He’ll be staying for repast, but then he needs to get back to his children in Solnes,” Brander said.

Ailia did her best to kill a gasp. “Oh,” she said instead. “How many...children?” She suffered a smile.

Unni glanced at Ailia, her eyes stern.

“Four,” Geir said. “All boys. Their ages are ten, eight, six and four. They’re a handful and they need a strong mother to keep them in line.”

“I see.” Ailia knew immediately that she’d never be the woman he was seeking. She saw herself as more of a nurturer, not a commander.

“Shall we?” Unni gestured over to the hearth and they all sat down near the glowing flames.

After the first awkward meeting with her future husband and after Ailia had filled everyone’s bowl with stew, she sat down next to Unni.

“Tell us about Solnes,” Unni said.

Geir looked at her and scoffed. “I do not see why that is an important subject to talk about.”

Unni’s eyes flared just a tad.

Geir turned his attention to Ailia. “What I want to know, Ailia, is do you feel prepared to be the homemaker of my longhouse and are you capable of raising my four boys?”

Ailia balked.

“Of course she is,” Unni said.

“I know your opinion, woman. I need to hear it from Ailia’s own mouth,” Geir snapped.

Ailia froze. Of course she *could* do it, but it was so very hard to say so out loud, because she knew that in the innermost part of her spirit that she didn’t want to. Seeing how he had disrespected Unni, it gave her reason to believe he would disrespect her, too. If that were true, she’d do anything to get out of this arranged marriage.

“Ailia?” Unni nudged.

“Why, yes, of course,” Ailia said. “I have trained my entire life to become the best homemaker I can be.” She felt her spirit revolting inside of her.

“Ailia, one more question and then we can go on to discuss other niceties. Are you able to bear children?” Geir asked.

Brander coughed, the stew in his mouth splattering onto his beard.

“If you are asking me whether or not I have started my menstruation cycle, then, yes, I have. For a few years now,” Ailia said.

“Ailia,” Brander said, his eyebrows gathering in the center.

“Was that not what you were referring to?” Ailia asked. Usually women only spoke about such things to each other, but

since Geir was asking so directly, Ailia couldn't help but be blunt in her response.

"Swell," Geir said with a look of relief in his narrow-set eyes. "I think she will do, Brander."

Brander nodded with a sharp exhale as his shoulders relaxed several notches.

Ailia hated how Geir said that: *I think she will do*. She wanted her marriage to be so much more than just a partnership of duties and responsibilities. Love would not be a part of the relationship with Geir. He was probably just looking for a woman to raise his children and a woman to bring to his bed when he needed it. *How could Brander have chosen him?* she wondered.

\* \* \*

After Geir left, Ailia felt like she could breathe again. Brander went outside to sharpen his knives while Ailia and Unni remained inside to clean the kitchen.

"I thought he seemed very—" Unni seemed to struggle with the right words to say. "Honest."

Ailia rolled her eyes. "Callous."

Unni said nothing, but she gave Ailia a knowing smile. "Brander was that way in the beginning, too. Things will change once you're married," she said. "Just make sure you take good care of him in the lovemaking area."

Ailia shuddered in repulsion at the thought. Touch Geir? Allow him to touch her? Make love to Geir? They were hideous thoughts and more than she could stand. And she disagreed with Unni. Geir did not seem like a man who would change. However, she concluded that it wasn't worth disagreeing with

Unni right now. There was nothing Ailia could say or do that would make a difference or change their decision. Unni and Brander had tried their best to find a suitable husband, even though, in her eyes, they had picked a man who she'd never love or even like. Ailia had never wanted to dishonor her family in any way and she wasn't going to start now.

"I always knew there was something special about you, Ailia. Perhaps this is your God-given destiny? To marry a chieftain. Not many young women accomplish that. You'll have a great life and many more opportunities than if you had just married a farmer or fisherman," Unni said.

Ailia nodded. She knew what Unni meant, but why did it feel so wrong?

## Trust

Three months had passed since Lucia's mother went to Valhalla, but the rawness she felt in her heart had failed to heal. It took all she had just to get up morning after morning and face another day where everything and everyone she encountered reminded her that the person she loved most was no more.

Nora was true to her word, and quickly became Lucia's confidante. Whenever she needed to vent about her father, Nora would lend an understanding ear, and when Lucia could no longer keep up the façade, pretending she was strong and had triumphed over her broken heart, Nora was there to hold her as she sobbed.

Lucia's father had become more controlling than ever, and his lectures had increased in both length and frequency. She let most of his incessant blabber go in one ear and out the other. Who could blame her? Surely no one expected her to listen to him when she was not planning on ruling like her father in any

way. And if they did, she would do away with them once she took the throne.

The day before her coronation, Olav awoke her early and demanded she attend a sermon with Vilda in the Christian stave church.

Over the past few months, Lucia had come to the conclusion that the gods had caused her mother to die because her mother had turned her back on them. After she died, her mother had seen the truth and had repented of her ways, and since two faithful handmaidens had been sacrificed at the Norse burial, her mother was granted admission to Valhalla. The Norse gods are merciful.

When she had told her father she would not attend the profane sermon, he had said that if she desired to be a great monarch, she needed to educate herself about what her people believed.

“Know your friends well, but know your enemies intimately,” he had said.

That was not the way she saw it.

When she became their ruler, she would tell her people what to believe, she had thought. As their leader, she had a responsibility to guide them on the right path. Lucia did not want any curse to befall her kingdom due to this false religion and so closing down the Christian church would be one of the first things she did after she became queen.

Just as her father was about to leave her room, an idea had come to her. If she did go to the sermon, she could see exactly who had betrayed the true gods and who she would need to target once she was ready to take the church down. She conceded to go.

When Lucia arrived at the stave church, Bishop Peter greeted her and Vilda warmly. He was just as tall as she remembered, however, the heathen looked even thinner than before—sickly

so. He had dark circles underneath his blue eyes, and he spoke slowly.

Lucia had never been to church before, and being so close to commoners—only a few feet away—certainly made her feel out of place. *I shall burn the Christian church down until there is nothing left but the ashes of ashes*, she fumed as the bishop seated her and Vilda up at the front in one of the seats reserved for dignitaries.

Just as the man of God took the pulpit and began to speak, Lucia studied the space. Certainly, it was nice to see gold and silver, but she could not understand why such fine things could be found in this place. Her mother always said they must lay up treasures for themselves in heaven, not on earth where moth and rust doth corrupt. She had never understood why someone would live for the afterlife. The only thing that was certain was the here and now.

Their dead God hung on a cross above the pulpit, and it looked as if he were in agony. Norse gods were much happier and were not nailed to a symbol such as this for eternity. Her gods were more powerful, too, and possessed magical abilities and special objects in which would grant the owner special abilities. Thor could create lightning and thunder. Freya could fly with her magical cape of falcon feathers. Odin had given up his one eye for wisdom. Nothing seemed special about this god of peace and humility. No, nothing at all.

Vilda's pants annoyed Lucia almost more than the bishop's monotone voice. *Does she ever not pant?* She certainly could not remember a time. She brought her hand up to her mouth to hide a yawn.

Lucia's eye raked the congregations as she tried to commit to memory the hundreds of people's faces. She quickly realized she would not be able to remember all of them after seeing them just



once, so she focused on the people sitting on the two front pews. There sat a burly, bearded man and his healthy wife. The woman's smile was so scintillating it was difficult not to notice her, and the way the man looked at the woman, Lucia could tell he loved her dearly. It was a shame they had been deceived into believing this fallacy and it would be a shame if they did not renounce their new beliefs when they would be given an ultimatum. Lucia had learned long ago that people would rather die than give up their beliefs. Even if those beliefs were wrong.

Beside them, sat a thrall. She wore a long skirt, but Lucia still noticed how one of the woman's legs was shorter and thinner than the other. Thralls were allowed to attend church service with them? Next sat a mother and father with four children. Perhaps Lucia could spare the Christian children and raise them in the right way. It was not their fault their parents had brought them into this. The children were innocent.

Bishop Peter gripped the pulpit with both hands and his heavy eyelids almost opened all the way.

"Bergendal has gradually declined into poverty as grief and fear have stolen the minds and hearts of its people. It is the kind of fear that is always lurking, always present, and will never grant peace to anyone who chooses to bear such sorrow. You have all become comfortable with living in fear and pain. Beware, for the longer you live with it, the more likely the pain will become bearable.

"You will gladly embrace suffering into your hearts and become one with it, barely noticing its toxic, deadly presence. It is everywhere and even some of our leaders have welcomed this dangerous state of mind. We must be watchful, always standing guard at the door of our souls, to not let the devil enter in with fear and sorrow. Amen." Bishop Peter outlined the shape of a cross with his right hand and stepped down from the pulpit.

Finally the exhausting speech was finished and Lucia was thrilled she would soon be home and away from these heathens. She rose from her seat and made her way down the aisle with Vilda and two guards in tow. Just as she passed the couple to her left, the woman spoke to her.

“Hello and welcome to church, Your Highness. I have not seen you here before. I am Unni and this is my husband Brander,” she said and curtsied deeply. Brander bowed.

Lucia looked at them both and smiled briefly. She would remember this woman’s insolence, speaking to her so informally. “Ivar, take me home. I have a meeting with my father and Vilda.” She continued down the aisle and headed for the church exit.

Snow fell from the heavens when they stepped outside. “Away,” Lucia said to the driver after she had settled into the sleigh. Her two guards were quick to mount their stallions and ride behind them back to the castle.

“What idiots,” Vilda said. “They think they can approach you like you are a commoner. They have no right to speak to you. You are the daughter of a king!”

“Do not worry yourself, Vilda,” Lucia said. She had not the energy to concern herself further with the couple. She peered over at Vilda and thought her aunt had become even heavier than before. Yesterday, she had overheard the handmaidens say that usually they estimated they needed to use four times as much fabric when they sewed a dress for Vilda than for anyone else, but that this time, even that had not been enough for her ever-expanding body. She muffled a laugh. *My poor, fat aunt.* Usually, women who were larger were looked up to, but Vilda was just *so* fat and *so* ugly that Lucia sometimes could not even stand to look at her.

And what bothered her even more, was that lately, it seemed as though Vilda was trying to take her mother's place by comforting Lucia. She was not going to allow Vilda into her heart for even a single beat. Vilda was her father's sister, and she would trust neither of them.

"They did not even acknowledge *me!*" Vilda's plump cheeks had turned red from the cold air. "I am the king's sister. They should at least show me some respect."

"You always say that, Vilda," Lucia said. "Do not worry. When I am queen, I will give you all the respect you deserve." She smiled at her clever choice of words.

"Praise the gods! That would certainly be a nice change around here." Vilda blew her nose in her linen handkerchief. "Your father certainly does not give me the respect I deserve."

"He does not give anyone respect," Lucia said with more bitterness than she intended. *Not even me.*

When they arrived at the castle, Lucia and Vilda dined together in the great hall. After that they headed for the strategy room where King Olav and his grand marshal were waiting for them. Shelves filled with books lined two of the walls, and a red and yellow stained-glass window let the afternoon light in, illuminating the opposite, stone wall.

"How was the Christian church service?" King Olav asked as they entered.

Lucia thought she spotted a mischievous smile on her father's lips. "It was—interesting," she answered. "Do you know that they believe there is an evil man called the devil who forces humans to do wicked things?" She chuckled. "Who would be so gullible and believe such a thing? Seems like they are looking for someone else to blame for their misdeeds."

"Hmm," Olav replied, not seeming to pay attention to what Lucia had to say, only looking down at the map on the table.

“Oh, Olav. I shall never return again,” Vilda said passionately. “Please do not ask me to. You might be wise to get rid of Bishop Peter. He mentioned you in his sermon, declaring you have given into your fears and are leading your people astray with your poverty of mind and poverty of land. He even called you a devil!” Vilda’s voice sounded unusually dramatic, even for her.

Vilda certainly had a way of twisting the truth, Lucia thought.

“Never mind him. I have more important matters to attend,” King Olav said.

Vilda huffed and looked at Lucia as if to say, *See?*

King Olav sat down around the oval table first. “Vilda, my beloved and trusted sister, come here and have a seat by me,” he said. Lucia and the Grand Marshall also sat down around the table. “Ever since I took on the crown and responsibilities of the Northlandic Kingdom, you have served me and the country with fervor, granting freedom and fairness to all. I, like many others, am grateful for your continued and faithful service.”

“It has been my honor and pleasure, dear Brother, to serve where I am needed. I am always at your, and the Kingdom’s, humble service,” Vilda said. “I respect you and the Kingdom of Bergendal and I would protect it with my life, if needed. But, as I frequently say, there is always room for improvement.” She rose and walked around the table.

King Olav nodded. “Yes, that is what I suspected,” he mumbled. “So, now I will ask something more of you,” he said, his eyes following her where she went.

Vilda’s eyes lit up at the mention of an opportunity for promotion. “I am speechless. More? It is well needed, of course. Anything, Brother, anything at all.”

*What is my father trying to accomplish?* Lucia did not think her father liked his older sister very much. He always complained about her being too overbearing.

“Vilda, I ask that you take the position as mistress of the Hammersten Fortress,” King Olav said.

Vilda stiffened where she stood, and it was as if the air in the room vanished. She turned to look at Olav and placed her hands on her gigantic hips with a huff. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“I beg your pardon?” King Olav said. “I am giving you greater responsibility—promoting you—and you ask me if I am trying to get rid of you?”

“Hammersten is the northernmost fortress in all of the Northlandic Kingdom and you want to send *me* there?” Vilda said.

“It is also the most important fortress in the Northlandic Kingdom. If we lose it, we could lose everything in the event we were invaded,” King Olav said.

Vilda folded her arms in front of her chest and huffed. “Who else will be there?”

“All your handmaidens will go with you and you will have the constant protection of my guards. I will compensate you generously,” King Olav said.

“How long do you expect me to be there?” Vilda asked.

“It is only for one year and then Ivar will replace you,” King Olav answered.

Vilda squinted her eyes. “Why not send Ivar there now?”

“He needs to complete another assignment for me here,” King Olav said.

“Which is—?” Vilda prodded.

“Which is none of your concern!” King Olav shouted.

Vilda's lips scrunched together. "Must I give you my answer now?"

"Have your answer to me by next Sunday," King Olav said.

Vilda huffed. "Will there be a festival of some sort? An official event in my honor for the people of Bergendal, so they might learn of my new assignment?" she asked.

Lucia thought that a celebration sounded fun. The one thing, and probably the only thing, she did like about her aunt was how she always found ways to celebrate life, or specifically, her own life.

"Do as you please," Olav replied. "So, is that a yes?"

Vilda nodded and snorted a laugh. "Oh, excuse me," she said.

"Good. Now go, leave me be," he said, waving his hand. "I will have you leave within the week."

Lucia thought her father was being very creative in getting rid of Vilda. But still, something did not seem quite right. Lucia thought Vilda had accepted the assignment too quickly.

Vilda waddled out of the room, panting heavily.

King Olav stood up and looked at two of the guards who loyally served him. "Lucia," he said. "Come here. I want to teach you a lesson."

Lucia approached her father. *Not another lesson.* The thought of it made her arms and legs feel heavy.

"You, come here," King Olav said, pointing to the guard closest to him.

The guard paraded over.

"Do you consider yourself a loyal individual?" King Olav asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he replied, his face sober, his eyes fixed forward.

"How loyal?" King Olav asked.

“Not even through my own death will I relieve myself of serving and guarding King Olav, ruler of the Northlandic Kingdom,” he replied, quoting the oath he had committed to when he had been sworn in to service.

“Is that so?” King Olav asked, pacing around him. “What if I killed the guard standing next to you without cause or for entertainment and my own amusement? Would you still serve me loyally?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the guard replied with a nod and with no hesitation in his demeanor.

“And what if I killed your friends?”

The guard’s eyes flinched. “Yes, Your Highness, loyally forevermore,” he said and bowed his head.

King Olav was right in the guard’s face now, glaring him in the eyes. “And what if I killed your family and burned down your family’s farm?”

The guard did not move.

“No? Is that the limit of your loyalty?” King Olav asked, pacing around him again, his hands clasped behind his back. “And what if I did not pay you? Would you lose your loyalty to me then?”

“No,” the guard muttered.

Lucia could see the guard’s forehead starting to bead with sweat.

“Your family—” King Olav said, staring into the guard’s eyes again. “I see how it is. Everyone, leave me be. Lucia, come here.” He walked her across the hallway and into the throne room. Then he ascended the steps and sat down on his throne.

“Father?” she asked, still standing at the bottom of the steps.

“No one remains loyal under all circumstances,” he said. “Trust no man or woman completely, for they will live to fail you. Remember that!”

“Yes, Father,” she said. “But I am sure not everyone—”

“No man or woman!” he repeated, slamming his fist into the armrest.

She jumped, shocked at his sudden angry outburst. “Not even you?” She smiled. *Certainly he cannot be speaking of himself*, she thought triumphantly. But when he did not answer, only glared at her as if he despised her, she wondered. *Does he not want to answer the question? Has his mind wandered to other thoughts? Can I...not trust him at all?*

“Now, go get fitted for your first ceremonial dress,” he finally said with the flick of a wrist. He fell into a pondering mood and let his fingers run through his short beard.

She had not thought her father could hurt her anymore, but the way he nearly admitted she could not trust him felt like a torch to her skin. Cursing herself for allowing this man to wound her yet again, She turned on her heels and left the throne room.



## Sun Queen

Soon Lucia was standing outside of the queen's chamber. She had taken over the room after her mother had passed, but although it had felt glorious to move into such a vast space, it had been a bittersweet transition. The air still smelled of her mother's sweet perfume, and sometimes late at night, she thought she could hear her mother's voice whispering through the gray stone walls.

Everything was exactly the way it was before, for she had not had the heart to change a thing. The curtains were still the red velvet ones, the wooden four-post bed remained at the end of the room, and next to the crackling fireplace stood the four chairs and a table that her mother had placed here. The large rug in the center of the floor matched the curtains, and the elk-horn chandelier kept the room well-lit on these long, dark winter nights. Not a thing was out of place.

However, no matter how she labored to keep things the same, she could not deny that the memory of her mother was fading.

Just remembering her mother's beautiful face, or trying to recall what her voice actually sounded like was becoming more difficult. It made her want to control her surroundings even more. And if she just held onto the pain and constantly reminded herself of how very much she missed her, then she would not forget. Then she could keep her locked up in her heart forever.

Lucia stepped into the room, and as she did so, the entourage of handmaidens turned and curtsied to her.

"Are you ready to be fitted, Your Highness?" Nora asked with a deep bow. Although Lucia had developed a less formal relationship with Nora than with the rest of her handmaidens, Nora knew that in the company of others, she must not show it.

"Yes," Lucia replied. Shortly after, she was standing in the middle of the room wearing the unfinished coronation dress. The handmaidens worked on the costume for hours, sewing, cutting, hemming, and adjusting the gown so it would fit the princess perfectly.

"I am almost finished, Your Highness," Nora said, her old wrinkled hands, sewing on the skirt hem. She was the best seamstress in the entire kingdom, it had been said, and even though she did not sew much anymore, due to the pain in her slow-moving hands, she had insisted on being this dress's maker. She sent the other handmaidens out as she finished up the last few stitches. "Are you ready?"

"I am," Lucia said, although it was hard to ignore the unsettling feeling in her stomach. "The only thing is, I thought I might feel different, but I still feel very much the same as before."

"Oh, you will never feel different, trust me. I still feel like I am eighteen years old on the inside, even though it looks like I am one hundred on the outside." Nora laughed and then pulled another needle out of her mouth and pinned it to the skirt hem.

“We are not as sturdy as the walls that make up the castle, not on the outside or on the inside.”

Lucia’s father had told her that the castle had been built over twelve hundred years ago, when the first royal family had established the Northlandic Kingdom with Iluxia. Iluxia, as Lucia understood, was from another realm, but more than that she did not know. Often she wondered if that story was no more than a child’s fable, spun to kindle awe in their subordinates.

“Your dress is finished!” Nora took a few small steps back and studied it. Her eyes turned soft and she placed a hand over her heart. “You look so much like your mother did nearly thirty years ago when she was crowned the Sun Queen. She would have been so proud of you had she been here today.” Tears filled the old woman’s eyes, but she quickly whisked them away. “Now this is a big day for you, love. I want to make sure you look and feel your absolute best. It is not every day you are crowned queen.” She walked over to the door and opened it, shouting, “Torill, come pick up the extra material and clean up here. Tanya, it is time to do Her Highness’ hair.”

The handmaidens rushed inside. “Yes, my lady.” They curtsied first to Nora, and then to Lucia. Then Torill quickly picked up all the extra material and threads and left the room. Tanya worked on Lucia’s hair for about another hour before she was finished.

“Now turn around and look at yourself,” Nora said, gesturing toward the three full-length, gold-plated mirrors.

Lucia walked toward them. Once she saw her reflection, she hardly recognized the woman staring back at her. As a young girl, she had always let her hair hang loosely down around her narrow shoulders. Now, her hair was up in an intricately braided up-do and decorated with golden lace and diamonds.

“A new look for the new queen,” Nora said with a proud gleam in her eyes.

Indeed. With her coming of age, and taking on her responsibility as the Sun Queen, she needed to step into her adult self. That step also included dressing, presenting, and speaking as a queen. *I must leave the child in me behind*, she thought as she admired herself.

Her dress was made of pure yellow silk embroidered with golden stars and suns. Crisscross lacing in the back kept the drop-waist bodice taught around her slender torso. Her neckline was not the typical rounded style the Northlandic women wore, but a V-neck with a regal standing collar and the sleeves were long, and flared, reaching all the way to the floor. The skirt was so long it covered her feet in the front, and it trailed behind her in a three-foot train.

Lucia slowly swiveled around to examine the back of the dress. The cape was pure chiffon and was embellished with gold stitching throughout, creating a sun-ray pattern, which originated at her shoulders and cascaded down the cape.

Nora placed the heavy solstice crown on Lucia’s head—the very one her mother wore at each solstice festival. It was a gold, full circle round crown with white and below diamonds embedded in the stars that ran along the spoked top.

Lucia smiled contentedly, feeling that now, truly she was leaving the young and innocent girl behind. *I am ready to be the Sun Queen*, she said with a sense of amazement.

“I see a beautiful lady where I once saw a young girl,” her father complimented, entering the room.

“My, how time flies, Your Majesty,” Nora said. “I remember your queen in that very spot at what seems but a moment ago. And now, your beautiful daughter is standing there on the eve before she turns eighteen.”

Olav embraced his daughter and they both looked into the mirror. “What a mighty queen you will be,” he said tenderly.

Lucia thought he seemed too kind, and that made her suspicious, thinking, *What does he want from me?*

“Nora, please excuse us for a moment,” King Olav said.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” She curtsied and left the room.

Lucia figured he was here to lecture her about something, and she immediately put up a wall on the inside.

“I have something very important to share with you before your coronation. I have waited many years to tell you this,” he said. “However, before I begin, there are a few things I must say to you.” He paused and his expression turned solemn. “What I share with you today is for the good of my people whom I have sworn to protect. From now on, you will have to give up the life you *want*, to serve the people you *lead*.” He looked her squarely in the eyes.

*When I am queen, I can do as I please,* Lucia thought.

“Today you will understand why I have been so hard on you all these years,” he said with a sigh.

Lucia was surprised by his candor. “What do you mean?” she asked. He had never really opened up to her before about anything.

“Just listen,” he said, quite impatiently. “There are many things you do not know.”

*He always tries to degrade me and make me feel like I am insignificant compared to him,* she thought.

“I have told you in the past that you will be the one who leads the battle to end all battles—the battle of Ragnarok,” he said.

“I remember,” Lucia said. How could she not?

“But it is not the truth.”

She stiffened where she stood. “What?”

He inhaled a deep breath. “Let me speak first, and then all will be clarified tomorrow.”

She was not quite sure what to think of his confession, but she still nodded.

“Tomorrow, at your coronation, Iluxia will reveal all the details pertaining to Ragnarok. Being the leader of the lightelves in Alvheim, he knows many things that have happened and of many things that will come to pass.”

She held her breath for a moment. She was to meet Iluxia? The same Iluxia whom her father claimed established the Northlandic Kingdom? Impossible. “If he truly were a real person, surely, he must be deceased by now.”

“Lightelves do not age at the same rate humans do.” He clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing around Lucia. “Your mother knew many more things than me, because she was the Sun Queen. Being the Sun Queen means you will be privileged to receive sacred information from the past and quite possibly of the future. Iluxia will share this information with you. He is able to see certain key moments that will have and have had eternal significances on Midgard,” he said.

“How?” she asked.

He glanced at her and cocked his head to the side. “Such moments create vibrations and those vibrations travel through time. Only those who are in tune with these vibrations will be able to hear them and actually see them. Iluxia has spent thousands of years perfecting his senses and now he can see that which none other can. But I doubt a mere mortal—such as yourself—would ever be able to achieve such a thing.”

She turned around to admire her reflection in the mirror. *I want to achieve that which he thinks I cannot.* She looked at her father again. “I must admit, I am a little anxious to meet Iluxia.”

“Iluxia is such a grand being that one would have reason to believe he would possess an air of superiority. However, he is not a mere mortal like you and me, and trust me when I say that you will feel completely at ease in his presence,” he said.

“Truly?” she asked. *I wish I were more than a mere mortal. Maybe I am?* She had no way to explain it, but she felt a strange connection with Iluxia already.

“Yes, and Iluxia has the unique ability to lift you to a whole other level of existence with his words. You will leave him a better person than when you came to him, just having been in his presence. I cannot explain it. It is something that must be experienced,” Olav said. “I have only met him once, but until this day, I remember it vividly.”

Her father’s comments felt true and they helped put her mind at ease.

“Having said that, a dark, perilous time is before us and before you, darker than has ever been experienced in the history of Midgard,” he said gravely, as his countenance fell before Lucia’s eyes. “On the eve of the winter solstice, you shall receive the Aesira Jewel.”

“What is the Aesira Jewel?” she asked, remembering her mother mentioning it on her deathbed.

“It is a sacred season-shifting jewel,” he said.

“Season-shifting?” She pondered on the meaning of that for a moment. “Can the Aesira Jewel...shift seasons?”

“It is the jewel that controls the seasons. If it is not used, the seasons will suspend at either winter solstice or summer solstice. Only a king or queen of the Aesira bloodline has the power to engage the jewel.”

*I am her. I am the one who can engage the jewel.*

“Your mother was the Aesira Jewel’s keeper until she died,” Olav said. “Tomorrow, on winter solstice eve, Iluxia will show

you how to perform the season-shifting ceremony at Solhenge and you will be its new keeper, ringing in the seasons.”

Pride and excitement filled her bosom.

“But with the responsibility comes much danger. One dark being seeks the Aesira Jewel, and has ever since its creation. You must keep it safe from her.”

“Who?” she asked.

“The Empress of Darkness, Eiess.”

The hair on the back of her neck rose. “Eiess is not of the Aesira bloodline, is she?”

“No. She cannot engage the Aesira Jewel. But she could prevent the Aesira Jewel from being engaged,” Olav said.

She gasped. “Then the seasons would suspend.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes filled with fervor. “The Aesira Jewel rests for the time being behind the painting, over there,” he said, pointing to the full-size image of him. “You must swear to tell no one of its whereabouts or of these matters.”

She nodded. “I promise.”

“There is more thing,” he said.

She thought she would burst from all the new information.

“Before your mother gave birth to you, Iluxia came to her and told her that—” Olav paused. “In her womb, she carried the Great Sentinor pre-destined to defeat Eiess.” His eyes welled up with tears.

She was gripped by his sudden show of emotion. He had told her this before, but the intensity of his words now drove the message straight to her heart.

“Your mother and I swore to protect the Great Sentinor with all that we had, including our own lives. She has lived twice before, but Eiess has managed to kill her both times. This is her last life in Midgard,” he said.



She was puzzled by his story. *I am the Great Sentinor, right?* The way he spoke about the Great Sentinor made her think he was referring to someone else entirely.

“She was given three lives by Iluxia and the gods to defeat the Empress. Do you understand? This is her last life. If she does not succeed, Eiess will rule Midgard until she finally destroys it with darkness and dearth. All of humanity is at stake. This is why I have been so hard on you. You have no time to waver, even for a moment. Once you are crowned queen, Eiess will know, and she will do everything in her power to destroy you.”

She nodded hesitantly, but she still felt confused and overcome.

“With the gift of the Aesira Jewel, the Great Sentinor shall also receive the power and force to eliminate Eiess,” he said. “You will be responsible for making sure this happens.”

“Did I receive this gift...before, in my previous lives?” she asked, feeling strange talking about something she did not remember.

“The Great Sentinor did,” he said slowly and clearly.

“But I failed before,” she blurted out. The reality of the heavy responsibility suddenly felt like it was crushing her past, present, and future.

“There is and always will be the risk of failure. Nothing is guaranteed,” he said.

*Eiess will come after me.* That thought sent her over the edge of controlled fear and she could not calm her pounding heart or subdue the voices in her head telling her she would soon be dead.

“Now, get ready for bed. You will need plenty of rest to prepare for your ceremony.”

“How can I go to sleep when I know Eiess might be coming for me?” she asked.

“Fear will incapacitate you. Faith will empower you. You always have a choice,” Olav said.

There were a thousand questions she wanted answered, but she dared not ask them now. She did not know if she wanted to know more. Ignorance seemed better.

“What about Soren? Where does he fit in all of this?” she asked.

“He is also a Sentinor and he was sent to Midgard to help the Great Sentinor defeat Eiess. They are Spiritus Amors—soul mates.”

*Then why do I not feel a connection with him?* Lucia wondered.

Olav stepped over to her, cradled her head between his hands and kissed her on the forehead. “Remember, I love you, Lucia.”

It was the first time she had heard those words from him. She wanted to believe them, but every inch of her questioned their truthfulness.

“You have been burdened with a heavy responsibility. I wish I could carry it for you and if there were any way that I could, I would give my life so that you would not have to put yours in danger.” Olav looked into her eyes and then hugged her tightly. “Good night.”

\* \* \*

As she watched her father leave the room, Lucia felt disturbed and confused about what she had just learned. How could she be the Great Sentinor destined to defeat Eiess? She had heard stories about an evil, powerful ice empress, but she had given no thought to it because she did not think such a one

actually existed. What powers did Lucia possess? None that she knew of.

Nora returned. "Why so gloomy?" she asked while undressing Lucia, helping her get ready for bed.

"There is so much I do not understand," she said. Then she wondered, *Does Nora know about Eieess and the Aesira Jewel?*

"Time will answer all mysteries," Nora said, helping her into her night tunic. "Everything you need to know will reveal itself to you, here a little, there a little. You have within you the ability to reach further than you ever imagined."

"But...I am...afraid. Do you know of...?" She stopped. She should not reveal what her father had said to anyone.

"I do know of the Aesira Jewel and of the Great Sentinor," Nora whispered.

The knot in her stomach eased.

"Listen to your heart. What it tells you is the right thing," the old woman said.

She thought that sounded like good advice. Thankfully, not everything had changed. "At least I know I am supposed to marry Soren." She sat down on the bed, holding onto what little was left of holding onto.

"He is a good man," Nora said.

"When you got married, were you excited?" she asked.

Her wrinkled eyes came alight with joy. "Oh heavens, yes! My husband was not such a noble man like Soren, of course, but he was simple and sweet and a hard worker. I loved him very much."

"I care for him and he has tried very hard to earn my affection, but I do not know that I am in love with him yet. There is not really any passion between us." She was not disillusioned enough to think she could marry only for love. Marriages had more to do with duty and Lucia was prepared and willing to

make that sacrifice for her kingdom, and although her relationship had been strained with her father, she trusted her parents enough that they had made the right choice for her. Her mother had said on her deathbed that Soren was meant for another, but Lucia had dismissed it now that her father had told her they were predestined to be together.

Nora paused and looked Lucia in the eyes, as if trying to choose her next words carefully. “He will make his wife very happy.”

Lucia sensed the hesitation in her words. It was the same hesitation she had heard in her father’s voice. Is he not a good man? Is he cruel? He had not seemed an angry man the times she had met him.

“Do not fret, young princess. Love will come in time,” Nora said. “Off to bed you go.” She gently nudged Lucia under the covers.

After Nora left, her mind continued to race. Her thoughts wandered back to her immense responsibility and she felt overwhelmed about all the new information she had received. The thought of Eiess being on her way to the castle sent a chill through her spine. Would the Empress of Darkness come tonight? Would she kill Lucia in her sleep? However, Lucia had not been crowned queen yet, so there should be no threat—at least not until after the coronation. In addition, this castle had withstood Eiess’ supposed attacks in the past, so surely, she must be safe within these sturdy, stone walls. Day and night, hundreds of guards stood at their posts without the walls. She could not be in a safer place in all of Midgard.

Finally, she drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

In her dream, Lucia found herself by a crystal blue ocean. The beach was misty, warm, and bright and the white powder sand slipped between her bare toes. There were three longships out at sea and the wind puffed up the red and white striped sails. She turned toward land, and in the near distance she saw several longhouses on the green hillside.

Turning toward the beach again, she noticed a woman in white gliding toward her. At first, she wanted to flee, but when she saw that the woman looked like an older version of her, her heart leapt in her bosom. Could it be? She took a hesitant step forward, and then she gasped.

“Mother! Mother!” She ran toward Maud as fast as her legs could carry her and she did not stop until she had leapt into her arms. Maud looked beautiful, radiant and healthy, and she squeezed Lucia tight and stroked her hair the way she used to when she was alive. “Mother,” she cried. “How I have missed you! I thought I would never see you again. I was so worried I...” She could not speak any more words—her throat had swollen shut with emotion—and all she knew was that she was in the arms of a being of pure light and love. They stood there for some time just holding each other as Lucia soaked up everything she had so desperately missed, as she began to remember what it felt like to feel safe and whole again.

“I have missed you, too, Lucia. But there is little time. Now, walk with me.” She took Lucia’s arm in hers. “You are not just the soon-to-be queen, my love. You were born at the end of Midgard as we know it. You were created to help bring to pass many important things.”

“Father explained some things to me, but—”

“There is another with whom you must be reunited, one who you cannot do without. I cannot tell you who that person is now, for Eiess will surely know if I tell you. Seek this person out and by the grace of the heavens, together you will conquer Eiess.”

Maud started to slowly fade away before Lucia’s eyes. Her face and hands were vanishing, blending with the misty air, disappearing into nothingness.

Her chest ached. “Mother, do not go. Please, stay. I will do anything, anything you want to have you stay. Please, Mother, please!” She tried to grasp her mother’s vanishing hand.

“Remember what I have told you and you will understand who you are. You will be tempted to betray your family, Lucia.” Now Maud was barely visible, and as the force of the wind increased, Maud’s voice was whisked away with it.

She was alone again. Tears brimmed in her eyes. “Mother!” she gasped, crossing her arms in front of her chest, embracing her shattered heart. All the days and nights of hurt, of despair and fear, came down on her all at once, and it felt as if her mother had died all over again. She fell to the sand on hands and knees, and as she collapsed to her side, she rolled up into a ball, weeping.

Suddenly, she heard a loud crackling sound. Startled, she lifted her head and saw that fire had erupted on the sea’s surface. The violent flames licked the blues, and as they approached the shore, threatening to ignite the sand, she retreated backwards on elbows and feet.

“Lucia,” someone shouted in the distance. “Lucia,” the voice said, summoning her again, this time with more force.

She squinted her eyes, and in the sea of fire, she saw a woman walking toward her. The flames did not take to the woman’s black dress, nor did she seem to be harmed by the scorching flames. By the way she held herself and the way she

dressed, it made her think the woman was of noble birth. The bottom half of her face was covered with a black veil, so only her green eyes were visible. When the woman reached the sand, she floated toward Lucia.

“Come, follow me,” she said in a deep voice.

Lucia felt an invisible force grab hold of her, lifting her off the sand, and pulling her toward the woman. As they glided down the shore, the sky grew darker and darker, turning black from the smoke. The clouds started churning in the heavens and swallowed the light from the day into itself.

“Where are we going?” Lucia asked.

“Just follow me,” the woman answered.

“Who are you?” she dug further.

“Why, I am your destroyer. Do you not remember me?” she sneered sarcastically.

She felt a surge of fear grip every part of her being.

The woman turned around. “This is my reign,” she said. Without warning, she ripped the veil off her face and flung it into the flames that now surrounded them. She was a beautiful woman, young-looking at first glance, but with hateful, old eyes. “Tell me what your mother said!”

“My mother?” she asked. She would never divulge what her mother said to her. “My mother is dead.”

“Tell me the truth about what your mother said, or you will never see your father again!” she yelled.

Lucia wrestled with the force which held her captive, trying to run away, but bound like a thrall to her master, she could not move at all.

“You will fail! You will die! I can take your life away in a heartbeat, just as I did in your lifetimes before!”

“Leave me be!” she demanded.

The woman started laughing. “You will never escape me, do you not see? I am the destroyer—your destroyer!” She waved her hand toward the flames, and Lucia was flung into the sea of fire.



## Mare Demons

*Today I will die.*

Ailia was back in her maredream and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She carefully peeled back the distressed linen curtain and glanced out the window. A black smoke trail followed the Surtorians, the Empress of Darkness's agents. The smoke was a circle around the entire city, and as the monsters of men made their way toward the center, they would slay every man woman and child, and burn every longhouse until they found who they were looking for.

"They're almost here! You must leave! Leave now, with Freydis before they come!" Ailia yelled to her mother, Edna. "Oh, may the gods be merciful today!"

Ailia wanted nothing more than to wake up, but she couldn't tear herself out of the dream.

*Why is she after me?* Ailia couldn't remember.

Dense smoke and flying ashes filled the spring sky and it smelled of burnt wood and flesh. The Empress had come on the one morning Ailia's husband was gone. *Did she plan it that way?* Ailia wondered. *What's my husband's name? Am I losing my mind? No, I'm just dreaming!*

"No, I will not leave you, not now, not ever. Do you understand?" Edna grabbed Ailia by the shoulders and shook her. "Freydis *needs* her mother, your husband *needs* his wife and I *need* my daughter." Her swollen almond eyes searched for Ailia's gaze. "Come with us. Please, my love, come with us. I beg you!"

Ailia had never seen her mother so distraught. "It's *me* the empress is after. If she has *me*, she'll put an end to the Surtorians' slaughter and thousands of lives will be spared." She twisted out of her mother's grip, pulled out the scroll she had been working on, and continued to write. The last time the empress had been on Ailia's heels was three months ago and they needed to uproot again and relocate to Whiteheim so they could gain more time, but time to do what? Something didn't seem right and the untimely loss of her memory petrified Ailia.

Suddenly, a clamoring crowd rushed past their window, followed by a mob of Surtorians. Death would swallow her victims whole, whether or not those victims were ready for death.

Ailia could stop the bloodshed if she surrendered, but first she must secure her mother's and Freydis' safety.

She signed her name on the bottom of the scroll and rolled it up neatly. "Please, Mother. If the Surtorians find you and Freydis, they won't hesitate to kill both of you as well as me." Ailia was tired of running from the Empress of Darkness. Eiess haunted Ailia's dreams at night and made each day a living maredream and she wouldn't stop hunting her until she had

killed Ailia. If she surrendered now, she could save many lives, and would still have one more life to use to outmaneuver and destroy the empress. *If only we had better concealed my identity, she would never have known where to find me,* Ailia lamented. “I know how afraid you must be, Mother, but please, for the sake of Freydis, leave now,” she said.

The plea came too late. A Surtorian kicked in the door and stormed into the dim house, lifting his great sword high above his head.

Freydis shrieked.

“I knew I’d find you here,” he said, his voice rough and threatening, a grim smile appearing on the monster’s crusty lips. Bright red blood dripped from the greatsword’s massive blade—the blood of many innocent lives.

Freydis ran over to her mother, hiding behind her skirt.

“Come with me now and I’ll spare the life of the snot child and the old hag,” the Surtorian barked. He pushed over a table and chair, backing Ailia and Freydis up into the corner by the spinning wheel.

Ailia could see that blood spotted his long, red beard as well. She looked at her mother and back at the Surtorian. His offer to spare Freydis and Edna was more than generous coming from a slayer who was trained to kill humans mercilessly. “Do I have your word?” she asked, staring him in the eyes.

“Yes,” the Surtorian said. He lowered his sword and rested both hands on the hilt.

*I have no other choice but to believe him.* Ailia hunched down and looked her daughter tenderly in the eyes. “You are brave, my love, so very brave. Remember, Mamma loves you. Be good for Bestmother,” she said, hoping the words would bring courage to her young daughter and herself. She stroked Freydis’s golden hair away from her face and kissed her

forehead. *There's nothing more beautiful than the innocence of a child*, she thought sadly. Ailia glanced at her mother and nodded.

"Freydis, come here, my love. Let's go into the other room and play," Edna said, holding her arms open to receive the child. Tears ran down Edna's cheeks.

Freydis ran over to her bestmother and jumped into her arms.

The moment was bittersweet. Bitter because Ailia wouldn't live to raise her child, sweet because her child's life had been spared. She stood up and nodded again to Edna, signaling for her to leave. "Please, please, don't let her forget me," Ailia said softly as tears flooded her eyes. *Oh, the things I would do to have just a few more days with my family, with my husband.*

A cry escaped Edna's lips and she turned to face her daughter again. "I'll always speak of you so she will remember you. I'll let her know who you were," she said.

"Enough! Before I change my mind!" the Surtorian yelled and rushed toward the women, his creaking black leather armor smelling of sweat and the sea.

Freydis buried her head in her bestmother's chest, and with the child clinging to her body, Edna disappeared into the back room.

Ailia lifted the scroll out of her pocket and placed it next to the hearth before stepping forward to surrender.

"What do you think you're doing?" the Surtorian roared.

"Leaving a letter for my husband. He's not here today. Surely you can give me that courtesy?" Ailia held her arms out front so he could tie them. She tried to read the writing on the outside of the scroll. *It must be my husband's name, but I cannot read it.*

The Surtorian grabbed the scroll and crumpled it up in his leather-covered fist, throwing it toward the flames. Missing the flames, the scroll thumped heavily to the mud-packed floor instead. He seized Ailia and tied her arms behind her back before

dragging her out into the summer sun. The smell of smoke flooded her nostrils.

Several Surtorians gathered around Ailia. “Look who I found!” her captor yelled. “The woman our Empress calls ‘Light’!”

*Light?* Ailia thought.

The Surtorians closed in on her and tugged her from side to side, nearly ripping off her clothes.

“Get back, fools! The Empress has instructed us to bring her back unharmed,” the Surtorian growled at the others. “Get back!” He lifted his great sword toward them and sliced through the air. They withdrew their filthy hands to keep them.

A lure sounded from the main longship, beckoning all Surtorians to return to the ship. The lure’s deafening sound competed with the warning bells from the Whiteheim bell tower. Both worked in unison to instill fear into all the people of Whiteheim.

“Can you swim, little fish?” The Surtorian grinned, nearly spitting in Ailia’s face. He pulled her along, kicking up the gravel from the road as he strode back toward Eiess’ longships.

“Yes,” Ailia lied. She twisted around so she could see Freydis and her mother in the window. “I don’t know when I’ll return, but never lose hope that I’ll be back!” she called. “Mamma! Mamma!” Freydis cried. *At least my child is safe now*, Ailia thought. *That’s all that matters.*

Unable to bear seeing her mother’s forlorn face or her daughter’s longing eyes, she turned back to face the fjord. Down at the docks, the empress was flying four crescent-moon embellished ensigns on her massive longship.

“I doubt you’ll be able to swim for very long with weights tied to your feet,” the Surtorian said, jerking her forward.

The other Surtorians roared with laughter, clanking and drumming their swords and shields together, as they marched in perfect rhythm to the beat of death—her death.

They reached the port quickly. Ailia noticed a slough of seagulls squawking as they flew in circles above the longship. They seemed disturbed—or obsessed—plunging into the sea, disappearing in its depths as if drowning themselves. The splashing sound of the waves and the fragrance of the sea rode in on the shifting winds and the breeze excited the longship's black sails.

The Surtorian pushed Ailia onto the longship and led her below deck. There, in the dimness, a young woman sat on a black and gold throne, her intense green eyes fixed on Ailia.

“Welcome. I am so glad I found you again,” Eiless said calmly. Her wavy, raven hair cascaded down her chest.

*Again?* Ailia couldn't remember ever meeting her. *Her eyes almost look like they are glowing*, she thought. The longship started to sway back and forth as it cast off from the pier.

Rising to her feet, the empress strolled over to Ailia. “Today, Light, you will lose your life again, just like you did before.” She stood at arm's length from Ailia now. “Do you remember the last time I drowned you? It was quite dramatic but fantastically rewarding for me.” She smiled.

Unable to recall the incident, Ailia looked away.

“You really do not remember, do you?” Eiless tilted her head back and let out a sigh. “How amusing.” She reached her hand forward and caressed Ailia's auburn hair. “You must be afraid now that I am going to drown you again. That means you only have one more life to try and destroy me. One. Two. Three. That is all you were given. You have not done very well with the first two lives at all.” She stroked Ailia's cheek with the back of her pastel hand.

“No, I’m not afraid,” Ailia lied. She did fear drowning and death but not as much as she feared losing her husband or failing in her life’s purpose to kill Eiess.

“Take care of her,” the Empress said to the Surtorian. “The sooner I can get rid of my problem and the sooner we can leave this wretched land, the better.”

The Surtorian promptly pulled Ailia out onto the deck. The bright sun stung Ailia’s eyes and the feisty summer breeze gusted in her face. Uncontrollable fear surged through her body like a scream when she saw how far they had already sailed from port.

The Empress came out from below deck. “I loathe the sun, but I will endure the light just so I can have the satisfaction of watching you die,” she said.

“I will return!” Ailia screamed, her voice cracking. “I will come for you again!” Had not the Surtorian held onto her, the legs would have buckled beneath her.

The Empress remained silent, but she needed no words to communicate the gratification that vibrated from her eyes.

“Any last words?” the Surtorian asked. He locked a chain with weights around Ailia’s ankles and dragged her to the longship’s prow.

“When I return, I will return with a vengeance and—” Ailia said.

The Surtorian pushed her overboard.

“—fulfill my life’s purpose in—” Ailia said just as she hit the water.

\* \* \*

Ailia woke up drenched in sweat, gasping for air, crying out for help. She hadn't had a maredream in a while and had thought the horrifying visions had finally vanished. Why? Why had they returned now? It had been months since the last one. She couldn't stop her heart from beating erratically, or prevent her hands from trembling.

*It was nothing but a dream*, she repeated to herself over and over. But the fear wouldn't subside this time. Dangling her feet over her bed, she debated whether she should try to go back to sleep or get up. No one in Brandersgaard was awake yet; it was as quiet as the deepest ocean. The ocean she had just... No! She mustn't think of it. Not today. Not any day.

Suddenly, it dawned on her what day it was.

It was winter solstice and Ailia's eighteenth birthday. For any other girl her age, it would be a happy day, but Ailia always felt gloomy this time of year as thoughts of her birth parents surfaced to the forefront of her mind. Normally, to compensate for this, she would have invited friends over to celebrate, but all her friends had abandoned her. Rumors of Ailia's curse still buzzed through Bergendal, and more recently she had even been branded a traitor for having attended a couple of meetings at the Christian stave church. She had quit going, hoping the persecution would stop, but now she felt like a coward for allowing others to control her in this way. Perhaps Uncle Brander was right when he said she needed to stand up for herself more. Perhaps she was obtuse.

She had realized that marrying Geir might be a blessing in disguise. No one in Solnes, Geir's hometown, knew about her alleged curse, and if she did decide to join the Christians, Solnes had many more followers than Bergendal and were much more tolerant to other religions. Geir had even expressed interest in converting when he had visited last month, which had Unni



smiling and Brander gawking. She found herself looking forward to a new beginning even though it took marrying a man she didn't love. But perhaps she could, like Unni had said, learn to love him. Their wedding was set for spring and Unni had just recently started sewing Ailia's dress.

When the red cock crowed, Ailia rose and dressed in her new rust red tunic. Unni had given it to her yesterday as an early birthday present. She had embroidered the edges of the skirt hem and sleeves with butterfly stitching, and the wool was exquisitely soft. Deciding to head to Odinseat to clear her mind, she threw on her sheepskin overcoat, pulled on her wool mittens, and bundled her scarf around her head, tucking it down into her neck. She also wanted to go there to get a better view of the Auroras that had been beaming across the heavens over the past few nights. Odinseat was the place in Midgard where the Norse god Odin supposedly visited when he needed to ponder and receive inspiration. And lately, it was one of Ailia's favorite places to go.

Fresh out the door, she took to a brisk walk. It wasn't too cold outside today, so she was looking forward to her little secret excursion under the star-speckled heavens. If she hurried, she figured she could even be back by sunrise, which was always late morning this time of year. She crossed the nearly frozen-over Bergendal River and continued through the pine-covered mountainside and on to Odinseat.

Ailia climbed upward for some time until she came to the steepest part of the mountain. With her back to the icy ridge, she inched her way sideways, so she could squeeze to the other side of the peak. Finally she stepped onto Odinseat, a perfectly flat and massive cliff jutting out from the mountain. The sky had been clear at the onset of her trip, but now, and to her great disappointment, heavy clouds hung in the heavens instead of

stars, and she could not see anything in any direction. Strange, she thought, how all these clouds had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. There was no way she would be able to see any of the Auroras in this overcast weather. *All that for nothing?* Ailia laughed. *Just like my life lately: a huge disappointment.* Figuring she might as well sit here for a while after having trudged through knee-high snow nearly the entire way, she slowly inched toward the drop-off. Almost to the edge, she sat down and scooted the rest of the way until her legs dangled over the steep cliff. It wasn't much of a sight as the fog covered everything more than a few feet away. But it felt good to be alone.

She sat still for a long time, thinking of all the things she had now started to realize she would never experience—love, being one of them. That was the hardest one to give up. She could never love Geir. There was no connection between them whatsoever and marrying him would be like marrying Uncle Brander: unnatural, awkward and plain wrong. *But at least I will have peace,* she thought.

As she sat there a while longer, the cold began sneaking its way back into her body. She tucked her hands underneath her armpits to warm them, but she really needed to get up and move to not freeze. Then the first snowflake gently swayed down from above. *I best get home,* she thought. The last thing she needed was to get stuck in the mountains in the middle of a snowstorm on her birthday.

She edged her way back around the ridge and started down the slope. Suddenly, she lost her foothold and slid down the mountainside. She didn't go far, however, before a pine tree stopped her rapid descent with a thud. After assuring herself that she was not hurt, Ailia opened her eyes. The air was much clearer here than on the other side of the mountain and would make it much easier to climb down.

Then, she saw them: a multitude of ruggedly-dressed men standing in the forest, holding longswords, colorful shields, spears, bows and arrows, and Dane axes. Most of them had heavily-bearded faces and they all had thick fur or sheepskin overcoats, with heavy boots, mittens and hats or hoods covering their heads. A few of the closest men spotted Ailia and pointed at her.

“Look over there! A girl!” one of them yelled.

Her stomach roiled. Where had they come from? What were they doing here, hundreds of them, thousands perhaps. If this was an attack on Bergendal, she needed to get word to Brander as soon as possible. But first, she needed to escape.

“Gunnar, seize that girl straightaway!” a man with a huge scar running down the side of his face said.

Ailia got up as fast as she could and ran in the opposite direction of the men. The snow on the slanted forest floor was difficult to run in and she kept slipping. All she could think about was her fear and how stupid she had been in not telling anyone where she had gone. Her heart started racing a thousand miles a minute now because she knew she was in grave danger.

“Stop!” Gunnar yelled after her. “Stop, or I *will* kill you!” On his way toward Ailia, he grabbed his Dane ax. “I have my ax aimed at your head and I’m ready to unleash it!”

Ailia froze up and slowly turned to face her pursuer. *Gunnar?* she thought. She used to know a man named Gunnar. He’d come over and visit Brandersgaard when Ailia was a child and she thought she remembered that he might somehow be related to Unni. This probably was not the same Gunnar, she figured.

*Should I run? Shouldn’t I run?* They would probably kill her if they caught her. They would probably kill her if she tried to run. Fear raced through Ailia’s veins and her heart thumped

against her ribs. Her feet instinctively started backing away from her adversary.

“Who are you?” she heard herself ask. No answer. The distance between her and Gunnar was decreasing rapidly as he pranced toward her light on his feet. *Get home! Get home!* Acting on instinct, Ailia spun around to make a run for it. What she had failed to notice was that another man had snuck up behind her. She ran into his chest, and before she had a chance to escape, he had grabbed her by the hair.

The pain was agonizing. “Ouch!” she yelled, grabbing his thick forearm. Tears flooded her eyes. He smelled disgusting, unfamiliar, almost sweet and yet rancid. Then she noticed a black raven embroidered onto his grungy, red wool overcoat. *Don't the Vik people carry a raven emblem?*

Her hair hurt, but she forced herself not to think about that now. *They are going to kill me!* “Unni! Brander!” she screamed, kicking her captor in the shin. But she knew they couldn't hear her. Not out here, miles away from Brandersgaard. In a flash, she thought back to a conversation she had overheard between Bishop Peter and Sigrid, their thrall. “If you ever meet a Vik person, make sure that whatever you do—” the Bishop had said, “—do not ever let them capture you and take them to their settlement. For if you do, you are as good as dead.”

“Tie her to a tree,” the scar-faced man said.

“No!” Ailia yelled, kicking her legs and thrashing her arms. But the more she resisted, the harder her detainer tugged at her hair.

Gunnar pulled out a rope, bound her arms and feet, and then wound the rope around her torso, tying her to a hefty trunk.

“What do I do with her now?” he asked.

“I will decide that later,” the scar-faced man said and rushed off.

Another man came up to Ailia and started untying his trousers. She immediately knew what he was going to do and felt sick to her stomach. But before he was even able to touch her, a circular object came flying through the air and struck the man. His head split open and he crashed into the snow, turning it red. Snowflakes were coming down so heavily now that Ailia had a hard time seeing where the object had come from. But as she trained her gaze into the night, she saw a woman on a black horse in the distance, wearing a light-colored dress. The woman caught the flying weapon and placed it on her head. *A crown?*

“Keep your men focused on the task at hand,” the woman yelled angrily to the scar-faced man. “If not, I will find other men to do the job.”

“Yes, Empress Eiess,” the scar-faced man said, bowing.

Ailia’s blood curdled in her veins. *Eiess is—a living, breathing person?*

She tried desperately to see through the white curtain of snow, but it was impossible because it was still dark. *Are the Surtorians here, too?* She didn’t see any, only the shabbily dressed Vik men.

“Get into your formations,” one of the leaders called out. Without missing a beat, the men lined up in five long lines across the mountainside. Standing shoulder to shoulder, with their weapons in hand, and at full attention, the men turned to warriors before Ailia’s eyes.

Eiess did not seem to recognize Ailia or even care that she was there—only that she did not distract the men from their plans. She rode toward Ailia on her black stallion, conversing with the scar-faced man.

“You will advance your men from the south,” Eiess said. “The Surtorians will come from the east. Once the outside of the Northlandic Castle has been secured, I will enter and take over

the throne—alone. Vilda, the king’s sister, has agreed to try and talk King Olav into a peaceable solution. If he does not agree, we will have to use a more creative method.”

“My men are ready at your command,” the scar-faced man said.

“Good, because I would hate to be disappointed by you again,” Eiess said. “Your job is to make sure the people of Bergendal do not interfere in my plans. Keep the inhabitants as unsuspecting as possible. Only kill if you absolutely have to. I need them alive, so they can do work for me later.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” the man said. “What about the girl over there?”

Ailia’s ears pinned instinctively, but she barely dared listen for the answer. *What will my fate be?*

“I do not have time to worry about an insignificant peasant girl. See that she does not cause any more distractions among your men. After the throne is mine, you can do with her as you please,” Eiess said.

Ailia breathed for a moment. *Safe for now*, but she feared what would come after. Captivity? Rape? Torture? Death? All four?

“Once that is complete, may I take the rest of Bergendal’s spoils with me?” the scar-faced man asked.

“Spoils?” Eiess said. “If you do your job like I have commanded, there should be no spoils. I do not want your men plundering or raping in Bergendal. This will be my city now. Anything you plunder, you will be plundering from me. I will reward you with longships and treasures beyond your wildest imagination if you do your job to my satisfaction.”

“Of course, Your Excellency,” he said, bowing.

“Now, let us take charge of Bergendal and the entire Northlandic Kingdom,” Eiess commanded.

The scar-faced man marched over in front of his men who were waiting.

“No plundering! No raping! No killing, unless I command! Only imprison those who rebel. Try to remain invisible to the people of Bergendal. If you keep to these rules, there will be generous amounts of treasures and countless other opportunities for all of you! If you do not keep to these rules, you all know what happens to traitors!” the Vik leader said. The warriors quietly clanked their weapons on their shields.

The Vik leader nodded to Eiess, who nodded back.

“Then let us proceed with our descent,” Eiess said.

The warriors started moving down the mountainside as quietly as cats, ready to help Eiess usurp the Northlandic Throne.

### Shift

Needing to calm herself from the maredream, Lucia rose out of bed, went to the window, and looked out across the country of which she would soon be the queen. The Northern Star had begun to shine more brightly over the land, as it did each year on winter solstice eve, but it did not bring her joy like it had in years passed. Now it only reminded her that her mother was not there to share in its scintillating beauty.

She had to find the person of which her mother spoke, even if it was near impossible. She had no clue who the person could be or even where to start searching. However, she trusted her mother when she had said it was vital she locate this being if she were to defeat Eiess.

That name sent a cold chill through her spine, and a feeling of ill-omen speared through her heart and shot from her chest straight to her core. She could not describe in words what was happening, but she could sense Midgard swing toward a perilous and dark season.



“Are you all right, my princess?” Nora asked, storming into the room, her voice filled with fear.

She startled at her handmaiden’s voice and turned around.

Without waiting for an answer, Nora dashed into Lucia’s wardrobe and started rifling through the clothes.

“What is wrong?” Lucia asked, stepping into the closet.

Nora threw a white rabbit fur coat around Lucia’s shoulders. “Quickly, quietly come with me,” she whispered, pulling on Lucia’s arm. “Your father has asked me to take you to a sleigh that awaits outside.” Lifting a torch off the wall, she said, “You must leave the castle immediately.”

“What? Why?” Lucia asked.

“There is no time to talk. The castle will soon be under attack,” Nora said as they started down the hallway. The torch lit up the blackened corridor so they could see a few feet in front of them. Finally, they reached the northeastern stairwell and started running down the steps.

“Your father told me that Eiess is on her way here to capture you and possibly kill you,” Nora said with a look of horror on her face. “She believes you are the Great Sentinor.”

“What?” Lucia’s insides churned in terror.

“Dear, there is no time to discuss or think about these things now. If we do not act immediately and get you out of here, Eiess will be here and we will all be killed.”

Lucia’s blood rushed to her face. She could not breathe. She could not talk. All she could think was that she would be dead by morning.

Soon, the women reached the bottom of the stairwell. Nora stopped and grabbed Lucia by the arms, looking her frankly in the eyes. “I cannot come with you, but Vilda is waiting outside by the king’s sleigh. She will take you to a safe place where Eiess cannot harm you.”

“You must come with me!” Lucia objected. “I refuse to go without you!”

“No time to debate.” Nora grabbed Lucia’s hand and started pulling her down the hallway. They entered the pantry room and scurried through it, maneuvering around crates, baskets, and boxes. It was tricky since it was stocked to the ceiling with food, drinks and items they had received just days before in preparation for the winter solstice celebration and Lucia’s coronation.

*Now it appears all the preparations have been for naught,* Lucia thought fleetingly.

Nora pushed the door open and the icy northern wind hit Lucia’s face. She shuddered as the unforgiving wind blew millions of fluttering snowflakes in hundreds of different directions, grateful to Nora for choosing her warmest fur. Through the open courtyard door, Lucia saw a sea of troops standing in front of the castle. Eies really was coming for her tonight. Her heart felt as if it had stopped, but there was not time to stop when she was running for her life.

As expected, Vilda was waiting by the sleigh. “Oh good, there you are. I was beginning to get worried something had happened to you.” She sighed briefly before opening her arms to greet Lucia with an embrace.

With her heart in her throat, Lucia ran over and hugged her.

Nora curtsied to Vilda and opened the sleigh door. “Do not you worry, Lucia, my dear. I will be meeting you soon enough,” she said.

“No, I refuse to leave without you!”

Nora turned Lucia toward her and looked her straight in the eyes again. “You will go and you will go now!” she shouted.

Lucia had never seen Nora this obstinate and was startled by her sternness.

“Now get in that sleigh, young lady, immediately. Everything will be fine in the end, you will see,” Nora said.

Lucia wrapped her arms around Nora again, squeezing her tight. She knew Nora was hiding something, something like fear or pain, or the knowledge that everything would not be all right, but there was no time to ask. Nora pried Lucia’s arms open and guided her into the sleigh.

“But what about my father? Where is he?” Lucia asked.

“He will meet you after all is settled,” Nora said, her voice competing with the howling wind. “Take good care of her, Your Majesty,” Nora begged Vilda.

“Why of course,” Vilda replied. “She is safe in my keeping; you can count on that.”

Nora burst into tears when Lucia sat down. “I will see you in a few days, my dear. Farewell,” she said, stepping back and holding the door open for Vilda.

“Thank you,” Vilda said civilly as she stepped into the white sleigh. “But in reality, you know I do not need *your* help.”

Nora curtsied and closed the door behind Vilda. She signaled to the coachman who was at the helm of six strong *dun fjord* horses and the sleigh started moving, slowly at first and then faster and faster until Lucia could no longer see her beloved handmaiden.

The night was bitterly cold, and Lucia pulled her coat closer to her body, trying to keep the heat inside. What was happening? Eiess was on her way. Her father was still at the castle. Would she ever see him again? It was true she was not particularly fond of him, but what he had done tonight, he had done protect her. To save her life.

“Your father is a fool,” Vilda said suddenly. “He thinks he can get rid of me by sending me away to Hammersten.”

Lucia was shocked. She knew her father and Vilda had some disagreements, but it shocked her that Vilda would ever call him a fool, especially in her presence. “I think he could really use you there,” she said.

“Yes, that is all I have ever been to him—someone he can use,” Vilda said.

Lucia shifted in her seat. “That is not what I meant.”

“It is the truth. Driver!” Vilda yelled. “Stop the sleigh. I need to get out.”

“No! Eiess is after me!”

The sleigh slowed and then finally came to a halt. Vilda got up next to the coachman and pushed him off with one forceful shove, sending him into the snow.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” Lucia asked, ready to jump out of the sleigh.

“We need the Aesira Jewel, so you can keep shifting the seasons. Your father is a fool to not have thought about that,” Vilda said.

Vilda was right, although had her father already taken care of the matter? He was not the kind of man to let something as important as this slip between the cracks. They rode back as quickly as possible and both got out of the sleigh.

“Do you know where the Aesira Jewel is kept?” Vilda asked.

Then it dawned on her: *How does she know about the jewel?* And now that she started thinking about it further, she became convinced that her father already had a plan for the jewel.

“There is no time to waste. Eiess will be here any moment,” Vilda said.

“I will go get it. Wait here,” Lucia said, thinking she would try to find her father and tell him.

“No!” Vilda yelled. “I must come with you.”

“No, I will go get it,” Lucia insisted. “My father told me that I should tell no one where it is kept hidden, not even you.”

“Your mother told me everything about the Aesira Jewel and the scrolls. You do not have to hide anything from me. I am only trying to help you. You can trust me, Lucia,” Vilda said.

*Scrolls?* Lucia thought. “Let us go see my father first.”

Vilda grabbed Lucia’s arm and shook it. “No! There is no time!”

“I would think, if you do not know where the Aesira Jewel is, you should not have access to it,” Lucia said, starting toward the castle entrance.

Vilda grabbed Lucia’s arm and pulled her back. Hitting her across the face, she sent Lucia face-down into the snow.

*How dare she?* Lucia thought as she pushed up into a sitting position. Looking around, her surroundings were spinning, and as she glanced at the ground to try and stop the dizziness, she saw blood dripping from her face and into the snow.

“I command you to stop!” Lucia yelled. But when she lifted her gaze, she saw Vilda approaching her with a chain.

Vilda slammed her fist into Lucia’s face again, and before Lucia knew what had happened, Vilda had chained her wrists and was pulling her toward the castle. Screaming at the top of her lungs, kicking and raging, Lucia was still powerless to her aunt’s brute strength. Vilda hauled her up the stairs and into the throne room.

Lucia’s mouth and nose were bleeding heavily onto her stark-white fur coat, but her focus was not on that. *When my father sees me, he will set me free.* “Father!” she yelled, as she saw him with his counselors, their heads down over a table, looking like they were planning their attack.

Vilda tugged at the chain around Lucia’s wrists and Lucia fell hard to the floor, slamming her head against the cold stone

surface. She let out a cry, but this did not stop Vilda. Pulling on the chain, she dragged Lucia backwards along the floor toward her until Lucia lay lifeless at her feet.

“What in Valhalla’s name are you doing here?” King Olav asked, his face paling immediately. “And what are you doing to Lucia?”

“Brother, dear brother,” Vilda said. “Hear me out. I have a superior solution to your—to our—problems. It will be better for your people, for your household, for you and especially for Lucia, your only heir to the throne.”

“Vilda, this is no time for discussion; we need to prepare, so we have a chance to save the Northlandic Kingdom. What are you doing? I asked you to take Lucia far away from here, so she would be protected and safe.” Olav started toward Vilda, and he glanced at one of the hundreds of guards standing against the wall.

“Stop, or I will kill her,” Vilda said, pulling out a dagger.

Olav stopped dead in his tracks.

“Do you really think you can stand up to Eiess?” Vilda asked. “You will be dead by morning if you resist her. There is a way we can peaceably resolve matters with her.”

“There is no way to peaceably resolve matters with Eiess. She demands utter submission and servitude from everyone. I will not discuss it here. Now, release Lucia instantly!” His voice thundered through the throne room.

“And if I do not?” Vilda challenged.

“You will be thrown in the dungeon until we are through fighting this battle and you will be tried for treason,” Olav threatened.

“Ha!” Vilda yelled. “Ha, ha, ha! I have been living under your pathetic rule for years. I have supported you and I have cared for you and Lucia since Maud’s passing and this is how

you repay me? I can help you find a way to live in peace and what do you do? You throw it in my face! You king of scum!” she fumed.

Olav gestured to his grand marshal and he sent the two closest guards to restrain her.

Vilda pressed the dagger in front of Lucia’s heart so hard that it pierced her dress.

Feeling the tip of the blade against her chest, Lucia let out a whimper.

“My Brother, do you think I would come in here empty-handed and without a decent plan? I am not an idiot like you.” She then pulled Lucia in even closer and spoke directly into her ear. “Lucia, your father is not a king to be admired. He hardly even deserves the title. He is a coward and a feeble-minded man. He was never even faithful to your poor mother and spent his time seducing and whoring with another woman named Ava. Did you know your mother was heartbroken over this? She would come to me crying almost every day. She deserved a much better man than him.”

Lucia looked at her father to see if this was true, not wanting to believe Vilda’s words.

“Enough!” Olav spewed. “Leave her out of this!”

*It is true*, Lucia thought. Her heart shattered for her poor mother.

Vilda stood up tall, an air of satisfaction and accomplishment resting on her face. “The seed of doubt has been planted in Lucia’s mind. Now, she is starting to see who you truly are, like I do.”

“What do you want?” Olav asked hostilely.

“I want to be heard!” Vilda snapped back. “I want to feel that what I have to say is important to you!”

“Do not think of yourself only. Eiess will be here soon and we will surely be defeated unless we act now,” Olav said, meekly now.

“Ah, but she is part of the solution—my solution,” Vilda retorted.

“Very well. If you let Lucia go, you may speak your plan and I will listen.”

“I will not let her go, but hear me now. Eiess will spare your lives and continue the seasons as usual if you give her all power over the Northlandic Kingdom and generously bestow her with the Aesira Jewel,” Vilda said.

“Have you been speaking with her?” Olav asked, his face grimacing in horror.

“She is my ally,” Vilda revealed, looking proud. “An unexpected friend indeed.”

“How could you betray your own blood?” Lucia asked. *I will never do that.*

“At first, I was afraid of the powerful empress and resisted her advances,” Vilda said. “I could never betray my brother, my own blood, I believed. But then I thought, what is blood? One cannot choose one’s family; one is merely randomly born into one and must remain with them until death. Life in Midgard is too short and difficult to suffer through bad families. So, when I accepted an audience with Eiess, she told me that she is here as the peace giver, the one who brings rest, tranquility and stillness to the weary, worried heart. She is here to—”

“Do you comprehend the destruction she will bring on this land if she gets her hands on the Aesira Jewel?” King Olav interrupted. “She will usurp everyone’s power, making all men, women and children thralls, with no freedom, no choice and no reason to live. We will all suffer and starve to death sooner or later. Have you given any thought to that?”



“No, Olav, she has promised to spare the people and to ring in the new season every solstice. She will even allow Lucia to do it. She is no liar, Brother. She is the Sentinor of rest and peace,” Vilda said.

Olav paused. “She *is* a liar. She is *the ultimate liar!* And she will devastate every living soul in Midgard with her finite ideas of rest.” Olav thought for a moment. “Vilda, I concede; I will listen to her when she gets here,” he stated. “Now, release Lucia immediately.”

“As soon as you give me the Aesira Jewel,” Vilda answered slyly.

Without warning, the castle started shaking violently. Vilda lost her footing and her grasp on Lucia and fell to the floor, and taking advantage of the situation, Lucia quickly made her way to her father.

“Are you hurt?” Olav asked, taking her into his embrace.

Lucia shook her head. *Only afraid.*

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the shaking ceased. In an instant, the torches were stripped of their flames, leaving the throne room in a void of light where only a hollow silence remained. Whistling wind sang through the corridors and as the wind approached, it sounded like a woman’s breath exhaling deeply. Sounds of ice crystallizing the walls trickled down in the darkness and with one last breath, the fireplace was also extinguished.

It seemed as if everyone in the room held their breaths as they waited for some evil to beset them. It was alarmingly quiet outside. No men spoke. And not even the wind howled anymore. If Eiess had arrived, there should surely have been a battle, with all the troop outside, but there was only the resonating sound of sinister silence. Dawn started to illuminate the cloudy sky and

light penetrated the stained-glass windows. The guards' armor picked up the subtle luminosity, reflecting it onto the walls.

Lucia could see her breath in front of her in the now-freezing room. She gathered her fur coat closely around her neck and tried to make eye contact with her father. She was afraid to speak, thinking her voice would attract more danger.

Then, almost unnoticed, Eiess entered the room.

\* \* \*

Eiess entered the room alone. She moved like a spirit, flowing as with invisible wings, gliding over the solid, cold, stone floor. She was as stunningly beautiful as she was cold. Her dress was made of ice blue and white silk and was simple, yet timeless. The square neckline on the masterpiece accentuated her square jawline and as subtle light peeked through the windows, Lucia could see that she had piercing green eyes and pitch-black hair.

Eiess' age could not be determined, because she was not a being of the realm of Midgard. She looked to be in her mid-twenties and exuded youthful beauty and vivacity. Lucia had heard rumors that the empress was the only living human-like being alive who was cold-blooded and who would devour humans, so she could continue to live in Midgard.

Eiess' skin was as pale and smooth as porcelain, but strangely enough, she did, Lucia could see, have light, rosy cheeks. Her posture was impeccable and she moved with graceful exquisiteness. The sleeves on her dress were not puffed, but sleek and flared down toward the floor. The drop set waist dress accentuated her elegant thinness. Her floor-length skirt had a

train that flowed endlessly, like the breath from a warm-blooded living being on a cold winter night. Sparkling diamond rings adorned most of her fingers and a diamond necklace decorated her swan-like neckline. The Empress had no armor to shield her body, no guard to protect her life; she needed no such things. Her power to kill was infinite and they all knew it and felt her threatening, overpowering presence as she silently entered their midst.

“Greetings,” Eiess said, her expression unapologetic.

Vilda moved to greet her. “My empress,” she said and bowed down on the floor before Eiess. “I have failed to convince King Olav of your noble and altruistic intentions,” she offered.

“Never mind him,” Eiess responded with the greatest of calmness in her deep, soothing voice. “I will take care of him,” she said, staring at Lucia as if she owned her.

“My daughter is not for the taking and using in your scheme to control me,” Olav said, pulling Lucia closer.

“Ah, but she is,” Eiess refuted. “You seem to think you are more powerful than me and that you have a say in the matter. But what you fail to see is that this is my reign!”

Lucia gasped as a deep chill shot down her spine. “My dream,” she whispered.

“Ah, now you recognize me, child,” Eiess said. “My question is the same for you. I will persist until I have the answer I seek.”

“I will never tell you!” Lucia insisted, still clinging onto her father’s armor.

“I will give you an opportunity to join me, Olav,” Eiess said, shifting her focus onto him.

“Never!” Olav roared.

“Are you certain? For if you do not, I will seize the castle by force and many more will die today,” Eiess said.

“Never!” he yelled again.

Smiling, Eiess raised her left hand and looked up into the ceiling. She clenched her fist and then pulled her hand down in to her body. She then raised her right hand, with her palm up toward Lucia, and started pulling her forward with an imperceptible force.

Lucia screamed as she felt the pull of gravity coming from Eiess and as she was being dragged in the direction of her adversary, she grabbed on to her father’s arm with all her might. “Help!”

“Lucia!” Olav grabbed on tighter to keep her from being pulled away. “Charge!” he yelled to the guards.

They responded immediately, attacking Eiess with full force.

For a moment, Eiess let go of Lucia, but only to get rid of the distraction King Olav had caused. Eiess pulled her hands into her chest, closed her eyes, and paused. Then, she opened her glowing, icy green eyes and flung her arms out to the side as quickly as she could.

Darkness oozed from her hands, permeating the room. Obscure mist swallowed the guards in its blackness, lifting them upward, forcing them to the top of the high ceilings. Nervous clamors from the men echoed through the room. Even Lucia knew that a fall from up there would cause severe injury, if not death. Then, Eiess thrust her arms downward, causing the guards to fall to the stone floor with a crash. The colorful stained-glass windows exploded to the outside, opening passages for the cool northern air to enter.

“Go!” Olav said, pulling Lucia with him toward the northwestern exit door.

The grand marshal and four guards followed King Olav and Lucia.

Wasting no time, Eiess lifted the diamond and sapphire crown off her head and flung it toward them, splitting the grand marshal's and one of the guard's skulls open. The crown rebounded after its brief, lethal flight and the empress caught it mid-air. She returned the weapon to her head. It looked innocently beautiful where it sat.

"Thank you Lamnia," Lucia heard Eiess say. It almost sounded as if she were speaking to her crown.

Lucia shrieked as they exited, stepping over the men who were twisting in agony on the floor.

"You shall not live where you have lived before," Eiess said, passing by the victims, stepping around their mangled bodies.

"Vilda, follow me!" Lucia heard Eiess command. Looking back, she clung to her father's hand for dear life as they ran toward the queen's chamber.

A guard opened the door to the room and shut it behind them after everyone had entered.

"Chairs, furniture, everything in front of the door now!" King Olav shouted. "Before we leave, we must get the Aesira Jewel. It is the only way to keep Eiess from becoming omnipotent," he ordered. "It rests behind the painting there."

Just then, the door blasted open and Eiess entered the chamber with Vilda and numerous monsters of men behind her. Lucia had never seen such large brutes before, and in passing, she wondered if they might be from Jotunheim, the realm of the giants.

"I am glad to see you have all managed to meet in *my* new chamber. I believe I have everything I need here, once my dear Lucia shows me where the Aesira Jewel is. So, my king, I have grown weary of you and I see no need for you to continue living. I am the new queen of this castle and I will reign here forever,"

Eiess said. "Prepare to meet your dead queen." Eiess stared at Olav with an emotionless gaze.

He started to shake uncontrollably, his eyes rolling back into his skull.

Lucia had heard about how the Empress could kill someone by freezing them to death from the inside, by sucking out their warmth and light, or their very soul. "If you kill him, I will never tell you where the Aesira Jewel is! If you spare his life and let us go, I will give you the jewel right now."

Eiess' eyes flicked to Lucia, and immediately King Olav ceased to shake. He collapsed to the floor with a thud.

"I will let you leave the castle with no harm done to you, or your father, or the rest of your useless guards," she said and waived to the guards with the back of her hand.

Lucia walked over to the painting and tried to lift it off the wall. It was far too heavy for her, so King Olav made his way over and helped her. They lost their grip on it as they lowered it, and the frame cracked as it hit the floor. Seeing it was a lost cause, they let the whole painting fall down with a crash.

"Oh, how fitting," Eiess chuckled. Her monsters of men laughed, too.

Behind the mural was a small silver door in the wall. Lucia opened it, revealing the Aesira Jewel. Carefully, she wrapped her fingers around the cold, oval, yellow diamond jewel, and lifted it out. She was surprised at its size; it was almost too large to fit in the grasp of both her hands.

"Here," Lucia said, holding it up for Eiess to take.

Eiess looked at the jewel and slightly raised her right eyebrow. "After all these years, I thought it would be so much harder to get my hands on it. And now I realize that all I needed to do was ask." She reached for the jewel and took it gently out of Lucia's hands. "You may go," she said without taking her

eyes off her new prize. She caressed the diamond with her fingertips, studying its intricate workmanship.

“But, Your Excellency, we cannot utilize the jewel without —” Vilda started to say.

“I realize that the jewel needs the Sun Queen and Iluxia to work. However, I do not plan on using the Aesira Jewel for a very, very long time,” Eiess said.

Vilda gasped and looked at Olav.

“Now, there will be no light or summer from this day forward. No heat to dread, no warmth to dull my bitterly cold wind, no sun to light the shades and shadows!” Eiess said. She turned her attention to King Olav. “Get out of here before I throw you into the tower! And Vilda, get me Johan!”

Vilda’s eyes searched nervously, but she curtsied and left.

King Olav, Lucia, and the three remaining guards headed for the door immediately. They rushed down the western hallway, down the stairs, and into the courtyard. The sky was blue and clear now, but the wind was freezing.

King Olav looked around, his eyes filled with dread. “Where are all the guards?” he asked the stable boy.

“What guards?” the stable boy answered.

*What does he mean, what guards?* Lucia wondered. She had seen them earlier, and there was not the slightest trace of them.

“My guards. All the guards that were—”

Lucia heard a loud crashing sound from inside the castle and she jumped.

“Never you mind,” Olav said. “Prepare the sleigh.” The stable boy rushed to get the sleigh, and once he returned with it, King Olav helped Lucia climb into it.

“You must leave the castle immediately,” King Olav said to the stable boy. “If you do not leave, Eiess will have you for her own.”

Lucia thought the stable boy looked unusual, void of his own personality, his eyes glazed over and drained.

The guard cracked the whip and the horses neighed before taking off. When they were well outside the castle boundaries, Olav leaned over to Lucia.

“How long until Eiess figures out that what I gave her is not the real Aesira Jewel?” he asked.

“What?” Lucia looked at him. “That was not the authentic jewel?”

Olav shook his head.

“Why did you tell me the Aesira Jewel rested behind the mural? Did you know Eiess would come today?” Lucia did not like that he had used her to promote his own purposes, even if his purposes had been for the better.

“I suspected she might. My scouts had been telling me all week that they had seen more and more Surtorians in the Northlandic Kingdom.”

“Surtorians?” Lucia asked.

“Her band of warmongers in a manner of speaking. But as an answer to your question, I will admit, I did not know my plan would work so seamlessly.”

Lucia thought they had just succeeded in the biggest deception since the beginning of humanity. “Where is the real Aesira Jewel if that was not the one?”

Her father glanced at the other three men in the sleigh.

She nodded. Of course, they needed to keep it a secret.

No one spoke a word, but their eyes all spoke of fear and nervousness as the horses galloped forward. As she began to feel safe again, Lucia rested her head on her father’s shoulder. Perhaps he was not as selfish a man as she had thought. He did send her away to save her life, and she did not doubt that he would give his life for her had he needed to.



As she watched the trees and sloping hills pass by, her thoughts turned to her kingdom. Now, what would come of it? She would not be crowned queen tomorrow, and if Eiess did not use the Aesira Jewel, the land would remain in a constant state of winter on the coldest and the darkest day of the year. Had Vilda truly been so stupid that she believed Eiess' lies? Or perhaps she was so desperate for power and importance that her obsessions blinded her.

Unexpectedly, one of the guards stood up, drew his longsword, stabbed the other two guards in the chest, and knocked King Olav unconscious with the hilt.

Before Lucia even had a chance to react, the guard turned to her and slammed her head into the side of the sleigh, making her lightheaded. As he held her down to tie her hands behind her back, she could see Eiess' Surtorians storming in their direction on black horses.

As her consciousness faded, the last thought she had was:  
*Eiess knows.*

## Wolves

The first thing Ailia noticed when she woke up was the eerie, hollow sound of the wind. Then, the pain set in. Her whole body felt as if it had been trampled on by a herd of distraught reindeer. She opened her eyes slowly and tried to make sense of her surroundings. Her cold fingers met the cold ground as she pushed herself up to a sitting position, and she immediately knew something was wrong. Every movement hurt, and when she reached to touch her face, she winced as her fingers gently touched the sores and bruises.

An opening a few feet away revealed that she was in some sort of a cave. The hood of her overcoat was down, so she pulled it up over her numb ears with her stiff, freezing fingers. Next to her was a piece of material that looked like a handkerchief and a small empty glass flask. She picked them up and put them both in her pocket.

As she rose to her feet, she peered to the outside and saw the Northern Star shining brightly in the sky. She tried to recall how

she ended up here, but the last thing she remembered was hiking to Odinseat, then—nothing.

She limped over to the ice cave's exit in hopes of learning where she was, but the night, and the way one of her eyes was nearly swollen shut made it difficult. An unsettling feeling in her stomach told her that she was far, far away from home.

The full moon's sheen glazed the snow-covered mountains and valleys with its subdued light, subtly lighting up the black vastness of the heavens. Endless and hazardous but beautiful glacier mounds and gorges were all Ailia could see. *Where am I?* Each gust of wickedly cold wind felt like death calling and it illuminated one dangerous reality; she was wet.

Both Ailia's ivory under tunic and rust red top tunic were wet and filthy at the skirt hem. Her sleeves came down tight to the wrists and were also wet and dirty at the edges. The butterfly stitches around her skirt hem and sleeves looked tattered—barely noticeable. *What happened?* This dress was new and clean only moments ago. Or was it days ago she lost consciousness? She looked down at her dark leather boots and noticed that they looked unusually worn from what she could remember and she didn't even recognize the navy woolen hooded cloak she was wearing.

She pulled the handkerchief out of her pocket and saw that it carried a black raven embroidering. *Don't the Vik people carry the raven emblem?* It sent a chill down her already cold spine. She hated the Vik people for the fear they had instilled in the people of her hometown, but she put the cloth back in her pocket, hoping it would lead to clues about how she had ended up here so dirty, so battered and so alone. She studied the empty flask for a moment, too, but smelling it, she noticed no scent, revealing nothing of its previous contents.

Biting cold wind tossed her messy hair in every direction as she exited the icy dome. She defensively grabbed the fur hood of her overcoat and pulled it tight onto her face to prevent the bitter blasts from entering. In the dim light, she could see the silhouette of the countryside and realized she was in an ice cave possibly located on or close to the Blue Glaciers.

“How did I end up here?” she said out loud as if someone were listening. Her sore lips burned in the freezing air. She recognized the towering Trollstein Mountains in the distant north, which were not far from her home, but very far from where she now found herself.

*There's no time to waste.* She took a few steps, but having nearly no traction beneath the soles of her boots, she slid on the glassy ice, falling onto her back with a thump.

“Why?” she said, looking up at the millions of stars above. Her stomach made a grumbling sound and she grabbed her belly. It felt considerably thinner than before, her ribs protruding. Finding food out here would be as likely as finding a fish in the sky. If she were extremely lucky, she would run into someone or find a cabin nearby with some hospitable folks.

She stood up and looked for a path to follow as she alternately walked and crawled across the slick, transparent glacier. *How long will I last before exhaustion sets in?* She angrily hurled the thought out of her mind. *Any doubt out here, Ailia, will cost you your life.*

Continuing over the ice, she heard the distant howling of wolves, wolves that were probably ravenous and hunting for their next meal. Her eyes scanning the surroundings, she quickly spotted the seven dark animals on the white mountain, their eyes glowing orange in the light of the moon. She hoped they hadn't seen her or picked up her scent, but it appeared by the direction they were heading that they had not only seen her, but were also

pursuing her. Ailia's heart skipped a beat, and when it started again, it went into triple-time.

She scanned the area for shelter, but the bare glaciers had no trees, no rocks, nor any other places that she could see to easily hide or escape. Instinctively, she ran in the opposite direction as her mind raced to find a solution. Her legs kept slipping and she fell over and over again as her body slammed onto the unforgiving surface. *No! This is not how I'm going to die!* She couldn't hold her voice back from letting out a loud, high-pitched scream. She screamed again and again. Her eyes welled up with tears, causing her vision to blur.

It was already difficult to see in the dark, but reason had left and emotion had taken over. She continued to run as fast as she could, hurrying away from the vicious predators. Now, she could hear their paws hammering the ice behind her. *Oh no, this is it!* she thought.

Then, she glimpsed a thick, dried, wooden stick on the ground in front of her and picked it up. She hastily turned around and started swinging the stick as quickly and violently as she could in the wolves' direction, all the while screaming at the top of her lungs, trying to intimidate the wolves.

The wolves slowed their pace as they methodically closed in on her, growling, snarling, licking their fangs and wagging their tails enthusiastically in excitement over their fresh prey. One wolf was nearly twice the size of the others and it appeared it was heading the attack on Ailia.

A smaller wolf got hold of her stick and locked it in with its sharp fangs. Ailia and the wolf were tugging at the stick in opposite directions, fighting for their own victory and a common reward—life. As she pulled the stick with all her might, she succeeded in tearing it from the wolf's jaw. With the stick loose, she fell to the ground, but she quickly recovered and jumped

back onto her feet. Swinging at the wolf, she hit it hard on the side of the head, causing it to fall to the ground with a whimper.

Then, the leader came in at Ailia with full force. It was much stronger than the first wolf and deftly pulled the stick out of Ailia's hands, flinging it to the side as it continued its fixated pursuit without losing a beat. The beast leapt toward Ailia and sunk its fangs into her foot.

She screamed. The pain was sharp and intense as the animal's incisors dug all the way into the marrow of her bones. She kicked the large creature in the snout with her other leg and pulled her injured one out of the boot. Thick, red blood dripped onto the white snow.

The terror coursing through her veins had started to wear Ailia out and she felt like she didn't have the willpower to fight back any more. Another wolf came at her arm, but it wasn't able to bite through her thick wool cloak. It bit again and again, until the fabric started giving into its piercing teeth. The animal's jaws were brutally strong and Ailia could feel the other wolves coming at her, tugging her, pulling her hair, her arms and her legs, wanting to get to her flesh. Just as she thought there was no hope and she was ready to give up, she heard one of the wolves whimper and fall to the ground. The other wolves looked up and another wolf was hit with an arrow, falling lifeless where it stood.

The leader of the pack looked at Ailia and was hit by an arrow on its upper back. The wolf whimpered and decided to abandon the hunt, pulling with it the rest of the pack.

Ailia couldn't believe that the wolves were gone. She knew someone was there heading in her direction, wanting to help her, someone who had saved her life. "Help," she was able to cry out. "Please, my leg—" she pleaded to her unexpected rescuer.

A young man ran to her side and crouched down beside her. “Everything is going to be fine,” he said, dropping his bow onto the snow beside her as he quickly scanned her body. He gasped. “Lucia?” he said.

*Lucia?* Ailia felt her strength leaving her body and then everything turned black.

\* \* \*

Ailia woke up and was instantly gripped by the pain she felt in her foot. Feeling exceedingly exhausted, she wasn’t able to say anything, but managed to moan quietly. When she opened her eyes, she saw a lively fire burning close to her and she felt the heat of the flames on her face. White polar bear furs and wool blankets covered her body and she felt no coldness even though she was still outside and still on the glaciers, as far as she could tell.

The young man she recognized as her rescuer approached her. At first she became afraid. He was a stranger and could harm her, especially since they were alone. However, when she looked at him, there seemed to be something both in his physical appearance and the way he moved and spoke that was so familiar, so comfortable, and soothing.

“I have never seen anyone take on the furious seven before,” he said lightheartedly. Brown, heavy fur covered his blue wool overcoat. His fur hat hid what she thought looked like dark-brown hair.

“The who?” she mumbled, still not quite certain she could trust this stranger.

“The wolves. A little south of here they are known as the furious seven. They have been responsible for many lost sheep lately.”

“I was close to beating them and if you had not interrupted me, I would have had them.” She tried to smile, but noticed that even that hurt.

The stranger smiled and let out a chuckle. “I believe you!” Shaking his head, he laughed again, his deep voice vibrating through Ailia’s chest. “Your leg will be healed in a few weeks. You had several deep puncture wounds and lacerations. I sewed them up while you were out. You also had an infection around your ankle. Have you been...chained?”

Ailia thought it a strange question. “No.” *I can’t remember.*

“You are lucky the wolves did not break any bones in your legs or arms with their tough jaws,” he said more seriously, stirring a pot on the fire. “I put an herbal compress on your foot and on a few of the smaller wounds on your face. You also had some sores on your hands from fighting off the wolves and I put some restorative ointment on them.”

He had certainly gone to great lengths to help her, and she doubted he would have, had his intentions been malicious. Still, she felt the need to keep her guard up. “Are you a healer?” she asked, looking straight into his blue eyes for the first time. There, she saw peace and kindness, and...immense suffering. How was she able to see all that without even knowing him? Yet, she could read his eyes like an open scroll. And not only that, her soul soared at the sound of his deep voice and she felt wholly and unreservedly drawn to him as if by a dynamic, living force—a force that was eternal, yet just beginning to flourish.

“I am,” he said. “My name is Soren.” He continued to stir the liquid and then he lifted the ladle and smelled the brew.



She thought the ladle looked like it was hundreds of years old. It was crooked and stained from years of use. "I'm Ailia." She sat up.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Were you on your way to help someone?" she asked cautiously, not wanting to impose too much on his privacy.

"Yes," he said without offering any more information about where he was going.

She felt guilty right away for having stopped him on his journey. "Sorry," she said. "I hope I didn't cause anyone else to suffer—or die."

He smiled. "No, they will be fine." He poured the boiling liquid into a wooden bowl and offered it to her. "Drink this. It will help take the edge off the pain."

She reached for the bowl and smelled it. It smelled like a mixture of coriander, mint and lavender, as well as some other herbs she was not familiar with. She carefully sipped the hot drink and grimaced when the bitterness hit her tongue.

Soren laughed briefly. "Not very appealing to the palate, I know, but it will help you sleep through the night."

"Have I been sleeping long?" she asked, realizing she didn't know how long she had been out for.

"Oh, about three and a half days," he answered.

"Oh, no! My aunt and uncle will be extremely worried about me," she said.

"Did you become separated from them?"

"Last I remember, I was hiking up to Odinseat in Bergendal, and they didn't even know I had left." Then she thought about it and gasped. "And it was on my birthday!" But she still couldn't remember what happened after she visited Odinseat. She must have been unconscious until whoever it was brought her and left her here.

“When was your birthday?”

“On winter solstice,” she said.

“That is the last you remember?” he asked, looking surprised.

“Yes.” Then she remembered more of what happened after she had visited Odinseat. “I remember seeing a band of Vik men with weapons, and...” She let her voice trail off, not remembering anything else.

“Have you been on the glaciers for a long time?” he asked.

“I, uh—I don’t know. I don’t remember. I don’t even know how I got here, or how long I’ve been gone,” Ailia said.

“If the last thing you remember was your birthday on winter solstice before the attacks, you’ve been gone for about four months,” Soren said.

Ailia choked on the tonic she was drinking, coughing it up. “What?” she yelled. Her aunt and uncle must be worried sick. Maybe they even thought she was dead. And what about Geir, her husband-to-be? He must be searching for her.

“So you have been gone a while,” Soren said.

“Yes.” Months had disappeared, if what Soren was saying was true. “I’m sorry, I—uh, I’m a little shocked,” Ailia said.

“No need to apologize. I am sure I would react the exact same way had I been in your position.” He glanced at her a couple of times, as if there was something strange about her.

*Maybe he thinks I’ve gone mad,* she thought. She should not tell him more. “I’m just not feeling well. My leg hurts, my head hurts—” she said, trying to explain why she was acting strange.

“The tonic will help you feel better soon,” Soren said.

She kept sipping the bitter brew until it was all gone. It felt good in her stomach and warmed her aching body, though it did nothing to calm her nerves. She needed to find a way to get home—fast. After they had sat in silence for some time, Ailia

asked, "Are you from Bergendal or thereabouts?" Perhaps he could help her get home.

"No, I am from Trollsoe, but I have not lived there for quite some time. It is about a week's journey by horse, toward the south-west, bordering on the ocean," he said. He paused before he added, "Now, I mainly travel from city to city, staying for a few weeks until my help is needed elsewhere. What about you?"

"I come from Bergendal. My parents died of the smallpox before I can remember and my aunt and uncle raised me as their own."

Soren looked at her again, that same scrutinizing look in his eyes.

*Why does he look at me that way?* Ailia wondered angrily. She'd had enough of people treating her unkind, believing she was cursed. "They're not actually related to me, but I call them aunt and uncle anyway."

"I am sorry to hear about your parents," Soren said. "I have lost loved ones in the past and know how painful it can be." His face went stoic.

"I don't remember my birth parents," she said. "I wish I would have known them. I wish I could remember my mother's voice, or that I even had something from them, a letter, an item of clothing, something to prove that they existed." She wasn't sure if the drink was starting to work and that is why she felt she could be so open with Soren, or if he was indeed a kindred soul.

"So you only know the old Bergendal before the eternal winter began," he said.

*The eternal winter, isn't that a prophecy?* She knew she had heard about it from somewhere, but where? "I don't know any other Bergendal than the one I grew up in," she said. "Is it different?" Now, she started worrying whether her aunt and uncle were all right. *They could have been taken by the Vik*

*people, or could be*—She did not want to think about what bad things could have happened to them.

“Bergendal is not too different, but in worse condition than before.” Soren took off his gloves and used some snow to rinse out the pot he had made the brew in.

Ailia saw that he wore a gold serpent wedding band on his ring finger. *Married*. Although, he hadn’t mentioned his wife or family yet. After a little while the brew was starting to make her feel really drowsy and she couldn’t resist yawning.

“We had better get some sleep before dawn. We have a long journey ahead of us and it is easier to travel during daylight. It will take us two to three days to get back to Bergendal.”

Ailia assumed that was an invitation for him to help her get back home. “All right,” she said and yawned again.

He plopped down on the opposite side of the fire pit in a makeshift bed.

Ailia could see that he had given her all the warmer furs as he pulled the thin, overused reindeer fur over his body. Looking at him, she couldn’t help but notice how attractive he looked in the light of the fire.

Their eyes met for a brief moment and Ailia quickly looked away, slightly self-conscious and uneasy about how her heart had started to race. “Good night,” she said, lying down and pulling the furs over her body.

“Good night,” Soren responded. “If you need anything, please do not hesitate to wake me. I am a light sleeper.”

“Thank you,” Ailia said with a nod. “For all you have done.” Then she remembered something he had said right before she lost consciousness. “I was just wondering—” she said. “You mentioned the name Lucia right when you saw me?”

“Yes, my mistake. I thought at first you were someone else.”  
He nodded, turned around and laid his head on the thin linen blanket.

“Good night then,” Ailia said and closed her heavy eyelids.

**Friend or Foe**

Ailia fell fast asleep. In her dream she found herself alone on a high mountaintop dressed in a simple, white, long-sleeved robe she had seen other youth wear at their baptism and confirmation. Heavy snow fell from the sky and the winter wind was so strong that it pushed her body off balance as she walked forward into a white abyss. Looking forward, she saw the silhouette of another taller mountain lingering in the distance.

Then, just as quickly as it had started, the snow stopped, and the burning yellow sun revealed itself in the suddenly blue sky. As she felt the sun's warm and soothing rays on her face, she closed her eyes to enjoy a rare moment, soaking in the life-giver's glorious rays. She breathed deeply as if to fill her body with its healing virtue, not understanding how she could have ever forgotten how pleasurable its heat felt on her skin and on her hair. *It feels like paradise.* Then, in the near distance, she heard a man's voice calling her name.

"Ailia!" he beckoned.

She opened her eyes and looked around. To her surprise, all the snow on the ground and mountains had vanished. Golden rays from the sun smothered the regal mountains as the bottomless deep blue waters from the old, wise ocean flowed between them. How could she have neglected to remember how breathtakingly sublime summer was and how exquisite nature was all around her?

The mountainsides were covered with resplendent green fern trees and the water lay resting still, mirroring the breathtakingly beautiful scenery above. *Anemone Hepatica* flowers covered the aspen forest grounds to her left. These delicate blue flowers only blossomed in Bergendal during late springtime and were Ailia's favorite flower. She hadn't seen them in forever, it seemed. Down by the lake, she saw Uncle Brander and Aunt Unni and also the town's Bishop, Peter, standing by a Stave Church. They were all looking in her direction, smiling at her.

Brander summoned her again. "Ailia!" he called. "Here!" He waved his hand to come join them.

Excited to see them, she waved back and started running toward the fjord. As she felt the cool grass beneath her bare feet, a child-like laugh spontaneously escaped her lips. She smiled, and for a moment, she felt like a carefree child again.

The palisade dark mahogany church was situated to the right of the fjord. It had five tiers of dark-brown, double-sharply sloped roofs, shell-like exterior shingles and intricate carvings of dragons and Christian images and symbols. Ailia remembered that Unni and Brander had recently joined the new religion. Ailia had wanted to join the Christian faith, because she liked how merciful and loving their god was.

Ailia slowed down as she approached her family and Bishop Peter. As soon as she reached them, she embraced Aunt Unni and then Uncle Brander, who were both beaming with joy.

“We have missed you so, Ailia,” Brander said, tears streaming down his normally jovial face.

She didn’t know how long she had been away and had forgotten that she was dreaming—the dream seemed so real.

“Today is your day to be baptized and confirmed,” Brander said. He gestured toward Bishop Peter.

“Today, you will be baptized and confirmed a member of the Christian faith. By so doing, you will swear to follow Christ and all His teachings. You will swear to live a life of service and virtue and always remember Him,” Bishop Peter preached.

Ailia looked at Brander and he nodded. Ailia looked back at Bishop Peter and nodded, *yes*.

“Then, to prove your commitment to Christ, enter these waters today and be baptized in His holy name,” Bishop Peter said, extending an inviting arm.

She took his arm and together, they entered the cool, clear waters. They went out until the water reached Ailia’s waistline.

Bishop Peter raised his right hand. “Do you freely confess that you are a sinner? Do you place your trust in Christ as your Savior and repent of all your sins?” he asked Ailia, his voice a supplication.

“Yes.” She nodded.

“In accordance to our Lord’s teachings and by His command, I baptize you, my Christian sister, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.”

“Amen.” She inhaled and held her breath before she was submerged.

Bishop Peter placed his other hand around her waist and pushed her under the water.

Ailia’s feet lifted off the bottom of the ocean. She felt the cool, cleansing water enclose her body, leaving her feeling buoyant and unrestricted from the forces of gravity. As she went



to place her feet on the bottom of the ocean to come back up again, she couldn't find her foothold. And then she noticed that Bishop Peter's hands were no longer around her waist. They had disappeared along with him.

The water grew freezing around her, and when she opened her eyes, it had turned so dark it was difficult to see anything at all. She started swimming upwards toward the dim sun, and as she drew closer, she saw that ice had started to form on top of the water. As she reached the surface, the ice had completely covered the entire fjord, leaving her trapped and unable to break through. Ailia hit the thick ice with her fists as hard as she could, however, it did not make a single dent. Now, she could feel that the air was running out of her lungs and her sense of panic increased.

Just then, she saw Eiess standing on the ice above her. Terror clutched her heart. *What is she doing here?* Eiess looked down on Ailia triumphantly, not saying a word. Ailia pounded the ice with her now bleeding fists, but it was useless. She could no longer hold her breath and went to inhale.

Just then, Ailia woke up with a scream. She gasped for air and yelled out.

Soren was quickly by her side. "What is wrong?" he asked, his eye scanning her face.

Ailia covered her face with her hands and exhaled loudly. "It was just a dream. I'm sorry I woke you," she said, dropping her hands into her lap. "It just seemed so real. I do not want to talk about it." *A new maredream to worry about.*

"You do not have to tell me if you do not want to," he said.

Soren looked at Ailia and his gentle gaze had a calming effect on her. She decided to tell him about her dream anyway, even though she feared he might react negatively to it like her friends had. "I have these—recurring maredreams about an evil

empress,” she started. “I don’t even know if she exists, but if I did ever meet her, I’m sure I would feel just as terrified as I do in my dreams. I started dreaming about her about a year ago. Her name is Eiess,” she said.

Soren’s eyes flinched. “Ah, I see.”

Ailia braced for a lecture, or for him to tell her she was possessed or cursed, or for him to start ignoring her.

“She does indeed exist and she is as terrifying as she is rumored to be,” he said.

Ailia’s heart overlooked a beat. “What?” she said. “She exists and you know of her?” She felt relieved that she was not crazy after all. But then she felt terrified that Eiess actually existed.

He nodded. “She is the one who usurped the Northlandic Throne about four months ago and instigated the eternal winter,” he said. “She is as real and as evil as they come.”

Ailia couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Now her maredreams took on a whole new dimension. If she hadn’t been terrified before, she definitely was now. “So, you’ve met her?” Ailia tried not to sound too shocked about this information, but her mouth had become so dry, she was hardly able to get a word out.

“Yes, on several occasions,” he said.

“How did you meet her?” She she sat up a little straighter, her appetite whetted with curiosity. She had finally met someone who could help her make sense of her dreams and excitement grabbed hold of her.

“You should get some sleep. You need rest so your leg can heal,” he said.

She was not having it. She’d waited a long time for an explanation to her maredreams. “I’m wide awake.”

“All right.” He picked up a few fresh branches and some firewood and added them to the dwindling fire. “The first time I

met Eiess was when I was a young boy, nine, maybe ten years old. I was living in Trollsoe at the time with my parents and three brothers. Eiess was riding in her sleigh with another woman, a young woman who looked absolutely petrified. I remember it so vividly, because I was struck by Eiess' beauty. I had heard about her from my parents, but I did not really understand who she was until much later. In my young mind, I had envisioned Eiess to look absolutely terrifying. When her sleigh passed through my village, I recall being impressed by how enormous it was. Her green eyes pierced right through me, as she slowly sleighed by and she smiled at me."

Ailia could see by his facial expression that he was envisioning the moment clearly. She knew exactly what he meant by her piercing green eyes.

Then he continued pensively. "It was not a normal, happy smile, but a smile of a scheming, hateful nature, as if she knew what great evil was going to happen to me in the future. I wonder if she knew then exactly who I was and what wicked vices she would curse me with."

*Who is Soren really?* Ailia wondered.

"She never was one to look after the well-being of another." Soren stopped and looked at Ailia directly. "We never spoke that day, but her glare left a lasting and chilling impression on my soul, an impression that terrified me even more than any threatening beast or demon could have."

Ailia was gripped by his experience and desired to learn more about the empress. "She sounds so—mystical," Ailia said for a lack of better words. "You said that that was the *first* time you saw her?"

"The second time I met Eiess was years later. My wife, Lucia, and I had just moved into our first home in Trollsoe and we had been married the first time for almost two years."

*Wasn't that the name he mentioned when he saw me?* "The first time?" she asked, thinking that was strange.

"I will explain later," he said. "Lucia was from Trollsoe and another Sentinor had told Lucia's mother and father, before she was born, that another baby, a boy, would also be born in Trollsoe and that we were separated Spiritus Amor. That boy was me."

"Spirit Am—?" Ailia asked confused. "Iluxia?" She didn't want to let him know she had dreamt of Iluxia also, since she didn't know whether or not to trust him completely yet.

"Spiritus Amor," he corrected gently. "When our souls were formed in the immaterial realm, we were created together, as soul mates, if you may, but two separate individuals to perfectly fulfill each other's incompleteness."

"How do you know that?" Ailia asked. She regretted asking the question immediately, afraid he wouldn't share more if she became too skeptical. However, she could not fathom how anyone would be able to remember the pre-mortal sphere, if there even actually was one. "I'm not saying I do not believe you, though. I have just never heard of such things."

"I do not exactly *remember* it, but Iluxia has told me about it."

"Who is Iluxia?" Ailia asked, wanting to learn so much more

"Iluxia is the leader of the lightelves. He lives in Alvheim. He is one of Midgard's four protecting Sentinors, who covenanted at the beginning of the Midgard's creation to protect humanity. He also helps change the seasons with the Sun Queen and the Aesira Jewel."

"I thought the Aesira Jewel was just a myth, too," Ailia said.

"No. The Aesira Jewel was created by Iluxia and it has been passed down through the generations of Sun Queens since the beginning of Midgard's existence."

“Where did such a powerful jewel come from?”

He hesitated for a moment, glancing at Ailia with a watchful expression.

“I won’t tell anyone. I promise,” she said.

His lips quirked up into a half a smile. “It is not that what I am worried about. Information like this can become lethal if you have it.”

She thought about his remark for a omen before saying, “I’d rather know the truth and be in danger than know ignorance and pretend to be safe.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Indeed.” Stirring the flames with a stick, he started explaining. “Iluxia captured seven thousand years of the sun’s rays and soldered it into an eternal jewel called the Aesira Jewel. The jewel was created for one purpose and that was to keep the balance of Midgard’s seasons, so humanity could survive. To release the Aesira Jewel’s powers, the jewel’s key and the jewel needed to be used by Iluxia and the Sun Queen of the Aesira bloodline.”

“Where is the Aesira Jewel now?” she asked.

“I am not sure. It has been missing since Eiess took over the Northlandic throne. Usually, the jewel has been kept hidden by the Sun Queen, so that no one can misuse its powers.”

“How do you know about the jewel?” Ailia asked.

“Maybe I will tell you some other time.”

Ailia squinted her eyes. *Another time?* There wouldn’t be any other time after she had returned home and married Geir.

Soren paused and looked at Ailia as if he had just realized something.

“What?” she asked, feeling self-conscious from the way he studied her face.

“I think the reason I feel I can be so open with you, is that you remind me of someone I used to know.” He shook his head and huffed.

“What?” Ailia endured. There was a long pause. Finally Ailia retorted, “Well, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

He looked at her and they both smiled at their newly created inside joke. “The same year we moved into our new home—was the same year that Eiess destroyed the entire town of Trollsoe, letting her Surtorians rage through the streets and scorch the city unrecognizable.” He paused.

Ailia thought about her dream and how similar it sounded to his story. Were her maredreams of another time? Perhaps she could see into the past.

“Lucia and I had discovered Eiess living in the Black Glaciers and had started planning our attack. Lucia, being the Great Sentinor, created and destined to destroy Eiess, became a serious threat to the empress and the empress quickly came up with a plan to kill Lucia,” he said.

Ailia had heard stories about the Great Sentinor when she was a child, but as she grew older, she dismissed them as nothing more than mere fables. “The Great Sentinor is a real person?”

“Yes.”

“So she really, truly exists?” she asked again to make sure she heard him right.

“Yes.”

She hardly dared to ask, but she had to know. “Are you a... Sentinor?”

He paused and looked away. “Yes,” he finally said. “One of the original four.”

A *Sentinor*. She felt honored to be in his presence. “What happened to your wife?” Ailia asked concerned.

“Eiess cold-bloodedly murdered her,” he said. “The empress was determined to destroy Lucia, so Eiess devised a plan to kill her while I was away on one of my trips. Eiess followed Lucia and her friends one day when they went out for an afternoon walk. They had down to the fjord to read and write poetry. Eiess captured them all and drowned them one by one, forcing Lucia to watch each of her friends die. She saved Lucia until the end and took her out on a boat into Trollsoe Fjord. When she had reached far out into the fjord, she threw Lucia into the water with a weight tied around her ankles. When Lucia hit the bottom of the fjord, she was able to undo the knot on the weight and began to swim to the surface. Right before she reached the surface, Eiess froze the fjord over, so Lucia became trapped under the ice. She drowned,” he said and paused.

Ailia felt all the blood leave her face.

“You do not look too well. I hope I have not frightened you with my story,” Soren said.

“No, I, uh...I just... My dream last night and my other dream was about what you just described,” she said disturbed—confused—afraid. “Except...*I* was the one who was underneath the ice.”

He leaned in and squinted his eyes. “You mean your dream last night was about the exact thing I am telling you right now?”

“Well, not exactly. There were other things that happened. I was to be baptized into the Christian church, but at the end, before I arose from baptism, I was trapped underneath the water, underneath all the ice the empress had created and she was looking down on me,” Ailia said distressed, remembering her dream.

“Oh,” Soren said, looking surprised and without an initial response. He then gazed into the fire for a long while, a serious gaze. “Eiess has this bizarre ability to go into people’s dreams

and pull out information, truths if you will, from their thoughts, or even to give people information she wants them to know. You said you never met her, right?”

“No, never.” Ailia shook her head. “I didn’t even know she actually existed until just now.”

“Well, she certainly knows about you!” Soren nearly yelled.

Ailia looked at him in disbelief. *She knows about me? How could this have happened? Am I indeed cursed as my friends claimed?*

“She must know something important about you or want something from you. It is vital we discover what that is before she finds you.”

“Finds me? You mean to say she’ll come after me?” Ailia asked, feeling every muscle in her body tense and tremble.

“Most likely—if what you are telling me about your dream is true,” he said.

“Well, I will run away then,” Ailia blurted out, throwing her arms up. Her heart had begun to race as her chest seemed to close up. Though Ailia hardly knew anything about the Empress, she knew one thing for certain: she was no match for Eiess.

“I do not want to alarm you, but Eiess will find you no matter how far you run away. She has thousands of Surtorians roaming every dark corner in Midgard. She has had thousands of years to build her legions and if she sets her mind on doing something, she will get it done. There is no winning when one competes with Eiess. The only person who can do that is the Great Sentinor,” Soren said. “Even she has failed and lost her life twice already.”

“I don’t want to have any part of this. I just want to go home and live my life like I have before,” Ailia said perturbed, the knot in her stomach tightening by the second.



“Then she will surely find you.” Soren spoke softly. He looked Ailia sincerely in the eyes and touched her arm.

A wave of energy went through her body at his touch.

“If you let me, I would like to help you solve this enigma. It has been my life’s mission to conquer the empress and I would be very interested to learn why there is a link between you and her.” He waited for her answer.

Ailia did not like that there was a link. “Why is this happening to me? I’m no one special. My parents died when I was young and I have no wealth, no influence and no connections. I cannot even keep my friends! This is—oh—wrong!” She stood up and limped back and forth, trying her best to avoid putting any pressure on her injured leg. Finally after fretting for a few minutes, she calmed down and settled into standing on her left leg. “Why?” she exhaled. She couldn’t help from crossing her arms. “I’m nothing but a peasant girl.”

“The empress must know *something* about you that you do not know,” Soren reiterated. “That *something* is what we need to uncover.”

Ailia thought for a moment, but she couldn’t come up with anything of value to add to or refute his statement. “What do I do?” she said, noticing how her mind refused to function at all it would seem.

“I will help you get home to your family in Bergendal and you should let your leg heal before we decide to do anything. Perhaps your family has some insight into this puzzle and of your disappearance,” he said.

Ailia nodded in agreement, even though she knew she wanted no part of this.

“Just remember: you are not alone. There are many, many others who would like for nothing more than to see the empress dead and gone.”

“All right,” she said. “You must promise to help me. I cannot do this alone.”

Soren nodded. “I will do what I can to help.”

The sun had begun to reveal itself beyond the horizon. Soren rolled up the furs, while he had Ailia sit on the upside down turned pot. Placing his thumb and index finger inside his mouth, he whistled loudly.

A large, black horse came running from the woods. The stallion’s silky mane waived in the wind and its hooves hammered the ground in a perfect rhythm, kicking up the snow behind him, as it gracefully trotted in their direction. The horse stopped right by them and Soren firmly grabbed him by the reins, stroking him briskly on the neck. Neighing in acceptance, the animal’s warm breath turned to smoke in the chill air.

“This is Volomite, my trusted companion,” Soren said.

“Glad to meet you, Volomite,” Ailia said, feeling he needed a proper salutation and curtsied.

“I will have you ride him, but we will want to move slowly to not agitate your wound.” Soren secured a brown, worn saddle and attached his pots, bags and furs on it. “That should do it,” he said. “May I help you onto Volomite’s back?”

Ailia limped closer to Soren and let him put his hands around her waist. Reaching for his shoulders, she placed her hands securely on top of them. She could feel his warm breath on her face and the warmth from his body. Standing this close to him, she noticed that his short beard had traces of gray in it. *He seems too young to have any gray.* Underneath his over-coat, she felt his strong shoulder muscles and she blushed, thinking it had been a long time since she had been this close to a man—at least as far as she could remember. A feeling of longing overcame her and she felt herself drawn to Soren, wanting to stay in his arms a little longer.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ailia replied and looked up into his bottomless, blue eyes. There was something so familiar about him and she found herself growing frustrated being unable to remember.

Soren hoisted her up like she weighed nothing. “I am going to walk with Volomite the first while, until we get out of these wretched glaciers. He does not do too well traveling on the slick ice,” he said.

Volomite neighed, as if in appreciation.

“How is your leg feeling?” Soren asked, looking up at her.

Ailia’s leg had started hurting again, but she decided to not complain about the pain. “Good, thank you,” she said.

“Here,” Soren said, handing her a piece of dark bread. “Eat this. It will help with the hunger and the pain.”

Ailia hadn’t noticed how hungry she was until now. She gratefully accepted the food and started eating.

“Let us hope we do not run into any brigands. That will be the death of us,” Soren said as he began walking.

Ailia clenched the handkerchief in her pocket and considered throwing it out without him noticing. *I don’t want him thinking that I’m associated with brigands or the Vik people.*

### The King's Sacrifice

Many men have died here.

Lucia did not keep track of how long she had been imprisoned in the southwestern tower, but she knew it had been more than three months—perhaps even four. She had developed a severe cough and was in and out of consciousness, her body vacillating between freezing and quivering, and profuse bouts of sweating.

Every few days, a Surtorian would come in and beat her. Today, it had been more painful than usual and she scanned her fingers across her forehead, exploring the sore parts.

“Ouch,” she said when her fingers reached the large, bruised area close to her hairline. She pulled her hand away and saw that it was covered in blood. As she wiped her fingers onto the floor, she looked around the ghostly room and saw her fur coat lying on the floor in a bundle in the corner. She stood up slowly, walked over to it, picked it up, and wrapped herself in it. It had kept her warm, however, it was now so dirty that it was hard to

believe it had ever been white. She coughed a few times, but fortunately was able to stop before blood was being expelled as it sometimes was.

There was a small barred opening for a window in the thick stone walls. Attached to it were poorly constructed, grayed, wood shutters that were wide open. She walked over and shut them to keep the cold and unyielding wind out. There was no bed in the room for her to sleep or rest on, only dried golden straw scattered on the floor and in the corners. The room smelled of urine, straw and old fabric.

The hope that her father was still alive was the only thing that had kept her alive this past, particularly grueling month. She walked over to the door and stopped to listen for him, like she had hundreds of times before. The only sound she could hear was the whistling wind as it came in through the angular cracks in the shutters.

“Father,” she yelled. “Father, are you here?” She pressed her ear against the dense oak door. No sound. No answer. There never had been an answer and lately, she had started to think that there never would be one. An empty feeling rumbled in her heart. She buried her face in her hands and shrank to the floor with her back toward the door. “Odin, Thor?” she said. “If you are there, show me a sign!” Only more silence responded.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps, followed by the clattering sound of keys and she managed to crawl away from the door just before it opened. Ivar stood in the doorway holding a tray, his muscular body filling the entire entrance. Once a day, he would bring leftover fish or game and moldy, dry bread, and had not Lucia’s life depended on it, she would have refused to eat the food brought by the savage traitor. Ivar was one of her father’s previous guards, and she could not believe he was now serving her father’s worst enemy.

“Where is my father? Do you know anything? Is he alive? Please, I just need to know,” Lucia cried. He set the tray down onto the floor and stepped back without a word. The door slammed shut and the keys clattered as he locked it. Never. Never was there an answer to her questions.

She scooted toward the food, picked up a piece of bread, and stuffed it into her mouth. Lifting the cup with an unsteady hand, she pressed it to her lips and gulped the fluid down. Milk! It was milk! She had not tasted the sweet drink for months, and although she should save it, she could not. Tilting the cup completely upside down, she sucked on the edge, ensuring every last drop fell into her mouth. She jammed the meat down her throat, nearly swallowing it whole. There was more food here than there usually was, but far from enough to fill her concave belly. After finishing the meal, she thought, *Had anyone seen me eat, they would have thought I was a wild, desperate animal.* And who was she to refute that?

To her surprise, she heard the keys clattering again on the other side of the door. Fear surged through her. *Is the Surtorian here to beat me again?* She fled from the door and cowered to the corner, her heart thumping like a drum against her ribs.

Ivar appeared in the doorway, staring at her from across the room. Puzzled, Lucia thought she saw something that looked like sympathy in his big, brown eyes.

“Your father is alive,” he said. “He is in the queen’s chamber.” He stepped back and slammed the door shut again.

Lucia gasped. “Thank you, thank you,” she said. *He is alive! My father is alive!* No words had ever sounded sweeter, and her bosom filled with warmth. She waited to hear the keys again, but only silence could be heard. Then, she heard Ivar leaving as his heavy boots collided with the stone floor. *Did he leave it*

*unlocked on purpose?* The steps grew quieter and quieter, until finally they were gone.

Lucia felt extremely tired and ill, not to mention beaten, but she forced herself to stand up and walk over to the door. She stood there for a moment, breathing heavily, her ear pressed against the door, listening for any movement or sound. It was completely silent. Dare she try to open it?

She pulled on the iron handle, and to her astonishment, it creaked open. She paused and listened again, halfway expecting someone to kick the door in and assault her for trying to escape. But there was no sound. She slowly opened the door enough so she could glance into the hallway. It was pitch black. Would she dare to try and escape? Her chest tightened, and she began to cough. Closing the door again, she held it shut as the coughs tore through her lungs and throat. She cupped her hand over her mouth, and tried to calm herself. However, this attack would not be tamed, and she just had to patiently ride it out. Once she felt as if her lungs had been turned inside out, she was able to stop the coughing. She opened the door again, and this time she squeezed through it and stepped into the dark corridor.

After taking a few steps, she reached the spiral stairwell. The light from the open door behind her was all that she had to go by, which was not much. She did not recall how many steps there were down to the bottom, but she knew she only had to go down one level to get to the main hallway. Slowly, as she descended the stairs, she curved around the cylinder shaped wall with her back against it, her hands feeling their way against the cold, rough surface. It looked like the torches had been lit in the hallway as the dim flickering glow painted the walls.

When she reached the bottom of the stairwell she paused and listened for voices. She heard Eiess and an unfamiliar man conversing in the throne room. Could this really be happening?

If she kept herself hidden, she might escape today. The thought excited her and frightened her. She should just make a run for it, but could not find it in her heart to not check on her father first, and now that she knew where he was, she set her course for the queen's chamber. She ran as quickly as she could toward the room, but did not get far until she had to stop when a coughing attack overtook her aching body. She covered her mouth with the inside of her elbow to muffle the uncontrollably loud sounds but kept moving to make use of her valuable time.

"Halt!" she heard behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and saw another guard, one she did not recognize, charging toward her. Petrified, she started to run down the corridor. Another guard was standing at the door of the queen's chamber, and as she approached him, she could see that it was Ivar. He did not react to her when he noticed her, but instead he let her pass by and even held the door open for her to enter the room.

"Ivar, grab her!" the other guard yelled.

Lucia expected Ivar to follow her and run her through, and so she lunged to the floor. She heard Ivar draw his longsword behind her and prepared for the worst. *He means to kill me!* She spun onto her back, and just as she did, the unknown guard fell to the floor as Ivar pulled the bloody longsword out of the guard's abdomen.

"Your Majesty," Ivar said, offering his hand to Lucia.

Lucia's body was shaking violently both from fear and from being weak.

"There is little time. We must get Lucia out of here now!" The voice was deep and familiar, and when Lucia glanced toward where it had come from, she saw her father sitting by the desk at the window. She took Ivar's hand, and he pulled her to her feet.



Turning toward her father, she noticed how it looked as if he had aged twenty years. His hair and beard were nearly completely white, and he had become so thin and wrinkled, it pained her to look at him.

She started coughing again, her whole body shuddering this time with the convulsions. “Father,” she said in between coughs as she rushed toward him. “You are alive! Are you ill? You look so pale. Oh, what did they do to you?” She had never been happier to see him, and she found it odd how she had been so angry with him before.

“You must leave now, Lucia. The empress will kill you if she finds you here,” King Olav said, taking her into his embrace. She wondered why he was not standing up. Was he injured? “What about you?” she asked.

“Eiess will not harm me, but you must go.”

She had never seen him this vulnerable before, so ill and beaten up. He had always been so strong, so powerful and commanding. His vulnerability touched her. *He is just a man after all.* To Lucia, her father had always seemed immortal, a man of strength who could overcome anything or anyone. She was not used to seeing him so helpless and lifeless, at the mercy of another being.

“No,” she said stubbornly. “I will not leave you.”

“Listen, Ivar will take you part way through the secret escape tunnel underneath that rug there,” Olav said, pointing to the floor. “Ivar and I have prepared a bag for you to take. It contains supplies, gold, food, and a Bergendal-crested ring,” he said, gesturing to a bag on the floor. “You will need it when you get out. There are also clothes in the bag, and you must change into them before you exit the castle so no one will recognize you. Ivar has arranged for Nora to meet you at the other end.”

Lucia immediately felt better when she heard Nora was still alive and that she would see her soon.

“She will wait for you outside the exit tonight. You need to go now. Be safe. I will see you again soon,” Olav said.

Lucia hugged her father and tried unsuccessfully to hold back her tears—weeks, no, months of accumulated loneliness coming out at once.

“I love you, Lucia, always remember that. And if you do what is right, everything will turn out for the best in the end,” Olav comforted.

He seemed a much gentler man than Lucia remembered. “Promise I will see you soon?”

“Yes, very soon, I promise,” Olav said.

Ivar walked over to the rug and peeled it back, exposing a trap door in the floor. He lifted the square latch by a cord, revealing a set of stone stairs.

*Has it been there all alone?* From the looks of the worn steps and cobwebs, she assumed it had. She wrapped her arms around her father again. “I will be so angry with you if you are lying,” she said, squeezing him as tightly as she could. They embraced again and she forced herself to walk over to the trap door. She turned around and looked at her father one last time. A feeling of death overwhelmed her. It was the same way she had felt at her mother’s burial: a numbing force of desperate surrender and utter helplessness.

“I love you!” She swallowed back fresh tears that were just waiting to flow and silenced her desperate cry to appear brave in her father’s eyes.

Ivar descended the stairs and his torch lit the way in the dim tunnel. Lucia turned around and followed after, noticing how the smell of mold and putrid earth rose into her nostrils. There were old spider webs, dust and mud covering the stone walls, and the

stairs only continued partway down until they came to a dirt pathway. When her father closed the trap door behind her, murky shadows appeared on the walls.

Suddenly, angry yells could be heard from inside the castle, and as surely as if her father had confessed it, she knew that he had lied. He would not be safe. He would not! A heaving cry grew inside of her and refused to be contained.

Probably seeing what was happening, Ivar lunged over to Lucia and held his hand over her mouth, quieting her cries.

“Guards!” they heard Eiess yell from the castle. “Guards!” She screamed in frustration when they did not respond immediately. Eiess had clearly found the dead guard in the hallway. Lucia heard heavy, rushed footsteps make their way to the scene and she heard Eiess frantically yell and order them to check on the princess, gather a search troop, and find the killer.

“Do not worry. All will be well,” Ivar said. “You will hide here until it has quieted down, and then you will sneak out the back exit, just a little ways from here. I will not fit in that tight tunnel before the exit, so you will need to go alone after that. Remember, Nora is waiting for you there.”

Lucia nodded, and he removed his hand from her mouth.

“You should go change over there,” Ivar said, pointing down the hallway. “I will wait here.”

It was a welcome distraction. Lucia walked a few steps into the dark and opened her bag. She could make out a few items in the dim light of Ivar’s torch. Inside was a small purse containing gold pieces, some food and clothing and a blanket. She pulled the clothes out of the bag, set the bag down on the ground, and started to change. Her body shivered from both the cold and nerves. The clothes looked like regular men’s peasant clothing, rough and worn, but she could not make out the color in the darkness. Unexpectedly her cough came back and she had to

stop changing in order to calm her sick body. When she was finished, she went back over to Ivar.

“Your father instructed me to remind you that you have been sanctified with a great responsibility to help rid this country of the evils of Eiess. He wrote you this letter and you must read it after you are in a safe place, far from here.” Ivar handed her a sealed scroll with her name on it, and then he stopped to listen. Footsteps marched in unison—more guards had been recruited—and they were probably searching the castle for Lucia.

“Come,” he whispered, waving her to follow him down the passageway.

Lucia followed him as closely as she could, clutching her father’s precious words in her hands. *Perhaps they will be his last.*

Finally, they came to a small opening at the end of the passageway. Ivar waived his torch across the wall as his eyes searched for something. He started brushing off the dirt and dust and uncovered an inscription. He mumbled as he read it. Then, he knelt down on the ground and brushed some dirt off something that looked like an iron gate, or a door of some sort. It appeared to be welded shut. “Hold this,” he said, handing Lucia the torch. He pulled a large key from his satchel and placed the key in the only hole.

Suddenly, the door began to rise. When it stopped, Ivar pushed the square iron box to the side and exposed a framed hole in the ground.

It was dark, but Lucia could feel the cool breeze from the outside gusting against her face.

“This is the way out. It is a tight, curved squeeze, but you are small. You must enter head first, as the path will later curve horizontally and then straight up like so,” he said, demonstrating

with his hands. “There is no room to change directions in the tunnel.”

Lucia cringed.

“You will need to knock four times like so,” he said and showed her on the stone wall. “She will remove the bushes and open the gate so you can get out. Do not attempt to get out on your own. Wait until she opens it. Nora will need to make sure the path is clear of any unwanted persons. Knock only four times, no matter how long it takes for her to open. Do you understand?” His eyebrows furrowed.

“Yes,” Lucia said quietly.

“And you must not return into the castle, for Eiess will surely have your head,” he said. “It has been a pleasure serving you, Your Majesty. May the gods watch over and protect you on your journey and until we meet again.”

“Please watch over my father. I cannot bear to lose another loved one,” she implored, even though she almost felt in her heart that he was already dead.

“I will protect King Olav, even with my own life,” Ivar said.

It took all she had to not break down and cry again. Lucia thanked him, took a deep breath, and crawled head-first into the dark pit. Small pebbles littered the tight passage, sticking to her palms, and Lucia barely fit through the hole. First she traveled straight downward, deeper and deeper the path of the cavity took her. After many minutes of being upside down, with blood uncomfortably rushing to and settling in her head, the path straightened and became easier to maneuver. Finally, she saw a dim light in the distance, encouraging moonlight peering through the tunnel.

She slinked forward for a long while on belly and elbows, having to stop and rest whenever another cough attack gripped

her aching body. Relief washed through her when the tunnel started to curve sharply upwards. *I am near!*

Seeing the end, she tried to squeeze through the last part, but became wedged in the tight space. She retreated back into the tunnel and tried another way but became stuck again. Even though it was cold, drops of sweat ran down her forehead, and as she struggled to free herself, her energy dwindled into nothingness. Finally, she became lodged so tight that she could not move backwards or forwards. *I hope I do not miss Nora.* She was so tired of crying, but she could not help the tears from coming, realizing she had become immovably wedged just a few feet away from her freedom.

*Is it my fate to die in a tunnel beneath my castle?* Surely, her life must have a better destiny than to end at this. *Mother, please help me!* Lucia pleaded, her entire body shuddering with sobs. Right after she had thought the words, a small rock loosened, giving her just enough room to squeeze free. She could hardly believe the small miracle, and immediately thanked her mother. She twisted through the last space and entered a small, cave-like opening. It contained the escape iron-barred gate Ivar had described, with dead bushes covered in snow in front of the opening.

*Is Nora really here waiting for me?* She knocked four times as loudly as she could, hoping Nora had heard her. It was hard to make a loud enough sound on the thick iron gate. She waited and waited. Nothing. Not a sound. Not a movement. She felt another cough attack coming on and buried her mouth in her sleeve to muffle the noise. It lasted longer than usual this time, and her stomach convulsed until it cramped.

She reached through the barred gate and picked up some snow, placing it in her mouth and letting it melt on her tongue. The liquid ran down her throat, and eased the cough. Once she

had caught her breath, she wondered if she should knock again. It was going to be a long, cold night if Nora did not come, but she still decided not to knock a second time, recalling what Ivar had said.

She began to shiver. To her great horror, she noticed that she had left her white fur coat behind. She had dropped it on the floor when she changed into these male peasant clothes, and had forgotten to put it back on. How would she live without it?

Fortunately, her father had enough foresight and had placed a wool blanket in the bag. She took it out and wrapped her cold body tightly in it. Although it was a thin blanket, it felt warm. To make time go by faster, she emptied the bag her father had given her. Slipping the Bergendal crested ring on her finger, she noticed how it glowed in the moonlight. *If I am the Great Sentinor, I must not die here. I must fight for my life and find the one person who can help me defeat Eiess.* And those were her last thoughts before she drifted off to sleep.

## Journey the Land

Ailia's bottom had become sore from sitting on the saddle for so long, but she felt she had no right to complain since she was sitting and Soren had been walking on the slick ground for hours.

"I cannot believe how vast the glaciers were," Ailia said, adjusting in her seat, trying futilely to find a comfortable position.

"They are not really that vast, but they take a long time to cross because they are so slick," Soren said, walking faster than before as he held on to the reins.

They had reached the end of the Blue Glaciers and had entered the Northland Forest. Ailia asked if he wanted to ride with her, but he preferred to walk instead of burden his horse with another rider.

The forest's evergreen trees stood lifeless, starved and skeleton-like, stripped of their previous majestic grandeur. Freezing wind breezed by, swaying the bare trees gently from side to side. About an hour ago, the sun had reached its



pathetically low peak and was now streaking the dimming sky with bright pink, flaming clouds.

“My uncle says the evergreen trees in this forest are enchanted with trolls and fairies,” Ailia said. “I used to come here with him all the time when I was a child.”

“And—” Soren started.

“I hope you’re not going to tell me that trolls and fairies exist, too. If you do, I will never believe you,” she said, smiling.

He laughed. “No, trolls are just the human’s way of glorifying giants and dwarves. I was about to say: and now the Northland Forest is a ghost of what it used to be.”

“I heard once that the Vik people lived in this forest. Is that true?” she asked.

“You mean the Vikings?”

“I suppose—” she said, not familiar with that name. “Is it the same thing?”

“The plunderers from the Vik district have recently been nicknamed Vikings. No one knows exactly where they have settled, or even if they have settled, but I highly doubt they are here,” he said.

“That’s a strange name—Vikings.”

“The southerners started calling them that after they plundered their country.”

“So they don’t only plunder here?” she asked.

“No, not at all.” He walked on for a while in silence. “I was recently in the Southlandic Kingdom and most southerners consider all of us northerners Vikings, whether we plunder or not.”

“They must not realize that some of us don’t condone that type of barbaric behavior.”

“No,” he said. “We are all the same to them.”

“Well, I suppose we view all southerners as overly religious extremists, so we’re not much better,” she said.

Soren laughed. “True.”

She grew serious. “I—think there could be a connection with the Vikings and my disappearance.”

He looked up at her, his eyes puzzled. “What makes you think that?”

She clutched the handkerchief and flask in her pocket. She was not sure if she was ready to reveal *everything* just yet to this stranger. “I remember seeing one of them before I lost consciousness.”

“You would probably be dead by now if they were involved,” he said, pulling on Volomite’s reigns.

“Yes, most likely,” she agreed on the surface, but she was now wondering why she was not dead. *Maybe they thought they had killed me when in fact they had not.*

“Now that I think of it, I do remember hearing a story about a young family that was captured and killed close to these woods,” he said. “I do not know if it was Viking related, but it could have been.”

Feeling suddenly very uneasy, she looked behind her to make sure they weren’t being followed. “But if they come from the Vik District, why would they have settled around here?”

“I remember hearing that a few Bergendalers joined the Vikings when Eiess usurped the Northlandic Throne,” he said.

Ailia thought back to the last day she remembered. The Vik men had been on the mountainside, and they were carrying weapons, appearing as if they were going to attack. But she didn’t see Eiess there. Then again, Eiess could have been elsewhere in the battle.

“However, after they helped Eiess seize the Northlandic Throne, she betrayed them and cast them out of the castle

without the promised reward. The Vik men tried to re-settle in Bergendal, but they left shortly after because they were ousted by the people for their treachery.”

*I had already gone missing by then,* she noted.

“As they left the city, they vowed with one another to destroy Eiess *and* the people of Bergendal,” he finished.

“Where did they go after that?” she asked. Each moment she grew more and more fearful that the Vikings might be lurking close by.

“That is what no one knows,” he said.

“Oh, so they could be here?” she asked, lowering her voice several notches, as her eyes again searched between the trees.

He looked up at her sitting on Volomite and smiled. “You need not worry. I will protect you.”

Not quite knowing what to think or say to that, she blurted out, “And I will protect you.”

He barked a laugh. Slightly offended by his apparent lack of confidence in her, she took off her wool mitten and threw it at him, but he ducked just as the mitten missed his head. She pulled off her second mitten and tried to hit him again, but missed.

“Be careful, Miss Ailia, or your hands will be very cold by the end of this trip.” He glanced at her, smiling mischievously, and raised an eyebrow.

She looked for something else to throw, but stopped searching when he handed her mittens back.

“We should break here before we continue,” he said more serious now. “I am starving. How about you?”

“Me, too,” she said relieved. His playfulness had helped her lose her nervousness a bit. *Did he intend that?*

“But before then, I was considering leaving you up there indefinitely as payback for trying to hit me with your mittens,” he said, his face looking dead serious.

She smiled guiltily. *Did I take it too far?*

Soren lifted the fur off from the horse, opened it and laid it on the ground. He then walked over to the right side of Volomite and raised his hands to help her down.

“You don’t remain angry for very long, do you?” she said.

He smiled and shook his head. “Too much to carry.”

She reached down and grabbed hold of his shoulders as his hands wrapped around her waist.

Lifting her off the horse, he set her down on the snow very gently. “My lady,” he said.

Their eyes connected for a moment and Ailia had to catch her breath when her heart started to beat faster. His eyes seemed to exude compassion and wisdom beyond a human’s capacity. If what he had been telling her was true, it would make sense that she felt this way around him, a half mortal, half god-like being. However, she still couldn’t help but think that she knew him from somewhere. He almost seemed to be a part of her in some way. *Maybe I’ve met him before, but I just do not remember?*

“Let me help you on to the fur.” He placed a hand around her waist, and she reached her arm around his shoulder. They walked over to the fur, and he helped her sit down. The sky had suddenly taken on a much darker color, making every shadow that much more frightening.

“Drink this,” he said, giving her a wooden bowl filled with liquid.

The drink was cold, but it was the same one he had given her earlier. It tasted much bitterer this time going down, but her leg had started to throb again, so she would do whatever it took to lessen the pain.

Soren immediately gathered twigs and wood, and started a small fire. “I have more healing herbs for you, but I need to go find one last ingredient, so I can prepare them. Volomite will

stay here to keep you company. I will not be long,” he said. “Maybe I will even get lucky and find something else to eat, too.” He snagged his bow and quiver. “I will be return shortly. Do not worry. No one is around.”

She watched him walk off into the blackness. Even the way he moved seemed so recognizable, slightly springy in his gait, with confidence in each step. The further away he got, the more she appreciated having Volomite close. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said, looking up at him.

Volomite neighed, flicking his long, black tail.

She tried not to think about the Vikings, but she couldn’t help from glancing around whenever she heard the slightest sound, or thought she saw movement. Once in a while, a few ravens squawked, causing her to jump, but never was there a Viking to be seen. As her eyes grew heavy, she lay down and gazed up into the dark, starlit sky. Radiant, colorful Auroras lit up the heavens with a beautiful dance. She remembered a conversation she had had with Uncle Brander several years back when she was just eight.

“The Auroras are known as the dancers of the spirits and they connect past generations to current generations to future generations with their light display,” he had said.

“Why are they different colors?” she had asked.

“The red Auroras are spirits that have not yet been born and the green and blue Auroras are spirits that have passed away. When someone dies, a part of their spirit is caught up into the heavens and is transformed into light. It is the only way for us to see that our loved ones are still with us. So anyone who hopes for a child, or has lost a beloved, can look up into the skies and the Auroras will remind them that the spirit is eternal.”

The light spectacle soothed Ailia’s fears and she felt at ease in the night. She thought about her birth parents, wishing she

could remember them, their faces, their voices and their loving embraces. *If only I had one single item from them, a word, or something I could know them by, I would be so happy.* She closed her eyes and imagined what they looked like, and gradually, she fell asleep under the stars.

Ailia woke up and saw that the fire had started to grow dim. *Where's Soren?* He had been gone longer than she thought he would. Suddenly, she heard rapid footsteps behind her, and she turned around. Nothing was there, except for the gaping vacuum of a dark abyss. "Soren?" Her breath grew shallow as she heard the footsteps behind her again, more prominent this time. She cringed and wanted to stand up and run away. *Maybe the wolves have returned to finalize their kill?*

Volomite whinnied fearfully and reared, floundering his front hooves into the air. Barely able to keep herself from screaming, she stood up and hopped over to him on one leg. She grabbed his mane and pressed herself close up to him to calm him *and* her. Panic grabbed hold of her body, escalating her heart rate to twice its normal pace. Where were the footsteps coming from? *Is another mare demon visiting me?*

The footsteps slowed until they completely stopped. She closed her eyes and squeezed herself closer to Volomite's large body, realizing he was currently her only safeguard against danger. She wanted to yell for Soren, but if the wolves or the Vikings were close by, they would hear her, too, and come for her. Having calmed down, Volomite stepped forward and lowered his head with a nicker as if to greet someone.

*It must be Soren,* she thought. "Soren?" she said, cautiously peeking around Volomite's chest.

But it wasn't Soren at all. There stood two little boys around two and three years of age, dressed in winter overcoats and fur hats and mittens, their boots caked in snow. They looked at her

with doleful eyes, and seemed to be lost. She remembered the young family that had been killed by the Vikings. *I hope these aren't their spirits still wandering these forests.* She quickly pulled her head back behind Volomite and closed her eyes to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Slowly opening her eyes, she took a deep breath and peeked around Volomite's massive body again.

The boys were crying and whimpering now, rubbing their moist eyes.

She stepped out from behind the horse. "It's all right. Don't cry. What's the matter?"

They stopped crying and looked up at her with swollen, red eyes.

"Mamma," the older one sobbed, pointing randomly into the air. The younger boy stepped closer to her and raised his hands toward her, as if he wanted to be picked up. She instinctively reached for him and lifted him up. She had to put weight on her injured leg and felt an intense shooting pain, immediately putting the boy down again. She wobbled over to the cushy fur blanket and sat down, smiling and waving for the children to join her.

The two babes rushed over, both jumping onto her lap, competing for affection and space.

"Where's your Mamma?" she asked.

"Mamma gone," the older one said.

She looked around again, but she didn't see anyone. "You can stay with me until we find her," she said, hugging their fidgety, cold bodies.

The older boy started to fuss and the younger one was quick to follow his example.

"Let me sing you a song," she said. She chose her favorite lullaby.

*Sleep now my child, your mamma is here  
To hold you so tight and erase all your fears  
The kettle is full of porridge for you  
Your father is coming and he loves you too.*

*Sleep now my child, rest your sweet head  
On this silk pillow that is in your bed  
Watch all the stars in the heav'n so bright  
Sleep till you wake to the morning light.*

*Sleep now my child, your future is set  
You will have all the riches a young prince can get  
Peace in your soul, love in your core,  
Faith in each step from shore to shore.*

*Sleep now my child, the sun will soon rise  
The Lord has secured all family ties  
Forever you will be in my heart and my mind  
My love is eternal, His love is Divine.*

*Sleep now my child, do not worry at all  
Your needs will be met, no matter how small,  
one day you will grow and not want to stay  
Just follow your dreams and you will find your way.*

The boys settled down serenely and looked up at Ailia with endearing eyes.

“I hungry,” the younger boy said.

She remembered where Soren kept his bread. She stood up and told the boys to stay put. “I have some food for you,” she said, limping over to Volomite, looking inside the leather bag. She found the bread and turned around.



She was startled to find Soren standing right in front of her.

“Heavens, you scared me!” she said, hitting his arm.

“Was that you singing?” he asked. “It sounded lovely. Look what I found!” he said proudly, holding up two lifeless snow-white hares by their hind legs.

“Uh, yes, you must have heard me,” she said embarrassed, as she tried to look around him for the children. “The children were hungry, so I wanted to give them some bread,” she said, trying to get him out of the way. “These sweet boys just appeared out of nowhere and were crying.” Finally, she walked around him to get to the boys, but to her surprise, they were not there. “Where did the boys go? They were just here!” She limped over to the other side of Volomite and looked for them there. “We need to find them. They were lost and looking for their mother and... Did you see them?”

“I heard you singing, but I did not see any boys here when I arrived,” he said, looking bewildered.

“They were *just* here. They sat on my lap and said their Mamma was gone and that they were hungry. You must have scared them off! We need to find them. They cannot be out here all by themselves!” She was becoming anxious and she always started rambling when she worried about something. “It would be inhumane to leave them in the forest alone.” She hobbled into the forest, looking for them and Soren followed. They searched the area for some time, but had no luck in locating the children.

The pressure on her injured leg became too much and she sat down in the snow as her eyes kept scanning the forest.

“Shh—” Soren warned unexpectedly, his body turning rigid.

She looked at him and listened. They heard men’s voices in the distance and saw torches flickering through the shadowy forest trees.

He signaled to her to be quiet, placing his index finger over his lips. “Shh,” he said, this time very quietly but more severe. He slowly crouched down to the ground.

“I think they are Vikings,” he mouthed to her.

She looked at him, her eyes widening, as terror filled her core.

The voices and torches were coming closer, but there was no place to hide. He signaled to her to follow him, and they crawled in the snow, worming themselves toward a hopefully safe shelter from the barbarians. He laid down on his right side behind a not nearly large enough rock and gestured to Ailia to do the same. She wiggled over and lay in front of him facing outward. Then, his arms wrapped around her, as he spooned her.

She felt his body heat burning against her back. His rough chin rubbed against her virgin soft cheek and his warm breath felt like a soft feather against her cold skin. It surprised her that her body responded so favorably to his and that she longed to be even closer to him than she was now. Their heartbeats conformed to each other as they lay wait for the Vikings to either pass by or notice them. However, it struck her: no danger in the world could make her feel less safe. Not around Soren.

“You must have been mistaken. There’s no one out here,” one of the men said, standing only a dozen feet away from them.

“What about these footprints?” the other said.

She cringed. *They know we’re here. We’re dead.*

“Those are our footprints, you idiot. I don’t want to waste my time out here. If Gunnar wants to search for people who don’t exist in the middle of Loki’s freezing night, he can go do it himself.”

“Well, if we find out later that there was someone here, it’ll be your fault that they got away,” the Viking said.

“Do me a favor and shut your stinkin’ lutefisk hole.”

Ailia could hear them continue to argue, as their voices faded away into the distance.

“They are gone,” he finally said, still whispering and slowly releasing his grip on her.

“That was close,” she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Even had we been discovered, I would have been able to take them both without difficulty.”

“But—they are Vikings,” she said in disbelief. “They plunder and kill for a living.”

He paused. “I do not know how to say this without sounding like a completely overconfident fool, but I could have killed twenty Vikings with the greatest of ease had they discovered us.”

She smirked and tried not to laugh at his ‘humility’. She just nodded her head and bit her lip. “Um-hmm—” she said.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

“No, what?” He smiled.

“You are just so— humble,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Hopefully, I will never have to prove it to you,” he said.

She rolled her eyes at him, sat up, and rose to her feet. She could feel that her injured leg had been used too much and the sharp pain had returned.

“Vikings wear a raven symbol. I did not see one, did you?”

“No,” she said.

“I did not see one earlier either.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I saw them when I went hunting,” he said.

“Why did not you tell me there were Vikings close by?” she asked disturbed.

“I did not feel the need to tell you, because there was no immediate threat,” he said.

She huffed. “I don’t need protecting, you know. I’m not a dainty little flower.”

He stared at her intently. “I beg to differ.”

“Well, not usually, only recently.” She met his eyes but looked away quickly, the intensity of his gaze causing her cheeks to warm.

“Just since you met me then?” he said with a penetrative glare.

She huffed and decided it was due time to change the subject. “Let’s just hope they didn’t see our fire and Volomite,” she said.

He let it pass. “Volomite is usually smart enough to stay away from strangers, but if they find the fire, they will know someone is here and will come looking for us.” He rubbed his forehead.

She had almost forgotten about the children she had seen. She gasped. “The boys!”

“I do not want to alarm you further, but are you certain the boys were...real?” he asked.

“Of course they were real. They sat on my lap and cried and I comforted them,” she said, almost insulted.

“Were they—alive?” he continued.

“What do you mean?” she asked, perplexed and annoyed.

“There have been sightings of ghosts here in the Northland Forest, sightings of two young boys who were killed by the Vikings.”

She stared at him for a moment before saying, “These boys were not ghosts or spirits. I held them in my arms. I felt them.”

“Were they cold or warm?” he asked.

“They were—” She had to think about that for a while. “They were cold, but it’s cold out here.” Yes the children were cold, but unlike Soren, they also didn’t have any body heat that she could feel when she held them. When she was pulled close to him, she

could definitely feel his body heat. "I saw them and held them," she said disbelieving. She knew that spirits held no body heat, but she had also believed they couldn't be held or touched.

"I had a friend who also had seen the boys a few weeks ago and they had vanished as quickly as tonight. I am not saying that you did not see them or hold them, but I think that they could be the little boy spirits trapped here in Midgard without a way to go back home to their parents in Valhalla," he said.

Ailia grew silent because she couldn't make sense of anything. Maybe the medicine he had given her had some hallucinogenic effect on her.

"You look like you are in pain," he observed, taking a step closer to her.

She thought about trying to remain brave and push through the pain.

"I would be happy to help you back to our camp site," he said, now serious and not teasing, but only seeming genuinely concerned.

"I think I do need help," she said, realizing her own limitations. She decided not to dwell on the children, but she hoped that they would reappear sooner or later, so she could help them.

Soren swooped her up into his arms and their eyes locked for a split second. For a fraction of a moment, she thought she saw something that looked like longing, almost as if he was searching for something in her gaze. However, before she could make sense of it, he looked away and carried her all the way back to their campsite. The fire had burned out completely, and while she sat down, He gathered firewood and rekindled the flames. They sat in silence as he skinned the hares, seasoned them and put them to roast on the fire.

Sitting and watching him do all the work, she felt useless. She wasn't used to sitting and having someone wait on her, and more often than not, she had been the one serving others at home. "I'm sorry I'm not much help. It feels strange to me to not be doing anything."

"I do not mind," he said. "It is good for you to get rest, so you can heal."

The hares smelled heavenly and her stomach growled. "May I ask what happened after your wife—?" She didn't like how harsh the word *died* sounded and decided not to finish her question.

"I arrived home and was told the news. Shortly after, our first son, Bjorn, died of a mysterious infection." He paused as if to compose himself. "I swore I would never rest until I avenged my wife's death and until Eiess was destroyed."

"I'm sorry to hear about your loss," she said. *It would be the most horrifying thing to lose one's wife and child.*

"It was so long ago, but I still feel it as if it happened yesterday," he said.

"How could Eiess kill you or your wife? Being a Sentinor, aren't you as powerful as she?" she said.

"She has had a much longer time to increase her strength here in Midgard. The rules are different here than in Alvheim or Vanaheim, the realm Eiess is from. Eiess became involved with black art magic even before she came to Midgard and she has grown very powerful over millennia now."

"Can't you just kill yourselves and you would be free and together again?" she asked. "I wouldn't want you to kill yourself, but perhaps you might be happier if you were with Lucia again."

"It is not that simple. My wife and me together are the only ones who can defeat the empress. If we both killed ourselves, we would be leaving Midgard in the hands of Eiess and we

covenanted in Alfheim to protect humanity. It is a commitment I am willing to endure all things for.”

“Does Lucia look the same every time she is reborn?” Ailia was spellbound by his story. She rested her chin in her palm and leaned forward.

“No, although the first two times she lived, she had hazel eyes.” He studied her face.

She blushed and looked down.

“Do you remember the incident when most young women disappeared in the Northlandic Kingdom about twenty-eight, twenty-nine years ago? Eiess took all women under the age of twenty, probably to be killed.”

“I hadn’t been born yet,” she responded. “But my aunt and uncle told me about the horrible story. Only a few made it out alive they said.” Her aunt was over thirty at the time, so she hadn’t been taken.

“The whole story was a lie. Eiess, still an unknown figure to most people in the Northlandic Kingdom at the time, led everyone to believe that it was the Vik people who headed the attack and kidnapped the young women. However, I have reason to believe it was her. I was on an errand for someone when Eiess sent her Surtorians out to round up all the women.” Soren flipped the hares around to roast on the other side.

“Why would she do something like that?” she asked, shaking her head with a furrowed brow.

“It makes sense if you are as greedy and power hungry as Eiess. Think about it: the prophecy states that the Great Sentinor would defeat her. If Eiess does not know where or who the Great Sentinor is, she will do anything to have her exterminated.”

“What did she do to the women?” she asked.

“No one knows, but they disappeared forever.”

She thought back to Lucia. “So, has Lucia been re-born many times?”

“This past time was her third time,” he said.

“Do you know where she is now?” Then something occurred to her. “It’s not Princess Lucia, is it?”

He nodded. “Eiess has Lucia imprisoned somewhere with King Olav. Nobody knows where Eiess keeps them, or even if they are still alive. I have tried several times to break into the castle, but to no avail.”

She could see the pain in his eyes.

“Ironic, is it not? I have waited for three-quarters of a century for her to be born again and she disappears the eve before I was going to formally propose.”

“I’m so sorry to hear.” She felt quite sad on his behalf.

“I believe Eiess has the Aesira Jewel with Lucia and King Olav in the Northlandic Castle. That is where it was last seen. It makes for a dangerous combination.”

“Can’t Iluxia tell you where Lucia is?” she asked.

“No. He only sees her spirit right before she enters this life and merges with her mortal body—like a light, he told me once.” He took the hares off the fire and cut them up. He placed a nice sized portion onto two different wood plates.

Her mouth watered, as the scent of fresh meat inundated the air.

“Here you are. I hope this will fill you up,” he said, handing it to her.

“Thank you.” She accepted the meat and started eating. It was the best meat she had ever tasted.

He poured her a cup of wine from his wine sack and into a wooden bowl. “This may be too strong for you,” he warned as he handed it to her.



She was accustomed to drinking strong mead and wine. She gulped deeply from the bowl, but quickly realized that this drink was much stronger than what she had been raised on. She coughed violently.

He cracked a crooked smile. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She coughed again. "Excuse me," she said embarrassed, wiping the wine off her face and chin.

"After repast we should be getting on our way again, so we can get out of this forest sooner rather than later," he said.

Her mouth was full again with another bite of hare and she nodded in agreement.

"We are lucky the Vikings have not found us yet," he continued.

"Let's make sure we keep it that way," she said strongly. She took another sip of the strong drink, feeling it burn her throat as she swallowed.

He smiled. "You surprise me, Ailia."

"What do you mean?" *Did I say something strange?*

"Maybe I will tell you someday." He took another bite of his meal.

"No time like the present." She raised her eyebrow and wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Do not take this the wrong way, but your spirit is so much stronger than I think you realize," he said.

She smiled softly, wishing it were true.

After the meal, Soren packed up the equipment and food and helped her back up on the horse.

"Are you sure you do not want to ride?" she asked.

"No," he said matter of fact. "It is best I walk."

She couldn't explain why, but she felt slightly rejected.

Lonely

Soren and Ailia rode in silence for the better part of an hour.

“It is best to travel quietly and not attract any attention from the Vikings or any other possible lurking danger,” Soren had said before they started their journey again.

As they approached the Small Mountains, snowflakes started falling from the cloudy, white sky. Finally, Soren stopped. His eyes searched the landscape.

“I am afraid a major snow storm is headed in our direction,” he said. “We need to look for shelter and, if weather permits, continue our voyage tomorrow.”

“I will welcome a break,” she said.

They rode on a bit further and finally came to an old cabin situated next to a frozen-over lake. Smoke rose from the cabin’s snow-covered roof, and she was looking forward to spending a night indoors. She had no explanation for it, but she had the distinct feeling it had been a very long time since she had experienced the comforts of a home.

Soren walked up to the cabin and knocked on the tattered door. Dirty rags had been stuffed into holes in the wood, and an ancient, broken rocking chair sat on the halfway-rotted porch. He waited patiently for an answer.

Finally, a middle-aged woman cracked the door open and stuck her head through the opening. Her face was etched with deep scars and Ailia immediately wondered what her life's story was. The woman's long, troll-like nose sat as the centerpiece of her face and her eyes were energetic and clear. Over her graying hair she wore a black scarf embroidered with gray flowers. She clasped her hands together when she saw Soren.

"What do you want?" she asked with a disdainful frown, her voice raspy and unwelcoming.

"We are traveling to Bergendal and my friend is injured," Soren said, pointing to Ailia who was still sitting on Volomite's back. "We need shelter for the night. Do you have room?"

"Yaren't welcome here," the woman said and then slammed the door shut.

Soren knocked again, no answer. He knocked again more fervently and the woman opened the door again.

"Leave me be. I don't want visitors," she snapped impatiently.

"Will this help?" Soren said, holding out a small leather purse. He shook it and it made a clinking sound. He then opened the bag and showed her numerous silver coins.

The women looked at Soren and then at the leather purse and then back at Soren again. "Why should I let ya in?"

"We are in need of shelter from the storm, and are on a very important mission to defeat Eiess," he said.

The woman's eyes grew large. Then, she opened the door all the way and stepped aside. "Hurry, come in quickly. Don't let all the warm air out," she said, waving them in. "I don't want any

trouble from you or ya girl there,” she said, nodding in Ailia’s direction.

“Thank you, ma’am. We will not be any trouble at all,” Soren said humbly. He walked back over to Ailia, lifted her off Volomite, and carried her into the cabin, where he set her on one of the two chairs in the main room.

“May I put the horse in your—uh—stable?” Soren asked.

Ailia assumed he meant the rundown shack next to the cabin.

“Ya. There’s room for only one horse there,” the woman replied. “My horse recently died,” she said and laughed.

Ailia couldn’t see how that was funny.

“But, ya, you may put em in there. The stable still has hay and oats inside, so feel free to give em some of it.”

Soren guided Volomite into the stable before returning.

The cabin felt so warm compared to the cold outside, it almost burned Ailia’s. The room was dark and stuffy and it smelled like smoke, old linens and horsemeat stew. In the middle of the floor was the well-lit hearth, and above the hearth was a small hole in the ceiling where the smoke escaped. A pot sat on top of the hearth and Ailia suspected from the odor that the woman had been cooking the stew for a really long time. To decorate the walls, the woman had hung colorful pieces of fabric and several varieties of dried flowers.

“Your flowers are beautiful,” Ailia said. There was also a small wooden table with a burnt orange tablecloth on it and two non-matching wood chairs in the main room. From what Ailia could see, it looked like the second, smaller room was where the woman slept.

“I don’t have very much,” the woman started. “Since ma great uncle died, it has been hard. The past few months haven’t been kind to me or anyone in these parts. Only cold and lonely,” she complained. “I never get any visitors.”

*I wonder why*, Ailia thought. If anyone else had received the welcome they had, of course no one would be visiting. “We are just so grateful you’re willing to let us stay,” she said.

“Yes, thank you for your generosity,” Soren added. “We would be stuck in the snow storm had you not let us in.”

“Of course,” the woman said dismissively. “You just have to be careful who ya let into your house these days. Vikings, thieves—cannot be careful enough,” she said as she walked over to the table standing next to the window. She closed the shutters, which also had stuffed fabric in between the multitude of cracks. She grabbed three of the four bowls on the table and her ladle. “Horse meat stew?” she asked, holding up her ladle.

“We would love some,” Soren said. “I have some bread that would taste good with that,” he said, reaching for his bag.

“Lovely,” the woman said. “I’m Hannah.” She stirred the pot vigorously.

“I am Soren and this is Ailia,” Soren said.

Hannah scooped stew into the bowls and smelled each of them. She moved slower than slow as she methodically placed the bowls on the table. The stew looked like a mix of horsemeat and bark. “Come, eat,” she invited.

They sat down at the table. Ailia and Soren sat on the two chairs and Hannah flipped over a bucket and sat on that. The stew had a distinct earthy taste to it, Ailia thought.

“Tell me about yourselves then,” Hannah said.

Soren and Ailia both pitched in and told about their journey over the last couple of days. They excluded the part where Ailia had seen the boys.

“I will say. You’ve both been through more ‘en your share!” Hannah said. Her eyes turned dark and she raised her wild eyebrows. “Did you happen to see the spirits of the Isaksen boys?”

Ailia glanced at Soren and leaned forward toward Hannah. “What do you know about the boys?”

“So, you have seen ‘em,” Hannah said, nodding her head. She took another bite of her stew and chewed it thoroughly.

“Yes, they appeared to me, but not Soren,” Ailia confirmed. “They seemed so real. I heard them cry. I saw them as clearly as I see you and I even held them on my lap. Then, just as quickly as they had appeared, they vanished.”

Hannah took another bite of her stew and chewed it slowly. When she finally swallowed, she spoke again. “They’ve been seen many times around these parts. But...I’ve never heard of anyone touching or holding them,” she said. “Now, that’s something special!” She wagged her index finger toward Ailia. “There’s some disagreement about what really happened to the family after they left Bergendal, but no one could really know for sure what great ills occurred to them since there were no survivors.” She paused. “I, however, was also one of the Viking’s prisoners at the time of the family’s capture,” she said intriguingly, taking another huge bite.

“Did you see the family when they were alive?” Soren asked.

Hannah nodded slowly. “Ya,” she said, not bothering to swallow her food before she spoke. “Regrettably, I was originally one of the Vikings supporting the Empress before she came to reign, but when I found out who she really was, I couldn’t and wouldn’t join in her grotesque, despicable lifestyle.”

Ailia stopped eating her stew. “Why would you ever support someone like her?”

“I was naïve then and I thought that Eiess was the answer to all our troubles. I learned in a short time that I had made a grave mistake in following her.” Hannah sounded depressed. “She’s a cunning liar, that empress, speaking of ideals, truth and glory.

Eiess betrayed us and threw us out of her midst shortly after she took over the Northlandic Throne. I wasn't a Viking myself, but I followed the Vikings to get away from the hatred of the people of Bergendal. But I should have rather endured their cruelty than associate with the barbarians."

"What do you mean?" Ailia asked.

"The Vikings soon became animals—no, beasts, or trolls without hearts, without love, compassion, or care for anyone other than themselves. They were vain and self-absorbed. I couldn't get myself to live that way and they turned on me, imprisoning me in a cage like a wild beast." Hannah breathed deeply as her weary eyes wavered.

Ailia and Soren exchanged glances.

"The mother of the young boys was killed first. They wanted her husband and children to watch the slaughter, hear her scream in pain and agony, and plead for mercy. I sat in my prison and couldn't bear to watch or listen to the poor woman's screams. Her desperate pained voice is etched in my mind forever. Then, the Vikings turned toward the husband. I've never seen a man treated with such disrespect. His body was dismembered and taken apart piece by piece—" Hannah stopped speaking and looked into the flames of the hearth.

"I don't think I want to know what happened to the boys," Ailia said, feeling rather queasy. She could never imagine hurting anyone, especially those two innocent children.

"I never knew what happened to the boys," Hannah said. "One of the smaller Vikings decided to open my cage and take me into the forest to have his way with me again. First, he cut me." She dragged a finger across several of the scars on her face. "I had had enough, and somethin' in me snapped. I had to get away from em, kill em or harm em in a way, so I could escape from these horrible monsters. When we were a ways away from

their settlement, I saw and picked up a large rock, and as quickly and hard as I could, I took the rock and smashed it against his head.” Hannah held her fist up into the air. It looked like she was reliving the moment. “He fell to the ground and never stood back up. I ran as fast as I could away from there and I never looked back.”

“Did you go back to Bergendal?” Ailia asked.

“Yes, but they would have no part in helping a former supporter of Eiess and drove me away immediately. I tried to go back to my family, but they had disowned me. My old father’s uncle took pity on me and invited me into his house. The day after he had taken me in, we were both driven out of Bergendal by a mob. After we left, we found this cabin to live in,” she said, gesturing to the whole house. “He was a good man, the only man with complete compassion and love for all fellow men, or woman in my case.” Hannah stopped and swiftly wiped the tears away from her eyes.

“He died?” Soren asked.

“Ya, a month ago last week.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Ailia said.

“Me too,” Soren said.

“Now eat!” Hannah said, slapping her hands on her thighs. “Food tastes much better when it’s warm.”

After repast, Hannah offered that Ailia sleep in her bedroom with her. She had a double bed that would fit them both. Soren would have to sleep on the floor in the main room. They were all very tired after a long day and the peace of slumber overtook them quickly.



## Nukkern

Ailia wanted to stay in bed forever. The night had been peaceful and dreamless, a luxury she rarely experienced these days, and if every night could be like this one, she would be happy. Hannah was already in the other room, clanking dishes and boiling water. She got up and pulled her messy hair loose from the leather string it was tied with, causing her long locks to flow down her back. After she re-tied the string, she got dressed, and limped out to the main room. *Where's Soren?* she wondered, not seeing him anywhere.

“Good morn to you,” Hannah said.

“Good morning.” Ailia pressed the back of her hand to her lips to hide a yawn.

“It’s going to be a beautiful day once the sun rises. Savagely cold and beautiful this country is.”

Ailia agreed on both accounts.

“I suspect you’ll be on your way shortly. I’ve packed you both food for your trip.”

Just then, Ailia heard Soren galloping off on his horse.

Hannah walked over to the window, opened the flimsy makeshift shutters, and looked out. She turned to Ailia, a puzzled look on her face. “Did he tell you where he was going?”

“No,” Ailia said and walked over to join Hannah where she stood. She peered through the window into the darkness and saw only Soren dash off into the murky pre-dawn morning on Volomite’s black back.

“I’m sure he’ll return soon,” Hannah comforted. “I never understood men. Just off doin’ their own thing, no consideration. Maybe gone huntin’?”

“Probably,” Ailia replied, but she felt like something wasn’t right. Soren wouldn’t just take off and leave her like this, would he? Not after all he had done to help her. He would probably return soon with a perfectly good explanation for leaving. But at the back of her mind, she couldn’t help but wonder: maybe she didn’t know him at all and maybe he didn’t care whether she made it back home or not.

Hannah was busy finishing breakfast: sop. Ailia hadn’t had sop in years, since Aunt Unni thought it was a vile, nasty meal.

Hannah prepared three bowls by putting a thick slices of wholegrain bread in each of them. “Sop is my favorite meal,” she said. “It’s easy to make, it fills the belly up for a long time, and it tastes wonderful, especially with a generous portion of honey. Soren gave me this honey this morning,” she said, holding up a small glass jar. She smiled. “Said he got it from the Southlandic Kingdom. They have the opposite problem down there now—no cold season.” Hannah scooped hot liquid over the bread. “Now, that might be all fine and dandy for them, you would think, but Soren said they’re sufferin’ from a fresh water shortage since none of the glaciers here are melting. It’s only going to get worse. Soren said that thousands upon thousands are

dying from lack of water. They're thirstin' to death! I'd much rather be here and cold, eatin' my fish, hare and horse, God rest Mimi's soul," she said, pointing to her stable. "Now, I cannot get around much any more, but there's really nowhere to go." She picked up a bowl and handed it to Ailia. "Be careful now, it's very hot."

"You ate your riding horse?" Ailia had eaten horsemeat before, and in fact, horsemeat stew was one of her favorite meals, but she'd never consider eating her riding horse.

"I didn't need to travel anywhere anymore. She was gettin' old and I needed the food," Hannah said matter of factly. "Now she serves me each day, just in another way."

When Ailia had finished her sop, she decided that it was now her new favorite breakfast. It satisfied her hunger and filled and warmed her belly, just like Hannah had said.

Finally, the sun rose above the mountaintops, peeking in through the cracks in the shutters. Ailia excitedly opened the front door and stepped outside to soak up its rare company. Her foot still hurt to step on, but the pain had lessened considerably and it looked a lot less swollen and not nearly as red as it did yesterday.

"Don't let all the warm air out!" Hannah hollered from inside.

Ailia shut the creaking door behind her. Last night's snow had covered the trees, fields, and every part of the Small Mountains, and Volomite's tracks were the only disturbance in this winter paradise.

Had Soren really left for good? Her mind vacillated between being concerned that he would never return and also thinking that she might be overreacting. *He probably just went out to hunt like Hannah said and will be right back.* However, if that were the case, why hadn't he told them where he was going and when, or even if, he would return?

Ailia glanced over the white and blue landscape. Branches of aspen and oak trees were covered with crystallized ice and they glittered in the light of the sun. Down by the frozen-over lake, Ailia saw a small deer prance gracefully across the ice. She took a few steps out into the snow to get a closer look at the deer. A chill shot through her legs as her bare feet touched the snow and she took a step back. Her foot was feeling much better and she could apply a little pressure on it without cringing.

To her astonishment, she thought she heard a fiddle playing somewhere in the direction of the lake. The song was upbeat, filling her chest with happiness, and she recognized the melody as the tune, *Maiden Dance*. She had heard it many times during the festivals back home, and had danced to it until her feet became sore. *Maybe the fiddler is from Bergendal?* she thought. Curious to find out where the sound was coming from and who was playing it, she went back inside the cabin and put on her overcoat and boots.

Hannah was still busy cleaning up from breakfast.

Ailia dashed out the door. "I'll be right back," she shouted, as she hobbled toward the lake. She didn't wait for Hannah to reply and wouldn't have stopped if she had. The mid-calf-high snow was hard to walk in, so she had to slow her pace and lift her skirt as she trudged through it. Snow entered her boots, freezing her delicate skin. *I should have put my stockings on.*

Music continued to flow, and before she continued, she took a moment to scan the forest on the other side. Nothing, not even a single movement was detectable, only jovial notes could be heard. She saw no reason not to explore and walked around the lake. *One can never be too careful around water.*

As she continued, she kept her eyes locked in the direction the music was coming from. Then, she noticed movement in the woods, and when she looked closer, she saw a man playing the

fiddle. *What in Midgard's name is he doing out here in the middle of nowhere?*

The tune stopped and Ailia held her breath as she stood in silence, waiting for it to return. The fiddler started playing another tune, a more melancholy, seductive one that stirred up emotions in Ailia's heart. She listened quietly as the notes filled her soul, penetrating her being. Hypnotizing her, compelling her to go to the creator of the intriguing music, it pulled her toward it. Step after step she walked, wanting nothing more than to unite herself with the heavenly sounds. Then she saw him through the woods: a young, well-dressed, dark-blond man playing the fiddle.

Suddenly, the man lowered his instrument and spun around.

Ailia jumped behind a tree, immediately feeling embarrassed that he might have seen her sneak up on him, and then feeling embarrassed that she had hid behind the tree after he had most likely seen her. She wrestled with what to do.

"Hello?" the man beckoned. "Miss?"

*Ugh!* Ailia grimaced. He *had* seen her. She apologetically stepped out from behind the tree.

"Ah, there you are!" the man exclaimed, with a beaming smile, a happy lilt in his voice. His nostrils flared as he spoke.

"I'm sorry, I, um—uh you startled me," she said, twisting her hands into knots.

He traveled very quickly toward Ailia, almost at a quicker than humanly possible pace. His deep-set, greedy eyes fixed on her like a predator zoning in on his prey. Up close, she noticed his unusually square jaw and the deep cleft in it. His full lips were cherry red and full—perfect for kissing. *Kissing?* Why had she suddenly thought of that? There was an extreme and unexplainable manly sensuousness about him, that's why. Pure and raw masculinity seeped from his pores and swallowed up her

senses, luring out her desires. She noticed how her knees felt weak, and how her heart rate was all over the place. Breathing deeply, she tried to remain unaffected.

“No need to apologize, miss—?” he said.

“Oh, Ailia,” she said and smiled. She was not sure whether she liked him and should stay, or whether she should run away.

“What a thrilling name,” the man said, not volunteering his own. “Ailia,” he said again, this time enunciating her name more loudly and clearly as he finished with a glued-on smile. “Bravo, Ailia,” he said.

Ailia muffled a chuckle. She had never thought her name was thrilling, but liked that he thought it was. She replied with a *thank you*.

“You must have heard me playing on my fiddle,” he said, holding it up. His movements seemed contrived, almost choreographed and extremely well-rehearsed.

“Yes. You are a very gifted fiddler, and I wanted to meet the one who could play so beautifully,” she said. “I don’t recognize you, but I recognized the first tune you played, having heard it performed in my hometown Bergendal. Have you visited there, perhaps?”

“No, but a man from Bergendal did teach me the melody,” he replied with a bow.

“Truly? What was his name? I know all the fiddlers in Bergendal,” she said excited, but still careful and wanting to test his knowledge on the subject.

“His name was Andreas. Do you know him?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Andreas was the best fiddler in town.”

“I agree,” the stranger said and nodded his head fervently. “We met a few years ago at the town festival and I was so

intrigued by his playing. I had never touched a fiddle in my life, but I knew I needed to learn to play like him, and—”

She listened as he told the whole story and was mesmerized by the way he told it. His voice danced as he spoke articulately in a slightly southern dialect and his movements seemed so graceful, almost like watching an archangel, if Ailia thought she'd ever meet one in this life. He seemed divine, or on a higher level than any other human, and as she studied his face, his deep blue, nearly black eyes drew her in. They were so dark and mysterious and she wanted to know more about him. No, she *needed* to know more about him. There was just something absolutely breathtakingly attractive about this man in a very sensual way, and as she continued to listen, all of her apprehension about him had vanished.

“—unfortunately, I have not seen him in a few years. I heard he passed away?” he finished his story.

“Yes, he died of old age,” Ailia said. She missed Andreas. He had been like an older brother to her, usually being the first one to dance with her at the festivals.

“Here, let me play you another tune you might know. Do you dance?” He tramped down the snow, flattening it out.

“Well, I do at our local festivals,” she said modestly. “My foot—” she started.

“Oh, come on!” He laughed in a high pitched tone. “Do not be shy. Show me a step or two.” He began playing a spirited tune, staring at her as he smiled ever so charmingly. “Come on then, dance!”

Ailia hesitantly put her hands on her hips and showed him a few steps, but she quickly stopped dancing because she felt silly.

He kept playing the melody and nodded his head at her to keep going. “Yes, beautiful!” he shouted over the fiddle tune. “Just keep dancing!”

Rather reluctantly, she kept moving to the rhythm. Fortunately, the more she danced, the more she enjoyed it. Happy to have some fun, she let out a laugh. The tune brought back so many wonderful memories from home. Oh, how she longed to be back with Uncle Brander and Aunt Unni! She then stepped harshly on her injured foot, and with a cry, she fell down into the packed snow.

“Oh, miss, Ailia, Ailia, are you hurt?” He flung his fiddle into the snow and fell to his knees beside her.

“My foot is just a little injured,” she said, trying to downplay it.

He helped her take her boot off and she could see that the wound had re-opened and was bleeding. “Will you help me get back over to the cabin over there?” she said, pointing.

“I have a better idea,” he said. “My home is right behind that hill there and it is closer. Let me carry you there. I have a very good supply of ointments and dressings.” He lifted her even before she was able to object and started walking toward the hill.

“No, I need to get back,” she said, her chest clenching in fear. “Hannah will wonder where I am and Soren will be worried too.”

“You mean the young man who took off this morning?” the fiddler asked.

“No,” Ailia lied. “That was Leif.” His strong arms gripped her more tightly, and immediately, her mind started to search for ways to escape. “I really need to get back now,” she said insistently. Maybe he was a Viking and wanted to take her back to his house to imprison her, or worse, kill her.

“I see,” he said and stopped. “I shall take you home then.”

She held her face stern to make sure he continued to recognize she was serious.



He turned around and started to walk across the lake. “The lake is solid ice and it is much easier to move across it than try to wade through the snow like you did,” he said.

So he *had* been watching her come toward him. That didn’t sit well with Ailia.

“I feel a lot better now. I can walk,” she said. By now they were about halfway across the lake. He set her down carefully and offered to support her with his hand.

“Thank you,” she said, still not trusting him. She wished she didn’t need his help, but the open wound was stinging badly, and it would be unwise to not accept assistance. He had led her about halfway back to Hannah’s house, so reason told her he was going to bring her the rest of the way, too. She stepped forward, but without warning, he pulled her back, wrapped his arms around her, clutching her body to his.

“Let me go!” she yelled.

But he didn’t listen. He stomped so hard that Ailia heard the ice crack below their feet. He stomped again and yet a third time. His eyes were staring into Ailia’s and she saw that they had lit up to a bright glowing golden color. His teeth became sharp and his skin took on the color of a corpse’s, like a dead man’s who had been underneath the water decomposing.

“Help!” Ailia screamed as loudly as her voice would go, now realizing her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. No matter how much she wiggled, kicked, and screamed, he would not release his grip on her. “Hannah!”

His stomps had opened a small hole in the ice, large enough to fit both of them. He jumped into the water with Ailia. The water was numbingly cold and she began shivering immediately.

“Help!” she continued to scream, but no one came to her rescue.

“Shh—” he said stroking her hair. “Do not worry. It will all soon be over.”

Just then a conversation she had had with Brander flashed through her mind. He had warned her several times about this brute water demon that would drag children and young maidens down to the deep with him, never to be heard from again. The Nukkern, he had called him.

The shape-shifting man tried to kiss her, but Ailia turned her head from side to side, avoiding his cold, purple, wrinkled lips.

“Help! Someone please help me!” she yelled again.

“Ailia!” she heard in the distance.

She glanced quickly to where the voice had come from, and relief washed through her when she saw Soren in the distance, galloping toward her. There was also another white horse, with a brown spotted pattern, carrying a woman dressed in the typical fancy royal blue, red and white Sami clothes.

“Soren!” Ailia yelled. “Help!”

Just as she uttered the last word, the Nukkern drew her underneath the icy water with him, wrapping his arms tightly around her body, locking in her arms so she could not move.

### Sister

It had been three days since Lucia had arrived at the end of the freezing tunnel. Her hands had been numb since day one, and a few of her fingers had turned blue with splotches of black. Her cough had progressively grown worse and her lungs burned as she hacked away, sometimes even coughing up blotches of blood. All the food that was packed in her bag was gone and she could feel the fever raging through her body.

She had tried once more on the second day to knock on the gate, but Nora had never come. Lucia had even tried to open the gate, but it was locked from the outside. Returning to the castle was out of the question, because she knew what ill fate awaited her there. Though she was utterly exhausted to the core, sleep had eluded her deprived body for she was too afraid to miss Nora's arrival, or worse, she feared she might fall asleep—forever.

When the knock finally came, Lucia thought she was dreaming, but then, as the knock persisted and increased in

volume, she realized it was real. She crept up close to the opening and saw Nora's familiar old face peaking in. "Nora!" she cried, tears of joy brimming to the edges of her eyes.

"Lucia, my dear, dear child, I am so glad you are still here. I was so worried about you. I shall explain everything later. I am just so glad to hear your voice, my blessed child," she whispered.

Lucia started coughing again.

"Oh dear, you sound dreadfully ill. We must hurry and get you to safety," Nora said, opening the creaky gate. She grabbed Lucia's arm and pulled her up and out of the cavern. After Nora made sure the path was clear, they ran across the quiet, blackened, snowy road toward the northern exit.

"I have my horse outside the walls," Nora said, breathing heavily.

Coughing and wheezing all the way, Lucia had a hard time keeping up with the old handmaiden. Finally at the horse, Nora helped Lucia mount it, and when they were both settled onto the mare's back, she nudged the horse to start moving. The wind was fierce, leaching in through Lucia's not warm enough blanket, chilling her bare face, and freezing her body to its core.

"It will be just a little way." Nora spoke directly into Lucia's ear, her arms wrapped around her torso. "This road leads down toward the main street and eventually to the church."

*I hope she is not talking about the Christian Church.* Lucia still hated Jesus, for the more she thought about it, the more she believed it was his fault her mother had died, and it was his fault she was in this life-threatening predicament. "I am so glad... ouch, uh... you are here... uh... uh," Lucia kept saying over and over, her body shaking and jerking with every cough.

"Oh, my dear princess, we will need to call for a medicine man," Nora said, placing her hand on Lucia's burning brow. "Just a while longer now and we will be there."

Heavy clouds hovered low over the city, slowly releasing their millions of snowflakes onto the tired, old town. No other people were out this time of night, probably for fear of being abducted by the Vikings who had steadily increased their raids, or for fear of Eiess' Surtorians.

Nora steered the horse into a small side road next to a tavern, and Lucia could hear laughter come from the inside. The snow-white path led to a field, where the modest Bergendal stave church stood. Its four-tiered roof was covered in snow. A low rectangular wooden fence, with one pillar at each corner, edged around the church and enclosed hundreds of tightly placed gravestones. There was a clear path stamped out in the snow from another direction and Nora steered the horse onto the path. Lights were lit inside the church, Lucia noticed, but no light was burning outside. Nora directed the horse to enter at the western gate at the church's rear entrance.

Right as the horse stopped, a tall, lanky man came out the back door and greeted them. Lucia thought she might have met him before, but could not remember where.

"Hello and welcome to the Lord's house," he said, reaching both palms up toward his guests. "I have been expecting you, blessed sisters." He lowered his hands, clasping them in front of his hips.

Lucia was in and out of consciousness now but still coughing often. She finally recognized the man as the bishop who had spoken when she attended church a while back. Bishop Peter. He wore a brown tunic alb and had not bothered to put his overcoat on before he came out. Lucia saw a younger, but very stalker man come out behind the Bishop.

"This is Anders. He will take your horse and feed him in the stable," Bishop Peter said.

Anders stepped forward and grabbed the horse by the reins.

“I’m Bishop Peter.” The two men of God helped both ladies off the horse, but they had not anticipated how weak Lucia was. Lucia collapsed the instant her feet hit the ground.

“Oh heavens!” Bishop Peter said, picking her up immediately and lifting her inside. “I apologize in advance. The church is not very well heated, I’m afraid. I will have Anders put some more wood on the hearth.”

Lucia’s eyes were shut, but she noticed they had stepped inside now. It was warmer inside the church but not warm enough for comfort.

“The girl is very ill,” Nora said, walking over to Bishop Peter. “Can you send for a healer or medicine man?”

“I am educated in the art of healing. I will do my best. Let me place her in my chambers. You may both sleep there tonight and until she is well. I will take the back room.” He started walking through a narrow hallway.

Nora followed closely behind.

“Ivar said you would be arriving several days ago. Was I mistaken?” he asked.

Lucia could hear Anders come back inside, stomping the snow off his boots in the entrance.

“Boil water immediately, Anders, we need to bring this girl back to life,” Bishop Peter yelled in Anders’s direction.

*I am in a Christian church. The gods will curse me, as they did my mother.*

“I was captured by a Viking,” Nora said.

So that was why she was late. *I could have died because she was not careful enough not to get caught.* Lucia surprised herself how bitter she felt.

They entered a small room with a humble looking bed at the end of it. Wool throws covered a straw mattress.

Bishop Peter turned around. “How on earth did you escape?”

“I told him I would return with my mother’s gold amulet if he released me,” Nora said.

“Do you have such an amulet?” Bishop Peter asked.

“No,” Nora answered. “My mother is not alive either.”

“So, how did you get him to believe you and let you go?”

Bishop Peter arrived at the bed and laid Lucia down on it.

Taking Lucia’s shoes off, Nora started massaging heat into her numb feet with her wrinkled, gnarly hands. Her feet were frozen cold, swollen, and some of her toes had turned blackish purple.

“You poor darling,” Nora said to Lucia. She turned to Bishop Peter. “I kept serving the Viking strong mead until he could not think straight.”

“Thank the Lord for mead,” Bishop Peter said, folding his hands as if he were praying.

It was not quite the reaction Lucia had anticipated from Bishop Peter. She thought men of this new God did not believe in excessive drinking.

Bishop Peter sat down on the bed and studied Lucia for a while, listening to her heart and lungs. He stood up and signaled for Nora to follow him to the corner. Nora stood up and approached him.

Lucia could hear their conversation even though they were whispering.

“This girl is very ill,” Bishop Peter said. “How long has she had this fever and cough?”

“I do not know, but longer than I would like to think,” Nora whispered back.

“Her lungs are not well. I will do my best, but unfortunately, there is not much I can do for her other than pray and hope for a miracle,” Bishop Peter said.

Had Lucia been able to speak up, she would have told the godless man to do no such thing for the truth was, she would rather die than have herself any way bound to a contrived idol such as this white pretend god.

“Surely, there must be something you can do. She is the princess!” Nora pleaded in desperation and then she lowered her voice. “And she is the Great Sentinor!”

Bishop Peter’s eyes widened. “*The* Great Sentinor? Oh, Lord. The only man I know who may be able to help her is not here. It would take weeks before anyone would be able to reach him.”

“Soren,” Nora said. “Yes, he would be the only one.”

“How do you know Soren?” Bishop Peter asked, sounding surprised.

“He is Lucia’s betrothed. I first met him when I contracted ergotism. He was the only one who could heal me. If Soren knew that Lucia was here, he would come for her immediately. Should we send for him?”

“Nora?” Lucia said. She could feel the warmth starting to breathe life into her body.

“I am here, my dear. You are safe with us now.” Nora hastened toward the bed.

“I have a letter from my father, uh... uh... uh...” she coughed. Her hands searched her bag for the scroll.

Nora helped her find it and gave it to her.

“From my father. He said to read it as soon as I was safe.” She felt the anticipation of reading his words energize her. Holding it up so Nora could see, she asked, “Will you read it to me? I am too tired.”

“Of course, my love,” Nora said, looking over at Bishop Peter.

“I will leave you to your privacy.” He bowed his head and walked out, closing the door behind him.



Nora tucked a brown, itchy pillow behind Lucia's back, so she could sit up in a semi-reclining position. When she opened the red Bergendal-sealed scroll, two additional smaller scrolls fell out. One of them read *Lucia* and the other, *Ailia*.

"Ailia?" Nora said, a tone of excitement in her voice. "Do you remember that Ailia was the name your mother spoke right before she died?" she asked Lucia. However, Lucia picked up on that it was not so much a question as it was a reminder.

Nora began reading the main letter first, smiling as if she knew something Lucia did not.

*My dearest beloved Lucia,*

*I have sat down to write this letter many times over the years, but have not been able to due to my lack of faith. Now, as I am imprisoned by Eiess in my own castle and am preparing for your escape, I am forced to write it in a hurry. Please forgive me if I come across abrupt, but time is not my ally and I must inform you of many essential things.*

*You may not understand everything I am about to say to you or understand why your mother and I chose to do things the way we did. It does not mean we loved you less than your sister.*

Nora looked up. "Did you know you had a sister?" she asked, caressing Lucia's cheek.

Lucia opened her eyes. "Yes, I always knew," Lucia said calmly. "My mother spoke to me about her from time to time, but she died when she was just a baby. She was my twin."

Nora nodded and continued reading.

*Your mother spoke to you of your twin sister who died at birth. The truth is that she did not die, Lucia. She still lives, even here in Bergendal.*

“She is still alive?” Lucia perked up a bit. “I have a sister! We must find her!”

Nora looked up again, lowering the letter to her lap. “I am sorry we have all kept this a secret from you, Lucia.”

“What?” Lucia said. “You knew my sister was alive and did not tell me?” Why did Nora know this and not Lucia? Every direction she turned, there was another lie, another deceit. But the worst of it was that the lies came from the people she thought she could trust. Nora. Her father. And worst of all, her mother.

Nora nodded her head, took a deep breath and read on.

*To protect Ailia’s identity, we gave her away at birth to a loving couple. To protect her identity even further, your mother and I did not know of the couple’s identity.*

*Ivar, our faithful guard, brought Ailia to the family and even to this day, the family still does not know who Ailia is. Your mother and I do not know where Ailia lives, only Ivar knows.*

*My dear Lucia, your sister is the Light—the Light in which you need to bear—the true Great Sentinor. Eiess still believes you are the Great Sentinor and she will be hunting you until the day you die, or until she discovers the truth. Please forgive us in protecting your sister and endangering you by creating an illusion that you were the Great Sentinor. Try to understand that this decision was an attempt to save her life and ultimately, the life of all people in Midgard, including yours, from the evils of Eiess. If Ailia does not defeat Eiess in this lifetime, we are all doomed.*

*Your sister needs you. She does not know of your existence or of her royal lineage and she is unaware that she is the Great Sentinor. You must find her and tell her. We gave the same Bergendal crested gold ring to her adoptive parents to keep in an unopened chest until we claimed her back. Ask them for it, for this will be proof to you that she is your sister.*

Lucia twisted her ring around her finger, a festering ache growing in her bosom. *They used me? They used me!*

Nora continued reading.

*On the morrow, Eiess has planned for my execution. Please forgive me for deceiving you, yet again. But I feared you would not have left my side had I told you. My sacrifice is getting you out safe and it is a happy sacrifice indeed. Rest assured, I am joyful, now having been reunited with my wife and your mother Maud and our unborn son in Valhalla. I am looking down on you with love and hope, and I will always be with you, watching over you until we meet again one glorious and bright day.*

*Your loving father,  
Olav*

*~ I have enclosed two letters from your mother. One is for you and the other is for Ailia. Please give it to her when you find her.*

Nora looked up with tears streaming down her face. She lowered the scroll and glanced over at Lucia.

Torn by this new information, Lucia closed her eyes tightly. *If I seek my sister out and find her, she will know who she is and*

*Eiess will not be after me anymore. If I do not find her, Nora will probably do it herself.*

Who was this man she called father really? She had always thought he was a man of integrity, one who she could trust to do the right thing, no matter what. Yes, he was harsh and cruel at times, but dishonest? Unfaithful, as Vilda had claimed? A... fraud? She unsuccessfully fought back her tears and wept in Nora's arms, waiting, hoping that the pain would subside, but no release of heartache came to her and her hurt only grew deeper. The loss of life and loss of trust was too devastating to take in and too painful to speak out loud. Now that she knew Nora was part of that deceitful circle, it made her even angrier.

"Oh, my king," Nora said finally. "May your soul rest in peace."

"Now I am all alone," Lucia said.

"No, you have a sister! And you have me, do not forget. We will need to find Ailia as soon as you recover," Nora said.

Lucia looked at Nora soberly. "I will recover and we will find her," she said firmly, her eyes focused and clear. *Better to have Nora think I care. Do I care?* She tried not to think about the voice in her head that mourned her parents' deceit more than their deaths, and which killed her trust in them and all she had ever held dear.

\* \* \*

A few days later Lucia's strength had started to come back and she felt physically well enough and emotionally ready to read the letter her mother had written to her. She started reading it with mixed emotions.

*My beloved daughter Lucia,*

*The night before you were born, Iluxia spoke to me about you and Ailia. It was a joyous and a sad moment in one. Sad, because Iluxia revealed that the Great Sentinor must be dead unto me at birth and joyous because I would get to keep you. He declared that I must name you Lucia, which means 'Bearer of Light', so everyone would believe you were the Great Sentinor.*

*Your mission in life is to be the bearer of your sister, the one light of Midgard and you must do everything in your power to bear her and uphold her.*

*I have prepared something called the Aesira Scrolls for Ailia, which she is supposed to receive when she turns eighteen. You must read the scrolls also, for you will learn through these detailed writings all the important details and history of your Aesira lineage.*

Lucia remembered that Vilda had mentioned the scrolls.

*On your eighteenth birthday you will receive the Aesira Jewel from either me or your father, if I have passed on to the other side. You will then take over as the Sun Queen.*

*You will be charged with keeping the Aesira Jewel hidden from the world and concealed from Eiess and also with engaging the jewel each solstice with Iluxia.*

*You, my beloved daughter have the immense responsibility and power to help Ailia defeat Eiess. She needs you to support her through her life and I am asking you, with all my love, to be there for her no matter how difficult your lives become. Without your support, Ailia is doomed to fail.*

*With all my Love,  
Mother*

*I am nothing but a pawn in their ploy, a daughter who they desire to play second fiddle. All along, I have carried the risk and burden that comes with the name "Great Sentinor," and what do I receive in return? A position of servitude to a peasant they claim is my blood.* Lucia had all the responsibility, but none of the glory. All the pain, but no joy. And now they needed her to commit her life to a sister she did not know.

Yet, she could not bear to refuse her parents their dying requests. She was not a selfish barbarian without a heart, and she had, for as long as she could remember, set her duty to kingdom and blood above all else.

Yet was Vilda right when she proclaimed, "What is blood?" No. She was not. And Lucia would do what was required of her, no matter how far down she must bury her own pain.

"Do you know anything about the Aesira Scrolls?" Lucia asked Nora, who was sitting in the corner on an old wooden stool, hemming a garment.

"Yes. Your mother wrote them and I hid them before you were born. They contained the genealogy of the Aesira bloodline and a lot more. I never read them, but it is imperative Ailia receive them."

"Where are they hidden?" Lucia asked.

Nora hesitated. "I had hidden them in the Godwalk Caves right around the time of your birth. However, I believe your mother had them moved to a different location a few years later."

"So, we will never find them then—" Lucia said, feeling discouraged.

"Your parents were very wise. They would have left clues about where to find them. I would not give up just yet."

Lucia sighed.

“Now, your job is to get better and to get enough rest. Stop worrying about the future. Just focus on getting well here and now,” Nora said.

“I cannot wait until I have recovered my health,” Lucia said. “Then I will not need to take orders from you anymore.”

Nora laughed. “And I cannot wait until you are healthy either. Then I will not have to give you orders.”

## Day Mares

As the fiddler plunged Ailia into the freezing water, she vividly remembered her maredream about being drowned underneath the ice. She panicked and started kicking and squirming to get out of the clutch of the shapeshifter who had quickly become her nemesis.

*Who is this being? Is he truly the dreaded Nukkern Uncle Brander had warned me so fervently about?* Ailia's fight was futile, for his grasp was too strong to escape. As she tried to wrestle her way out, he drew her deeper and deeper into the lake, a lake that appeared shallow and small on the surface, but now felt like a bottomless ocean. The freezing water numbed her body, making it painful and difficult to move. Her heart let as if it would tear out of her chest, it was beating so fiercely. Soon she started to feel the need to take a breath. But she must not.

She looked up toward the top of the lake and saw sunrays glittering through the broken ice. It was so far away, and with each passing second, the distance grew further still.



All of a sudden, a body dove into the water. Soren! Right as his eyes connected with hers, he started swimming toward her. *If I can only last a while longer, I will be safe and back in Soren's care*, she thought.

Soren swam aggressively downward. Right when he reached them, he grabbed the Nukkern by the shoulder, looked him in the eyes and blurted something incomprehensible.

The Nukkern's eyes glowed fiery red as he strengthened his suffocating grip around Ailia, squeezing out the last bit of air of her burning lungs.

Soren blurted out something again and punched the shapeshifter in the face. Suddenly, the Nukkern let go of her and swam at lightning speed into the deep, dark chasm. Soren grabbed Ailia by the hand and headed upwards to her salvation, swimming toward the surface.

Ailia was so cold that she could barely move a muscle, but she still tried to assist him in their ascent by kicking her wilting feet. The instant she broke through the water's surface, she sucked in several breaths of air.

"Grab on," the Sami woman said, offering her bare hand to Ailia. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties and was stalky with a muscular build. Thick brown leggings covered her legs, and her calves and feet were bound in red and white wool fabric. On her feet, she wore white and brown reindeer fur boots decorated with white, red and green trim that came up to a swirly point at the toe.

Ailia slowly lifted her hand up. It was shaking violently. *So cold, so cold.*

The Sami woman pulled her out of the water, and immediately wrapped her into first a wool blanket and then a reindeer fur she grabbed off her horse. "You will be just fine, just fine," she said, rubbing Ailia's back briskly.

Soren placed his hands on the ice and pushed himself up out of the water. He grabbed a fur off Volomite and wrapped himself in it. Both Soren and the Sami woman lifted Ailia onto Volomite's back and then they made their way across the rest of the ice-covered lake. When they arrived at the cabin, Soren lifted Ailia off Volomite and barged in the door.

"What happened?" Hannah asked startled. She rose to her feet from her chair, dropping the cup of tea she was drinking from.

"The Nukkern!" Soren yelled. "You should have warned Ailia about him!" He carried her over to the hearth.

"What do you mean? There is no Nukkern around here," Hannah replied defensively. "I would have warned her if I knew."

"Well, he is here now!" Soren said, his voice seething. He laid Ailia on the floor close to the fire. "Bring me hot water. We need to warm Ailia up or she will freeze to death."

"Right away, sorry, sorry," Hannah said, moving frantically to get it done.

Ailia started to shiver even more violently, but was it because she was cold or because she was so afraid? She closed her eyes and tried to relax.

Soren started ripping off her wet, cold clothes. "I need more blankets, Silya," he ordered the Sami woman. Silya gathered all the blankets and furs she could find and brought them to Soren.

"Horses, get the horses," Soren said as he took the blankets.

Silya immediately left the cabin to tend to the horses.

Soren covered Ailia's body with a blanket before he took off her last undergarment. He then proceeded to undress himself, leaving only his undergarments on and slipped underneath the blanket. Embracing Ailia's cold, quivering body, he pressed it up against his. He felt firm against her and warmth flowed from him

as she embraced him back. She thought he seemed unusually warm to just have come out of the same frozen lake as her. Perhaps he had some special power since he was a Sentinor.

This was the first time Ailia had been pressed up against a man in this way—wet skin, bare bodies. It was difficult to say if she enjoyed it so much simply because he was a man or because it was Soren.

Hannah came over with a bucket of hot water and a cup of herbal tea for Ailia. She soaked a cloth in the bucket and laid it on Ailia's forehead and then handed the tea to Soren.

"What happened?" Hannah asked concerned, kneeling down next to them.

"The Nukkern got hold of her somehow and dragged her under the water with him." Soren stopped for a moment. "Did you not hear her screams?"

"I... am sorry, but I'm deaf in my left ear and I have limited hearin' in the other, so the main way I listen is by readin' lips," Hannah said. "I wish I could have heard her. I never would have imagined that something like this could happen here."

Ailia's shivering had nearly ceased and the warmth had returned to her body and even to her hands and feet. In fact, she was almost back to normal physically, although she still felt shaken from the incident. She hated water for a reason, and this experience only made her more afraid.

She opened her eyes and fully realized she was lying next to a nearly naked man. She watched as the fur covering them rose and fell with each breath. There was a slight gap between them, where Ailia could see his chest. It was firm and tan, and the indent at the center of it ran deep. His shoulders spanned wide and were muscular, and his arms wrapped around her were strong.

She opened her mouth to catch a breath and looked up into Soren's eyes. He looked down at her, an intense, yet impassive stare, and suddenly there was no air left in the room. The muscles in his jaw clenched shut, and as he offered a conflicted look, his breathing shallowed. She leaned her head to rest on his bare chest. She felt so safe there nestled in his care.

"Where did you go? I wasn't sure if you had left for good, or if you were even coming back," she said.

Soren slowly wriggled away and stood up. Watching him move, bare wet skin, a strong body, Ailia had a difficult time averting her eyes. She wanted to memorize every valley and every peak of him, not only with her eyes, but also with her hands. When he looked straight at her, a wave of blood heated her cheeks and she looked away.

"Your temperature is stabilizing rapidly, so you will be fine now. Something has come up and I need to leave, so I brought Silya here to help you get home," he said coolly.

"Oh," Ailia said dispirited, trying to read his face for any clues of his sudden change of plans.

"Silya knows the land and she is a very skilled hunter and traveler. She will be good company and help you with anything you might need." He pulled his blue tunic on, secured the belt around his waist, walked over to Ailia and knelt beside her. Gently stroking her forehead, he said, "Make sure you stay warm for a while longer and stay close to Silya." He looked into her eyes and exhaled. "You need to be more careful. It is a miracle that you did not die. What happened out there?"

"I heard music and—" Ailia huffed. "I'll be more careful." She was embarrassed that she had to be rescued by him yet again. She sat up and tried not to seem too upset that he was leaving her. Which made her ask herself: why was she upset?

She had only just met him. In addition, he was a Sentinor and was betrothed to Princess Lucia.

He walked over to her foot and lifted the blankets. "I saw that your wound had re-opened. I will need to stitch it back together before I leave." He fetched his bag and pulled out a few instruments. "This will hurt," he said, looking her in the eyes. "Hannah, do you have a stick Ailia can bite down on for the pain?" He then refocused on Ailia. "Try to think about something other than the pain."

Hannah brought a wooden spoon and inserted it into Ailia's mouth. She bit down hard.

"Ready?" he said and looked into Ailia's eyes.

She nodded, not really knowing if she would be able to handle it.

He started sewing and Ailia felt the needle every time it punctured her skin. She breathed erratically and bit down hard as she strained to not scream in agony.

"Just a few more stitches," Soren informed sympathetically. "You are very brave, you know, so very brave."

Ailia decided to focus on Soren's face to help keep her calm. She noticed the pain lessen as she focused on him, on his deep, calming, narrow eyes. Her breathing became more stable and the pain more manageable, the more she immersed herself into him.

"All done," Soren said, exhaling a long breath. He walked over and crouched down by her side. "I wish you well on your travels and hope you find the answers to what you are seeking."

"Thank you again, Soren, for all you have done for me. I'm glad our paths crossed, even if only briefly. I..." She was about to say, "I will miss you," but those words were too forward between two who had just met. Instead, she said, "I hope your travels are safe as well, wherever they may lead."

He paused and looked at her in silence. All else seemed to fade away except for the oneness that connected them then and there. "Thank you," he said, almost whispering.

She reached for his hand, but he pulled away. He stood up and started cleaning the bloodied instruments, placing them in his bag when he finished.

Hannah walked over to him and handed him some food she had prepared for his trip. "Thank you for your generosity," she said. "Perhaps I will purchase a new horse and travel a bit."

"You are young. You should. Thank you for your hospitality." Soren opened the door and joined Silya outside.

Ailia could hear them talking.

"Please make sure she gets home safely. I might come see you after I have been to see the empress," Soren said.

Ailia's blood froze. *The empress? Why would he visit the empress? Is he a secret scout after all?* Ailia's heart dropped as she kept listening in on their conversation. And she was now terrified that Soren might travel to the empress and reveal all that she had shared with him. Maybe that's why he needed to leave so suddenly.

"Have a safe trip, Soren," Silya said, hugging him warmly.

"Thank you." Soren stepped back inside again and looked at Ailia as if he were trying to engrave the image of her face in his mind. Was he trying to memorize her features in case he needed to find her again for Eiess? She looked away.

He took a breath and opened his mouth to say something, but quieted his voice instead. He then turned around, stepped outside, closed the door behind him, and mounted Volomite. He grabbed the reins and made a clicking noise twice. Volomite neighed and took off.

Ailia closed her eyes as she heard Volomite's hoofs disappear.

“It is a cold day today,” Silya said, entering the room with a huff, her full cheeks rosy from the cold.

Ailia slightly resented Silya being there in Soren’s stead. She didn’t want to be escorted home by a stranger, even if Soren had recommended her. “I forgot to ask Soren before he left: what did he say that made the Nukkern leave?”

“Probably his name. If you know the Nukkern’s name and speak it out loud, he has to leave,” Silya said.

“Oh?” Ailia said.

Silya rubbed her hands briskly together above the flames in the hearth. “Years ago, the Nukkern was one of Eiess’ followers in Vanaheim and he descended with her to Midgard to gain power over mortals. They were also followed by many other creatures of darkness.”

“Like who?” Ailia asked, slightly frightened to know the answer.

“Have you heard of the huldras or darkelves?” Silya asked, her alert eyes narrowing.

“Yes...” Ailia said. “They cannot possibly be real?” she added disbelievingly. It was one of the reasons she had chosen to convert to Christianity. She found it ridiculous to believe in such supernatural beings.

“Did you believe in the Nukkern before today?” Silya asked.

“Well, no—?” But just moments ago, he had shape-shifted before her eyes and dragged her to the depths of the lake with him. The reality of that could not be explained away. But huldras? Darkelves? “Why haven’t I ever seen them before?”

“In the past they have not associated too much with mere mortals,” Silya said.

“Oh,” Ailia said, feeling being a *mere* mortal was something a little too average.

“Recently, though, and especially since Eiess took over the Northlandic Throne, they have started interacting with humans and have even started regularly threatening human existence,” Silya said.

“Just like the Nukkern?”

“Well... the Nukkern is a little different. Soren captured the Nukkern long ago and was going to kill him. Instead, Soren made a pact with him that he could keep his life as long as he remained anonymous and would do a certain amount of work for Soren. Part of the agreement was that if anyone found out the Nukkern’s name, the Nukkern would lose his life.”

“So, his real name is not Nukkern, then?” Ailia asked.

“No. However, no one except Soren knows his real name,” Silya said.

“So, do any of these other shape-shifters have agreements with Soren?”

“I do not think so, but I will be the first to admit that I do not know everything.” Silya sat down by Ailia. “How are you feeling?” she asked and smiled, revealing pearly white teeth.

“Much better.” Ailia felt strong enough that she could start traveling back to Bergendal. “When can we leave?” She preferred to not stay here any longer than necessary; this sinister forest wasn’t the most welcoming place.

“As soon as we have prepared the supplies and your clothes have dried, we can go. Are you feeling well enough to travel, though? We could wait until tomorrow,” Silya said.

“I feel great. I’m ready to get going,” Ailia assured, a little too eagerly perhaps.

“Great. Hannah?”

“Yes,” she said, coming out from the back room.

“Will you be so kind and help us pack our things? Let us put Ailia’s clothes by the hearth so they’ll dry quicker,” Silya said.



“Yes, dear,” Hannah replied.

They started to pack the blankets and supplies for the trip. Hannah prepared a generous portion of dried horse meat, fish and water in leather skins, and once Ailia’s clothes were dry, they were ready to go.

“Soren told me to give you this before we left,” Silya said, handing Hannah another bag of coins.

“No, I couldn’t,” Hannah said, shaking her head. “He already gave me enough to last my whole lifetime!”

“He insisted, so here you go,” Silya said and placed the bag of money on Hannah’s table. “We should be going, so we can utilize the few daylight hours we have. Ailia, Soren told me that you shouldn’t put any pressure on your foot for at least two days, so if you would hop on one foot out to the horse with my support, I can lift you up onto Miika.”

“Sure,” Ailia replied. She stood up with Silya’s help and they both hopped through the cabin, out into the snow and stood next to Miika.

“On three,” Silya instructed, grabbing Ailia around her waist. “One, two, three.” She hoisted Ailia up onto the horse, straining a little bit. Miika was not as tall as Volomite but was extremely thick and stalky and probably weighed the same, if not more.

*Soren certainly picked a sturdy woman to escort me back home.* “Thank you for your generosity, Hannah,” Ailia said when Hannah walked out the front door.

“If you ever travel through these parts again, please come visit,” she said, placing her hands on her heart. “If I am here, that is.” She smiled a little.

“I most certainly will,” Ailia said.

Silya signaled to Miika to start walking and they were on their way.

Ailia waved to Hannah until they reached beyond the first hill. *Poor woman.* She hated leaving her all alone in these wretched woods, especially since knowing the Nukkern was close by. She hoped that wretched shape-shifter had left after what Soren had done to him, left and would never return.

After they had traveled for a while, Ailia's mind wandered back to thinking about Soren. He had promised he would help her find out why there was a connection between Eiess and her, and Ailia had believed him. *I'm a fool to have believed him,* Ailia thought. For now, he had just abandoned her without warning to fend for herself against the most powerful and evil being that walked Midgard.

*Who can I trust anymore?*

## The Four Sentinors

“Where do you know Soren from?” Ailia broke the silence that had been hovering uncomfortably in the air since they had left Hannah's cabin.

“We have known each other since I was a child,” Silya said, looking at Ailia, sitting on the horse. “We met right after I had been sold into slavery by my uncle. Southerners would come to my hometown, Alta, and pay handsomely for strong, young thralls—thralls like me.”

“How horrible,” Ailia said, stunned by Silya’s tragic story.

“After I was sold to a traveling company, who claimed they represented the Southlandic Empress, Mumtaz, Soren bought me with sixteen pieces of silver and set me free. I was able to return to my family and I have lived as a free woman ever since.”

“It’s amazing how someone can come into one’s life at exactly the right time and perform miracles like that,” Ailia said, thinking about Soren and how he had rescued her from the wolves. “Was that who Soren was going to see, Empress Mumtaz?” Ailia couldn’t wait to find out.

“Yes,” Silya answered.

Ailia smiled a little, relief settling in her chest.

“Oh, did you think he was going to see Eiess?” Silya asked and laughed sarcastically. “No, not Soren. He has been working with Empress Mumtaz on a plan to overthrow Eiess. The Southlandic Kingdom is also suffering tremendously because the seasons have stopped. Except, in their case, they have the opposite problem.”

“Yes, Soren told me. It’s horrible that one person’s actions can have such a drastic effect on so many innocent lives,” Ailia said troubled. How had Eiess become so powerful? Perhaps Silya knew. “Why is she so powerful compared to anyone else?”

“There are many reasons, but what most people don’t know is that Eiess also used to be a Sentinor just like Iluxia, Lucia and Soren.”

“Truly?” Ailia asked shocked, still not understanding wholly what a Sentinor was, but never expecting that Eiess would be one.

“Eiess was created in the beginning with the three others, thousands and thousands of years ago. What happened then was never told to anyone in Midgard, except for the Tundra people or, as you call them, the Samis.”

“You are Sami, right?” Ailia wanted to clarify just to be sure, even though Silya’s dress had Sami written all over it. “Silly question,” she said under her breath, knowing what the answer would be.

“Yes, I am a Sami,” Silya answered without a hint of condescension in her tone. “Many generations ago, our Noaida, Geidun, our mediator between Midgard and the spirit realm, was granted a vision by Iluxia. The realms opened to him and he was shown in a fantastic revelation what transpired before the creation of the Aesira bloodline. Four beings were created to be Midgard’s protecting Sentinors: Iluxia, the Sentinor of progress and keeper of the key of the Aesira Jewel; Eiess, the Sentinor of darkness, who grants life rest, peace and sleep; Soren, the Sentinor of spiritual and physical healing; and finally, Lucia, the Sentinor of physical and spiritual light.”

Ailia was starting to see a much larger picture of Soren’s deep love and devotion for Lucia. How inappropriate it had been that she found him attractive, that her eyes had lingered where they shouldn’t have. “What about the Sun Queens, the keepers of the Aesira Jewel?” Ailia wondered.

“First, let me tell you about what happened to Eiess,” Silya said. “Eiess and Iluxia were charged to work in perfect harmony, one ruling the sun, the day, growth, energy, light and anything pertaining to progress, increase and development, while the other would rule the night and anything pertaining to rest, slumber,

tranquility, harmony, serenity, repose and stillness. As Midgard drew nearer and nearer to the sun, Iluxia's powers would strengthen; likewise, as Midgard drew further and further away from the sun, Eiess' powers would increase. Not only that, but as time went on, their powers would increase with each passing solstice. So Iluxia's powers were strongest at summer solstice eve. Eiess'—"

"Powers were strongest on winter solstice eve," Ailia said. "That's why she chose to strike on winter solstice eve, so her powers would be the strongest, not only on that day, but for as long as the dark season prevailed."

"And how many winter solstice days have we had?" Silya asked sarcastically.

"Way too many," Ailia replied facetiously.

Silya looked up at her and laughed heartily. "A person after my own heart!" Silya turned serious again. "Now this part of Midgard stands frozen on the darkest day of the year and will forever, until someone destroys Eiess. Some people believe this is the eternal winter that will ring in Ragnarok. Others believe winter is here to stay and that the gods have cursed us. Either way, Eiess' powers are growing exponentially every day since the days are in her favor and Iluxia's powers are remaining constant. Unfortunately, in comparison to Eiess' powers, Iluxia's powers are decreasing."

"Why can't the other three Sentinors work together and destroy her?" Something was not making sense, Ailia thought.

"Let me backtrack a bit. First, none of the Sentinors were supposed to come to Midgard's realm. When Eiess defiantly descended to Midgard, breaking her pact with the other Sentinors, Lucia and Soren were sent to Midgard to bring her back or defeat her if they could not. The difference was that Soren and Lucia had to be born into Midgard by mortal parents

and needed to relearn who they were. That is how they became demi-mortals. Eiess found a way to come to Midgard without having to be born and she remembers everything from before mortality.”

“Demi-mortal?” Ailia asked confused.

“A demi-mortal is someone who is half-human, half-Sentinor. When a Sentinor is born into Midgard, he or she becomes more than just mortal. They retain some of their divine powers that mere mortals like you and I do not have. One of their divine powers is that they cannot be easily killed. They also possess special endowments. Take Soren, for example, he is a healer. Lucia has three lives. The difficult part of becoming a demi-mortal is that they have to be born as infants into Midgard and leave behind all knowledge and power until they rediscover them and redevelop them here again,” Silya said.

“So, they don’t remember who they are?”

“No. They need to learn in time, through life’s experiences and they do not remember the pre-mortal spheres, or what they learned there, as the Empress does. *Empress* was a title she gave herself by the way.” Silya shook her head as if disgusted. “She is a self-serving witch. Whatever she is, Eiess unfortunately remembers the pre-mortal sphere and now she is more powerful than anyone.”

“Do demi-mortals live longer than an average human?” Ailia wondered.

“No, but Soren was given a potion that Iluxia had procured from the tree of souls to extend his life, so that he could remain in Midgard until Lucia succeeded in destroying Eiess. They knew it would be a nearly impossible thing to accomplish, so she was granted three lives.”

“How long will Eiess live?” Ailia asked.

“Eiess will live forever if she wishes. She is not a mortal, or even a demi-mortal, so physical laws do not pertain to her. If Soren and Lucia do not find a way to destroy Eiess this time, which is Lucia’s third and final life, their spirits will dissolve. He does not take it lightly. Now, if they succeed and both live, they will age and die together, returning to Alvheim to continue to live as Sentinors. Their goal now is to gather as many allies as they can.”

“What about Eiess? She is here and if she is destroyed, who will be the Sentinor over rest, peace and sleep? Does not there need to be one?” Ailia asked.

“Now, that I do not know,” Silya answered.

\* \* \*

Silya made good time. She was a clever traveler, seeming to know exactly where to go to find the less-encumbered path. They reached the edge of the Small Mountains and entered the Woodland Forest. The forest floor was flat and easy to travel on. Silya could even pick up a trail here and there, which made walking for both Silya and Miika much more manageable. The Woodland Forest trees were shorter and further apart than in the Northland Forest, most of them lifeless, frozen grey-colored Aspen trees.

After long, they reached the base of a tall mountain.

“This is the Vesten River,” she said, stopping. The wide river was partially frozen over, making it impossible to cross. “If we head further east, we can cross the river at a more narrow point. I do not want to risk crossing here with you, injured and all.”

Ailia thanked her for the consideration. She didn't want to experience any more injuries or near-drowning incidents. "I have been here with my Uncle Brander and yes, I do remember there's a narrowing of the river just a little east of here," she confirmed as she pointed eastward.

"I am going to set up fire, so we can eat here. Then, we can worry about crossing the river later." Silya started to pull supplies off of Miika and set them down onto the snow. She then reached for Ailia and pulled her off the horse. "Sit on this," she said, guiding her to the bundle of string-tied reindeer furs.

Ailia took a wobbly step over to the furs and sat down. Right away, Silya started digging at the snow, removing it with her mitten-covered hands. A campfire was soon lit and water was placed in a small kettle to boil.

"I am making reindeer meat stew. It is my specialty," Silya bragged. She grabbed a small leather packet and started opening it.

"Sounds delicious," Ailia said enthusiastically. Her stomach had been rumbling for a while.

"My grandmother showed me how to make it. She was very particular about the order to put the ingredients in. I presume it was some type of superstition on her part. May I share with you a story?"

"Certainly," Ailia said.

"One time, actually the first time I made the stew on my own, I put the reindeer meat in after the carrots and my grandmother threw the whole stew out. Said it was bad luck if we did not do it exactly like she had taught us. She was a great woman, strong willed and obstinate," Silya said and laughed. "She just held many superstitions." After she had unwrapped the package, she started meticulously pulling apart the dried meat that was in it,



tossing it into the kettle of hot water. She then added some spices, leaves and some old gnarly looking potatoes.

Ailia wondered if they were safe to eat, but she didn't say anything.

"One day, Grandmother left the house to go to the market, which was about a third of a day's travel away. When she was almost to the market, she remembered she had not had anyone throw a cup of water after her when she left. She believed if someone did not do this, it would mean bad luck for her journey. She turned around immediately and traveled all the way back home. When she arrived, she opened the tent door and announced, "See, it was bad luck that no one threw water after me in my direction. I had to travel all the way home and missed the market!" Silya said in a nasally, angry voice.

Ailia laughed. "My Aunt Unni is also somewhat superstitious. When I was younger, she would never allow me to whistle inside the house. She said if I did, someone would die somewhere in Midgard." They both laughed.

When they had finished eating their humble meal, Silya gathered up the dirty dishes.

"Let me help you clean them," Ailia insisted, as she took a plate and started rinsing it in the snow.

Silya loaded the horse and put out the fire by stomping on it.

As Ailia was finishing up with the dishes, she started thinking about some of the things Silya had mentioned earlier. "What role does the Sun Queen play in all of this?"

"Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. The Sun Queen is the only person who can initiate the Aesira Jewel with Iluxia. Iluxia holds the key to the Jewel. To be a Sun Queen, you have to be a direct descendant of the Aesira bloodline. Princess Lucia is the only one who has that blood running through her veins."

"Soren told me a little about it," Ailia said.

“It is the pure bloodline from the beginning of Midgard and the only bloodline directly tied to Iluxia, but that is a whole other story I do not know much about,” Silya admitted. She paused, gazing toward the Trollstein Mountains. “We are just about one and a half day’s journey from Bergendal.” She removed her hat and revealed her thick waist-length black hair. She pulled a comb out of the purse and ran it through the knots a dozen or so times. She twirled a tan piece of leather string around her hair to make a perfect ponytail and put her red and white wool hat back on. Silya was more beautiful to look at than Ailia had initially thought. Her costume aged her, making her look ten years older than she was. Her smooth olive-colored skin was flawless and her almond eyes tilted slightly up at the edges.

“It looks like it is snowing in Bergendal. The clouds are not heading in this direction, more east.” She nodded in agreement with herself and then looked at Ailia who had finished the dishes. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Ailia replied. She was more than ready to be home again. *Will my family still be there?* She hardly dared think the thought, afraid something could have happened to them.

Silya gathered the clean dishes, put them in her leather bag and tied the bag onto Miika. “Let me help you get onto the horse again,” she said.

“Have you ever met a Viking?” Ailia asked after she had settled back onto Miika. “I’ve decided I *never* want to meet one.”

“Yes, I will never forget the day I did. It changed my life forever.”

“What happened?” Ailia wondered.

She paused for a long while. “It is a long, gruesome story; are you sure you want to hear?”

“Yes, please. If you don’t mind, of course,” Ailia said, not deterred by Silya’s warning.

Silya walked on for a while in silence before she spoke. “Our people had been driven from their land by the barbarians of the south, left without homes, lands, or rights. It was a time before the Vikings had a name, a time when such plundering, murders and rapes were uncommon, especially among the peaceable Sami people. The unnamed savages came upon us one winter. The first thing they did was amass the youngest of the young, piling them as logs one on top of another, crying, screaming with their aching voices, freezing, naked on the snow. They grabbed each infant by the ankles, flinging the poor newborn into the air, running to impale the child on the tips of their swords.” She sucked in a sharp breath before continuing. “I have never been able to erase the images from my memory, or the feelings of fear, rage and compassion from my heart—rage and fear for the Vikings and compassion for the babies. The horror of such a thing ever happening to one of my own children frightened me into never birthing any.”

Ailia had never heard of such horridness. “That’s awful!” she said.

“Among the children—” Silya continued. “—was my newborn baby brother, Hansa. He was the most beautiful child you could imagine, with black coarse hair and steel blue eyes. His olive complexion looked golden in the sunlight on the autumn day he came to be birthed. My mother, so proud for having produced a son after three daughters, treasured him beyond compare. His first tooth had just appeared the winter the word arrived that cruel raiders were heading in our direction. How could we have known what cruel meant, being a nonviolent people, living simply in our tents, with our reindeer, desiring nothing more of life?”

“Living secure from the schemes of men, protected against their maliciousness by the gods, we had cultivated a thing of immeasurable challenge: that nothing remained ever to be wanted. After the destruction of our land, I had prayed to the guardian of children and asked the only questions my young mind could: Why and how? Why did this happen to us? Why did they do it? How could the gods let this happen to us, to my baby brother? When I approached the Noaidi, our spiritual guide, his response had been clear. He said,

‘It is easy to blame the person responsible for the crime, to hate them and despise them, but when we sit idly by and watch evil happen right before our very eyes and become bound to the person by hate, we become co-conspirators of the wrong. It is a weighty responsibility within each of us to stand up at our time of appointment and fight the battle, so the guilty does not wrongfully and unaware by us, become the power and reigning force and rulers of our lives.

‘Sometimes to have peace, Silya—’ he had said. ‘—We must fight and even be willing to sacrifice our own lives to stand for what we know in our very soul is right and just. And when we choose to fight that battle and not hate, but rather have faith in truth, in love and in right, we align with our Creator. We become our true selves, the complete form our Maker intended and purposefully created us to be.’”

“That’s so true, but so difficult,” Ailia said.

“At first, I rejected his answer, of course. How could I have done anything other than watch idly by?” Silya said. “I was a victim, bound and bruised, forced to watch while they destroyed precious lives with their gruesome games. Now, years later, I have had a change of heart and understand what he meant. Each day I live, I will fight exactly that battle, choosing faith and not turning to the cunning pulls and calls of fear, hate and revenge. I

desire to be free from these demons, which incessantly hound my peace.” She paused and a tear rolled down her cheek. “I can still not stop mourning my brother’s death. I hope one day, when I die, I can meet him again and let him know that his life mattered—that I loved him and that he had a positive influence in my life because he lived.”

Ailia felt honored to be in such a wise woman’s presence. How had Silya been able to forgive such a horrible act as this one? Ailia would have shrunk, she knew, unable to be so strong.

“You are a strong woman, Silya, with a heart of light,” Ailia said.

Silya looked up. “One day, it will all be set right by the Great Sentinor.”

Ailia definitely didn’t envy the Great Sentinor’s immense responsibility.

## Heim

Silya and Ailia rode into the outer limits of Bergendal, both riding on Miika's sturdy back. To Ailia's delight, the rest of the trip had been uneventful, even bordering on drab. The less that happened, the faster she could get home. She had made up her mind to not ask questions about Soren since it seemed to stir up unwanted sentiments. It made no sense why she should want to see him again or why her heart should flutter at the mention of his name, but it did.

Silya wanted to keep talking and Ailia didn't mind listening, so she gladly sat on Miika's back and soaked in any stories or information her new friend offered.

"Our Noaida, Geidun, taught us that the Aesira Jewel is a vital instrument in keeping the seasons balanced in Midgard. Its powers are only engaged on winter solstice eve and summer solstice eve—"

Ailia's mind wandered. Four months—Where was I? Bergendal looked the same as it always had during winter time—

bare, ashen and dearth—but with a little more wear and tear on some of the longhouses. The mountains surrounding Bergendal were completely white, fully covered in snow and ice. Ailia remembered the Bergendal summer, so lush, fresh and warm. Would it ever return?

Then, glimpses of a small settlement flashed before her eyes. Snow, fire, blood—everywhere, though not here. Ailia had seen things, experienced these things somewhere else, somewhere threatening and cold. Loneliness—Feelings of pain. *Where?*

“—and the current Sun Queen, who protects and possesses the Aesira Jewel, has the power to complete this ordinance,” Silya said.

Ailia couldn't help but get drawn back into the story. “Soren told me he didn't know where the jewel is,” she said, trying to remain indifferent.

“Exactly. We are unsure whether or not Lucia actually received the Aesira Jewel before Eiess stormed the castle.”

“Isn't it likely Eiess would have gotten hold of it by now if it was there?” Ailia asked.

“Probably not,” Silya said. “If she would have gotten hold of it, she would have stopped the sun from rising at all and we would see nothing but darkness. But I have been talking too much. Now it is your turn. Tell me about life in Bergendal. I have only been here a couple of times briefly in passing,” Silya said. She slowed Miika's pace as they passed a few villagers along the road.

Ailia waved to them, even though she didn't know who they were. They looked at her, smiled and waived back. “Welcome,” they said.

“It's a wonderful place to grow up. The people here really work together and look after one another.” Suddenly Ailia remembered that her friends had turned their back on her

because of her maredreams. “Well, most people look after one another,” she said. “Over there is the Bergendal Stave Christian Church,” she said, pointing to it. “Over there lives the blacksmith and his wife, who is also a midwife and the best baker in Bergendal. Someday you’ll have to taste one of her tarts.” Their home looked terribly run down, she noticed. “Over there is the town’s cobbler. He makes foot wear and he’s also a great tailor. He made these,” she said, lifting up her left foot to show Silya her boot. “They used to look good,” she said, noticing how disheveled it looked.

“Still, not bad though,” Silya said.

When they passed a couple of Surtorians, riding on gigantic, black stallions, Ailia thought her heart had stopped beating. They looked exactly like they had in her dreams: black tunics, long, unkempt hair, un-proportionately muscular and their skin was as tawny as amber. She lowered her head and pulled her hood close to face as she held her breath. The Surtorians glanced at them in passing, but did not approach or stop them. Once they had ridden by them, she was finally able to take a breath again.

“This town must be crawling with them now that Eiess has the throne,” Silya muttered under her breath.

That made Ailia even more worried that something might have happened to her family. “Take this road here.” She pointed to the right. Her throat felt dry and her voice cracked as she spoke.

Silya steered Miika to the right and merged onto the next road. It was lined with a wood fence to keep travelers off the field and to keep cattle in—though there were no cattle to be seen. The vast field was divided into sections, each owned by peasants or farmers.

“We’re almost at my house. It’s the next one here.” Ailia excitedly pointed the way. When she saw smoke rise from the



shaft in the roof, she breathed a sigh of relief. The house was built of oak planks with a straw roof. Everything from the barn to Uncle Brander's outdoor workstation looked exactly the same, but Ailia felt like something was distinctly different. The entrance door had a round metal handle in the center of it and was situated underneath a triangular archway. A beam between the archways had the following engraving:

*Trust no man so well that you trust not yourself better*

Below the engraving hung the name of the farm 'Brandersgaard' inscribed onto an old wooden frame.

Ailia tried to think of what she would say when she met Aunt Unni and Uncle Brander again. How would she explain that she couldn't remember how she had ended up inside the glacier cave far away from home? Or that she had been missing the past four months. Maybe they would know more about her unexplainable disappearance.

"Here we are!" Ailia said and exhaled. *I'm home.*

Silya pulled the reigns and stopped the horse a little ways away from the entrance door. "Very nice," Silya said after jumping off the horse. She led Miika to the barn to station her there, but it was full. Three horses stood in the stable. "These are the King's horses," she said in amazement. "Is there something you are not telling me?"

"No. I've never met anyone from the castle and it has been months since I've been home," Ailia said.

Silya helped Ailia off the horse, took Miika by the reigns, and tied her to one of the many soaring pine trees next to Brandersgaard. "Let me enter first," she said, grabbing her bow and an arrow and signaling with her head for Ailia to follow her.

Ailia thought it was unnecessary, but she complied with Silya's request.

Silya vigorously knocked on the door and stepped back, her hand clenched tightly around her weapons.

Unni opened the door. "Can I help you?" she said, and then she gasped when she saw Silya pointing an arrow toward her.

Ailia couldn't keep herself away a moment longer. "Aunt Unni!" she blurted out and ran into her arms.

"Ailia?" Unni said, looking as if she had seen a ghost. "You're... alive? Where have you been? Oh, we have missed you so much! Are you hurt? You are limping!" Unni gasped. "Brander! Come here now!" she yelled over her shoulder. Unni studied Ailia from head to toe, hugging her in between.

Brander rushed to the door. "Ailia? Ailia!" he said, nearly pushing Unni over to get to her. "Where have you been?"

"How many months have I been gone?" Ailia asked, wanting to confirm how long she had been missing.

"It was four months last week," Unni said. "Oh, my dear, I've been worried sick over you, child." Tears started streaming down her lightly creased face. She hugged Ailia again and again.

"I thought the Vikings had taken you away for good, or that you had run away because we were going to marry you off to someone you didn't want to marry," Unni said. "I remember in horror the day you vanished without a word, without a trace. Oh Ailia, I thought I'd never see you again. It was the scariest, worst, just most horrible experience of my life." She started crying again.

"Where have you been?" Brander asked again, relief and horror written all over his face.

Ailia didn't quite know what to say. "I... I don't remember. I thought maybe you would know what happened to me."

"You don't remember anything?" Unni asked.

“No, just being here with you and then nothing,” Ailia said.

Unni’s worried emerald eyes connected with Brander’s.

“Let’s talk about it later,” Brander said and placed both hands on Unni’s narrow shoulders.

“Yes.” Unni sniffled and clasped Ailia’s hand in both of hers. “Come inside. You must be starving and exhausted. It doesn’t make for a very good combination.”

“This is Silya. She helped me get back home safely,” Ailia said, pulling Silya’s arm.

“A pleasure to meet you and thank you for bringing our Ailia back to us in one piece,” Unni said and hugged her warmly.

“You are welcome,” Silya said, looking hesitant to hug her back.

“Well, almost one piece,” Brander blurted out. “Would you look at how skinny she is?”

“We will have to feed you some extra helpings,” Unni said as she brought them inside.

They unloaded their outerwear in the entryway and sat down in the dim main room. Lanterns lighted the room, one in each corner and a strong hearth burned in the middle of the floor. Unni had decorated every corner of every room with paintings, fabrics, statues and embroideries. One of the walls held Brander’s weapons, which weren’t few, and many more than Ailia could remember him having. He must have purchased new ones recently.

“We saw horses outside that belonged to King Olav—?” Silya prodded.

“Yes, just one moment. I will get the guests. They arrived right before you did.” Brander stepped out of the main room and into the back room.

“We wanted to make sure you weren’t Eiess’ Surtorians, so we hid our guests in the back room,” Unni said, somewhat nervously. “I have rosehip tea ready, anyone?”

“Yes, please,” both Ailia and Silya said in unison. A warm cup of tea sounded heavenly, Ailia thought.

Ailia noticed the main room had subtle changes throughout. Fresh wood covered the entrance walls and the ceiling and walls seemed thicker than before. Brander returned quickly with four guests, two middle-aged men, one of them being Bishop Peter, and two women—one young and one elderly. Everyone stood up from their seats to greet the guests.

“This is the wonderful Bishop Peter,” Unni said, resting her hand on his shoulder. “Ailia, you remember him from church, right?”

Ailia nodded.

“This is Ivar, one of King Olav’s former guards. He is *not* associated with Eiess.” She took his hand in hers and squeezed it, a grateful expression in her face. Then she walked over to the two women and gestured to the older one. “This is Nora, Queen Maud’s former head servant and finally, Princess Lucia,” she said, gesturing to the other.

Silya and Ailia looked at each other.

Ailia curtsied deeply. “Your Majesty, it’s an honor to meet you,” she said surprised and impressed at the same time. *She’s alive? What is she doing here?* Looking at her, Ailia thought Princess Lucia was the most beautiful girl she had ever met. Though Lucia had dark circles under her eyes and a few scabs on her face, she was still gorgeous. With light blond hair and pale blue eyes, slightly tilting upward, she was as fair as a summer morning.

Silya walked over to Lucia. “You are alive! You are still alive!” Her voice exuded elation. “We did not know whether

Eiess had killed you or not, but now I find renewed hope in knowing that you live. Soren will be so pleased!" She bowed and kissed Lucia's bandaged hands.

Silya's last comment stung a little, Ailia had to admit.

Lucia pulled Silya up by her hands. "We are all equals here and now," she said with a smile.

After Ailia had introduced herself to each of the guests, Brander said to Nora, "Well, why don't you tell them why you are *really* here?" He sounded unusually excited, Ailia noticed.

"Let's all have a seat. This is going to be an exciting evening." Unni aimed them toward the benches around the hearth. They settled in and glanced at each other over the rising flares, each of their faces glowing and moving with the flames.

"Well, let's not wait forever," Brander said. He sat on his undersized stool and rubbed his hands briskly together.

Nora started. "First, this information must not be shared with *anyone* outside this room. I have known about this information for many years, but even Lucia just learned about it. You must all promise that you will never reveal any of what is spoken here tonight to anyone, no exceptions!" she said solemnly. "If this information leaks out and Eiess hears about it, we are all doomed." Her wrinkly, yet clear eyes pieced everyone in the room.

"Don't you think you're being just a *little* intense?" Brander said and laughed.

"No!" Nora replied rather harshly. "No," she said more softly this time. "If this information leaks out to Eiess, Ailia's and Lucia's lives will be endangered and could lead to death, which will result in Eiess' victory. One cannot be too intense when it comes to these matters."

Ailia tried to keep up with all the details, but she quickly became confused. She sensed that this was no commonplace

meeting, nor were any commonplace people attending the meeting. *What do I have to do with it—if anything?*

“You have all proven your worthiness and shown your commitment to the better cause, choosing to fight for freedom and the power of liberty for all of humanity.” Nora turned to Bishop Peter first, clasping her wrinkled hands as she began to speak. “Bishop, you helped Lucia and I after she escaped from Eieess’ imprisonment. You have fought our fight and put your life at risk.” She then turned to Silya. “Silya, I had not expected you to be here. I am so pleased that you are. You have shown great courage and have been there to support Ailia, guiding her safely back home. You have been a great friend to Soren for a long time. I have known Soren and Silya for many, many years.” She turned her attention to the others.

*How does she know Soren and Silya?* Ailia wondered.

“They have both worked tirelessly for the continued freedom of this kingdom and this people, whether they be thralls, freedmen, chieftains, or kings. I would entrust anybody in their safekeeping. Thank you for bringing our Ailia back safely to us,” Nora said, looking back at Silya. Her heavily creased eyes filled with tears.

“Thank you,” Silya said, looking puzzled.

Nora cleared her throat and continued. “Ivar, as a man of honor, strength and dignity, loyal to King Olav to the end—”

*The end?* Ailia thought. *Does that mean the King is dead?*

“—I am grateful to have you here with us tonight. You were the one who brought our beloved Ailia to Unni and Brander one clear, cold night many years ago. A new babe, so innocent, so beautiful and full of life and love, she was. Only you, King Olav, Queen Maud and Iluxia knew who she was. Much of her being alive today is due to your silence, your diligence and your effort.”

Brander pitched in, “You’ve always been a man of few words and it has served us all well!”

Everyone laughed.

*This isn’t what my aunt and uncle told me.* Ailia’s stomach twisted.

Nora turned to Unni and Brander. “Unni and Brander you did not know then what you found out today. Thank you for keeping Ailia for us all these years and for raising her as your own.”

Ailia was listening intensely. *What do they mean about my true identity? Do I have a different one than what I have been raised as?*

Nora continued. “Lucia, my precious princess, your name meaning Bearer of Light, but not because you are the Great Sentinor, but because you do indeed bear the burden of Light, her identity concealed in your name, hidden by your image. This is all revealed in the late Queen Maud’s and King Olav’s writings.” Nora paused and nodded encouragingly to Lucia. “The letter?”

Lucia took out a scroll and handed it to Ailia.

“A letter for me?” Ailia asked. “But it’s addressed to Lucia, her Royal Highness of Bergendal. Why should I read it?”

Unni nodded. “You’ll see,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Now, Ailia,” Nora said formally.

The room had grown completely silent and they were all looking at Ailia, waiting for her to read the letter.

Nora continued. “Ailia, read the letter. It was meant for you as much as for Lucia.”

“I don’t understand; I’m not anyone important, I’m just a, just—a girl, a peasant girl,” she said. *That’s my identity.*

“No, you’re not just a peasant girl, Ailia,” Bishop Peter said.

“The bishop is right. You will understand *who* you are when you read this,” Nora encouraged.

Unni and Brander nodded, both smiling proudly now.

Ailia peered down at the letter and started reading out loud. She had to pause several times throughout the letter to try and grasp its message and to get assurance from Lucia and Nora that it *was* indeed the truth. When she finished reading, she looked up and sighed deeply. *Who am I truly? Human or demi-mortal? Just a young maiden or the Great Sentinor of whom Iluxia had prophesied would be born three times to terminate Eiess.* She almost dared not think the thought of the latter, for if she did, she could no longer afford to live the life of freedom and preference that she had always imagined and wanted.

“I had no idea,” Ailia finally said, still trying to grasp the realism of the letter. “I always felt there was something important missing in my life, but I always assumed that void was there because my parents died when I was young and I never had the chance to know them. I just thought I would always feel this void because I couldn’t remember them.” She lowered the letter, feeling the smooth scroll beneath her fingertips.

“Now you know,” Lucia said, as she stood up and walked to greet Ailia.

Ailia worried that Lucia would be bitter, harboring anger and resentment toward her since their parents had used her to protect Ailia.

“I always felt I was not the Great Sentinor—that my mission was different than yours—and now it makes perfect sense,” Lucia said. “I know this all sounds strange and new and I cannot imagine what you are feeling. I am so glad that I have a sister, a beloved relative who is alive and well and who is here, now finally standing in front of me after all these years.”



Everything did start to make sense now, why she had always felt she did not belong among her friends, why Eiess was after her in her dreams, even though Eiess didn't know her true identity. The empress probably sensed that Ailia possessed powers far greater than any mortal in Midgard and that was why she was after her. "Does that mean I am a... demi-mortal?" she asked.

"It is a deceiving name for a reason. It sounds like you're only half mortal, less than mortal, but what most people do not know is that the other half is a Sentinor," Bishop Peter said.

"Yes," Silya said, nodding. "I suppose it does make you a demi-mortal. All along I was traveling with you not knowing—"

"Did you know *anything*?" Ailia asked Silya.

"No. However, I sensed that there was something different about you. When Soren wanted to get away from you, I knew he was not being completely open with me. He must have felt your presence, felt that there was a connection between you two. He must have become scared and left, thinking he needed to be true to Lucia, who he thought was—well—you," Silya said.

Soren. What of him? He had told her they were... Spiritus Amor. That thought made her feel uneasy. However, if she was completely honest with herself, she had felt that connection, too, even though at the time she had dismissed it as a foolish sentiment. But now that she knew why she had felt the way she did, suddenly she didn't know what to think of it. Did it mean her destiny had been set? Did it mean she had to marry him? Would he expect her love and affection immediately? She didn't remember her first two lives, but he did. That thought sent a surge of panic through her. What if she didn't love him in this life? And what of Geir, her fiancé?

Ailia looked at Lucia and thought she saw a tinge of pain in her sister's smiling eyes. *Did she love him?* Had she been told

she would marry Soren and now she had found out she would not? She didn't know Lucia well enough to read her subtle expressions.

Unni left the room for a brief moment and returned holding a small gold and silver Borre-style designed chest. "Ailia, this is for you from your father, King Olav," she said and handed it to her.

Ailia lifted the chest out of Unni's hands.

"It opens like so," Nora said, helping Ailia unlock the box. Inside was the ring that King Olav had written about in the letter.

Lucia, standing right next to Ailia, lifted her right hand ever so gracefully and showed Ailia her ring. "See," she said. It was an exact match.

Ailia reached into the chest, grabbed the ring, and put it on. Lucia and Ailia looked at each other and smiled and then they embraced as sisters for the first time.

"This is not all," Nora said. "There was another scroll inside this one. It was addressed to you, Ailia." Nora handed it to her. The scroll's seal was still intact. "From your mother, Queen Maud, before she died" she said.

"Thank you," Ailia said, receiving the letter, reading her mother's handwriting '*Ailia*'. She lifted it close to her heart, clutching it with her hands, fighting back her tears. She had dreamt of hearing her mother's words her whole life, or of having something, anything from her. Now, that *something* was in her hands. "I think I would like to read it alone—later, if that's all right?"

Brander started objecting, but before he could get a word in, Unni interrupted. "Of course, we understand Ailia," she said. "Right, Brander?" she finished, speaking under her breath, peering over at him with one brow peaked.

"Oh, well, uh, yes, we understand," Brander said.

“I must remind everyone in this room—” Nora said. “—that no one else must come to find out about what has been spoken here tonight. The fewer people who know, the less risk there is of Eiess finding out. As you all know, Eiess can enter your dreams and pull out important information, so anyone she knows, any Sentinors, demi-mortal or not, could possibly leak the information. Tell no one, especially not Soren yet. He is one of the Sentinors Eiess is incessantly pursuing.” She looked at Ailia and Silya as she spoke.

Ailia’s felt slightly relieved to have been given more time to process this, but oddly enough, her heart dropped in her chest. Either way, she couldn’t tell him. He wasn’t here anyway.

“And I must add this: Surtorians roam the streets of Bergendal day and night, so you must be very careful where you go,” Nora said. “If they spot Lucia, Lucia will be taken back to the empress. So be on the lookout day and night.”

Unni prepared repast for everyone and they had a great time getting to know each other. Shortly after repast, Bishop Peter thanked Brander and Unni for the lovely evening, excused himself and bid farewell. “One must retire early to bed and be early to rise,” he preached to the guests.

The remaining party ended the evening by playing the board game Hnefatafl, with Brander winning. He prided himself as the master in Bergendal of Hnefatafl and had never lost a game, or so he claimed. Unni started pulling out the bench-beds to sleep on and set them up against the walls inside the main room.

“Why don’t you two sleep over there,” Unni said to Ailia and Lucia, pointing to the far back area. “You probably have a lot to catch up on.”

They walked over and sat down on the floor close to the bench-beds, anxious to get to know each other even more.

“So what happened to your hands?” Ailia asked concerned. “I hope it doesn’t make you self-conscious that I ask.”

“Not at all. I was outside for too long and I developed frostbite. Bishop Peter had to saw off part of my pinky and ring finger, but he was able to save the rest.” She showed Ailia the bandaged up hand. “I lost three of my toes too, both pinkies and the one toe on my left foot next to the pinky toe.”

“Oh, wow, did it hurt? It must have hurt. That was a silly question,” Ailia said with compassion in her voice, yet unable to hide her distress.

“It hurt, but it is healing well,” Lucia said. “How is your foot healing? Silya said you were attacked by wolves?”

“Oh, it was the scariest thing I’ve experienced. Well, at least until I was almost drowned by the Nukkern!”

They exchanged many stories and details of their lives into the night. Finally, they decided to go to bed. Lucia fell asleep first. Ailia tried to sleep, but she couldn’t wait any longer to read the letter her mother had written to her. Her heart fluttered in her chest as she opened the sealed scroll. She went out to the main room again to get some light from the burning hearth.

*My dearest Ailia,*

*Please forgive me for giving you away at birth. I have spent endless nights worrying about you, thinking about you and asking myself if, by giving you up, I had done the right thing. My intent in doing this was to keep you safe, so you may grow up and finally fulfill your destiny. I am harrowed up inside that I will not have the opportunity to raise you, to see the magnificent person you will become and to know all your quirks that will make you so endearing and unique. I wish I could hear the words ‘Mamma’ spoken from your precious lips, hear your*

*tender voice laugh for joy and cry for comfort. I had yearned for you to come into my life for many, many years and it has caused me much pain to have to give you away, even on the same day that you were born, without holding you or being in your awesome presence.*

*I had hoped I would meet you one day, but now it appears I will not survive this second pregnancy. The decision to send you away was the most difficult decision Olav and I have ever had to make, but I also believe that out of our great sorrow and pain, will come our greatest joy. I would not change my decision if I had the chance again; I would not give all my pain away, all my sleepless nights or all my lonely moments, to have you back. If I did, you could not have the opportunity to fulfill your destiny and that is the most important thing I can provide for you.*

*Your identity is your most important possession, knowing where you came from and who you are. You must keep your identity a secret from the world, no matter what. Only a few can know who you are—the few who will support you, guide you and help you fulfill your destiny and your perilous journey, for it will be a perilous one.*

*I have compiled and written detailed and sacred scrolls that will teach you the truth about who you are and where you came from. Not even your father knows the whole truth. These writings also contain vital information about our Aesira lineage and what you need to do in order to defeat Eiess. You must find these writings. I have not written down where they are hidden intentionally, in case this letter falls into the wrong hands.*

*Lucia is a good person, Ailia, but I must warn you. I have had a vision in which she betrays you. That is hard for a mother to say, but the most important thing is that you succeed as the Great Sentinor.*

*Understand this, my daughter: from the moment you were born, I knew you would succeed. I believed in your greatness. I believed you would finally conquer Eiess and correct the evils and suffering she has caused since nearly the beginning of Midgard. I will always be a part of you, taking every step with you, speaking every truth with you and fighting your battles with you, right there beside you, in front of you, behind you and in your heart.*

*Your loving mother, Maud.*

At the bottom of the letter was a saying:

*A wise woman seeks after the words of her parents in life and in death.*

Ailia could hardly believe she finally knew who her mother was and that she had read a letter from her. She dared not believe that she was a princess and even more, the Great Sentinor. It seemed too much to take in for a peasant girl from Bergendal.

Her heart pounded as she thought of the great responsibility that had been placed on her shoulders. The letter from her mother rang true in her mind and in her heart. She knew she could challenge and destroy Eiess, but what she didn't know was how. She needed to find the Aesira Scrolls and Aesira Jewel, so she could figure it out.

The forewarning about Lucia surfaced for a moment. *Lucia would never betray me, would she?* Ailia pressed her lips against the letter as tears flowed freely from her eyes. She was happy. She had come home.

### Forgotten Past

“Breakfast?” Unni asked, holding up a ladle. She smiled warmly to Ailia who had just entered the smoky, fire-lit room. Unni was always in a good mood. She was steady as a flowing river, calm and deep.

Sigrid, their thrall, was busy cleaning up animal lard and cooking utensils. She hobbled around and was singing a tune.

“Of course, your breakfasts are always so tasty!” Ailia said and sat down on a beat up, old wooden stool next to the crackling, hot hearth.

Silya had stayed overnight and slept in the main room on a bench-bed next to the wall and she too, was to Ailia’s surprise, still sleeping. Ailia was glad that Silya had decided to stay another few weeks. She felt safe around her and even though she wasn’t quite certain what to make of it, it was her closest connection to Soren at the moment.

“Were you able to get any sleep last night?” Unni asked, stirring the horsemeat stew in the massive black cauldron.

“Lucia and I did stay up late and talk. Then, I had to read the letter from my—birth mother.” Unni had been the mother who raised Ailia, who had wiped away her tears, who had babied her wounds and who had taught her everything she knew up until this point. It felt strange calling anyone else by that honorable name and Ailia didn’t want to hurt Unni’s feelings. “So, maybe half a night’s sleep?” she guesstimated, her voice rising at the end. She tucked her cold hands in between her legs and the bench to warm them.

“Well, there’s so much new information.” Unni exhaled slowly. She paused and placed her hands on her hips with the ladle clasped in her right fist. “You were right, after all, about having a special purpose. I feel bad that I ever doubted you.”

“I’m not upset. Of course you didn’t know,” Ailia said. “Did you know anything about where I came from at all, any hint or clue?”

“No, Ivar is the most loyal man I have ever met. He never alluded to where you were from. I’m just as surprised as you are. When he brought you to us, he said your parents had died in a neighboring village of the smallpox and that you needed a new home and someone to raise you as their own. I never thought your parents might still be alive and I never imagined you were a princess, or something called a Great Sentinor,” Unni said, leaning in close to Ailia as she whispered. Then, she backed off and spoke normally again. “Brander and I were thrilled when he brought you to us because we were never able to have any of our own children.”

Ailia thought she remembered Ivar from her childhood. “Did you know Ivar well *before* he brought me to you?” she asked. She accepted a ladle from Aunt Unni filled with stew, happy to taste a sample.



“No, but we did know of him and had met him on a few occasions. He was my distant cousin’s best friend.”

“You mean Gunnar?” Ailia asked surprised.

“Yes,” Unni said. “Rather I should say, they *were* best friends, like family almost, before Gunnar befriended Eiess. After that, sadly, their friendship ended,” she said, shaking her head. “There was more to the story, but Ivar refuses to talk about it. I think he was too hurt and too pained by their broken friendship. I have just pieced together information to try and figure out the story.” She lifted the heavy cauldron off the hearth. Ailia stood up to help her.

“I always wondered what happened to Gunnar. He was such a happy man, kind and fun. He’d always play with me when I was a child. I remember I used to love it when he came over,” Ailia said straining, not anticipating how heavy the cauldron would be. “What a sad story.”

“Yes, it is a sad tale. He somehow disowned his wife, Ragnvei, of only a few weeks. His reason was that he didn’t approve of her new religion. She had turned to the Christian faith and he despised her for it. Then it was just as if Ragnvei couldn’t take any more of her life and she jumped off Odinseat, killing herself on the sharp cliffs.

Ailia felt shivers through her spine.

“Shortly after that Gunnar left to be with the Vikings. I personally think she was heartbroken,” Unni speculated. “Terrible man, terrible,” she said, squinting her eyes.

“What a tragic story,” Ailia said. “I feel so sad.”

“Yes, poor Ragnvei. She just married the wrong man, who joined the Vikings of all things, and had too much of pain in her life. Now tell me more about what actually happened to you.” Unni sat down on the same stool Ailia had sat on earlier.

“I found a handkerchief with a raven embroidered on it in the cave where I woke up,” Ailia said. “Let me get it.” She ran and got it. “I also found this.” She showed Unni the empty flask.

Unni took the flask. “I’m relieved to hear that you did not run away. I thought you had maybe decided to run away when we were going to marry you off to Geir. I felt so guilty for having mentioned how I almost ran away when my parents picked Brander for me,” Unni said.

“I would never have run away,” Ailia said.

“Geir is happily married again, so there is no need to worry about him any further.”

“I’m glad to hear,” Ailia said, feeling more relieved than she probably should.

Unni took the flask and smelled it. “No scent, strange, it could be anything.” She handed it back to Ailia. “There seems to be a likely connection with your disappearance and the Vikings.”

“I just hate not remembering anything about my disappearance. I could always go back to the Viking settlement and—” Ailia started.

“Do not even think those thoughts!” Unni said furiously, her eyes suddenly intense. “The memories will probably come back to you soon enough.”

“And if they do not?” Ailia asked.

“Then, good riddance! You don’t need to remember the bad to move forward in your life. Just count it as a blessing that you don’t remember. Do you really need to know?”

“No, but my curiosity is haunting my mind!” Ailia said impatiently.

Unni smiled. “Oh, Ailia.”

“I know what you’re going to say,” Ailia said.

“Well, I won’t say it then. Let’s talk about something else, shall we?” Unni suggested.

Ailia looked at her new ring.

“Lovely ring, don’t you think?” Unni noted.

“Yes. I feel it connects me to my parents in a way. It also makes me sad.” Ailia said. She studied her ring, thinking that just a little while ago, her father had been alive. “My father, oh, had I known, I would have given anything to have met him.” Ailia buried her face in her hands and cried silently. She finally looked up. “Are you sure he is—gone?”

“Yes, Ivar confirmed it yesterday.” Unni walked over to Ailia and sat next to her.

“Do you know what happened to his body?” Ailia asked, not knowing if she felt strong enough to hear the details if they were presented to her.

“Ivar said that Eiess disposed of it. Are you sure you want to know?” Unni asked.

“Yes, I need to hear how he died and how he was treated,” Ailia said, feeling stronger now.

“Eiess dismembered him and displayed his body parts all over Bergendal as a warning to anyone who would challenge her,” Unni said bluntly.

“Does Lucia know?” she said, feeling she needed to protect her sister.

“Yes, she knows,” Unni said sadly. “Brander went around with Bishop Peter and collected the remains. They gave him a proper burial right next to your mother.”

“I would like to visit them soon,” Ailia said. “The burials, I mean.”

“When you go there, just know there is no stone or anything that marks your father’s grave. This was done to protect Brander, Bishop Peter and King Olav’s grave. I can show you where it is on Sunday, if you would like.”

“I’d like to go sooner than that,” Ailia said.

“How about Brander take you early tomorrow morning?” Unni said.

“I would like that.” Ailia said, comforted her father had received somewhat of a proper burial.

“If it’s any consolation at all, remember, your father wanted to remain unknown by you. He realized the danger in meeting and knowing you. It was the only way to truly protect you. It must have been the most difficult, yet the most heroic, thing he had ever done. He sacrificed his life, so you could complete your life’s purpose. He gladly surrendered everything, so that you could have a chance to triumph.” Unni placed her arm around Ailia, tenderly stroking her back. “He made that his ultimate purpose and he succeeded.”

Ailia laid her head to rest on Unni’s shoulder. She thought about all the times she had cried on her shoulder before and how this time was so different from all those other times. “Oh, Aunt Unni, if there were any other way,” she said, letting the tears flow freely.

“I know, my love, I know,” Unni replied.

### The Viking

“I’m so pleased to hear you’ll be staying longer,” Unni said to Nora and Lucia the next morning during breakfast. Watered-down sop was being devoured, and Lucia was just trying not to gag as she swallowed the ghastly concoction down.

She had tried to fit in as best as she could since they arrived at Brandersgaard, but one thing after another had made that near impossible. First, when Ailia had figured out that she was predestined to be with Soren, Lucia had, to her surprise, felt jealous. She was fully aware of the fact that Soren and her had never really connected, but she had been told her entire life that she was the one to marry him. At least it had been something she could hold onto. Now Ailia just waltzes in, and suddenly, everything Lucia had counted on—had trusted and believed—vanished into thin air. And what was worse, Ailia did not even seem to care one bit about how she had stolen so much from Lucia. All Ailia wanted to do was talk about herself. She had no compassion for Lucia who had given up so much for so long.

In a way, it was not Ailia's fault; she was lied to also, and had to be raised in poverty, amongst commoners, but she seemed to not care or understand how horrific these deceits were and still are. How could they even believe what was written in the scrolls were true? Ailia accepted her parents'—their parents'—word as truth, but Lucia had learned better. All Ailia wanted was to visit their parents' grave and talk about them as if they were beings to be revered.

Lucia should be the one to receive the scrolls, not Ailia. Can she even read, that peasant girl? Lucia knew she was being unfairly harsh toward Ailia, however, someone had to keep the girl in line before her she became too arrogant and self-important.

Sitting here at the long table, no one seemed to realize how difficult this was for Lucia. Everyone spoke constantly of how wonderful it was that the true Great Sentinor had finally been found. She knew the did not mean it, but it made Lucia feel like a fraud. Unni's, Branders', even Nora's eyes beamed with admiration toward Ailia, and Lucia felt she had no place there. Or anywhere. They did not seem to understand that within a few months, Lucia had lost everything: her throne, her parents, her future, her fiancé, and nearly her life. Now she was eating sop at a Christian table, conversing with the godless, playing second fiddle to a sister she never knew existed. Where was the justice in that? Had Odin and Thor truly turned their backs on her because her mother had worshipped a dead god? She must be very careful not to fall into the same thinking these peasants held.

“Thank you for having us. There will be more mouths to feed, but we will happily do our part, right Lucia?” Nora said, eyeing her.

*Even she is quickly turning against me,* Lucia thought. “Absolutely—that is—if you will be patient with me as I adapt. I am not accustomed to working, but I am excited about learning how to run a household,” Lucia said, picking up a rag, shaking it in her hand. The peasant life was not for her and she was not really interested in learning anything as degrading as chores. She just needed to make do until she had come up with a better plan.

“It will be Ailia’s and my pleasure to teach you about how to become an outstanding homemaker, maybe even the best in Bergendal!” Unni said.

Lucia laughed facetiously, but then stopped when she saw the stern look on Unni’s face. “I am not laughing because I do not believe I could become the best, but because I have such a long way until that point.”

Silya stood up from her chair. “I will be staying for another week or so and then I will have to be on my way back to my family in Alta,” she said.

“You may stay as long as you please. I know Ailia is truly enjoying your company,” Unni said, picking up the bowls off the table.

“Why did she not join us for breakfast?” Silya asked.

“She wanted to visit her parents’ graves, so she and Brander went early this morning. She said she’s searching for clues on the rune stone to where the scrolls might be,” Unni said.

*Perhaps I shall look as well?* It was not a conscious thought, but somehow Lucia felt it might bring her back into everyone’s favor if she located them before Ailia did. Lucia did not appreciate Ailia’s self-centered attitude, wanting all the glory for herself, but did feel a little sorry for her sister. “At least I had time with my parents and knew them. I feel for Ailia. I wish I could be more of a support for her,” she said. She stood up and watched the others clear the table.

“Trust me. You are already a great support,” Unni said. “Just you being here has changed Ailia’s life and the friendship you two are developing means everything to her. She really enjoys having a sister she can relate to. It makes the loss of her parents so much more endurable.”

*I will never be able to relate to a peasant.* But Lucia scolded herself for such a harsh thought. Perhaps she needed to give the friendship more time to mature, be more giving, kinder, more merciful. She should not be so rash and throw it away before she had fully given her all to it. Ailia was her twin, after all.

“Yes, we do share many things,” Lucia added. “I hope I am the sister she deserves. I will try to be.”

“Ah, there you are, Brander,” Unni said as her husband entered. “The wall over there needs patching up,” she said, pointing to the back corner where the loom sat. “Cold air is seeping through the wall and Sigrid is complaining about it. You know how she becomes when she whines.”

Brander rolled his eyes. “I know exactly how she gets—martyr wouldn’t even begin to describe her.”

“When you’re done with that, please make sure the firewood is filled,” Unni added.

“Yes, my queen,” he said cheekily, bowing as if he were her servant.

Ailia walked in and stared at the performance. “My, are you declaring your subservience to Unni?” she said.

Unni didn’t reply to him at all, but rather ignored him. “Ailia, today would be a great day to teach Lucia how to milk the cow and make porridge,” she said.

“I am a thrall unto my queen,” Brander said, continuing to bow in circles around her.

Lucia giggled. *They are cute. Simpletons, but cute.*



“She has captivated my heart,” Brander continued playfully, pulling Unni in for a hug.

Unni smiled. A twinkle lit her emerald eyes. “I love you, too, Brander,” she said and kissed him briefly. “Did you find anything on your parents’ gravestones Ailia?”

“No,” Ailia said, a look of disappointed on her face. “Nothing.”

“Don’t become discouraged. I’m convinced something will surface eventually,” Unni said. “Just be patient.”

Lucia did not think Ailia was looking in the right places, but she was not going to say anything, being after the scrolls herself.

## Surtorians

Today was the third Sunday Ailia had been back home. She had begged Unni and Brander to please take her to a church sermon, and finally they had conceded. Unni said she didn't think it was a threat, especially since she had yet to see a Surtorian on church grounds. And it had taken a lot of pleading, but finally, Ailia was able to convince Lucia to come with her.

Arriving at the house of God, Ailia stood in awe for a moment, studying the building's exterior. The church's front door was set back behind a shallow porch, which held four supporting wood beams on either side. A single copper cross was embedded above the entrance on the gable roof and two other crosses were also attached to the other two angular rooftops. Vine and swirling designs adorned the oak door and led into an arrival foyer. Stepping inside, Ailia noted how bare it seemed in there. The walls were nothing but plain wood, and the only thing that was carved and embellished was the frame around the door leading into the main chapel. The door itself was tall, narrow and

plain. Door frames on either side had interconnecting patterns of snakes, vines and lizards.

When Ailia entered the main chapel, her bosom burned as her eyes lifted toward the high, arching, hand-carved ceilings. Life-like images of Jesus, Mary and his disciples were everywhere. The nearly nude Crucifix hovered with a silent, suffering expression above the platform, gazing down onto the churchgoers where they sat, inviting them to follow. Behind the platform was a circular rotunda with a canopy of brightly painted scenes from the bible and the life of Jesus. Inside the rotunda, stood a silk-embroidered linen tablecloth-covered altar, and to the left of the altar was a door to the back section of the church where the clergymen lived.

Ailia listened intently to the sermon, and again, she was drawn to the merciful and loving teachings of Christ. Yet how could she reconcile what she knew—that she was a Sentinor sent by the Norse gods, and that they did indeed exist—with what she felt in her heart was right, which was to follow Christ Jesus? If one of the religions were true, didn't that mean the other one must be false? Could they both co-exist?

After the sermon had finished, Unni, Brander, Silya, and Lucia lingered a while longer right outside the church to speak with Bishop Peter. Ailia walked to the side of the building, continuing to study the intricate workmanship. While walking, she listened to their conversation.

“A soon as Ragnvei wanted Gunnar to convert to Christianity, he would have nothing more to do with her. He blamed the dead queen for his misfortune, turning his anger on everyone and eventually supported Eiess,” Brander said.

“I heard there has been another attack on Bergendal,” Unni said. “Small as it was, the attacks are happening more frequently and that is concerning. Last week, they raided the Johansen

homestead, pillaging and burning the farm to the ground. They left no survivors. I just don't understand that kind of brutality and for what, money?"

"All we can do is pray and hope they will stop," Bishop Peter replied. "Eiess certainly will not defend Bergendal, even though it is off the sweat of our brows she is able to eat and drink."

"What do you mean?" Lucia asked.

Brander said, "I will give you the short version of the story. Eiess instituted a city tax of fifty percent on all households. Fifty percent! But she didn't seem to think that was enough. Right after she took the throne, she organized two alternating, traveling crews that would journey to the Southlandic Kingdom every month to pillage wheat, oats, barley and precious metals or jewels to benefit her and her alone. That damned greedy dragon!"

"Brander! Watch your language in front of Princess Lucia and might I remind you that we are in the presence of a servant of the Lord!" Unni said.

Lucia chuckled lightly. "Do not worry about me. I have heard much worse."

Brander continued. "No compensation is provided to civilians other than the gift of their lives, that is, if they even survive the chancy journey. The leaders of the voyages do receive compensation."

"How are the travelers selected to go?" Lucia asked.

"Eiess sends her Surtorians out to round up citizens and then she sends them to the Southlandic Kingdom," Brander said. "I've even heard that's where she sends the huldras too," he said in a low voice, as he leaned in, his eyebrows rising high.

"Now Brander, that's just some fabrication," Unni said, shaking her head. "There's no such thing as a huldra. A huldra is

just a man's way of coming up with ways to cheat on his wife. Blame it on the huldra's magical seductive powers, right?"

"My father saw one once with his own eyes!" Brander exclaimed. "Don't tell me there's no such thing. She was as beautiful as a goddess and irresistible, he said. It is said that a man cannot resist a huldra's beauty no matter how loyal a husband he is. Her only purpose is to seduce the poor victim, trap him under her spell, so she can bring him to Eiess, who will devour his very soul."

"It sounds like an easy way to put the blame on someone else," Bishop Peter said.

"I can see Eiess doing something like that, though," Lucia said.

"There, see, I knew it!" Brander said.

Unni huffed. "That's not proof. Lucia was imprisoned the whole time she was in the Northlandic Castle with Eiess and probably didn't know what was happening downstairs."

"True," Lucia said.

"Besides, your father also said that trolls stole his goats, when in reality he had never even had any goats," Unni said.

"Er...well, that was one of his delusions. It's nothing like the huldra story. Anyhow, Eiess hired the Vikings to do her dirty work and head these rampages. Gunnar was one of the Empress's servants. He claimed he was a true Viking. He sailed throughout the Northlandic Kingdom, ambitiously serving his new mistress. He was enormously successful on his first conquest and the empress rewarded him handsomely. Then, on his second traveling raid, he failed and came back empty-handed. Eiess cast him out of her castle and took back all the prizes she had previously bestowed upon him. He vowed to make her pay one day. Later, I found out that he took his Vikings with him, usurped a small settlement south-east of here, killing

all the inhabitants who had previously lived there. They live there still, and his followers are increasing by the day.”

“Soren and I met a couple of them when we traveled. They mentioned Gunnar’s name,” Ailia said, joining their small circle.

“Surtorians,” Lucia whispered.

“What?” Brander said. “Yes, the Surtorians—”

“No, they are coming! Surtorians are coming! Over there.” Lucia pointed.

Down the road, Ailia could see four of them heading in their direction.

“Ailia, Lucia, get inside the church now!” Brander said.

“Oh Allfather!” Lucia seemed to have frozen where she stood.

Ailia grabbed Lucia by the arm and pulled her with her inside the church. “Move!” she said. Running into the church, Ailia searched for a hiding place.

Bishop Peter came up behind them. “This way,” he said, whisking past them to the back. “There is a room back here they will never think to look in.” Storming through the rotunda with the girls on his heels, he opened the door to the back, and led them into a narrow hallway. He squeezed Ailia and Lucia into a small compartment underneath the stairwell. “Do not breathe and do not move, or they’ll find you,” he whispered and shut the door.

Blackness surrounded them, and all Ailia could hear was Lucia’s panting breaths.

“They will find us—I know it,” Lucia whispered.

“Shh,” Ailia said. She could hear Lucia struggling not to cry. Then she heard heavy boots stomping the floor. The Surtorians had made their way into the chapel already. She clenched her hands into fists, digging her fingernails into her palms.

“We are looking for someone,” a Surtorian said, his voice angry and impatient. “A young woman. She has long blond hair, blue eyes.”

“I have not seen anyone who fits that description around here,” Bishop Peter said.

“Do you think I am stupid? I saw someone running into the church with you that fit that very description,” the Surtorian barked.

“She was my daughter. She became frightened when she saw you and ran off into the woods,” Bishop Peter replied.

Ailia heard Bishop Peter groan and then there was a thud. *No!* She worried they had stabbed him to death. Creaking boots approached the back.

“I know you are here. Come out now and we will spare your life,” one of the Surtorians said.

“Should we surrender?” Lucia whispered.

“No. They’ll kill us,” Ailia whispered back.

The footsteps came closer now, stopping right outside their hiding place. Ailia held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut. She thought the Surtorians might be able to hear her heart racing—it thumped so loud. Lucia whimpered. Suddenly, the door flung open and the Surtorian stood in the doorway. He smelled like sweat and blood.

“There you are!” he said.

“Ailia is the Great Sentinor! I am not the Great Sentinor! It is all a lie; she is the one!” Lucia blurted. “Take her I am innocent, I tell you!”

*What?* Ailia thought. She didn’t have time to think about what Lucia had just done. The Surtorian pulled them both out into the hallway by their hair. The three others stood behind the first, grunting and laughing in pleasure to have found their prey.

“Princess Lucia, I am glad to see you again,” the Surtorian said. “I have missed taking my frustration out on you.”

“I am not who you think. Ailia is. She is my twin sister and the Great Sentinor. I am just the Sun Queen,” Lucia said.

“I am not here for Ailia. Eiess sent me to get you,” he said.

Ailia heard a loud crash coming from behind them.

“Run, girls, run!” Brander yelled. He had slain one of the Surtorians, stabbing him through and through with his great sword. Then he turned his attention to the one confining them, and stabbed him in the leg.

Ailia took the opportunity, kned the Surtorian as hard as she could in the groin, and started for the exit door. The Surtorian collapsed to the floor, but he was able to grab hold of Ailia’s skirt and she fell to the floor as he pulled it. Lucia kicked the Surtorian in the face and Ailia was set free. They both bolted toward the exit door and ran outside into the cold winter day. With two Surtorians trailing them, they headed for the woods.

“We will never make it!” Lucia yelled after Ailia. “They are too quick!”

“Don’t you dare stop running!” Ailia yelled back. She didn’t want to let Lucia know that she too was afraid. “I know of some places we can hide in the woods. Just keep running!” She couldn’t think of one at the moment, but she was sure a good hiding place would show up. Ailia’s throat and lungs burned as she inhaled the chill air. It was hard to go fast in the slick snow. She fought off the tears of fear and of betrayal. How could Lucia have done this? Even feeling betrayed, she swore to herself that she wouldn’t let the Surtorians have her or her sister. Lucia was falling further behind now and Ailia stopped to grab her hand, pulling it. “Just keep going!” They dashed past an old shed and approached the frozen over Bergendal river. There were no places to hide in broad daylight.



Exhaustion started to set in, and Ailia looked behind her to see if the Surtorians were still following. Only one was coming up behind them now, but all too quickly. *Where did the other one go?* For a quarter of a heartbeat Ailia thought she would just give up. Let the Surtorian have her and Lucia. He seemed so strong, so powerful and relentless, just like Eiess. The hesitation cost her valuable time and the distance between them and their slayer was now much shorter. She turned around and kept running. Suddenly, Ailia felt a sharp pain in her right shoulder and fell to the snow.

Lucia, standing next to her, gasped. “You are hit! Oh, Odin in Valhalla, we are going to die!”

Ailia looked down and saw an arrow protruding halfway out of her shoulder. Arising, Ailia turned to face her assassin.

“Lucia, someone wants to see you,” the Surtorian said, nearing her with his arrow aimed at her and ready to shoot.

“You cannot have her,” Ailia said stepping in front of her sister.

The Surtorian dropped his bow and lifted Ailia up by her collar, pushing her up against a tree.

The pain in her wounded shoulder intensified and she tried to scream, but no sound would come out.

The Surtorian’s face was right in hers now. He panted and gnarled like a wolf, his yellow skin as yellow as his fangs. “Do you think you can tackle me? That you can take away my prize? What Eiess wants, Eiess will get and Lucia is the one she has been looking for.”

“Run Lucia, run!” Ailia tried to yell, her voice barely audible. She could no longer see her sister, only the Surtorian in her face. The Surtorian clamped his fists around Ailia’s neck so hard, she couldn’t breathe at all. She squirmed and kicked, trying to free

herself from this devil's grasp, but air and consciousness was running out too quickly.

Then, a sword popped out from the Surtorian's chest. Blood gushed from his mouth with a cough, splattering onto Ailia's face. He released her and she tumbled to the snow, drawing air into her lungs, and coughing. She had enough sense about her to dodge the Surtorian as he fell lifeless to the ground beside her.

Brander rushed over to Ailia. "You're hurt," he said, carefully lifting her to her feet.

"I'm fine," Ailia said, studying the protruding arrow. "Where's Lucia?"

"She's safe. She ran back to the church," he said. "Ailia, go home immediately. Ivar and I need to bury these savages before Eiess links any of us to their disappearance. A few people saw what happened, but they'll cover for us." He walked Ailia down to the church where Unni and Lucia waited with Bishop Peter. "Unni, take her home. Ivar and I will be back as soon as we can."

When Ailia saw Bishop Peter, she said, "I was so worried they had hurt you." She felt relieved he was safe.

"By the grace of the Almighty, I shall recover soon," Bishop Peter said. "Come. Let us go. I will join you back to Brandersgaard to help tend to your wound."

\* \* \*

Back home at Brandersgaard, Ailia was glad to finally sit down. Each step on her way back home had inflamed the pain she felt from the arrow and blood had oozed down her nice red Sunday dress, saturating it and her tan wool overcoat.

“The arrow has to come out now,” Bishop Peter said, sitting next to her. He wasted no time and didn’t even bother to prepare Ailia. He snapped the arrow in two and pulled it out on either side.

Ailia screamed. The pain was intense, so intense that she saw splotches of blackness as her head began to spin.

“I will need to sew you up so the bleeding stops,” Bishop Peter said.

“How did you learn to be so callous?” Ailia asked, still upset he hadn’t even bothered to warn her about what he was doing. Soren had been much more careful than this man.

“Before I was converted unto the Lord, I trained as an archer for King Olav. It was then that I learned to tend to wounds such as this one,” he said. “Unni, may I please have some fresh water, plenty of clean towels, a needle, and some string?”

Unni left, and soon she returned with the items in hand. She sat down next to Ailia, who had now laid down on the bench. “Lucia is crying in the back room. She says she feels terrible she gave you away to the Surtorians. She doesn’t even want to show her face.”

Ailia took a deep breath. “I’ll talk to her later,” she said. First, she needed to get through this and then, she needed to process what had happened in the church. Ailia was still shocked how easily Lucia had betrayed her.

After another round of torture, Ailia made her way to the back room.

Lucia sat crying in the corner on the floor, but rose to her feet as soon as Ailia walked in. “Ailia, I am so sorry I said what I said. I do not know what came over me. I was—so scared and I did not want to go back to the tower to be tortured and then, I just—” She did not finish the sentence, but covered her face with her hands and started crying.

“Lucia.” Ailia reached her hand toward her sister.

“Please, please forgive me, I beg of you,” Lucia said, tears trailing down her face, her voice carrying a desperate plea. “I will never betray you again, I promise.”

Ailia pulled her closer and gave Lucia a soft hug. Her shoulder hurt and she pulled back. “Sorry, my shoulder... I forgive you, Lucia.” Although, it wasn’t the complete truth. A part of her heart had been shattered so thoroughly that she feared not even time would mend its brokenness.

That night, Ailia lay awake thinking before sleep took her. She wished Soren was here with her now, to support her, to explain things to her, but to her great dismay, Ailia’s recollection of Soren had started to fade.

A northern chilling wind swirled briskly through Bergendal as the Eastanine Gypsies rolled their wagons into town. They arrived playing cheery music, promising fortunes and answers to

life's mysteries, as if they were the only ones who had the answers to the questions all mortals seek. All they really sold were illusions and daydreams, but dreams nonetheless. And sometimes dreams were the only substance to keep one hoping for a brighter day. Their old, creaky wagons found a home outside the Bergendal Stave Church, camped in a circle, enclosing a constantly blazing bonfire. The children and elderly were kept inside the wagon ring and as customary—to Bishop Peter's great dismay—they celebrated into the wee hours of the night with constant music and dance.

Four months had gone by and life had almost become normal again, as normal as it could get, considering all the changes that had happened in Ailia's life. A steady troupe of Surtorians lingered around Bergendal and Ailia and Lucia had to be careful, so these agents of Eiess wouldn't spot them. Remaining indoors had started to become frustrating for Ailia and she looked for opportunities to escape.

The moment Ailia discovered the Gypsies had arrived in Bergendal, she had to find a way to have her annual fortune read. Lucia had been somewhat disinterested in Ailia and she had even been sharp toward Ailia on many occasions. Ailia thought having some fun with her sister might be a way to help them connect better. Lucia had been adamant about not going to see the Gypsies at first, but the fourth time Ailia brought it up, she finally agreed to come.

"Are you sure about this?" Lucia said, stopping on their way over to the gypsy tent, her blue eyes scanning the surroundings, her face carefully covered with a scarf. "I do not have a good feeling about this. What if the Surtorians see us, or what if the Gypsy woman can tell I am Princess Lucia?"

"Don't be silly. There's no way she'd know that and besides, you don't have to have your fortune read. I'll just do it if it

makes you feel that uncomfortable.” Ailia grabbed her by the hand. It was a slow climb up to Bergendal church from Brandersgaard and Ailia dragged Lucia behind her all the way.

The Gypsy tent was very small, much smaller than Ailia remembered. They both had to duck to get through the entrance. Inside sat a middle-aged woman with a brown and green shawl over her head. Her untidy, below the waist-length hair was as messy as the inside of the tent and her raggedy old red dress was frayed like the tablecloth on the small round table.

“Ahhh,” the woman said in a high-pitched tone, rising from her seat. “Welcome, welcome to you two beauties of the Norse world. I is Ivanka, the reader of fates and fortunes.” She deftly maneuvered around the table and kissed both Ailia and Lucia on the cheek. “You are here for reading?” she asked, smiling and raising her eyebrows so her leathery forehead wrinkled.

Her scent overwhelmed Ailia, stinging her frozen nostrils with the floral perfume. “Uh, yes, uh—I am,” Ailia said, placing her hand on her chest, trying not to cough from the odor.

“The Princess?” Ivanka said, looking over at Lucia.

Lucia coughed, her eyes lightening at Ailia.

*Does she know Lucia’s a real Princess, or does she just call everyone Princess? Ailia wondered. She didn’t call me Princess, even though I am, so it’s probably just a term of endearment to make more money.*

“No thank you,” Lucia finally said.

“Then we start. You—for free,” Ivanka said, gesturing to Lucia. “You—one silver coin,” she said, pointing at Ailia with her right hand, while pointing her left index finger up. Her hands were covered with thin wool mittens, which could hardly be thick enough to protect them from the cold.

Ailia pulled a coin out of her pocket and placed it in Ivanka’s hand. “Here you are.” She smiled, excitement filling her body.

She didn't understand why she felt so excited about this; she knew the reading wasn't real. It was entertainment—at best.

Ivanka studied the coin for a moment and then smiled generously. “Yes, good, please sit,” she said placing the coin in her pocket.

Lucia and Ailia sat down around the miniature table, squeezing their legs under it, trying to get comfortable.

“Now, the left is what the gods give you, the right is what you do with it,” Ivanka explained. “I will look at both.” She reached her hand out toward Lucia and signaled for her to give her hand.

Lucia hesitated for a moment, but then gave in as she huffed loudly.

“Thank you,” Ivanka said, closing her eyes and took two deep breaths. She mumbled something in a foreign tongue and Ailia and Lucia looked at each other. Ailia forced herself to remain serious and it looked like Lucia was having a hard time doing the same.

Suddenly, Ivanka opened her eyes. It was almost as if another woman had taken her place, or a new spirit had inexplicably possessed her body. She looked into Lucia's left hand first. “Oh, I see,” she said, nodding her head. Her voice had changed and become deep and serious. “You are hiding.” She looked up into Lucia's eyes, smiling, her eyes narrowly squinting. Ivanka looked down into the gods-given palm again. “You two sisters—yes?”

Ailia looked at Lucia in astonishment.

“You have suffered so much in your short life. Poor girl, mother dead, father dead, unborn baby brother dead,” Ivanka said. She shook her head and made a tsking noise.

Lucia withdrew her hand and clenched her fist tight near her bosom. “I, I do not want to hear any more,” she said, looking down at her hand.

“Let me tell you your gifts from the gods,” Ivanka said. “You are strong in your heart and strong in your soul. You have helped your sister very much. Yet you carry a dark secret here,” she said, pointing at Lucia’s heart.

Lucia smiled nervously, Ailia thought, as if she did indeed keep a secret.

“You have been given many talents. One talent is only for you,” Ivanka said.

“What do you mean?” Ailia said, disturbed.

“Ah, it is not for me to say. Only reading, dearie. Now, other hand please,” Ivanka said.

Reluctantly, Lucia gave Ivanka her right palm.

“Good, good—” she said, peering into her future. Then she turned silent and serious, pulling Lucia’s hand closer, squinting her fixated eyes to get a closer look. She thrust Lucia’s hand down and pulled away from the table. “All done, bye-bye,” she said, standing up and pushing them out of the tent.

“You didn’t even finish and I didn’t get my reading,” Ailia objected.

Ivanka pulled the silver coin out of her pocket and threw it at Ailia. It fell down onto the snow. “Done,” she said and disappeared into her tent, closing the entrance flap behind her.

Ailia and Lucia looked at each other, both at a loss for words. They slowly headed homeward again. Ailia’s plan had failed. She had really just wanted to connect more with the ever-growing gap between her and Lucia. About halfway back to Brandersgaard, Lucia finally spoke.

“I told you I did not want to have my fortune read,” she seethed.

Ailia started laughing, her body swayed as she chuckled. “This is silly! It’s not even real—” Ailia said, continuing to laugh. “We might as well have some fun with it.”



“That is what you think. This is serious, you know. Our lives are at stake,” Lucia said and took off.

Ailia huffed. When she arrived home, Unni had prepared sheep stew for repast. The rich aroma filled the longhouse. “Did you see Lucia come in?”

“Yes, she seemed upset. Is she all right?” Unni asked.

“I had her come to the fortuneteller with me, but I think it was a mistake,” Ailia said. “I thought it would be fun, but she took it so seriously.”

“Just give her some room. I’m sure she’ll be just fine in a little while,” Unni said.

Ailia peered into the stew. She was surprised when she saw barley kernels and carrots mixed in with the meat. Their grain and vegetable storage had run out about a month ago. “Where did you get the barley and carrots?” she asked.

“Silya’s in town and she dropped off a few special things that Soren had brought with him from the Southlandic Kingdom. Wasn’t that nice?” Unni said.

Ailia froze. For some strange reason, the mention of his name made it feel as if her heart couldn’t be contained. Did she want to see him? It had been so long. Would she still feel the same way about him when she saw him again? “Is Soren in town as well?”

“No, just Silya, I think,” Unni replied. “She said she would be back tomorrow for a visit and would love to see you both.”

Ailia’s heart sank, but she was still very excited to see Silya again.

After repast, everyone gathered in the main room for stories and a round of Hnefatafl, which Brander won again.

“One day—” Ailia said, shaking her finger at him. “—I’m going to win.”

“Sure you will, Ailia, but not against me!” He laughed mischievously.

When Ailia finally went to bed, Lucia had already fallen asleep. Now she wouldn't have a chance to talk to her and try and set things right. She didn't know if she needed to apologize and had become increasingly annoyed by Lucia's lofty attitude. Her mood seemed to change day-by-day, or even minute-by-minute, and it was becoming hard to keep up with her mood swings. Why couldn't they be friends? It was as if Lucia looked down upon her for being a peasant, and every minute around her sister, she felt as if she were doing something wrong.

She lay awake for hours, forcing her eyes shut, but there were too many thoughts buzzing around in mind to find a wink of peace. Tomorrow, Silya would return, and she felt excited about seeing her again. But where was Soren? He had no reason to come here, because he hadn't yet learned the truth. Besides, it was probably for the best that he stayed away. Ailia would be safer then. He would be safer, too. Yet, she wanted him to come to her.

Frustrated, she jumped out of bed, bundled up in her coat, scarf, and hat, and went outside to get away from her racing mind. The temperature outside had dropped over the last few days and her eyes watered as they came in contact with the stinging, cold breeze. She instinctively headed toward her mother's grave. *Maybe I can find some clues or information about the scrolls imbedded on the gravesite.* She had looked at what seemed a thousand times for clues, but never found any. *I am sure if I look just one more time...*

She had mainly studied the large center rune stone the past four months, not all the smaller stones comprising the shape of a longship, or even the longship's prow.

As she headed down the snowy road, she heard the Gypsy's cheerful music in the distance. The song had a rich, ethnic beat to it and she found herself stepping her feet to the rhythm. She

thought about what Ivanka had said to Lucia earlier and wanted to know what, if anything, she had seen in her future. As she passed the fortuneteller's tent, Ivanka stepped outside.

"Ah, beautiful girl, come here. I wait for you to return," she said. Her voice was back to its high-pitched tone. "My apologies. I saw so much suffering and I did not want to scare your sister, dearie. She is still so lovely, still so innocent still that one." She approached Ailia.

Ivanka's eyes looked sincere, Ailia thought. "It's... we laughed about it really," she replied nervously.

"Oh, no, no, no! There is no laughing here. The Aesira scrolls. Your mother hid, yes? She will die the worst death. I cannot say—" Ivanka said, shaking her head despondently.

Ailia couldn't make out exactly what she was saying, but she did hear something. "How do you know about...?" she started. "Who are you? How do you know these things?"

"I see it like it happened before. It will happen soon," Ivanka said. "You will see. You will become me, my gift to you, dearie."

Ailia had a really hard time figuring out what the woman was saying. Ivanka's accent was too strong to understand at moments and the meaning of her words, difficult to grasp. "Will you read my future now?" she asked.

"Come with me." Ivanka gestured and held open the tent entrance. Dozens of candles lit the tent and had transformed it into a hot and smoky dancing cave of shadows. Ivanka sat down in her chair. "Sit," Ivanka ordered Ailia, moving her chair to the other side of the table.

Ailia sat down on the same stool she had sat on earlier in the day and leaned forward. *I must be crazy to try this again*, she thought.

“Left hand, please,” Ivanka instructed, reaching out for it. She took two deep breaths again and said the same foreign words she had before, just faster. She then opened her eyes and her demeanor had changed.

“Now, let me see.” She studied Ailia’s palm. “Yes, I see, I see, good—not good. Hmm—” She was nodding and shaking her head interchangeably. “Ah, your palm is not able to be read, except for you have three lives, one love. Cannot see which life you are living now—three is too much. Other hand,” she said and let go of Ailia’s left hand.

Baffled, Ailia extended her right arm and opened her palm.

“Hmmm,” Ivanka said. “Hmmm—” She turned Ailia’s hand around and clasped it. “Not tonight, dearie. You make your own destiny. You find it in here,” she said and pointed her long, dirt-infested fingernail into Ailia’s chest. “— here,” she said and pointed to Ailia’s forehead. “You may or may not win.”

“What?” Ailia asked. That was no more or less than she already knew.

“Remember, truth is inside you, buried down deep. Your spirit creates all wonders,” Ivanka said and stood up. “No need to look elsewhere than inside.” She blew out a dozen candles and then looked at Ailia. “No more tonight, good night.”

Ailia stood up and slowly walked out of the tent miles more confused than when she had walked in.

“One more thing—” the fortuneteller said. “He will be here tonight.”

“Who?” Ailia said.

“Good night.” Ivanka shut the tent door without another word.

Nothing made sense. Ivanka seemed like she knew what she was talking about, but why wouldn’t she share what she had

seen? It had been a rather unsatisfactory adventure, incapable of answering Ailia's important questions.

She started to feel tired and she thought it would be best to head home and try to get some sleep. Searching the heavens, Ailia sighted a shooting star in the pitch-black, light-speckled sky. The Auroras hadn't shown themselves recently and she wondered if her mother was still looking down upon her, guiding her steps through life, helping her onto unseen, privileged paths.

Out here in the dark, she was alone, yet strangely enough, not lonely. Ailia headed toward Brandersgaard and tried to clear her mind of all the questions life had recently thrown at her, insurmountably difficult questions she had no answers to—at least not yet. She could go mad thinking about them, searching for the answers that life so slowly rewarded.

Life on the farm had not been easy, but one thing Uncle Brander and Aunt Unni had taught her, something she was truly grateful for, was to value work. She was embarrassed to admit, even to herself, that several times when asked to help, when she was blossoming into adulthood, Ailia had declared her independence, saying that Unni and Brander were not her real parents, so how could they order her around? Ailia liked to think her remorseful and quick attitude adjustment was proof of her maturing, but it probably had a lot more to do with her having to sleep outdoors in the pigsty and not having the privilege of a meal. She smiled as she remembered the 'old' Ailia. Finally, she arrived home. Right as she was about to enter through the front door, she heard someone call her name.

“Ailia?”

A chill went through her spine. She could recognize Soren's voice anywhere.

### A Healer Returns

“Soren!” Ailia fought to contain the irrepressible joy that welled up inside of her. She stepped closer to him, and though she didn’t feel she could or should embrace him, even though that was what she wanted, she stroked his shoulder and arm to greet him.

“You look well,” he said, smiling at her. Then his eyebrows crinkled. “Something is different with you,” he said, his eyes searching hers. He looked different too. His skin was sun-kissed, and the stubble on his face was a little lighter than the it had been before.

“Different?” Ailia said. Could he truly recognize how she now knew the truth just by looking at her? *How will I manage to not tell him?* “My foot has completely healed. Thank you, again, for your help,” she said, ignoring his prodding, redirecting the conversation to safer subjects.

“So—any more wolf chasing?” he asked with a smirk.

She laughed. “No. I knew you were away, so I thought I’d refrain from such adventurous activities.”

He chuckled. “It is really good to see you again,” he said sincerely. He took a step closer and gave her a big bear hug.

Ailia hugged him back and she leaned her head into his chest. She remembered that firm chest and his broad shoulders, and soon she felt her cheeks become warm. A feeling of peace and belonging spread through her like the sun’s rays on a hot day.

Soren’s body tensed for a moment, and then he sighed. He slowly pulled away, his arms still wrapped around Ailia.

Ailia looked up into his blue eyes. He seemed to draw her in closer with each glance, each breath, and each word. She stood speechless for a moment, trying to read him.

He let go of his grip and stepped back. “I am curious, did you ever figure out how you ended up in the middle of nowhere?”

“No, it’s an enigma. I lost four months of my life,” she said. “I did find...a...” She stopped.

“A...?” he gently nudged her.

She wanted to make sure she didn’t share information she wasn’t supposed to, but decided it couldn’t hurt to tell him about the handkerchief and flask. “I found a raven embroidered handkerchief, so we have reason to believe the Vikings had something to do with my disappearance,” she said. “There was also an empty glass flask.” She had a hard time concentrating on anything other than the fact that Soren was standing right in front of her. “Can we talk about something else?” she finally said.

“Are you trying to hide something from me, wolf girl?” His right eyebrow rose in a playful way.

“No!” she nearly yelled and shook her head fervently. She resisted every temptation to think or say anything about him and her or any of the other things she had learned over the past few months.

He scratched his eyebrow and laughed under his breath. “All right. It seems I have asked a forbidden question.”

She pressed a smile. Why was this so hard? “How were your travels down south?”

“They went really well. Empress Mumtaz is gathering the elders who will in turn help us get the armies we need. Once the Great Sentinor is ready, the armies will cross the Orken Desert and come here. It will be a challenge to have all the troops cross the desert when it is time, so a lot of planning is needed,” he said.

*Once the Great Sentinor is ready?* She felt she would never be ready, and besides, she didn’t even know what that meant. *How am I supposed to be their leader? I know nothing of troops or armies, or anything! They won’t follow me.*

“Ailia, the devastation down south is horrific. Can you imagine living without access to clean water, being swarmed by bugs the size of my hand?” he said, lifting his hand up to show her. “People lie dying in the streets without anyone to help them and the only food they have are grains since nearly all their animals have died of some disease. Fortunately, they are still able to harvest plants and grains, but it will not be long until there is nothing left.”

“I’m sorry. Is there any way I can help?” she asked, feeling compassion well up in her bosom. She knew she needed to complete her plan, but she had absolutely no idea of where or how to even start.

“Not yet, but eventually we will need everyone’s help to defeat Eiess. Once Lucia finishes her plan, for it has to come from her, we will be ready to attack.”

“I understand,” she said, nodding her head anxiously, taking his statement to heart.

“I also visited my... descendants,” he said, his eyes softening.



“Oh,” Ailia said, slightly interested, nodding her head. “Oh!” She hadn’t thought about the fact that she had descendants. She felt guilty immediately.

“The youths call themselves Quartz.” Soren laughed.

“Quartz?”

“Yes. They gave themselves that name, being descendants from Lucia and myself. As you know, Lucia and I are demi-mortals, but they are not. They do have certain endowments within them, unique supernatural gifts, but not as much as Lucia and I. They thought instead of calling themselves demi-mortals, which they are not, they would go by quarter-mortals, or Quartz for short,” he said.

Ailia stared at him without responding. This was too much to take in at once, plus she already struggled with trying to hide her identity. She had just gotten used to admitting she *was* the Great Sentinor and now she had to hide it again from the one person she really wanted to tell.

“Are you sure you are all right?” he asked. “Did you have too much mead, perhaps?”

“No. I... I’m sorry.” Ailia exhaled sharply. She decided to be as honest as she could, without divulging what she needed to keep secret. She wasn’t doing a very good job at ‘acting’ normal, or like the old, peasant Ailia. There had to be a way she could be honest with him without breaking her vow of silence. “There *is* something,” she said, looking away. “I cannot tell you what it is. You need to trust me on this.” She turned toward him again, took his hand, and looked up into his eyes, finally letting her guard down. “Will you trust me—please?”

“Yes,” Soren said without hesitation in his voice. “Yes, I will trust you.”

They stood looking at each other for a moment, communicating in silence. Ailia felt that he truly did trust her. A

friendship had been taken to the next level. “Thank you. I’m so relieved. I worried you wouldn’t. I cannot keep up with all the changes that are going on in my life, a new sister, new information—” Ailia said. She let go of his hand.

“Of course I trust you. Silya told me you are Lucia’s sister, which is wonderful. No wonder I felt there was something special about you.” He nudged her.

Silya must be trying to get Soren to realize who Ailia was without breaking her vow of silence. Perhaps she could also do something of the sort? “Ah, yes. I am indeed her sister.”

“You would probably like to stay out here all night, but I am anxious to get inside to the heat,” he finally said. “Besides, there are Surtorians lurking around every corner and I would rather not get noticed by one.”

Ailia felt foolish. She hadn’t thought about the fact that Soren had just come traveling from heaven knows how far and she was keeping him outside. “Sorry. I was just so happy to see you again. Of course you should be getting inside.”

They stepped into the dim foyer and removed their overcoats, the flame from the hearth casting a low glow into the room. As if by instinct, Ailia took Soren’s hand in hers and guided him toward the main room.

“This should help you warm up,” she said once they arrived at the fire. She picked up firewood and placed it onto the dwarfed flames. “You must be starving. Would you like a bowl of stew?”

“That sounds delicious,” Soren said.

“Please, have a seat.” She gestured toward the bench.

He sat down slowly at first and then with a low thump. The modest amber light from the fire burned low, illuminating his serious face. His dark hair was a mess, standing in all sorts of different directions, and he smelled of sweat and the outdoors.

Picking up the stew-filled cauldron, she set in onto the flames.

“I apologize for leaving so abruptly with no explanation,” he said.

She glanced at him from beneath her eyelashes. “Not to worry. I made it home safely,” she said with a soft smile.

“Will you forgive me?”

“Of course,” she said without hesitation, stirring the stew with a wooden spoon. They sat in relaxed silence for some time, and Ailia noticed how he kept glancing at her. She pretended not to notice, afraid if she looked back at him, her eyes might not be able to hide the truth. Once steam rose from the stew, she scooped a portion into a wooden bowl and handed it to him.

He sat and ate in silence for a few moments. “How was your journey back home?” he asked quietly.

“The trip was uneventful. I adore Silya. She’s a gem. She told me how you two met and filled me in on more information about the Sentinors and Eieess and the Aesira Jewel. It’s very fascinating,” she said.

“Silya is one of the wisest women I know. She has had a rough life, but instead of growing angry and bitter, she has taken the hardships of life and molded each lesson into diamonds of great wisdom.”

“I agree. She is very wise. Did she travel with you here to Bergendal?” Ailia asked.

“Yes.” He took another bite and swallowed. “I was not planning on stopping by,” he said reflectively, scraping the last part of the stew from the bowl. “However, Silya insisted I did. She can be as stubborn as a mule that Sami woman.”

She laughed. Silya was really trying to nudge him toward Ailia it would seem. “How long do you plan to stay?”

“Until the day after tomorrow and then we will head back to Trollsoe.”

The thought of him leaving felt like salt on a raw wound, and in that instant, she wanted to tell him everything. But she had given her word not to! *Perhaps if I approach him a little more directly, he'll realize who I am without me having to tell him.* It was a dangerous plan, yet she could not have stopped herself if she had wanted to. In her desire to be chaste and save herself for her husband, she had never approached a man in a manner like this and her heart started pounding immediately. Squeezing in right next to him, she placed her narrow hand on his knee, trying not to think of the rejection she might go through if he declined her.

He shifted in his seat. “Ailia—” he said, freezing up and not looking at her. He exhaled. “I cannot be that for you,” he finally said, seeming as if he were struggling with the right words to say. “You know that, right?”

She wasn’t willing to accept the rejection just yet. She lifted her knee up over his lap and sat down on his lap facing him. “I think you can,” she said and smiled, her heart in her mouth.

He looked away. “I have felt an attraction to you and I cannot explain it. It does not make any sense, especially since my one eternal partner is someone other than you. However, I cannot give into a fleeting feeling such as this one.”

She turned his face toward her, nudging him along. “Everything will be all right; just trust your heart.” She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I do not expect you to understand,” he said impatiently, shaking his head.

She stood up and felt extremely embarrassed, not to mention rejected. “Why, because you think I’m not a demi-mortal?” she

concluded, slightly offended. She had no one to blame for the rejection other than herself, but it was still difficult to bear.

He stood up and looked her squarely in the eyes. “I admire you so much. There is a strong force inside you that I cannot explain. It is almost like you *are* a demi-mortal, your energy is so strong. Perhaps it is because you are Lucia’s sister.”

Ailia knew she couldn’t tell him about her true identity, not yet at least, so she decided to abandon her risqué plan. If she continued, she felt she would have to stoop too low and she wasn’t strong enough to handle that kind of refusal from him. She walked away from Soren, embarrassed, and braced her chest with her arms.

To her surprise, he came up behind her and grabbed her shoulders, pulling her body close to his. His hands slowly made their way down Ailia’s arms and finally down to her hands, where they clasped hers in a tight grip. Goosebumps speckled her arms and shoulders.

They stood there for a long time, their hearts beating steadily. Ailia leaned her head into his chest and he kissed her on the neck ever so lightly. Surprised that he had done so, she turned around and faced him and then they both embraced each other, holding on so tightly, afraid that if they let go, they might do something they both truly desired, but could not afford to do.

“I know this might sound outlandish,” he whispered. “But it is almost as if you—”

Ailia looked up into his eyes, hoping he would realize that she *was* the one he spoke of. “What?”

He stroked her hair, caressing it with his hand and then pulled it gently as he continued to kiss her neck and face.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed every touch, every kiss. She then started kissing him back, their lips still not joining. “Soren,”

she said longingly. Her body tingled as Soren stirred up feelings inside her no other man had even come close to.

He seemed to enjoy hearing his name spoken from her lips and he cradled her face in his hands. He came in so close and Ailia could feel his breath on her lips. Their eyes connected and Ailia could see that he really did feel something for her. His intensely blue eyes burned with desire and Ailia could see in them that he truly wanted her in that moment.

“No, not like that!” Brander said, over by the outer wall.

Soren and Ailia froze, completely startled by the noise. They hastily stepped away from each other as if they were children who had been caught with their hands in a basket filled with fresh bread. Standing still for a moment, they listened. No sound.

“I think he is talking in his sleep,” Soren said. They both laughed silently, and began to move toward each other again.

“Ailia?” Lucia said, suddenly appearing out of the darkness. She gasped when her eyes fell on Soren.

Soren looked as if he had seen a ghost, his face turning ashen. “Lucia.” His mouth fell open.

“What took you so long, Soren?” Lucia asked. “I have been here for many months and you did not come for me.” She quickly turned around and walked away.

For a moment, Ailia had forgotten that he didn’t know the truth. To him, Lucia was his bride-to-be, his eternal love, his Spiritus Amor. She wanted to tell him that that was not true, but she couldn’t get herself to say so much as a single word.

“She was here all along and you did not care to tell me?” Soren’s face flushed red.

“I... I...” But she couldn’t find the right words.

“This was a mistake,” he said. “I do not know what came over me. Ailia, I—”

“Let me go talk to her,” she said, trying to make it better without having him feel too bad about it. “I, I’m sorry. This was a bad idea. I will explain everything later,” she said and trailed after Lucia. Arriving in the corner, Ailia approached Lucia. She heard footsteps, and then the door slammed shut behind Soren.

“Soren is here? Did you tell him?” Lucia asked, sounding somewhat dispirited.

“No, of course not. It’s not the right time yet. It kills me that I cannot tell him, especially now. And what’s worse than that is that I don’t know how long it will be until I can tell him. It could be weeks, months, years—or worse, even decades,” Ailia whispered, letting out a groan.

“Oh, it will not be decades,” Lucia said. “It will be sooner than you think.”

“Thank you,” Ailia said half-heartedly. She couldn’t expect Lucia to really understand or even sympathize with her predicament. Immediately, she felt guilty for thinking that. “I’m so grateful I have someone to talk to about this—it helps a lot.”

Lucia smiled faintly. “What am *I* supposed to do?” she asked, her brows furrowed. “I would feel rather uncomfortable pretending to be *you*.”

She said it in a way that made Ailia think it was intended as an insult. But, she was right. Ailia hadn’t thought about how this would affect Lucia. Lucia would have to go along with being the Great Sentinor, acting as if she were Soren’s. She tried to push away the unexpected and irrational emotion of jealousy. She had nothing to fear, did she? *How should we handle this?*

“It’s the only way,” Ailia finally said. For Lucia couldn’t ignore him, acting as if she were nothing to him. *In the long run, this short time will not matter. When Soren and I are married and I have defeated Eiess, Lucia, Soren and I will look back at this time and laugh—or so she hoped.*

“I am not a good liar, you know,” Lucia said. “Are you sure this is the best way? What should I do when he tries to kiss me?”

Ailia gritted her teeth. “Then you have to kiss him back as if he were your Spiritus Amor.”

Lucia leaned in. “I do not mean to make you feel uncomfortable, but I know Soren better than you. He is a very passionate man with passionate needs. He may even try to bring me to his bed and have his way with me.”

Ailia felt her entire body go rigid. Was she telling the truth? She had no reason to lie, did she? However, Ailia had not seen that passionate side of him, only the tender one. But the again, he thought Lucia was his one love.

She wished she could talk to Unni before they jumped into role-playing. However, she remained steady in her decision. The answers would have to come along the way.

“It is the best way and I have complete confidence and trust in you, Lucia. He told me he wants to leave the day after tomorrow to Trollsoe—with you. You’re going to have to go with him if he insists, or if we cannot sway him from leaving.” It tore Ailia up inside that he would be leaving again, but she couldn’t think about that now when so many other things were at stake.

Lucia leaned forward, sitting on both her hands. “I will do my best. I hate to see you struggle with this,” she said. “Maybe, I could insist you come with me since you are my sister?”

Ailia raised her eyebrows and peered over at Lucia. “That might work.” She paused. “Let’s sleep on it and talk again tomorrow,” she said, her hope renewed.

“Good night,” Lucia said.

“Yes, good night and thank you,” Ailia said and hugged her sister before jumping into bed.



Ailia's mind continued to race with the day's events. Ivanka's forewarning hung as a red banner in the back of her mind as she tried to go to sleep. She hoped Ivanka had been wrong. She was probably just an insane fortuneteller anyway, or a mad old hag. Still, something told her that there was some truth to her terrifying foretelling. Finally, sleep took her and it was, thankfully, a dreamless night.

### A Change of Plans

All were still sleeping, dreaming and worry-free, at Brandersgaard when Ailia arose early next morning. Her mind wouldn't rest and kept churning and winding, provoking her heart with bothersome thoughts. *What if our plan doesn't work? What if Lucia betrays me again? What if Soren loves Lucia? What if—?* Fear had come knocking, worming its way into her mind and she was helpless to let fear stay outside, feeling forced to open to its piercing demands.

This was the first time she could ever remember being up before Unni, who usually rose to light the hearth if it had gone out at night, or increase its blaze if it hadn't. The flames were still aglow, bringing with them the only physical warmth the Northlandic Kingdom had seen in all too many months and the seasons were not about to return to normal any time soon. When she saw Soren asleep next to the hearth, her stomach fluttered. But when she remembered how they had left things last night, the flutters quickly morphed to boulders.

She wrapped a reindeer fur throw around her shoulders and quietly stepped outside, looking to the black, star-speckled heavens. The dry snow creaked below her feet with each step, and the bitter blasts of wind gusted against her face. If she ever needed help, it was now. Would her birth mother hear her if she called upon her? Was she listening and was she aware of what Ailia was faced with?

“Mother?” she beckoned, seeking loving advice from the spirit realm. “I feel so lost. I don’t know what to do. It seems like every choice I make ends up wrong. I feel I cannot move in the direction my heart tells me. If I tell Soren who I am, we may all be in more danger, yet I need his strength to move forward.” She walked casually over to the stable and entered where Volomite was standing. He was not asleep either. “Hello. Good to see you again.” She brushed his cold, black mane.

He nickered, pawing his hoof on the straw-covered, mud-packed floor below and moved his head to greet her.

“I missed you too.” She placed her hands on his face and stroked him calmly down his neck toward his well-developed shoulder. Letting him go, she strolled over to gather the eggs from the chicken cage.

They used to have dozens of chickens, but now, they were down to a measly seven after having lost them to the frost. Brander had mentioned he wanted to bring the fowls inside the main house before they all froze to death. In the beginning, Unni was fervently against it, not wanting the “incessantly chirping creatures” inside, but now she realized if they stayed outside for much longer, they wouldn’t have any chickens or eggs left.

Ailia picked up seven eggs, put them in the wicker basket next to the pen, and started toward the house again. *Scrambled eggs for breakfast sounds delicious.*

As she looked into the heavens again, she saw the Auroras gleaming brightly across the sky. Her mother *was* listening. Now it was time for Ailia to see if she could hear her mother calling from the grave, bestowing wisdom upon her spirit by speaking to her heart. She stood still for a moment, waiting for a revelation.

“Please, Mother, please tell me what to do with Soren. Should I tell him?” she whispered, closing her eyes, turning inward, but not receiving any communication other than her own thoughts, which were, *It is too cold to stay out here.*

Heavy of heart from not having received an answer, Ailia flung the reindeer throw onto the bench as she entered the front foyer. She heard movement from inside the house and when she glanced into the main room, she saw Unni breathing new life into the hearth.

“He’s here?” Unni whispered, looking up at Ailia as she entered.

“Yes,” Ailia confirmed, seeing he was still sleeping by the hearth. She followed Unni into the kitchen, and placed the eggs on the table.

“What’s wrong? You’re fretting over something,” Unni whispered.

She thought she had been able to hide her emotions, but of course, Unni could read her like an open book. “It’s nothing.” She thought about not bothering Unni with her problems, but she then quickly changed her mind. She needed a trusted confidant now more than ever. She took a cleansing breath. “It’s concerning Soren,” she said in a low voice.

“I see,” Unni said. “Tell me more.”

“I’m trying to pretend I’m someone else. Unfortunately, I’m not pretending very well.” She leaned her hip against the table and crossed her ankles and arms where she stood.

“I have been thinking about it as well. I believe the wise choice is to include Soren, even if telling him is potentially dangerous. There is strength in numbers. We will just have to be more careful in how you two interact in public. As far as we all know, Eiess still believes Lucia is the Great Sentinor and we need to use that fabricated reality to its fullest potential.”

“It’s not fair that Lucia has to take all the risk. She already resents me for it, and I cannot blame her. If Eiess discovers where she is hiding, she would kill her in an instant. She’s risking her life for me,” Ailia said.

“Look at it this way. If Lucia refuses to help, Eiess will come after you, killing you for the third and final time and everyone will perish by Eiess’ hands or live as thralls, in fear and bondage forever. You cannot take upon you someone else’s responsibilities in life, not even your sister’s. Each has to pay their own dues and find their own way.” Unni walked over to Ailia and placed her hand on her shoulder, looking her in the eyes. “She is happy to do this for you and for everyone.”

“I still feel guilty.” Ailia pivoted away from Unni.

Unni placed her fists on her hips, glaring at Ailia. “Let go of the guilt, let go of the worry. Guilt is only there for misery’s benefit and if you hold on to it, it will decrease your strength. There’s no other purpose for guilt than to correct an error, before you *choose* to err or after you have done it.” Unni looked around the room as if she was searching for something. “There’s no error here,” she said, her hands and shoulders lifting up.

“I suppose—” Ailia started.

“Ah—” Unni stopped Ailia.

Ailia sighed in annoyance. “I understand,” she finally said, rolling her eyes.

“I mean it,” Unni said strictly, with the same look Ailia had seen hundreds of times growing up, when she knew something was to be taken seriously.

Ailia slowly broke a smile. “I do, I understand.” She laughed.

“So, what’s for breakfast?” Brander interrupted. “Serious stew?” He laughed at his own joke.

“Scrambled eggs,” Unni and Ailia said in unison. They looked at each other and smiled.

“Great, I will take three,” he said, fastening his belt around his shirt, still getting dressed for the day. “I’ve been losing some muscle lately and I need the meat.”

“Oh, no you won’t,” Unni said feistily. “Not until you finish building that indoor chicken coop we’ve been talking about.”

Brander looked at Ailia. “What mare demons visited her last night?” He winked at Ailia.

Ailia tried to remain serious but couldn’t help smiling.

“May I help get breakfast going?” Lucia said, looking all pretty and ready for the day. “I am starving!” Her wavy long, blond hair was brushed and she had put a dried flower over her ear.

“You look lovely today, Lucia,” Brander said.

“Soren arrived last night,” she said with a giddy smile.

Was she playing her part really well? Or was she truly trying to impress Soren? Ailia brushed the thought away quickly. Lucia had promised she would never betray her again.

Unni pointed toward the table with the pots and pan and looked at Ailia. “Fetch the pan. I’ll ready the omelets.”

Breakfast was prepared and devoured in a hurry. Soren had left right after breakfast with Lucia to pay Bishop Peter a visit. He said they’d be back by mid-day.

Today was a big day in Bergendal and no one wanted to miss any of the festivities that were held during the Late Summer

Festival. Of course, the events had changed since its inception, not to mention the weather.

“I have decided to speak to Soren after the event tonight,” Ailia told Nora as they finished cleaning up after the meal.

Nora nodded, as her eyes blinked fervently, like they always did lately. Her wrinkled face had shriveled up nearly beyond recognition, with deep lines grooving into her leather-looking skin. It was as if she had aged overnight. She had lost one of her front teeth since she had arrived at Brandersgaard and her hair had thinned and whitened to a soft silver—like an angel’s.

“It is wise that we include Soren. Though, there is much danger associated with him knowing the truth, we are better off using his strength at this time,” Nora said, drying the pan slowly with her crinkly spotted hands. “Just make sure he is fully sober when you tell him.” She laughed. “You will want him to remember it in the morning.”

“He doesn’t seem like a man who is too fond of strong drinks,” Ailia said. “But just in case, I will make sure Lucia keeps an eye on him for me.”

After her chores were finished, Ailia went into the rearmost room and laid out her special blue Sunday dress on Unni and Brander’s bed. Her ivory, long-sleeved, ankle-length underdress looked quite frayed and old lying there next to the new blue over-dress, but it would have to do since it was the only one she had.

Everyone had left the house to either run errands or to do chores outside and she seized the opportunity for a bath. She filled the largest cauldron with melted snow, putting it on the hearth to heat. Once heated, she took it into the back room and set it down on the floor. Her last full body bath had been on their designated bath day—Saturday. Today was Thursday, named after the god of thunder, Thor.

Unni, who had recently been dubbed the best housewife in Bergendal, kept a neatly filled supply of linens and washcloths inside the wood pantry. She grabbed the top washcloth and laid it on the cauldron's thick upper edge. She undressed and started to bathe.

Washing her body, she imagined what it would be like if Soren saw her like this. Would he be pleased with what he saw? Would he want to touch her bare skin where her clothes normally covered? Her breath caught as warmth spread through her, settling in side of the deepest, lowest part of her stomach. She washed the swell of her breasts, imagining it was his hands caressing her, seeing the look on his face, the desire in his eyes. Sliding the washcloth down between her legs, she let out a sudden, breathy sigh.

A creak in the flooring made her turn around and she covered herself as best she could with the washcloth. Soren stood in the main room, his body frozen stiff, his gaze directly at her. She met his eyes across the divide, the distance as if it were nothing. For whatever reason, she lowered her hand and the washcloth with it, standing before him in her pure form. It appeared he could not look away at first, as his eyes raked her with desire, as his lips parted with an exhale. When the washcloth fell to the floor, it was as if the spell was broken, and he quickly averted his eyes, as a low moan escaping his lips.

"I am sorry, Ailia. I thought no one was here," he said, turning away. "I left a—something here." He clenched his fist and squeezed his eyes shut.

"I know you didn't mean it," she said.

He excused himself and dashed out of the longhouse.

*I wish he knew already, she thought. What would he have done had he known?*



\* \* \*

After her bath, she dressed and thought she looked decent enough for the night's events. Unni and Sigrid had returned from helping Brander slaughter the evening's main course: Lotte the pig. Ailia had picked up a bad habit of naming all the animals on the farm. She hated it anytime any of her 'children' were slaughtered, even though she fully realized they needed the food. Busily, they scurried to and fro, in and out of doors, preparing the master meal for the evening.

As Ailia walked in with her gown, Unni glanced at Ailia with a frown, dipped her hands in the water bowl, dried them on her apron, and walked over to her.

"Let's go to the back again. I have something special I want you to wear for tonight's event," Unni said, her voice brimming with excitement. She led Ailia to the back room and opened the linen closet.

Hurriedly, Unni searched through the linen sheets and located what she was looking for. She pulled out a finely woven silk handkerchief, folded carefully around its mysterious contents. "Here you go." She reached her arm out toward Ailia. "I wore this on the official day of my marital pledge, which it almost is for you. Here." She reached her hand forward more firmly.

Ailia accepted the bundle, knowing it would be a great insult if she didn't. She peeled its exquisite edges apart until it opened, revealing two shining Hatteberg bi-metal brooches. She gasped. Their complex design included six silver animal eyelet masks embellishing the upper circular border and domed golden bronze panels inlaid on the front. The triangular Valknut symbol was barely noticeable in the vine-like side patterns. Ailia had never

seen anything nearly as beautiful in her entire life. Her fingers feathered the surface of the brooches.

“Now, let me help you put them on,” Unni said, picking the brooches out of Ailia’s hallowed hand. “Oh dear, that under tunic will never do!” She looked in horror at Ailia’s ragged under tunic. She pulled out a stark white new under tunic that was embroidered with a detailed blue thistle pattern at the sleeves and skirt hem. “Here you are, dear. Now hurry and change. I have repast to prepare.”

After Ailia changed, Unni helped her attach the brooches, and together they strung red, green, brown, yellow, and silver beads between the jewels.

“Come with me and help set the table. Don’t worry about preparing the food. I wouldn’t want you to get your dress dirtied,” Unni said, ushering Ailia with her.

\* \* \*

Silya, who had been invited to repast, arrived with Soren and Lucia. She was going to spend the night with them before the three left for Trollsoe in the morning.

“Repast is ready!” Unni hollered from the kitchen. The long table had been pulled out and set in the main room between the hearth and the kitchen. The Late Summer Festival repast was the fanciest meal Ailia had seen all year. At the center of the table sat the roasted pig still intact with all its limbs and body parts. Brander had been roasting the beast outside for hours, and its aroma filled the entire room, flirting with their taste buds and hungry bellies. Bread, carrots and potatoes, which were considered luxury foods in these times of dearth, were all laid

out on the table in plenty. Abundant amphorae filled with mead and even wine had been allotted for the day's events and none in the house would leave without being a little cheerier.

"A toast to all guests and especially our beautiful women," Brander said, raising his glass at the end of the table.

Everyone stood by their seats at the overly crowded table and rose their glasses. "My cheer, your cheer, all the pretty women's cheer!" they all chimed in.

Unni sat at the other end with Ailia, Ivar, Sigrid, Silya and Nora on one side. Soren, Lucia, Bishop Peter and his deacon, Anders, sat at the other side.

Ailia noticed that Soren kept glancing at her several times throughout the meal. Was it because she looked nice in her dress? Or, maybe he was thinking about how he had walked in on her earlier when she was taking a bath? She hoped so.

Lucia looked perfectly happy sitting by his side at repast; she played her part well. *Almost too well*, Ailia thought. All through the evening, Lucia would brush her hand lightly over Soren's and a couple of times it even looked like she was touching his knee under the table.

Before repast, Ailia had pulled Lucia aside and spoken to her about bringing Soren to the storytelling tent before the first reading.

"Make sure he does not drink too much mead," Ailia had said and laughed.

"Of course," Lucia had said and skipped off to be with him.

Ailia didn't think Lucia was taking this seriously enough and didn't know if she had even heard what Ailia had said. All throughout the meal, Ailia noticed that even though Soren seemed to return Lucia's affection outwardly, he had the slightest expression of awkwardness in his eyes as they moved from place to place, never finding rest.

“More potatoes, Ailia?” Unni prodded. She handed her the potato bowl.

“No, thank you,” Ailia said, passing it on to Ivar. He looked remarkably well-groomed tonight, handsome even, for a man of his age.

“But, you’ve barely eaten anything,” Unni said.

“I’m just excited for the festivities, that’s all,” Ailia said, picking at her food with her eating knife.

“Maybe some carrots then?” Ivar pitched in.

“No, thank you,” Ailia said, refusing the bowl and gulping some more mead. “More mead?” she asked.

Unni was about to object.

“Here you go.” Brander was quickly by her side, winking at her. “One more won’t do any harm.”

It was not that Ailia was full, or that the food didn’t look absolutely mouthwatering, she just didn’t have room for anything other than the overzealous butterflies in her stomach. She kept rethinking her plan, even though she felt happy about it. She had decided that after she had met up with Soren and Lucia in the storyteller’s tent, she would take Soren to Bergendal Stave Church and open her heart to him, explaining who she really was. *I hope I will say the right words, so he understands.* As long as Lucia vouched for her, her plan should work. She finished off the rest of her mead and smiled over at Soren. Their eyes locked for a moment and the flurries in Ailia’s stomach returned. He looked so handsome in his fancy blue tunic. It really brought out his eyes and complemented his dark hair.

“Well, we best be off to the festivities,” Lucia said, rising to her feet.

“But, there’s still dessert,” Unni objected. “You must stay for dessert.”

“We will be back for it later.” She grabbed Soren’s hand and pulled him with her.

Soren followed her lead and thanked Unni and Brander for the wonderful meal. “We will see you all at the festival,” he said, glancing at Ailia again.

Lucia wrapped her arm around him and they left.

“I don’t like the way she’s flirting with him,” Unni muttered. “Not one bit.”

“We spoke just last night. I’m sure she is just playing her part really well,” Ailia hoped, but now she had started to doubt her sister’s loyalty.

“Well, you better keep an eye on that one,” Brander said. “She’s a little too flirtatious in my opinion.”

“Lucia is as honest and full of integrity as the day is long,” Nora said. “If she said she is going to do something, she will.”

“I sure hope so for her sake. If not, she’ll have to deal with Unni and my wrath,” Brander said gruffly. “And no one should ever have to be in that merciless position.”

Ailia braved a smile, though without as much confidence as she would have liked. “We have a plan and we are going to follow through. Besides, what could possibly happen?” *A whole lot*, the answer came to Ailia’s mind. *A whole lot*.

### Treachery

“Their ugly, brown faces peered at them with black eyes. These skraelings, ugly men, brutally attacked the Vikings in Wineland, the land they had themselves claimed when they sailed their ships to this mystical land. Halvor the Red headed the dangerous expedition after being banned from Frostland for manslaughter. He established Bratthild estate with the men and women—”

Ailia sat in the back row on the benches listening to the storyteller’s gripping tale of the Viking excursion to Vinland and beyond. Looking through the crowd, Ailia didn’t see Lucia or Soren anywhere. “Be here *before* the storyteller starts,” she had told Lucia. How could she have misunderstood her? Perhaps they got lost? But, she knew that now she was just making excuses for her sister.

“—finally, they were victorious over the devil-faced skraelings. It was even Guro, Halvor’s half-sister, who was eight months pregnant with her firstborn, who overcame them! She

had fallen behind the others, pleading for their help, but she could not keep up. She grabbed a sword from a man's deceased body and plunged it into her own breast, frightening the others in —”

Ailia couldn't concentrate on the story. She was too nervous, anxiously awaiting Soren and what was to be one of the most significant moments of the rest of their lives. Tonight, he would see her for the first time in the light of the truth. And tonight, they would start their journey together to defeat Eiess.

“—and that is why the Norse always win their battles.” The storyteller finished, rising to her feet in a glorious crescendo. Her braided blond hair looked lovely tonight, glowing like gold in the light of the lanterns.

The eighty or so people who sat and listened applauded warmly, roaring and whistling in delight. The merry crowd trickled out of the massive tent in anticipation of attending another event at the festival. Ailia didn't see any of her former friends here and she was glad they hadn't come to the storytelling.

As people passed by, they were putting their masks on: some sheep, some cows or goats, even cats or dogs. Ailia would normally participate at the masked dance and would wear the sheep mask Unni had made for her, but her thoughts were not at all focused on the dance as they normally would be. She could not bear to tear herself away from the tent in case she would miss Soren.

Outside she heard the fiddlers walking around the streets, spreading their merry tunes. The frightening memory of the Nukkern flashed through her mind and she cringed. *I won't be dancing to his tunes anymore.* Ever since that day, she had hated the sound of any instrument that sounded like a fiddle.

“Why, there you are!” Silya exclaimed. “I have been looking for you everywhere! Something has happened. You must come with me immediately back to Brandersgaard.” She took Ailia’s hand and hauled her along with her.

“What’s wrong?” Ailia asked, while trying to keep up with Silya’s increasing pace.

“We cannot talk about it until we are back home, but yes, something is very wrong,” Silya said, panting as she ran.

“Is anyone hurt?” Ailia asked.

“No. Stop asking questions and focus on your pace. Every second we wait is wasted, another second gone, another second to recover what is lost,” Silya said.

“Lost?” Ailia tried her very best to keep up with Silya, picking up her pace, moving her legs faster and lighter. Then, something unexpected happened. As she was thinking about what could have possibly occurred, the answer came to her. Ailia knew exactly what had transpired down to the smallest detail. She stopped abruptly, letting go of Silya’s hand.

Turning around, Silya looked at her. “What?” Silya said, impatiently.

“They left,” Ailia said, looking into Silya’s eyes for confirmation.

“Did you know?” Silya gasped surprised. “How did you know? Unni *just* discovered that all of their things are gone!”

“Just now,” Ailia revealed, the images and feelings still entering her mind. “I’m having a vision,” she said, her eyes wandering as clear impressions flowed into her thoughts. “Lucia has told Soren that I’m in love with him and that I’m trying to deceive him into believing that I’m the Great Sentinor. She convinced him to leave early, so it wouldn’t be as hard on me or embarrassing to him.” First irritation, and then anger welled up in Ailia. “But why?” she questioned. “She’s going to ruin any



chance I have of defeating Eiess. Doesn't she realize that?" Ailia agonized as her heart was breaking, breaking for her sister's betrayal and breaking for Soren.

"Let us not waste time here. Come with me back to your family, so we can make a plan. They probably left four to five hours ago, so they do have a head start, but we can still catch up with them if we hurry." Silya gently took Ailia's elbow in hers and started moving again.

\* \* \*

Unni ran toward Ailia as soon as she entered the longhouse. "That deceitful young girl! She's going to get it from me!" she blurted. "Did you know about this?" She turned to Nora, who had also just returned from searching for Ailia.

"No, my lady." Nora was able to maintain her composure. No one was going to ruffle her feathers. "This is completely unlike her. There is a perfectly suitable explanation for all of this," she said.

"Suitable? There would be no suitable explanation in all the nine realms of Yggdrasil that would suffice! We must do something quickly before we lose them forever. Who knows what Lucia will do to keep Soren away from Ailia? They may never return again." Unni sighed as she paced around the hearth.

"Ailia said she had a vision. We may want to take heed in that," Silya interrupted. "Did you see in which direction they were heading?"

"No, just that they were packing and getting ready. Lucia had convinced him to leave and he had agreed." Ailia had also seen them embracing and kissing, but she was too devastated, too

embarrassed, to share that information in front of everyone. Now, she started second-guessing herself. She had thought Soren felt something for her too, and she had sensed the strong connection between him and her. *Maybe I have just been fooling myself.*

“I will ride after them. Most likely, they are heading to Trollsoe as they planned,” Silya figured.

“They could have headed in any direction,” Nora pitched in. “If Lucia truly does not want Soren to be reunited with Ailia, she could have changed their travel plans. She is a smart girl, but this surprises me. I am shocked to say the least. She is young and seemingly innocent that girl, but she does have a stubborn head on her shoulders, especially lately.”

“Only three main roads lead out of Bergendal: the northern, the southern and the western. We should send someone in each direction,” Brander said.

“I’m almost certain that they are heading to Trollsoe,” Ailia said.

Silya answered, “I agree, but to be on the safe side, we should send one rider in each direction. I will take the southern route toward Trollsoe. I am used to traveling alone and it will be faster for me that way.”

“I will come with you,” Ailia said.

“No,” Brander said firmly. “You must stay here. It will be safest for you.”

Ailia’s heart fell. “I’m not in need of protection!” she said, her voice shaking and angry. The last thing she wanted to do was sit here and wait for her fate to unfold.

Nora interjected. “Yes, Ailia, you *are* in need of protection from every source you can get. The first time you were killed by the hands of Eiess was when Soren was away. She drowned you in the fjord along with all your friends. The second time she

captured you was also after Soren had left for a short trip. He had carefully planned everything out, so you would be safe, but Eiess' powers had grown stronger than before and she had trained her Surtorians to track you down. They found you despite all your efforts and drowned you again. And today, Eiess is even stronger than before and we must all be at our guard at all times. When Soren finds out that you, and not Lucia, are his Spiritus Amor, we will need to increase the level of protection surrounding you tenfold. If you fail, Ailia, none of us will be safe and we will all suffer under the rule of Eiess. We cannot afford to let that happen, would not you agree?"

Ailia closed her eyes for a moment. "All right."

"I will head west," Brander said. "Toward Asker. I will ask Ivar to head north toward Hammerburg. He's familiar with the territory."

"Great, we have a plan. Now let us go before more time is wasted," Silya said.

"May you all be safe in your travels," Ailia said. "And thank you for your courage and willingness to support me. May we together conquer the destroyer."

### Betrayal

Lucia was still surprised Soren had agreed to leave without a word to the others at Brandersgaard. Understandably, he had been hesitant at first, saying it would be wrong of them to vanish without giving thanks or telling anyone where they had gone. At first when she mentioned the secretive plan to him, she had not truly meant to follow through with it. She had merely wanted to see how committed to her he really was. But it seemed fate had stepped in and had spun the right words into Lucia's tongue. When she by chance mentioned that Ailia had become infatuated with him and that it made her feel uncomfortable, he had immediately agreed to leave. After that, all the right words fell out of her mouth like raindrops from heaven, and it was easy to slip back into the warm, safe past where she had truly believe Soren was hers. Seeing how devoted he was to her, Lucia thought maybe, just maybe there was a future for them after all. And the way he had kissed her, with not just his lips, but with his

entire being it seemed, perhaps she could learn to return his affections.

They had been traveling for several hours, heading southward toward Trollsoe, starting their long journey at the first sign of the cool blue winter night. The weather had been milder today, but not nearly amicable enough to melt any of the snow that blanketed the entire country and had for what seemed an eternity. Now, the distant sun had set in the west, behind the Tinden Mountains, after having burned the skies with red, orange and pink streaking clouds. The absence of the sun had ushered in the icy air, which crept and gnawed on Lucia's body.

Soren was a man of few words, and they had been riding in silence for the better part of the trip. Boredom set in, and so she thought she might try to engage him in conversation.

"I used to look forward to your visits, before—" She stopped, realizing she had nearly said, "before my parents died." She did not want to speak about them. Their deaths were still too fresh in her bones, still tormenting her raw, mourning heart as only the death of one's parents could. Their lies had not really made it easier for Lucia to let them go, and in fact, it seemed the pain of their deaths felt worse because they had deceived her.

"I always looked forward to the day I could visit and you would be a young woman, no longer a girl," he said.

Lucia blushed, as her eyes wandered away from him.

"I did not mean to make you uncomfortable," he said.

She turned to him and smiled. "I am so used to being told no, not now, you are not ready yet, and it feels strange to not have those limitations anymore. This newfound freedom will take me some getting used to." She removed a section of hair that had slid down her forehead and was playing with her lashes. Her blondish-white hair and fair complexion could mesmerize nearly

any man, she had discovered, and she used that to her every advantage with Soren.

“You can take all the time you need. I remember you and I remember our past, but this is all new to you,” he said. “We do not need to rush into our relationship again.”

“Thank you,” she said, trying to be as sincere as she could. She briefly lifted out of her seat in an attempt to ease the numbness in her behind. “They will understand. We can always go back and visit after we are married.” An intense feeling of guilt festered in her gut as a stale piece of bread, churning and making her slightly nauseated as she thought about what she had done. Why had she done it? And how could she have betrayed Ailia again? She swore to herself she would never betray her own blood, and she had sworn to Ailia that she would be true.

But over the past few months, her sister had shown her true colors and had been disrespectful and inconsiderate toward Lucia. She never asked Lucia how she felt, or if she had any feelings for Soren. What if Lucia actually loved him? Did that not matter? Ailia was too absorbed in her own problems to notice anyone else’s, especially any problems Lucia was going through.

“I do not remember anything from—before,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Soren asked.

“I have lived two other times, correct?”

“Yes.” He glanced at her.

“I do not remember anything whatsoever from my first two lives—it is strange.” She gave him as sweet a smile as she could.

“As I recall, in your last life, you could not remember anything either until you were a older.”

Good. Now, she did not need to try to conjure up their old memories.

“It will come back to you sooner or later. In your second life, you started having dreams of our first life together. You dreamt of certain important moments,” he said.

“Oh?” She was baffled. Ailia had not mentioned any dreams to her, but then again, maybe she had not had any yet. *Or maybe she kept them from me. She could be as deceitful as my parents.*

“Have you had any dreams?” he asked.

“No, none at all.” She grinned, lifting her eyebrows innocently. “How do you think we should go about keeping everything secret?” she asked. *I do not want Eiless or her Surtorians coming after me.* The thought made her feel as if a giant fist had clamped its fingers around her heart. Had she been unwise in her plan? Had she acted hastily and not thought of the consequences? No, she had tried—for months had she tried to accept that her calling in life was to be a queen only and an honorary sacrifice for Ailia. Yet the more she had thought about her parents’ lies, the more their lies had bothered her. First, they had lied about her sister dying at birth and not only that, but they even lied about their daughters’ identities. Then, her father had been unfaithful to her mother. What other lies could be waiting out there in the dark? If her own father could do this one thing to her mother, betraying her trust, exchanging it for heated nights with a whore, what type of man was he? Certainly not a man worthy of Lucia’s trust. And if her mother could lie to her so easily, putting Lucia’s life in jeopardy, what type of person was she?

Her child-like love had been tainted, and the penetrating wedge in her heart had started to expand into a vastness of entitlement. *I need happiness and I deserve to be happy*, she told herself. *I do not owe anybody anything, especially Ailia.*

“We need to be strategic. I thought we could set up rules for when we are in public. We probably should not even be seen in

public together at all after we arrive in Trollsoe. Eiess has her Surtorians out looking for us everywhere,” Soren said.

“I will have you to protect me.” She reached across and stroked his shoulder.

“I cannot always be there, but I will do my best when I am around. I will also have our grandchildren watch over you when I am away.”

She snapped her arm back, her eyes widening, but quickly composed herself. “What are they like?”

“They are wonderful, Lucia. You will love them the moment you meet them.” His face lit up immediately at their mention. “They call themselves the Quartz.”

“The Quartz? Why that name?” she asked, confused.

Soren explained it to her and then added, “It was rather a long process before they agreed on their unofficial name. Everyone finally conceded to Solvei’s suggestion. She is the stubborn one, as stubborn and feisty as anyone I have ever met!” He laughed. “She is the daughter of Alva and Eira and is known in Trollsoe as the most beautiful girl in the city. Dangerously beautiful though, like Erlend Sr. always says.”

She smiled.

“And then we have Martin, son of Alva and Eira. He is a gifted artist and has been painting for years.”

“What does he paint?” she asked.

“Portraits,” he answered, a faint smile shading his lips. “He painted one of you, with me describing the way you looked in your first lifetime.”

“Did he capture me well?” she asked intrigued, almost forgetting he was speaking of Ailia.

“Yes. It is almost like you are looking back at me from the painting.”

“Did I look much different, then?”



“Yes, very much so. The first two lifetimes you looked somewhat similar, but now, it is like you are another woman,” he confessed.

Lucia felt a sting of guilt, but not as much as before. “I hope that does not displease you.”

“No, of course not. It is you that I love, your heart, your mind, your spirit, not the exterior,” he said. “You are very beautiful now, too.”

She looked at him, but then looked away quickly, feeling the burden surface in her eyes. “Have we any other grandchildren?”

“Yes, there is Stina, Vidar and Erlend Junior, who are Liv and Otto’s three children. Stina is extremely well-educated and has an obsession with music. I will tell you more about that later. Then, Vidar loves to travel and prefers to sleep outside in the back yard. And finally, there is Erlend Junior, the eldest of the youths.”

“They sound like great youths,” she said.

“They are.”

“Do they have any—gifts, as well?”

“You mean endowments?” he asked.

“Yes, of course. I apologize,” she said, feeling embarrassed. No, not embarrassed, just nervous he might see through her stories.

“Lucia, you do not need to apologize to me, ever.” He smiled and continued. “Solvei has magnified physical senses. She can hear and see things from a faraway distance. She can also sense smells well before everyone else. Martin has the gift of ancestral evocation. He has the ability to contact a being who lived in the past, either a deceased family member or any person really.”

“Could he contact me in a previous life?” she asked, a wave of panic hitting her.

“I suppose he could. That would be a fun thing to try!”

“Well—” Lucia hesitated. “I suppose,” she said, knowing full well she would never allow it.

“Stina has the gift and power to dull a person’s senses, by either putting them to sleep, easing their pain, or decreasing their sensory awareness,” he said. “And she has recently discovered that she can induce death by song.”

“Can she kill someone by singing to them?” Lucia wanted to know more about that power and if *she* could learn to command it.

“Yes, or about them; they do not even have to be there. Granted, she has only tried it on animals, but I am convinced her ability works on humans as well,” he said.

“Can anyone learn this—endowment?”

“No, it is an endowment one is born with,” he clarified. “Her gifts, if used wisely, may be valuable to us as we make our move on Eieess.”

“What about Eieess? I saw how she was able to control gravity. Is that all?” Lucia asked.

“Eieess is complicated. She has other endowments, as well, ones that she has developed over the past few thousand years. She is not a demi-mortal. She is an enigma. Her body, though it appears to be made of flesh and bones, is made of something else. We just do not know what,” he said.

“But *we* are human, right?” she asked.

“Halfway human. We are subject to human frailties and weaknesses, but we are not as easily killed off as a human. That said, if someone knows our weakness, we become an easy target. Drowning, for example, is the only thing that can only kill you. Eieess is well aware of that. If I were to light you on fire, you would not burn. You *are* Light, so anything pertaining to light will not harm you. It is the same with me, except I am the opposite of you. I can only die by fire, but not by drowning or

anything else. I am a healer and since fire destroys all life, absorbing oxygen, which is the main source of healing, I cannot withstand fire. If Eiess ever finds out my weakness, she could kill me faster than a Viking kills his prey.”

“Is that how I died before?” She cringed, almost believing now that she was talking about herself.

“Yes, both times,” he said. His lips clamped closed, his jaw biting so hard together that the muscles protruded in his face. “The memory of your blue, prune-ridged body still haunts me.”

“What is Eiess’ weakness?” she asked, leaning forward on her horse.

“Eiess is a tough nut to crack. She despises light and seeks the darkness, but she can still endure sunlight and heat very well without dying. It is almost as if she is immune to every element,” he said. “Have you had any inclinations maybe?”

“No, not yet.” She shifted uncomfortably on her saddle. They rode on in silence.

Finally Soren spoke. “Are you hungry? If so, we can stop and eat.”

“No.” Getting to Trollsoe was her only objective, so she could get as far away from Ailia as possible. “And what about Stina, Vidar and Erlend Junior?” she said, trying to keep him from taking a break.

“Erlend Junior has part of the same endowment you have: seasonal manipulation. But his powers are not as developed or strong. He possesses another gift, the gift of discernment. He can read any person, not their thoughts really, but their intentions, their personality, their soul—”

Why had she thought this was a wise decision? Was she doing no more than jumping from one bucket of rotten eggs into another? “If he saw me and did not know who I was, would he be able to tell I was the Great Sentinor?” she asked.

“No, his endowment is not that specific, though it has strengthened recently. His endowment has more to do with reading and recognizing the person’s core or integrity, I suppose.”

She breathed. As long as she did not associate too much with him, she thought she would be able to deceive him.

“Vidar has the gift of environmental adaptation. Do not be surprised if you see him wearing nothing but a summer tunic in the middle of winter. He is not affected by weather. It is one of the most impressive things I have seen. He can also see perfectly well in all shades of darkness.”

“That would be a fun endowment to have,” Lucia said, laughing. “I just hope our grandson is not too interested in secretly watching young ladies undress.”

“He did it one time when he was thirteen, but he was caught and punished sternly by the young lady’s father.”

“What was the punishment?”

“He made him choose between undressing in front of everyone in his household or in paying him one silver coin every month until he turned eighteen,” he said.

“Which one did he choose? Wait, I shall guess he chose the easy way out,” she said.

He laughed heartily, his head tilting back as he closed his eyes. “He chose to pay. He was so embarrassed after that, it made him think twice about ever doing it again.” He turned more serious. “Of course I am not condoning his behavior. Liv was and still is to this day, appalled that her son would do such a thing. She raised them to be good Christian men, seeking after chaste women.”

*Christians? Ugh!* She started thinking her new life with Soren might not be such a good fit after all.

Soren yawned. "If we ride on further for just another hour or so, we will arrive in Solnes. I know a family there and they would be happy to let us stay overnight. Does that sound like something you would like?"

"Absolutely!" She had never slept outdoors before, other than when she was waiting for Nora at the end of that wretched cold tunnel and it was not something she ever wanted to do again. "There is so much I do not know. I am feeling a overwhelmed at the moment."

"How can I be of help?" he asked.

"Just support me when I need it. I have a feeling I will be needing a lot of it," she said.

"I will be honored to." He bowed gentlemanly on his horse and smiled at her.

She smiled back. *He is so gullible, but nevertheless a sweetheart.*

They rode on for some time in silence, listening to the sounds of the black forest night.

"We should be seeing the lights from Solnes soon," he said.

They rode a while longer, but no lights appeared in the distance. Without sound or warning, a little girl appeared on the road in front of them, bloodied, walking with a blanket around her small frame. She could not be more than seven or eight years of age, Lucia guessed. Her big brown eyes looked up at Lucia and then Soren, her face serious, yet without emotion. They stopped their horses and Lucia jumped off immediately.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, approaching the little girl. "Where are your parents?" Her eyes searched the night, but there was no one in sight.

The girl spoke no words, only stood in silence and stared at Lucia.

"What is your name, girl?" Soren descended from Volomite.

The girl took a step back, cowering with a scowl.

“You are frightening her,” Lucia said. Turning to the girl, she said, “We mean you no harm.” She knelt down in the snow to be at the girl’s level.

The girl’s lower lip pouted out as she closed her sorrowful eyes. A whimper escaped her bruised lips.

“What happened to you, my sweet girl?” Lucia crept closer to the child in an effort to endear the child to her. “Will you whisper it to me?” She held her arms out, welcoming the lost little child.

The girl stepped closer and paused, looking as if she was thinking about whether or not she should say something, her eyes wanting to tell, but her fear probably holding her back. Her body shivered and a lonely tear mixed with blood skimmed down her cheek. She stepped closer and brought her lips to Lucia’s ear.

“The Vikings are here,” she whispered.

### Viking Attack

After the last traveler had left Brandergaard, an eerie atmosphere lingered in the stuffy longhouse. Sigrid was eagerly weaving on the loom, which was situated in the corner by the back of the house. She hummed an old Anglo-Saxon tune Ailia had heard her sing many times before. Its ghostly melody, combined with the thrall's breathy voice sent chills up and down Ailia's spine.

*Let us all remember  
All those that died that winter's night  
As we scurry on our path.  
No one knew  
That one kiss farewell would be their last  
As they close the door  
For all who are left behind, the memories haunt  
We still climb the tall mountains*

*Speaking of the pain of loss we share  
The loss of those who live no more*

*Let us all remember  
Our lives will not ever be the same  
We face the  
new world alone  
Let us all remember  
While the time slowly passes  
We are all left behind to sorrow*

*Let us all remember  
That winter's night became their final  
As life continued on its eternal cycle  
Do not forget  
Some lives continue, yet for others  
Today will be their last.*

Ailia was not sure if Sigrid had chosen that song intentionally, or if she was just singing it out of habit. It was a poor choice either way.

Brander and Ivar had decided it be best if Ivar stayed to protect Ailia. Unni had traveled with the teenage neighbor boy to Hammerburg. It was unlikely that Lucia and Soren had headed in that direction, but it needed to be covered just in case. Hammerburg was only a two-day journey away on horseback, so Unni would be returning within the week if she couldn't locate or track them down.

Whenever Ailia sat down, her legs itched to move, and her mind filled with disconcerting thoughts. Not even scrubbing the floor until her knuckles bled or clearing out the ashes from the



hearth could distract her enough to make her mind from conjuring up the worst of outcomes.

Soon so much had amassed in her mind that she had no choice but to find an escape, and she concluded that the best thing to do was to go to her mother's grave. Being close to the rune stone, she felt a strong connection with her mother, and being near a loved one was what she needed.

She pulled her overcoat on, strapped on her boots and headed outside.

Ivar was busy chopping firewood. He paused when he saw Ailia. "Where do you think you are headed, young lady?" he asked with no lightness in his voice.

"To the Bergendal Stave Church. Will you escort me perhaps?"

"Yes, of course, my lady. This firewood can wait until later," he said. He imbedded his heavyweight ax onto the giant log he was working on and proceeded to straighten out his clothes, brushing the sawdust off them. "There is nothing like chopping wood to keep you warm—and foul-smelling." He laughed. "Ready when you are, my lady."

She smiled at him as she started toward the church, hoping she wouldn't bore him with her company. They walked in silence until Ailia finally thought of something that would be worthy of conversation.

"How did you come to be employed at the castle for the king, er... my father?" Even after all these months of knowing that King Olav was her father, Ailia still had difficulty accepting her relationship to him.

Ivar looked at her briefly and almost smiled. "I was a young lad, twelve, maybe thirteen, no definitely twelve, when my father died at the hands of his brother in a sword duel. At the time, I

was a very small boy, probably the smallest twelve-year-old in Asker,” he huffed.

“My father was a very proud man, seeking honor and respect at any cost and he had become infatuated with the idea of being revered and in appearing upright in society. My uncle had a very jovial personality and had jokingly made a comment about me, something like I should have been born a girl—I was so small. It did not bother me much, but my father insisted he take the comment back and apologize to him in front of our chieftain. When my uncle refused, my father became furious and insisted on a duel between the two. It ended badly. I lost my father and my mother lost her husband, all in the name of pride and respectability.” He looked into the horizon.

“I vowed to live each day in an honorable manner, so I could gain the respect my father once sought. I felt it was the way to honor his memory. When King Olav announced a few years later that he was looking for young men to train for his guard, I eagerly traveled to Bergendal and joined the guard. By then, I had grown quite a bit, even rising above my uncle. I think he felt horrible the rest of his life for killing my father. He even took my widowed mother in after I left and fed her, clothed her, and gave her a home until she died,” he finished.

“How did you come to be one of the king’s right-hand guards?” Ailia asked. She had no idea Ivar had such a sorrowful past.

“I did not know it then, but I set my standards so high, even higher than what the king expected of me. I suppose he took notice and hired me to report to him directly. After that, I was promoted to the king’s chief guard.” His posture improved and the energy in his voice accelerated as he spoke.

“Quite an accomplishment,” she said.

“I was only doing my duty.”

“I would say it was more than that,” she said. “I understand my father trusted you completely. It’s a rare man who can be entrusted to such a level. I’m sure my father considered you among one of his highest blessings. Every kingdom needs a good leader, but the leader needs support, needs to stand on the shoulders of grand men and women.” She thought for a moment about her situation. She needed to select the right supporters to help her through these coming times. Then it occurred to her: that was the first step in her plan! Excitement grew in her bosom. She had known it all along, but she hadn’t been able to put it into words until now. She realized that it was important to prepare herself, but that it was equally important she select and then prepare, her supporters, not just accept whomever was there. This became as clear in her mind as the burning sun on a bright summer’s day. *Lucia’s betrayal is as deep as the ocean.* She sorrowed because she realized she would never be able to trust her sister again and Lucia would not be a part of her future the way Ailia had envisioned.

They arrived at the Bergendal Stave Church right after the sun had descended below the mountains. Low-lying, dense fog covered the white valley, bringing with it a rather unwelcome frost. The fog would hide them from their enemies as it had become difficult to see even a few feet ahead.

Ailia walked over to the familiar sight, the tall rune stone that stood erected in her mother’s honor. Each time she neared the burial place, an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia overcame her. Standing there beside Ivar in front of her mother’s grave, another thing finally dawned on her. She needed to start realizing her potential, her destiny, and the force she had been endowed with. The game which she was playing would only end the way she wanted if and only if, she stepped into it with both feet, grabbed it with both hands, and saw it with both eyes.

“Eyes see to the future,” Unni would always say. Now, she saw what was in front of her and no longer regretted what was behind her. The ending had already been established, the victory ripe. Now, she needed to become worthy to claim it, to take it, and make it her own.

Her bosom burned with fervor, her heart felt strong and courageous, knowing she was the Great Sentinor. She saw life as it was, like she had never seen before and it was hers for the taking—her right, her privilege. She looked over at Ivar standing so gallantly beside her, protecting her, serving her. She must claim her rightful position and not live in excuses, nor fears, any longer.

“My lady,” Ivar said and knelt before her, bowing his head in a knightly manner.

She thought it strange that he would bow to her here in front of the church. Then, she noticed that it had become lighter around her and wondered where the light was coming from. It was not a blazing light, not even a bright one, but a soft radiant glow. Suddenly, she realized it was coming from her skin. It was barely perceptible, but nevertheless perceptible, to her in the dusk. She sighed in amazement and took off her mittens to better see her flesh. The light from her skin dimmed slowly until it was noticeable no more. “Did you see—?”

“Yes, my lady,” he said. “You were... glowing.”

“I was glowing,” she said and walked over to the rune stone. “I am the light source and there is no reason I should not find what I am searching for. I believe my father inscribed this rune stone with directions on how to find the Aesira scrolls. My mother said in her letter to me that ‘*A wise woman seeks after the words of her parents.*’ These and the letter she wrote, are the only words that I have from them. I have read her letter a

hundred times and found nothing. But maybe there is something to be found here.”

“Your mother’s favorite symbol was the Valknut symbol—this one here.” He pointed to the symbol engraved on the rune stone.

“What is significant about it?” she asked herself more than him. “Hmm—it has three interwoven triangles. The symbol isn’t related to our family in any way, is it?”

“No, not that I am aware,” he answered. “But, look at the pattern. Everything is in threes.”

“Perhaps every third gravestone has something on it?” she said.

They walked over to different gravestones and searched their surfaces.

“There is nothing on mine, is there anything on yours?” Ivar asked.

“No.”

“Let us look at one more,” he said. They found nothing of interest, not even a small inscription or indent, on any of the stones. They were all perfectly round.

“Maybe on the rune stone itself?” Ivar suggested. “How about every third sentence?” They tried to read it but it made no sense.

“What about every third word,” she said. They looked at each other believing they were onto something. “Inside—the—Queen—concealed—and—buried—the—Holy—” Ailia’s heart leapt. “We need something to write on,” she said.

“I will go ask Bishop Peter.” Ivar ran toward the church even before she had a chance to answer. He returned with a breathless Bishop Peter on his heels.

“What have we here?” Bishop Peter asked politely, still securing his overcoat around his waist with a pen and scroll in hand.

“We believe there is a message on the rune stone,” she replied. “Will you write the words while I read them out loud?”

“Of course,” he said. “I often wondered if this rune stone had any other purposes,” he said, sliding his hand across the words. “Whenever you are ready, Ailia.”

She nodded and started deciphering the message from the beginning. It was almost dark outside now and difficult to make out the letters. “Inside—the queen concealed and buried the Holy—Northern Jewel and Sacred—Consecrated writings for the one—elect being—Born and pre-mortally destined for—every victorious end. These will conquer the destroyer—All are hidden inside—Bergendal Church.”

“Read it for me,” she said, so excited she could hardly stand it. “Read it! Does it make any sense?”

He read it out loud for her and when he finished, they stood speechless, staring into each others eyes.

“How did you figure it out?” Bishop Peter asked.

“The Valknut Symbol. Three sides, three triangles, every—third—word—” she said, slowing toward the end. “Is there a Valknut symbol inside the church?”

Bishop Peter thought for a moment. “The church was built for your mother, by your mother’s builders, so I imagine that it must be where the scrolls are hidden or buried. I do not remember there being one, but I was not the bishop here when the church came into service. If there is a Valknut symbol inside, it is hidden in some detailed painting or carving which would go unnoticed by anyone.”

“I think it would be wise to continue the search now,” Ivar said.

“Yes, I agree. Let me first make sure my deacons are praying properly in their rooms before we start rampaging the church. They would think I have gone mad and it is best to keep this information between us. Shall we?” Bishop Peter said, leading the way.

Ailia hadn't noticed how freezing and numb her hands had become until she stepped into the foyer. Her cheeks burned as the hot air met them, and her fingers ached as they thawed.

After Bishop Peter had settled his deacons, he came back out and pointed them each in different directions to look for the Valknut symbol.

By the time Ailia had quickly scanned the numerous paintings and engravings, she fretted, realizing it could take days, if not weeks to locate the Valknut symbol. Yet it still did not deter her from starting the search tonight or from praying for a small miracle.

“The rune stone mentions 'Great,' which could also mean Jesus or Mary. It also mentioned the destroyer, which could mean Satan or sinners. Maybe we should start there,” she yelled out into the chapel.

“Shh—” Bishop Peter cautioned her.

“I'm sorry. In my excitement I forgot to be reverent in the Lord's house,” she said.

“No, that is not what I meant. I just do not want the deacons to hear us,” Bishop Peter said.

Ailia smirked. She meandered over in front of the Rotunda and looked up at the hovering Crucifix. Letting her eyes wander the room, she searched for any triangular symbols in the paintings that covered the walls. Before, when she had studied these paintings, she had searched for the meaning of life and the meaning of the afterlife. Now, as she let her eyes glide across the wall, she was hunting for a sign that would save not only her life,

but also the life of all people in Midgard. *Where could the Valknut symbol be?* Her mother would not have hidden it too well, for she would have had to know that no one would ever find it. “Anything?” she yelled to Ivar.

“No, nothing here,” Ivar said.

Ailia entered the holy rotunda and looked at the painting of the last supper on the vaulted ceiling. Christ was centered in the middle, with his apostles surrounding Him, partaking of the first sacrament. She looked around to see if she could find a small stool to stand on and grabbed a small stool that stood next to the pulpit. Standing on it, she could almost reach the ceiling now. She squinted her eyes, trying to make out the details.

“This will help you see better,” Bishop Peter said, handing her a torch. “Just do not hold it too close to the paintings or you will burn them.”

Ailia gladly accepted the torch and held it up closer to the ceiling while Bishop Peter walked away to continue his own search.

“Perhaps your mother did not embed the scrolls in the ceiling. They could be on statues, on the walls or on the floors,” Ivar said walking past her, holding his own torch. He marched over to the square soapstone font.

“Maybe,” Ailia said. She hopped down from the stool and looked down on the rotunda floor. To her amazement, a large, lighter-colored pine triangle was imbedded in the slightly darker floor. How had she not noticed it before? It was only one triangle though, not three like on the Valknut symbol. “Bishop Peter—over here!” she said.

“Yes, coming!” He rushed over to Ailia.

“Look,” she said, pointing to the floor with her torch. “A triangle.”



He looked down at the floor and his already wide eyes widened. “Indeed.”

“Do you think my mother could have separated the three triangles and placed each one in separate locations in the church?” she asked.

“The triangle is a symbol in Christianity too, but it could mean something. Let’s keep looking,” he said, his slender, gangly frame shuffling off.

Shortly after, they discovered another triangle embedded in the floor by the front door. They kept searching for a third one, but couldn’t find it.

Finally, Ivar found something. “Come look over here,” he said, pointing to the soapstone font. “Around the font, on the floor—” He circled his torch above the floor, illuminating it.

“The third triangle,” Bishop Peter said.

“It has to be it. Three triangles, just like on the Valknut symbol,” Ailia said. “Let’s try and pull up the one in the rotunda first.”

“All right, but we must be careful to not damage the floor,” Bishop Peter cautioned as they ran over to the rotunda. He carefully guided his finger along the edge of the triangle to see if there was any ledge to lift it. After trying for a while, he said, “Let’s try the font instead.”

They made their way over and all stood in silence for a moment, looking at the square soapstone font. Four stout pillars comprised the font’s base and Jesus, Mary and the Apostles were all carved into the pillar walls.

Bishop Peter knelt down and crawled around the font, his hands searching the surface of it. “There is something here that resembles—a triangle,” he said as he looked behind one of the four pillars.

Ailia stepped closer and knelt down beside him to look. It was hard to see, but she could make out a small Valknut symbol hidden in the sophisticated design.

“The Valknut symbol!” she said.

“There it is!” Bishop Peter said. He scooted in closer to get a better look.

All of a sudden, a torch broke through one of the stained-glass windows. The sharp, crashing sound of glass hitting the floor echoed through the chapel. The torch hit Ailia’s leg, the flames nearly setting fire to her dress, but she quickly kicked it away and brushed the flames off her skirt.

“Are you all right?” Ivar asked. “Did it burn you?”

“No, I’m fine. What’s happening?” she asked.

One of the young deacons burst in through the back door. “We are being attacked by Vikings!” he yelled, his eyes glowing with the fear of death. “They are setting the church on fire! What do we do?” he asked Bishop Peter frantically.

They all looked to Bishop Peter for their next move, but he was paying no attention to them. His focus was on the impressively stunning jewel he had just pulled from inside the hollow font.

## Confession

The young girl had vanished as quickly as she had appeared, running into the forest, disappearing into the shadows of the moonlit night. Lucia had tried to run after her, but Soren urged her not to, saying the child would only scream and attract unwanted attention.

“As we approach Solnes, we will need to carefully assess the situation. If what the girl told us is true, then we will have to find a detour and continue our journey through the night. We can then camp where it is safe. It will be too risky for us to stay there,” he said.

“I just hope the girl is not right,” she said, although something told her she was.

“Chances are she is. I just hope the attack is local and that the Vikings have not planned to attack Bergendal.” He paused, his brow furrowing in deep thought. “Maybe we should be heading back?”

“Bergendal is so far away from here,” she said.

“I am worried about Ailia and the others. Their lives could be in danger.”

“Soren, you are just one man. Even if there were ten of you, you could not have stopped the thousands,” she said. “We must focus on *our* lives, on building our future together and let the others go.”

“I sense danger,” he said, ignoring Lucia’s prodding. “I could help a great deal if they were in trouble. Sentinors are capable of much more than what you might think.”

“Bergendal is miles away. They cannot possibly have attacked there, too,” she said, knowing if they went back, her lies would be exposed.

“If it were my family back there, I would return in an instant.” His voice had become stern.

“Yes, I am sure you would, but you do not know Ailia the way I know her.”

“I hope us leaving so abruptly and her affection for me, hasn’t caused a rift between the two of you?” he said.

Lucia sighed impatiently. “Of course not.”

“Because family is important—the most important—at least to me,” he said.

“Me, too.” Or... was it? Her actions would say she honored truth, honor, integrity, and respect, were more important.

“What is it you are not telling me?” he asked.

She gave him a sideways glance. “Nothing.” But she knew he would not relent until she had given him an answer, and so she said, “It was a challenge trying to befriend Ailia when she was in love with you.”

He nodded his head once. “I sensed some tension from you while Ailia was around.”

*Why must he prolong this conversation?* It was as if he could not stop himself from speaking of Ailia, and that made her even more upset. “I tried to understand my sister. I tried to reason with her, tell her you and I were meant for each other, but she said she felt a strong connection between you and her. It tore me apart, Soren, and I was afraid she would betray me and steal you away.”

He sat in deep thought for several long moments. “I have to be honest with you. I feel there is something you are not telling me.”

Lucia exhaled sharply. How did he know? The more she said, the more he suspected, and she feared he would soon realize everything. *I cannot do this anymore.* She squeezed her eyes closed and huffed. *Should I tell him?* Her stomach revolted at the thought.

“Lucia?” he asked, waiting for her reply.

“Please just leave me alone! I do not want to talk about it. Can you not understand that?”

“Lucia, whatever it is, I am sure we can talk through it. Nothing should come between us, *especially* not your family. I hope you can trust me enough to open up.”

Lucia glared at him in the darkness. *He must already know and is playing me for a fool. He must just be waiting for me to admit my transgression.* “There is nothing wrong, do you understand?”

“I would say there is something very wrong, or you would not be so upset.”

“Very well. Do you want me to admit it? I am not who you think I am, Soren!” She gasped from what she had said, her hand hitting her mouth.

“What do you mean? How could you be anyone other than yourself?” he asked.

She could not hold back her tongue. “I am the *Bearer of Light.*” Her tone had turned sarcastic—bitter.

“Yes—?”

“What does *Bearer of Light* mean?” she asked.

“That you bear the light, of course.”

She let out a frustrated moan. “You do not understand.” And he would not until she gave it to him straight. Should she? She had only left Brandersgaard out of spite—toward Ailia and the rest of the Christian household. Now it had become clear she was heading toward another Christian household and more problems.

She sighed inwardly as it dawned on her that she had made a mistake. Why was she fighting so hard to continue her parents' lies? Because she wanted Soren to love her? No, it had more to do with that she wanted to rebel against the unfairness against her. She had hoped he loved her and thought perhaps if his love was strong enough, they could find a way to make it work. Perhaps she in time would even learn to love him back. However, Soren did not love her; that was clear now. He wanted Ailia, even though he would never admit it. What was she fighting for? Nothing. And as long as Eiess thought Lucia was the Great Sentinor, her life would be in danger.

"Well, I would if you told me," he said frustratedly.

"Why are you trying to humiliate me?" she asked.

"I am not. I would never try to humiliate you."

"Well, you are."

"If I am, I apologize, but that is not my desire," he said softly, as sincerely as Lucia had ever heard him.

Something snapped inside her. She could not keep up the façade for another minute. This was going to be painful on so many levels. She adored Soren, but did she love him? No. And he did not love her either. It was her parents who had painted a picture for her, and as the innocent child she was, she had believed it. But now she was a woman, the Sun Queen, and she needed to see things for what they were. *I do not want to become like my parents.* It was the most honest thought she had had all day.

"I have deceived you." She stared at him, trying to read his expression. Should she confess? *There is still time to run away, to keep up the illusion. My parents' illusion—my illusion.*

He remained silent for a moment.

She could not hold her tongue. "Please forgive me. You see, I thought I loved you and I always thought you would become my

husband. Ever since my childhood I dreamt of us being married and raising a family together.”

“And we will,” he said softly, still smiling, unaware of the revelation he was about to have. “Wait...you do not love me?”

“No, I do not and no, we will never raise a family.” She cried and laughed at the same time. She stopped the horse and jumped off, not knowing what to do with herself other than to pace back and forth on the snow-covered road.

“Lucia, what are you doing?” he asked and jumped off of Volomite, rushing over to her. He slowly turned her around and looked into her eyes. “I love you and we are going to get married. Trust me, no matter what you have done, I will forgive you,” he said. “I am not perfect either, you know. While I was waiting for you, I was sorely tempted to—”

“Please, just let me speak!” she shouted.

“I love you. That is what is true and that is all we need to know here and now.” He kissed her on the forehead. “I know it has been confusing with Ailia in the picture, but—we have to do what is right.”

“You do not know what I have done.” She twisted out of his arms. “You do not know who I am. I have been such a—liar,” she said, finally giving herself the name, which was rightfully hers.

He scooped her back up into his embrace and held her.

She enjoyed having his affection, but knew it was just a matter of time before he would despise her and see nothing more than a fraudulent liar standing before him. She hated him for that already. “You are not accepting or even trying to hear what I have to say. Your eye is single to the deception, making it so you cannot see the truth!” She still had time to keep everything from him. Perhaps if she loved him even just a little, she would keep her secrets. She needed to find out. “Kiss me.”

He pulled her closer and squeezed her tight in his arms and then pressed his cold lips gently to hers.

She tried to soak up the love he was showering her with, the attention he was giving her so freely. But it felt so wrong. His kiss became more passionate now, a force to quench his soul's fiery thirst. He was honest and true. She was deceitful. Maybe, she was starting to feel the passion now? She tried. But no, it was not there. It had never been.

She pulled back abruptly and shoved his chest. She could take no more of these lies, her lies that corroded away her insides, burning them useless and unrecognizable. Ailia would hate her for this. Soren would hate her for this. She knew it, however, she could not care about their feelings anymore. She should only care that she did not continue to live the lies of her parents and that she was true to herself.

"I will understand if you do not want to see me ever again after I reveal my secret," she said, looking away, hiding the appalling reality, which could easily be read in her eyes had Soren only looked more closely.

"This is not the Lucia I know," he said.

"Please, shut up and just let me speak! Do not say another word. I need to think about how I am going to say this to you," she said, her brows furrowing in deep thought.

"Very well." He clasped his hands in front of his hips.

She wanted to be as direct as possible, so there was no room for any more misunderstandings. "Ailia is the Great Sentinor. I am not."

"What?" he said, taking a step closer.

"My parents named me *Lucia* so that everyone, including you, would believe I am the Great Sentinor. They did this to protect Ailia, the true Great Sentinor, so she would have a



chance at destroying Eiess. They thought that if they created this—illusion, her life would be spared. They used me!”

Soren’s face paled, but he spoke not a word.

Her eyes welled up with regrets of her duplicity. Searching his eyes, she saw the moment when he fully realized what had happened. It was that moment he went from loving her to despising her. “Soren, I am so sorry. I just, I...something came over me and I just wanted to be with you. I... I thought I loved you. I wanted to love you.”

Soren gestured to her to be quiet. “Exactly how long have you known this?”

“Ever since I met Ailia,” she said. “Before, actually. I was the one who told her who she was.”

He nodded briefly, not looking at her. “We need to get back *now*.”

She nodded.

He walked over to Volomite but stopped and turned to face Lucia again. “Do you know that I struggled with whether to go with you or not? I felt something for Ailia, but I chose to do what I thought was right. I chose to go with you because I trusted you and because I thought you were—never mind what I thought. I was wrong.” The veins in his forehead protruded, and he pointed a finger at Lucia. “You have not got a single decent bone in your body. Do you know the damage you have caused us? Do you know that Ailia could be captured by the Vikings right now?” His voice was quiet but brutal.

“I am sorry, Soren,” she said, barely able to speak, feeling truly ashamed of what she had done. “I am so sorry.”

His eyes turned hard and cold. “I will hear no more words from your lips, for your words are words of dishonesty and deception.” He jumped on his horse and waited for Lucia to

mount hers. They galloped down the snowy path in silence, both carrying their own tender burdens and remorseful regrets.

Lucia knew she could not object and that she was nothing but a problem and hindrance to him now. Her heart mourned the loss of a love that was never truly there and never rightfully hers. And what would she say to Ailia once she met her face to face? She did not want to confront her sister who she had betrayed. *No, Ailia betrayed me!* Perhaps, if she just let him ride ahead, she could just slip away forever.

## Captured

“Bishop!” Ailia yelled, trying to pull his attention back to reality. “The Vikings are burning the church down!”

Bishop Peter looked at her. “What?” he said, his eyes in a daze.

“We must stop the Vikings, or they’ll burn the church down and the scrolls with it!” she said.

One more torch cracked through another stained-glass window, landing on one of the pews, bouncing on impact. Ivar darted over, picked it up and chucked it back out the same broken window it had entered.

“Toll the bell!” Bishop Peter yelled to the deacon. The deacon nodded and vanished to the back again.

Suddenly, the front door opened with full force, the splintering sound of cracking wood reaching all the way to the front where Ailia and the others stood. A heavily-weapon-laden Viking with long blond hair and a full red beard entered in through the door. Four other large Vikings followed behind him.

Their thick burgundy wool tunics all had black embroidered ravens on them and on their heads, they wore simple iron helmets that covered their ears and necks.

“Look who we have here.” The leader said and smiled wickedly when he saw Ailia. He pointed toward her. “Finn, grab her! She’s mine! Remember me, Ailia?”

“Should I?” Ailia asked. *Is that—?*

“Gunnar!” Ivar yelled from the pews, stepping into the hallway, becoming a barrier between Ailia and their attackers.

Ailia recognized him now, a friend of their family from long ago. But there was something else she was not remembering.

The bell began ringing, warning Bergendal of the attack.

“Ah, Ivar,” Gunnar said. “This time, you will not rob me of my woman.”

“She is not your woman. Leave her be, Gunnar. If our former friendship meant anything to you at all, leave her be and we will be on our way.” Ivar stood unwavering in his spot with his feet firmly planted on the floor, his hand already reaching for his sword.

“Friendship? We had no friendship. You made sure of that when you deprived me of my freedom. Do not deceive yourself into thinking I was ever your friend or you mine.” Gunnar spit on the floor, the frothy discharge landing right in front of Ivar. “Take her Finn,” he commanded again, signaling his head in Ailia’s direction while holding his hands on his hips as if he owned the city and everyone in it.

Finn dashed across the room to where Ivar and Ailia stood, and he withdrew his sword from its casing. Backing up, Ailia panicked and tripped over a pew. Ivar responded by drawing his sword and stepping forward ready for assault.

“Do not disgrace the Lord’s house!” Bishop Peter yelled, raising both hands up into the air.

Meanwhile, Ailia could hear the hammering sounds of planks being nailed into the exterior walls over the windows. The Vikings were probably planning to pack the church full of Bergendalers and burn it down, but only after they had relieved the church of all its gold, silver and other valuables.

Finn came down the center of the pews toward Ivar, swinging his sword so fast that it could cut through a man like butter. Their swords met, chiming loudly as they collided in the holy sanctuary.

“Ivar, I’ve learned this valuable truth from you: once a friend, soon an enemy.” Gunnar was standing in the corner, shouting over the loud blows of the crashing swords. “I used to believe there was such a thing as a true friend, but now I have learned the truth. I must trust no man better than I trust myself. I find the money I want, I take the women I want, I demand respect and I live in excitement every day. It is a much better life, and what man wouldn’t want that?”

The three other Vikings who were watching the duel nodded in agreement.

Gunnar glanced at them over his shoulder. “Haven’t I given you all you ever wanted, boys?”

“Yes!” they all praised.

“This is a Viking’s life, Ivar. Why don’t you join us and I will give you this little handmaiden as your first reward. Ah, look at her, Ivar! She’s youthful, beautiful, and she has a flower that’s still waiting to be taken. I can taste girls like her a mile away. They are ready and waiting for a man to make a woman out of them! This time, she’ll break—I can feel it.”

His proposition sounded despicable to Ailia and her skin crawled just thinking about it. “Who do you think you are to give my life away?”

“Ooh, this will be a real exciting game,” Gunnar laughed. “I can already see the battle concluding in my favor. Your freedom has ended and now you finally belong to me, my sweet blossom!” he said, claiming his prize before he had won it.

Ailia felt violated and disgusted at the same time.

Ivar and Finn kept hacking at each other, both fighting for their lives, though for two completely different reasons: one to take away freedom, one to keep it.

The sword duel escalated, both men panting, groaning, and grunting as they chopped at each other, destroying and hacking at the pews when they missed. Finn gave Ivar a shove, knocking him to the floor so he skidded across the surface. Ivar dried his sweaty brow with the sleeve of his tunic, and started toward Ailia.

*He means to kill me!*

Ailia ran behind the pulpit and into the rotunda, and from the corner of her eye she could see the Viking holding his sword high, coming at her as if he intended to run her through. Just as she reached for the doorknob, he shoved her away. Lowering his sword, stroking it up against her face, he pressed the blade into her skin.

She felt the edge pierce her skin and she winced at the burning pain.

“Finn!” Gunnar yelled. “The girl is mine! If you lay a finger on her, you die!”

Finn laughed mockingly, but he obeyed his chieftain and stepped back into the chapel.

Ailia never imagined that the battle for her life would start so soon. They were not prepared to fight against mere mortals, far less against the Empress of Darkness. She inched toward the chapel and glanced at Ivar. He was out of practice and he looked

ashamed for having taken the first beating of the combat, but he was all she had.

Ivar climbed to his feet, shook off his defeat, and snuck up behind Finn. He lifted his sword high above his head and was about to finish him off. But the Viking was too quick. Finn dodged Ivar's sword, and it became imbedded in the altar instead.

The Vikings laughed as Ivar jerked the sword out of the sanctified table.

"So, what do you say, Ivar?" Gunnar chimed in. "I'd hate to see a strong, trained soldier like you be sent to Valhalla years too early. Join me and you'll all be spared and live and reign with us as kings—and queen—" he said, glancing at Ailia. "—of Midgard!"

"I am not at all enticed by your future promises," Ivar spewed. "A man who would live off of the welfare of others is no man to respect or follow. Do you think this is the life, Gunnar? Living off others, murdering innocent lives, plundering churches and instilling fear in the hearts of innocent people? The friend I once knew is dead if this is the man who is standing before me," he yelled as he fought off Finn, jabbing at him quicker than before, trying to finish him off. "I will never join you, for living a life like yours is worth less than not existing at all. I do not live to serve my passions like a primitive animal that only knows how to eat, sleep and piss, but I live so that others may benefit from my life."

Their swords met, metal to metal, ringing with every clash. Finn lunged forward, jabbing at Ivar who aggressively riposted Finn's advance by swerving around and forcing his sword to the ground. Ivar stepped on Finn's arm, locking his weapon useless. Pressing his sword up to Finn's throat, he said, "Now, let us go and we will spare *your* lives."

Gunnar started clapping, applauding the duel's end, but laughed mockingly. "In case you haven't noticed, I have three other willing strong Vikings ready to fight, with hundreds upon hundreds more outside, and if I command they kill you, you'll be dismembered faster than the flash of Thor's almighty lightning bolt."

Finn was tugging uselessly to get out of Ivar's deadlock, trying to free his arm.

"I am not playing games, Gunnar. I will not hesitate to take this Viking's life, especially if it means I must do that to get out of here alive. Now, let us go. One more threat from you and I will end this man's life," Ivar said.

Gunnar paused. "I'm sure glad I'm not in Finn's position," he said. "You're a skilled swordsman, Ivar, I will give you that. Even at your age and with the extra layers of fat you've put on. It appears I've underestimated you and, in the process, overestimated Finn."

Finn snarled at Gunnar.

"I hope this is not still about King Olav rejecting you in his guard?" Ivar said.

Gunnar scowled. "No, this is about Ragnvei."

"But, I spared your life and then *you* left her to die!" Ivar said.

"It was your fault she died!" Gunnar yelled back.

Finn looked at Gunnar with pleading eyes, but it was to no avail.

"Kill the damn fool," Gunnar said, staring Ivar in the eyes. "He's been a very disappointing Viking from the start."

He left Ivar no choice, if he wanted to live and have any chances of saving Ailia. Ivar raised his sword and, with one deft move, decapitated Finn.



“Now, Ivar, why did you have to go that route?” Gunnar said. He looked at Bishop Peter whose jaw was wide open. “Just remember who desecrated the church first, Your Holiness,” he said, raising his eyebrows as a smile glazed his lips.

Bishop Peter ran through the back door and disappeared, with the Aesira Jewel in hand.

“Bishop!” Ailia yelled after him, but he didn’t respond. *Is he a coward after all?*

Ivar stood up tall and gave Gunnar a fierce look. “Who is next?” he said.

The other three Vikings stood ready to attack at Gunnar’s command.

“Get that bastard and kill him. And bring me the girl alive!” Gunnar commanded.

All three Vikings started moving, slightly hesitantly, toward Ivar. Just then, Bishop Peter came back out without the Aesira Jewel, but with a loaded crossbow. He wasted no time in shooting one of the Vikings in the chest and quickly re-loaded the crossbow again with another bolt. This time, he leveled the crossbow directly at Gunnar. “You have one chance to get out before I will shoot again,” he said, his hands shaking like leaves on a tree in the middle of a storm. “I am going to count to three, and then I will shoot.”

“Now, certainly we can work this out, Your Excellency—” Gunnar said, his voice as humble as an angel’s.

“One—” Bishop Peter could not be deterred. “Two—”

“All right, all right, I will take my men and leave,” Gunnar said, finally backing down, oozing anger from his eyeballs. The remaining Vikings left the chapel and closed the double doors behind them.

“They’ve surrendered too quickly. They’ll be back soon with more men,” Ailia said frantically.

“Where in Helheim’s name did you get that crossbow?” Ivar asked Bishop Peter.

“I purchased it from a constable from the Southlandic Kingdom when I was there.”

Ailia remembered how he used to be an archer for King Olav.

“Let us depart from the back of the church,” Ivar said.

Ailia folded her arms stubbornly across her chest. “We cannot and I will not leave without the scrolls. If the church burns down, I will burn down with it.”

“We have no choice. There is no time to look, now,” Ivar barked, beads of sweat dripping down his red face.

“But, they will burn the church down and then we’ll never have a chance to find them,” she said.

“We have to take that chance. Hopefully they will be content with the gold and silver and leave the church be,” Ivar said.

“Not likely,” Bishop Peter said. “It is been said that their goal is to burn all Christian churches in the Northlandic Kingdom, leaving none for the worship of the heathens we supposedly are.”

“To live life in oppression or die trying for a mightier cause, which will it be? Which one must it be?” she asked, still believing a path would reveal itself for the liberation of the manuscripts tonight.

“A scroll of no substantial importance may have been left here to burn, but the scrolls of deliverance for all beings in Midgard is worth dying for,” Bishop Peter said. “No time like the immediate, for tomorrow we may be dead, serving life and God’s people no longer. It is in the now we must take action to become the heroes of the morn’,” he finished.

A sledgehammer and wedge were quickly located and the triangle floor underneath the rotunda was quickly removed. Underneath the floor was a bronze chest placed inside a square

wooden cavern. The trio looked at each other in excitement, but their joy was short-lived.

“It’s a shame I don’t give up so easily,” Gunnar announced as he entered the church again, this time accompanied with a whole gang of ravage-hungry Vikings.

Ailia and Bishop Peter blocked the newfound treasure with their bodies while Ivar rapidly re-laid the floor. They heard the thud behind them as the triangle descended back into its frame.

It appeared Gunnar had planned the next attack in advance, for his Vikings all strategically went after their own prisoners.

“Remember boys, the girl is mine,” Gunnar said, oblivious to their huge discovery. “Anyone who tarnishes her will suffer death by the blood eagle.”

Ailia had vaguely heard of this method of torture and she knew that threatening this unthinkably gruesome method would immediately make lambs of wolves in any situation.

Two Vikings grabbed Ailia and another three, Ivar. Six others went to the back to round up Bishop Peter who had disappeared through the backdoor again.

“Don’t worry, Ailia. Finally with Ava gone for good, I will make a woman out of you this time,” Gunnar said as the two Vikings dragged her past him, out into the night.

### Bergendal is Burning

Lucia trailed behind Soren, who rode Volomite and Lucia's horse senseless. The guilt nearly burned a hole in her chest, and now it was official: she was a fraud of a woman. They stopped only occasionally for water for the horses and nothing else. Silence burned her ears and not even the pounding hooves of the horses drowned out the annihilating blizzard she felt coming from him. She suspected he wanted to hear nothing from her, yet she wanted to confess to him everything that had made her come to the decision to deceive him. Volomite seemed to be trained well, but Lucia's horse had a hard time keeping up with the fast, furious pace Soren was setting, panting and sweating, nearly stumbling forward.

In front of them, in the moonlight, another rider stood on the side of the road. As they approached, she saw that it was Silya. She did not want to face her—not at all.

Silya looked as if she was waiting for something or someone, or as if she was uncertain of what to do.

*Maybe she is waiting for us?* she thought.

“What brings you in this direction?” Soren asked as they neared her, their breaths now mingling in the dark, smoking up the chilling air.

“I was following you. There has been a severe violation of trust, an illegitimate theft of identity—” Silya looked at Lucia sternly, her eyes piercing right through her. “Lucia is—”

“Yes, Lucia told me everything,” Soren said plainly and without even a hint of emotion.

She cringed at his words.

“I am heading back to Ailia. Have the Vikings entered Bergendal?” he asked.

“Not that I know of, but I did see some traces of other Viking activity nearby,” Silya said.

Lucia’s arms folded tightly in front of her chest as if that would protect her somehow. Suddenly, she heard a sound. “What is that?” she asked surprised. “It sounds like a crying baby.” The helpless screams came from the woods.

“It is a Viking child,” Silya said coldly. “His mother died.”

“You already checked on him?” Lucia asked. *How could she be so calloused?* She hopped off her horse.

“Leave him be,” Silya said more coldly this time. “He is a Viking.”

“We cannot just leave him here to die. It is not his fault his parents are Vikings,” Lucia said.

“Never mind that now. He has no right to live, a babe with Viking blood running through his veins,” Silya said angrily, though not quite convincing. “It is hard enough to listen to the incessant cries without you complaining.” She rolled her dark brown eyes. “Fine, you go get him, but I want nothing to do with him, you hear? He will be your responsibility and yours alone.”

“I am amazed that you have such a hard heart for this abandoned, vulnerable creature,” Lucia snapped.

“You are not one to speak,” Silya said, moving closer to Lucia.

Soren stepped between the two women. “There is nothing we can do now to change what has happened.”

Lucia headed as quickly as she could toward the screaming child, stepping in the tracks Silya had made before her. She heard Soren speak to Silya as she walked off.

“I need to get to Ailia so I am going to leave Lucia with you. I will meet you back in Bergendal,” he said.

The closer Lucia came to the infant, the less she could hear Soren’s voice beneath the cries. Between the snow-covered trees, she saw the wagon and, then, the moving bundle on the mother’s stiff corpse. Her heart ached for both of them.

“There now, sweet one. I am here,” she said kneeling down beside the babe. His hands were flailing, and he had almost kicked his blanket off. *He is so small an innocent. How could Silya leave him here to die?* She scooped the infant up and swaddled him in the blanket. Pressing him against her body, she rocked back and forth.

“I will not abandon you,” she whispered. Her heart warmed at her own words, and she suddenly realized that this was why she had to leave Bergendal. Finding the child—saving this boy—it was her fate! Had she not come here, she would not have discovered the child. *The gods have brought me him*, she thought. *It is a sign from the gods! A new beginning.* Her new life would start now, she decided. The babe fussed for a while longer and then he settled into a low whimper. Looking back toward the road, she thought, *I could leave now. Run into the woods and never come back.* However, she felt the risk was too great now that she had a child to look after and with the Vikings

still raiding the area. *I will wait to leave until I am back in Bergendal.*

When she arrived back by the road, Soren had already disappeared. Lucia was both relieved and disappointed.

“So, you got hold of the Viking?” Silya said.

“Yes.”

“He is all yours. Do not bother me with him.” They mounted their horses. “What will you name the berserker?” Silya asked before they rode.

“A name fit for a king.”

Silya scoffed. “The mother was a bloodthirsty Viking named Ava, and she told me before she died that the child’s father is a king. Probably a king of the Vikings.”

Ava? Lucia had recently heard that name before. *Was that not the name of my father’s mistress, the one Vilda spoke about? The babe cannot be his.* And there were many women named Ava, she knew. However, she could not help but wonder.

“His name shall be Harald.” *My little ruler.*

\* \* \*

Thick, black smoke and orange flames rose above the Bergendal skyline. It was a savage yet beautiful sight, Lucia thought, riding toward the devastation, as the wind carried the scent of burnt flesh and ashes. The closer they came to the city borders, the more people lay slain, their fresh blood blemishing the pure snow. Clamoring voices abound—cries of war, of mourning mothers and fathers, brothers and friends. Bergendal was burning like it had never burned before.

Snow descended heavily from the heavens, mingling with floating cinders. Lucia could hardly bare to keep her eyes open as they rode past fallen Bergendalers—men, women. The children were the worst to see, their small bodies lying lifeless in the snow, stabbed through and through. Eyes open, vacant expressions. Small hands and feet and bodies that should be about playing, laughing, and making mischief, not waiting to be thrown into a mass grave, which there surely would have to be after this slaughter. How could the Vikings have done this? She searched the streets and the fields to see if she could spot one of the barbarians. There were no Vikings in sight, but the trail they left behind could not be missed. She squeezed the bundle in her arms. At least she had saved one.

Harold had slept the entire way, which she was grateful for. Though he weighed hardly nothing at all, still Lucia's arms had begun to tire shortly after they had started the journey back. Now, hours later, her arms felt as if they would fall off, and she had not breathed a word of it to Silya. The hateful Sami woman would never know what sacrifices Lucia would make for this child. She did not deserve to know and she would never understand how Lucia could love this babe with all her heart and so soon.

Once they were well within the city limits, Silya jumped down and took both horses by the reigns, guiding them forward. The creatures neighed and flicked their tails, and Lucia felt the beast's muscles tense beneath her legs.

"Whoa, boy," she said, stroking the beast's upper back to try and soothe him. A stallion galloped toward them at full speed, its eyes shining with terror. Silya raised both hands up into the air, and when the horse slowed, a young man fell off with a thud. The man's white tunic alb was soaked with blood at the waist, and he moaned as he slowly turned onto his back.



Silya rushed to the man and knelt beside him in the snow. “I heard there have been local Viking attacks. Is that what has happened here?” she asked, lifting the young man’s head and placing it on her lap.

“The church—they are burning down the church,” he said, his voice labored and panting. “I am a deacon of the Lord. Save the church!”

Then something occurred to Lucia. Bergendal was being attacked because the people had let the Christian faith take root in their hearts. Of course the gods would be furious and eradicate the blasphemous religion. They would not allow such deception to flourish and so they had sent the Vikings to cleanse the evil out of their midst. In a way, they had become the gods’ army in Midgard. *But they should have spared the children.*

“Come with me.” Silya started to lift the man up onto Miika.

“No, no, do not take me back to that place. Oh please. They will kill me!” He gripped Silya’s arm. “Please, I do not want to die today.”

“We will take you to Brandersgaard with us then,” Silya said.

“Thank you,” the deacon said, his voice whimpering.

After Silya had helped him onto Miika, they continued toward Brandersgaard. On their way, Harald started crying, but no matter what Lucia did to try and make him stop, he would not. *He is hungry*, she concluded. She needed to find milk for him soon.

Riding into the street leading up to the place she had spent the last several months, her breathing turned shallow. *They hate me. They hate me. They hate me!* When they arrived, Silya secured the horses to a nearby tree, and helped the deacon off the horseback.

*She helps him, a man of God, but not me, the queen of this land?* Lucia thought. She struggled to climb off the horse, her

arms exhausted—shaking—from holding Harald for so long. Gripping onto the reins, she eased off the saddle, but she could not stop herself from falling when her hands slipped, and feet hit the ground. In the fall, she must have squeezed Harald, because now he was screaming at the top of his lungs, crying as if he were dying. Lucia stuffed a finger into his mouth, and he started to suck on it right away. But when there was no milk, he began to fuss.

Silya walked right past them without so much as a glance, leading the deacon toward the longhouse.

Lucia trailed after them. Her clothes and hair were wet, and her stomach felt as hollow as the empty barn to her left. Arriving at the entrance, she noticed that there no longer was a door. All that was left was an open space with deep axe-like gouges on the doorframe. Stepping inside, she shivered just as much as she had outside. The abode did not look at all like Brandersgaard. A portion of the roof had been torn or burned off at the front of the room. Snow entered through the hole onto the loom, turning it white where it stood as beams of subdued moonlight streamed in through the gaping hole. The longhouse was still standing, regardless of all the fire damage to it, despite the fact that it look like someone had taken a hundred axes and chopped the walls to smithereens. It was unusually murky inside and Lucia coughed as she entered the smoke-filled room.

“Hello?” Silya’s voice sang, sounding muted and hesitant. She helped the deacon sit down by the hearth. Its crackling sound permeated throughout the main room and its flames rose twice as high as they usually did.

They walked slowly to the back of the longhouse. Shelves and cupboards were tipped over, but there was still no sign of Ailia or the others.

A voice could be heard in the dark. “Silya?”

Lucia followed Silya back into the main room, and just as they arrived back at the hearth, Sigrid peeked her head in through the front door.

“Sigrid!” Silya ran across the room, between the rubble and ashes, and threw her arms around the thrall. “Are you well?”

“Yes, I’m well, but they’re are dead,” she cried.

“Unni and Brander?” Silya asked, her voice cracking.

“They haven’t returned from their travels, but Ailia is gone. The Vikings took her,” Sigrid said, her face twisting in agony. “The Vikings took my Ailia.” She buried her face in her trembling, soot-covered, bloody hands and cried.

“Many souls will return to Valhalla tonight,” Lucia said, coldly. “All because of this new God.”

Silya scowled at Lucia and then she turned her attention back to Sigrid. “Did Soren come back yet?”

“Yes. He took Ivar with him to go after Ailia,” Sigrid said. “Though, they didn’t know where to start looking. They thought maybe they’d head to the Viking settlement south of here.”

“Strange, we did not see them on our way,” Silya said.

Harald began to fuss again. “I need to find milk for my child,” Lucia said.

Silya glared at her. “Do you not remember what I said?”

Lucia gasped. “How dare you treat me, a queen, this way?” She would not take this blatant contempt for another moment. She secured her grip around Harald, stormed outside, and started walking—to where, she did not know. All she knew was she could not stand to be near that coldhearted Sami woman any longer, and she refused to stay in a Christian household for even another second. If she remained, the gods might become wrath with her, and if that happened, it would be better for her if she were dead.

The snow came down heavily, splotches of white fluff falling and sticking to her clothes and hair and face. Arriving at the street, she saw Bishop Peter heading toward her in the distance. She wanted nothing more than to get as far away from the heathen as possible. *I have to get away. There are too many Christians in this wretched town!*

She took a left and headed toward the Fest Hall, hoping perhaps she could stay there. But when she was almost to the hall, she saw that it had burned to ground, nothing but ashes and embers remaining of the gigantic longhouse.

Where should she go now? Her feet were frozen cold and caked in snow. Harald had not stopped crying since she left Brandersgaard, and no one had approached her and offered to help her. Many were dead, but those who were not were either mourning the loss of loved ones or trying to clean up what little was left. She still hadn't found a drop of milk for the baby, and he would starve soon unless she fed him something. She knew no one in Bergendal and if she kept wandering the streets, she would surely freeze to death and the babe with her.

She wandered in circles, just trying to stay warm, bouncing the child up and down even though it was useless trying to cam him. The longer she walked, the angrier she grew. They did this to me—the queen! I should have their heads for this! Her heart leapt at the thought. Should she kill them?

Yes.

However, she did not want to return to that wretched place no matter the reason. If she did not kill them, what could she do to punish them? She thought long and hard, and then the answer was revealed. If she killed herself, they would regret how they had treated her. Their guilt would eat them alive, and would be a constant reminder of how horrible they had been to her. And not only that, this way, Lucia could take her power back and refuse

to be the victim, refuse to be used by her parents and by Ailia and Soren. Ailia did not deserve a sister like her, who would risk her life to protect her. And so she would end her own life so no one would ever have power over her again.

On a mission, she searched among the bodies, looking for a dagger or a knife. It was an honorable death—was it not? *Will the gods accept me into Valhalla?* They would, because she had died to honor them.

She pulled a dagger out of a dead man's chest and found a forlorn, halfway burned down barn. *I will do it in here.* She tried not to think about what she was going to do, but her body nearly convulsed as laid the screaming child onto the floor. She knelt down on the floor and took her mittens off. With shaking hands, she held the dagger up high above the infant.

"Odin. Thor. Freya," she said. "I offer this child's and my soul to you as a blood sacrifice. Please accept this act as proof of my devotion to you." She sucked in a deep breath and held it, letting the dagger hover above the babe's heart.

*Is this my destiny? To die instead of rule as queen? To be made a fool of by my sister and her lover?* She gasped as she clutched the dagger's handle, as she squeezed her eyes shut.

She let out a scream, wrestling with herself whether she should see this through or not. *Once life has been taken, it can never be given back.* Was this her fate? *Oh, Odin! The wisest of all gods. Tell me what to do!* Tears streamed down her face.

"This is not why I was born," she said out loud. "This is not why I was born!" she screamed as loud as she could. *I am queen! I am queen! I am queen! Aesira blood runs through my veins!*

Her eyes popped open and she flung the weapon aside. *Yes, Aesira blood runs through my veins.* There was someone who might want her: Eiess. The empress might now see the value in

her. Eiess was her enemy, yes, but so were her parents. *They betrayed me! My sister and her lover betrayed me!* Together, Eiess and she would be unstoppable. Had The Empress of Darkness not thought of that? Perhaps if she suggested it. Perhaps...

Would Eiess imprison her if she returned to the castle? She might, and then it would all be over. But return to Brandersgaard? Never. And if she stayed out here, death would take her and her child soon—even tonight perhaps. But if Lucia went to the empress, suggesting a partnership, like Vilda had done, perhaps...

## 31

### Caged

Ailia woke up in a small wooden cage, which was propped up against the wall of a large longhouse, how large she couldn't tell. The box prison was too squat to stand up in, but wide enough that she could almost stretch her legs all the way out in one

direction when she lay down. The floor was covered with hay and old frayed fabric and the heavens were quickly turning dark. Feeling at the back of her head as she sat up, she felt a tender lump.

It was difficult to see out between the tightly assembled planks, but slits between the construction allowed her to make out that the longhouse she was backed up against was one of five large ones built in a circle. Beyond the narrow passageways between the buildings she saw many other longhouses, shacks, and barns.

She assumed she was at the Viking settlement Soren and she had passed by on their way back to Bergendal many months ago. And she remembered Hanna mentioning that she, too, was imprisoned in a crate similar to this one.

Right next to her, there were a few more cages propped up against the wall and she thought there might be one other person inside the cage furthest away from her.

“Hello?” she called.

Movement came from the other cage. “Hello?” a woman’s voice beckoned in return.

“Where are we?” Ailia asked.

“Where are we?” the answer came. The woman’s accent revealed that she was not from here.

She grimaced. *Why is she playing games?* “Do you understand me?”

“Do you understand me?” the answer came.

Ailia huffed. *She must not understand me.*

Before she had lost consciousness, Gunnar had dragged her out of the church. He had thrown her into an enclosed sleigh with her overcoat, but without her mittens, and she had watched with great dread as they set the stave church on fire. Ivar had still been inside the chapel, trying to fend off the Vikings, but she

hadn't seen what happened to him before one of the brutes had hopped into her sleigh and knocked her on the head so hard she had lost consciousness.

She couldn't remember the last time she had cried, but now, with her body being cold and tired, and being all alone, she had a hard time holding back the tears.

*Now I shall never defeat Eiess. The scrolls have been burned, and the Aesira jewel is gone. Will I ever see Soren again?* She hated being so vulnerable in the grasp of such a savage as Gunnar. What did he want with her? Why hadn't he just killed her like the Vikings had the others?

Loud, unencumbered laughter came from inside the larger of the five longhouses. The Vikings were in a happy, highly-tipsy mood, probably from drinking all the mead they had stolen in Bergendal and the surrounding villages. Most likely, they were proud of their conquests, reveling in their victory and congratulating themselves on such a successful night.

Suddenly, the door to the largest longhouse burst open, causing Ailia to cower to the back of her cage. Several Vikings staggered out into the central area as they clung onto each other. They were halfway undressed, their round, pale bellies hanging out to meet the cold. Snow fell onto their beards and bodies and they bellowed a song.

*We, the sons of Thor the strong  
Mightier than any throng  
Fiercely feared by all the land,  
From the seas until the sands.*

*We have lost some brethren dear,  
do not shed a tear*



*For they are in paradise today  
Drinking mead and eating steak.*

*We will take whate'er we see  
Vikings, we are tough and free  
Live today for present cares  
Take your prize and spoil your shares.*

*Freemen we will always be  
We live as Kings and royalty  
When we are dead, we want to hear  
Songs 'bout us, a thousand years*

They were awful singers—couldn't even carry a tune—and their bigheaded lyrics repulsed Ailia. One of the men fell headfirst into the snow, causing the others to hoot and laugh, slapping their knees and nudging each other. She thought the unconscious man might be Gunnar, and she hoped it would so she would be safe for the night. Two men picked him up and dragged him inside the longhouse across from her cage. They shut the door behind them and it grew quiet again, only their muffled voices escaping to the outside.

She was shivering now, and in a matter of hours, night would fall. How would she stay warm? *Is this how I'm going to die: alone, freezing and never having known my love in this life?*

A couple came out arm in arm from another one of the longhouses. The man roughly pressed the woman up against the outside wall and kissed her passionately. She laughed and cooed in approval, while knitting her fingers into his hair. Ailia averted her eyes when she saw that he lifted up the woman's skirt, groping between her legs. The woman moaned just as he grunted, and not wanting to hear or see what was about to

transpire, Ailia stuffed her fingers in her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. Even then, she could hear the unrelenting thumping, and the woman as she called out in pleasure again and again. Soon the noises stopped, but Ailia dared not look until long after the sounds had died down.

Finally opening her eyes, she saw to her great relief that the couple was gone. Only one man stood guard in the small tower by the main opening, and it looked as if he had fallen asleep. Perhaps she should try to escape. With at the Vikings drunk, and the guard passed out, she might have a chance. The cage looked rather poorly constructed, being built only from planks and nails, so it couldn't be too difficult to break and exit.

She pressed her feet against one wall, and lodged her back onto the opposite side, pushing off as hard as she could. Nothing happened. Trying a different approach, she repeatedly kicked the planks as forcefully as she could, trying to loose a board—any board—but none of them budged.

Suddenly, from between two of the longhouses, she saw four men approaching. She immediately stopped kicking and curled up into a ball in the corner. As they came closer, she could see that three Vikings held one man. The prisoner's hands were tied behind his back and a sackcloth was pulled over his head. The Vikings pushed and kicked him to move forward, laughing when he tripped over something in his path. Once they had arrived on front of Ailia's cage, two Vikings restrained the prisoner, and the third unlocked the empty cage next to her.

"Get in, dead man," one of the Vikings said. He opened the top-hinged cage door and pushed the prisoner into the crate. The man groaned as he fell to the ground, taking a hard hit. The Vikings locked the crate by enclosing its exterior with a larger iron cage.

*No wonder I couldn't get out. Its exterior is reinforced with iron*, Ailia thought. After the Vikings had left, she scooted closer to her new neighbor. "Are you all right, sir?"

The stranger sat up awkwardly, with his hands still tied behind his back and the sackcloth over his head. "Ailia?" the voice replied. "Is that you?"

"Soren?" She was shocked, concerned and excited all at the same time, not knowing whether she should jump for joy or cry in the small confinements of her pen. "How did you get here?" Her eyes burst with tears of joy, mingled with sorrow, bitter tears of fear and hope welling simultaneously from the windows of her soul. "Soren, I...how...? I don't know what to say. I'm so glad, but also sad that you're here," she finally said, her words not even coming remotely close to expressing her feelings. She tried to get a glimpse of him through the slivers of space. "How did you get here? Are you hurt?"

He struggled for a brief moment to get the sackcloth off his head and was able to untie the ropes that bound his arms behind his back. "Ailia, Lucia told me the truth," he said, reaching his fingers through an opening in his cage. Their eyes met in the darkness.

She slid her fingers through the cage and they touched his as the cold air blew through their grasp. It was too cold to hold for long, but she endured the pain.

"You came for me," she said.

His eyes rested in her gaze. "I wish I would have known sooner. I should never have left you."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before; I thought it was for the best. I wanted it to be a special moment between us," she said, stretching her fingers longer to be closer to him. "Now, I wish I would have told you the moment I saw you again," she said, hoping he would meet her heart where it burned.

“I knew in my heart that you were—are—you are my *one*. How long have you known?” he asked.

“I found out the day I arrived in Bergendal. I wanted to tell you then, but you were still traveling,” she said.

“I thought I was doing us both a favor by leaving, so I would not...” He turned quiet as if he struggled with whether to share something or not.

She looked back into his eyes again, encouraging him without words.

“I had a dream about you the night before I left you in the care of Silya and when I woke up, I realized you were a threat to Lucia and I. I felt a deep, unexplainable love for you even then,” he confessed.

She smiled as he spoke to her, of her, and of the love he had for her. His words felt so right, as if they fit perfectly into every groove and every corner of her heart. Yet how could this be when she hardly knew Soren? Did her soul remember? Her heart? Just like her dream on the mountain, she had forgotten how wonderful the sun felt on her skin, and how beautiful summer was. Now, she had forgotten their previous lives together. But just like the sun had felt on her face, his words warmed and nurtured her heart.

“In my dream, you were so beautiful, Ailia, and I could not ever remember wanting anyone the way I wanted you. My love for you grows stronger over time, with every life you live,” he said.

Ailia’s smile widened. “I thought you left because I had done something wrong,” she admitted, slightly embarrassed. She pulled her fingers away for a moment to warm them underneath her overcoat. The chilly wind had frozen them stiff and her fingers stung as they thawed close to her body. She really wished she had her wool mittens, but they were probably burned to

ashes with the church. “I recognized you too, from the moment we met—again,” she said, her heart and soul agreeing in unison as her fingers reached for his again.

“You are cold,” he said. “We need to escape before they kill us, or do anything else to harm us.”

“I’ve tried to kick my way out of here, but the entire wooden crate is enclosed by an iron cage,” she said.

“Ivar came with me,” he said.

“Ivar escaped the Vikings in Bergendal?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Relief set in. “How did the Vikings capture you?”

“Well,” he said, “I walked over to their camp and I let them seize me.” He nearly let out a laugh and a smirk lightened his face.

“It was your plan to be captured?” she asked, trying to decipher his strategy.

“Yes. It was the only way to get close to you,” he said.

Of course, it would be impossible for Soren to be captured and taken. He was the master of all hunting, tracking and waylaying methods, having been alive for centuries now. No Viking, no matter how skilled, could compare to him. *I would do the same for him*, she realized. Now she didn’t feel *as* bad that he was here imprisoned with her. If anyone could get them out safely, it was him.

He turned more serious. “I would do anything to be with you, Ailia. I will never leave you again for as long as I live. I would even sit right here for the rest of my life, if it were my only option.”

“I would do that, too,” she said. She gazed into his eyes, and it was as if she could see to the very bottom of them, to that place where there was nothing but the love he had for her. And it was so pure and so overwhelming that it took her breath away.

“Before I left Ivar, I told him to ride back to Bergendal and round up as many able men as possible so they could attack the Vikings on their own territory and take back what was stolen from them. I just hope he makes it back soon and that the chaos in Bergendal is not too maddening. It took me a good day’s trip to get here, so I would imagine we can be expecting them the day after tomorrow.”

Loud laughter came from the large longhouse again, and Ailia and Soren looked up.

“They’re drunk,” she said. “I doubt they’ll disturb us tonight.” Her body ached in so many places, and she was becoming sleepy, but she didn’t want to sleep a minute as long as she was with Soren. She had longed for time with him, to be open with him and for them to get to know each other...again. She looked back at him, and saw he was already watching her. If these walls hadn’t been here, she would have leapt into his arms and held him tight. Had she truly lived before she met him?

### Thrall

When Ailia woke up, the first thing she did was to look for Soren over in the next cell. When she saw that he was still sleeping and hadn't suddenly disappeared in the night, she breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't been as cold as she thought she'd be, maybe because the snow that covered the planks had kept some warmth inside.

The sun started rising in the east and she could see that dunes of snow covered the surfaces of everything, blanketing the longhouses, the courtyard and every tree around. Not a single cloud that she could see from her limited view graced the blue sky. She hoped the sun would warm her, as its rays would soon shine around the corner and onto their cages.

Her stomach rumbled, and the last meal she remembered eating was repast at Unni and Brander's house during the Late Summer Festival. Would the Vikings feed them or would they starve them to death? She peered over and wondered whether she should wake Soren or not. She decided to let him sleep a while

longer. Sitting in silence, she searched the surroundings for any weapons or other items they might appropriate if they managed to escape today.

She noted that a different Viking stood watch over by the main entrance and he looked much more alert than the guard who had been there yesterday. A raven flew from the top of one of fern trees to another. Cawing as it landed, it disturbed the heavy snow-covered branch, causing clumps of snow to fall to the snow below. *How fitting*, she thought. *A stupid raven*. Most birds had flown south for the winter, the eternal winter it would seem.

The door to the main longhouse opened and three stout Vikings immediately headed in Ailia and Soren's direction. Gunnar probably lived in the largest of the five abodes and more than likely, he had sent these men to do something sinister.

Ailia recognized one of the brutes from the previous day, but the others were unfamiliar. They waded one after each other through the new, ankle-high snow with their hefty boots, plowing a path that would last until the next heavy snowfall.

"Soren," she said, trying to wake him. "Soren!" she yelled. "They're coming! The Vikings are coming!"

He stirred for a moment and then woke up, rising abruptly. He quickly spotted the Vikings. Turning to Ailia, he reached his fingers toward her through the cracks. "Everything is going to be fine, Ailia," he said, in a deeply penetrating voice, looking into her eyes across the divide. "There is no escape for us at the moment, but Ivar will return soon with hundreds of angry Bergendalers. Just find a way to survive until that time, promise me."

She nodded. "I will."

The eldest Viking lifted the steel cage from off her prison dome and lifted the opening flap of the plank crate. It creaked



loudly, its high-pitched scream sending chills through Ailia's body.

"Come here, girl." He grabbed her arm and jerked her out of the cage. The Viking let her go just as the force of the pull peaked, and she tumbled into the snow with a grunt. As her bare hands met the snow, they stung.

"Are ya havin' trouble standin' up, hora?" one of the Vikings said.

She glowered at them as she stood up and brushed the snow off her skirt and overcoat.

"Be careful what you do to her, for your heads will soon be on my chopping block," Soren said.

"The damage will already have been done by then," one of the other Vikings retorted. "And from the look of things, you're going to be losing your head here in a bit."

Ailia's heart pounded in her chest as she thought of the things they might do to Soren and her. But she must not show them she was afraid. "If you knew who you are dealing with—"

The short Viking walked over to her and slapped her face, knocking her into the snow again.

"You will treat her with respect!" Soren yelled from his cage. "Once I get out of here, I will kill every one of you. If you stop now and let her go, I still might spare your pitiful lives."

The eldest walked over to Soren's cage and kicked it hard several times, causing the rusty metal to shake and rattle. He lowered his head and looked into Soren's eyes, which were peeping through a small opening. "I can't wait," he said, sneering as he spoke.

The two other Vikings grabbed Ailia's arms and lifted her to her feet.

"Gunnar would like to see you now," the eldest said, staring at her. He walked over until his face was just an inch away from

hers, and then he sniffed her skin, inhaling her scent and closed his eyes, as if to experience the smell more intensely. “Ah, the smell of fresh, womanly youth.” He opened his eyes. “Nothing smells better.”

Ailia turned her face away in disgust. He reeked of sweat, smoke, and urine and his breath stunk like rotten reindeer meat. When he smiled, he looked like an ogre as his teeth were decayed and stained from many years of neglect.

“Did your mother not teach you how to bathe?” she asked.

“She did. And actually, I loved having her wash every part of me. Especially here.” He seized Ailia’s hand and shoved it to his genitalia, making her rub it. She snapped her hand back, but not before she had felt how hard he was. The Viking grabbed her hair and pulled her head backward, aiming a dagger to her throat.

“Ailia!” Soren yelled from his cage, trying to kick it open. “I will kill all of you, do you hear?”

“Shut your face, dead man!” the eldest yelled, not taking his eyes off Ailia. “Gunnar shares all of his spoils with me, so when the time comes, I’m going to...”

Suddenly, Gunnar came storming out of the largest house. “What’s in Loki’s name is taking so long?” he blasted, his eyes wide open, his bearded face steaming red.

The eldest Vikings immediately pulled away and redirected his attention to his chieftain.

“She’s being difficult,” the eldest said.

“Difficult?” Gunnar said, giving him a look of disbelief. “Difficult? She is our prisoner. There are three of you, one of her!”

Ailia saw the opportunity to free herself. She leaned into the Vikings’ arms, lifted her feet off the ground and kicked Gunnar as hard as she could in the head.

Gunnar flew through the air and hit the snow. Everyone stood silently watching for a moment.

“Are you—uh,” the eldest Vikings started as the others dug their fingers into Ailia’s arms.

She gasped at the pain.

“Am I what—am I hurt?” Gunnar said, laughing as he rose to his feet. Blood ran from his nose and lips and he wiped it away with the sleeve of his black wolf-fur overcoat. “I’m a Viking chieftain. Do you think that a sniveling girl like this can disrupt my being—all right? Oh, she’ll be a pleasure to break, this feisty one,” he said, licking the blood from his lips. “Do you remember us? We had big plans together you and I,” he said, moving closer, not breaking his stare.

*Big plans?* Ailia wished she could remember. What she didn’t know frightened her.

“I don’t know how you survived,” Gunnar said. “How ever did you manage?”

“You will leave her alone, Gunnar,” Soren said calmly, but so firmly that Gunnar turned his attention to him.

“Why, who have we here?” Gunnar said. He walked over to the cage and hunched down beside it. “A helpless animal trapped in a cage, threatening his executioner? Soren, old friend, I almost didn’t recognize you there behind all the wood and metal. Is this your girl?” he gestured to Ailia with a flick of his wrist.

Ailia could see Soren’s eyes growing darker and darker.

“But, surely, this isn’t Princess Lucia, the Great Sentinor, your soul mate which you are *destined* to be with? Do we have a love triangle going on here?” he mocked. “How interesting—I would have to agree with you, though, this young lady is much more desirable than Her Royal Highness Lucia, who pales in comparison to this beauty.”

Ailia was shocked he knew about them at all, but not wanting to feed his knowledge by acknowledging or denying his information, she kept her lips sealed.

“I am warning you, Gunnar. if you touch her in any way, you will live to regret it every day of your life,” Soren said.

“I doubt it,” Gunnar retorted arrogantly, staring Ailia down. “Eiess told me many things about you and your beloved Princess Lucia, Soren. It’s a shame that as we speak, she’s headed to the Northlandic Castle to join forces with the Empress,” he said, his hand fondling Ailia’s overcoat.

Ailia glanced at Soren. *Don’t say anything, Ailia. Gunnar’s just trying to get inside your mind. His words are calculating and well-placed. Don’t give him that satisfaction,* she thought. Gunnar most likely didn’t know about Ailia’s connection to Lucia but was probably trying to get Soren to react to his cunning comments and spill more information.

Soren shook his head at Ailia.

*I’m not going to fall for it and divulge more information,* she swore to herself. Ailia tried to wriggle out of the tight grip the Vikings held her in, but it was no use.

Gunnar smiled devilishly. Then, a stroke of enlightenment flashed across his face.

“Put her back in the box,” he ordered the Vikings. “Come with me.”

The Vikings did as they were commanded and threw Ailia back into the cage. She hit her head on the side of the cage and cut herself across the right eyebrow, muting a scream of pain that wanted to surface. She refused to give the Vikings the satisfaction of knowing they had hurt her and she definitely didn’t want to appear weak in the barbarians’ eyes. Not because she wanted to impress them, but rather, because she wanted them to know that she would not be cowered.

The Vikings followed Gunnar back into the longhouse.

“You are hurt,” Soren said.

She touched her forehead by the cut and winced when it stung. “It’s nothing.”

“Press snow on it. It will help stop the bleeding.”

She squeezed her fingers through a couple of planks and scooped up some snow, pressing it to the wound.

“See this?” he said.

Ailia scooted closer and looked to where he was pointing.

“After you went to sleep last night, I worked on sawing the bottom edges with this,” he said, showing her a small knife. “I hid it inside my stocking, so the Vikings would not find it when they ransacked me. I am done detaching one side and as soon as I detach another, I think I might be able to break the bottom of the cage free if I lift up forcefully like so,” he said, as he showed her how.

“If only being a Sentinor meant we could walk through these walls, we’d be fine,” Ailia said, wishing now that she had another power other than being able to envision the past. It seemed like a useless gift, at least in the moment.

Soren continued to gnaw at the wood with his knife, moving closer to their escape with every stroke.

A shorn-headed woman crossed the courtyard with two buckets of snow. She glanced over at Ailia and Soren and stopped in the middle of the yard, looking at them as if she wanted to approach them.

“C-c-can I fetch you s-something?” The woman stammered in an unusually high-pitched voice, and her whole upper body twitched uncontrollably as she moved. Though she was young, she was far from beautiful. Perhaps she had been beautiful at some point, but with her hair shaven, a filthy face and yellowing teeth, Ailia couldn’t help but feel sorry for her.

The woman set the buckets down and eyed the guard, who had turned in another direction, before she shambled over to Ailia.

“Here,” she said, handing Ailia a piece of dried meat, squeezing it through the largest gap between the planks. She quickly stepped back away from the cage a good two feet.

“Thank you,” Ailia said.

“I’m K-k-kelda, the n-n-new thrall here, serving these s-self-proclaimed k-k-kings. It has all g-gone downhill s-since Ava, G-g-g-gunnar’s wife, left a little while b-back. She h-helped k-k-keep things b-b-b...b-balanced around here. Now, it’s b-becoming a miserable p-place.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Ailia and this is Soren.”

“I can c-c-come back with extra after I p-p...place some more wood onto the h-hearth inside. There’s p-plenty m-m-more,” she said, looking nervously around. She hurried off, picking up the buckets on the way.

There wasn’t much meat, but Soren insisted Ailia eat all of it, saying he would eat some as soon as Kelda returned with more. They chewed on snow to quench their thirsts and Soren returned to his sawing project.

“Tell me about our grandchildren, or great, great grandchildren, right?” Ailia invited, feeling somewhat strange asking the question and strange that she actually *had* grandchildren.

“I call them grandchildren; it makes me feel at least a few years younger,” he said, cracking a smile.

As he went into great detail about each grandchild, Ailia envisioned their beautiful faces before her. “I cannot wait to meet them all. I just hope they’ll want to meet me also.”

“They cannot wait to meet you,” he said, tediously working on the next plank.

Ailia leaned her back toward one of the walls. “In the past, I’ve had a recurring maredream of Eiess and I wonder if it might be a memory from one of my first two lives. We had a daughter named Freydis,” she said, seeing if that name meant anything to Soren.

He stopped working and when he looked at Ailia he had tears in his eyes. “She was our first and only child, in your second life.”

“Oh.” Ailia’s throat clamped up.

“She waited and waited for the day you would return. She never gave up hope that she would see you again. Even right before she died, she thought she might get word of your return,” His voice was deep and thick as though he was about to cry.

Ailia covered her mouth with her hand and let out a cry. “Oh, my Freydis.”

Two of Gunnar’s Vikings stormed back out of the longhouse, heading straight in their direction.

“Be brave, Ailia,” Soren said, reaching his fingers toward her. “I love you.”

“I love you.” She didn’t know where the words had come from, and she wasn’t sure she meant them, but they came so easily, as if she had spoken them a thousand times before.

In no time, the Vikings had flung open Ailia’s cage and were trying to pull her out, but she moved to the back, making it difficult for them to get hold of her. They finally grabbed her feet and hauled her out into the snow. Fisting his fingers through her hair, the Viking dragged her after him toward the longhouse.

She could feel Soren’s eyes on her and it gave her strength. “Be brave,” he had said. And she would be.

Entering the smoggy longhouse, Ailia felt the hot air burn her cheeks and hands. Weapons hung on one wall, and animal heads mounted to wooden plaques hung on the other. Two hearths

burning side by side in the center of the room were crackling with fervor, and the room smelled of leather, wood, and stew.

Gunnar sat on a large, intricately carved, wooden chair and wore a red tunic and fox fur shawl. He had combed his hair back, and smiled when their eyes connected.

“I’m going to give you two choices,” Gunnar said cheerfully as he played with his beard.

“Only two?” Ailia said.

“Shut your mouth and hear the king speak!” one of the Vikings said, slapping her head.

“Choice number one,” Gunnar said, raising his index finger on his right hand. “Stay here and rule with me as queen of the Vikings. Rule by my right hand, as a free woman, as my wife and equal.” He paused.

“And the second choice?” she urged him, letting no emotion show on her face. *Never will I be this man’s queen.*

“Choice number two.” He added his middle finger to the first one. “Be sold as a thrall to whoever would buy you.” He sat back with a smug smirk on his face.

Ailia glared at him for a long time, saying nothing. Did he truly think he could convince her to marry him this way? And why did he want to marry her? She was no one to him other than an old family acquaintance. Did he know she was the Great Sentinor? No, he couldn’t know. Unless Lucia had told him. He did say she was heading to the Northlandic Castle, and maybe he had spoken to her, or one of his men had spoken to her.

“Well, have you an answer for me?” Gunnar finally asked.

“There’s a third choice you haven’t given me and that is to let Soren and me go free. We will then promise not to destroy your settlement and exterminate you and your filthy followers.” She had no idea where her strength was coming from. She didn’t fear torture, or dying, or any other manner of ill fate that would come



to her if she didn't please Gunnar. Though her body was trembling with fear, she felt calm and peaceful inside, standing firm on her ground, ready to demand what she wanted.

"Do not mock me!" Gunnar scooted forward to the edge of his seat, pointing an accusatory finger at her. "I can order these men to kill you right here, right now. You need to think more about your life before you throw it away with your arrogance and idealistic stupidity," he said, still calm, but with a bit more anger welling up in his tone. "And as you remember before, you made the wrong decision and Ava had no other choice but to get rid of you." He slouched back into his chair. "Though I still don't understand how you survived Ava..." His voice trailed off.

*What was my association with him before?* "Whatever your former wife's plan was, it failed, seeing I'm still here." But then suddenly, as if a veil was lifted from her eyes, she remembered everything—every minute detail of the events that lead up to her awakening on the Blue Glaciers.

After the Vikings had captured her and dragged her here to their settlement, Ailia had sat imprisoned for over a month in the very cage Soren was now in. Ava had requested Ailia become her handmaiden, and after that, Ailia had been allowed to move around the settlement, though still bound by a long chain around her ankle.

The problems had started when Gunnar had wanted Ailia to become his second wife. Ava had grown jealous, but Gunnar wouldn't stop pursuing Ailia. He had tried to rape her once, but fortunately, Ava had walked in on them and she had put an end to it, threatening she'd leave him if he did not stop. After that Ava had kept Ailia with her at all times, saying she was protecting her and her marriage. Then, Ava had become pregnant, and Gunnar had accused her that the child was not his. Lastly, Ailia remembered right before Ava had left the

settlement, that she had forced poison down Ailia's throat and dragged her to the glacier cave with two Vikings. They had beat her senseless until she lost consciousness and left her to die.

*The thing that was supposed to kill me, led me to Soren.* She turned her attention to Gunnar. "Look at you sitting there on your self-made throne, pretending to be a king among men, leading a bunch of fools with wills so weak they seek nothing but to be ruled by your ignorant, incompetent hand." She paused and waited for his response, thinking he just might order his Vikings to take her life.

"You have chosen then?" Gunnar asked.

"Yes," she said steadfastly, clenching her trembling fists, feeling her fingernails digging into the palms of her hands.

"Such a shame. Such a loss. You could have been ruler of the Vikings, queen of them all. I will not force you to marry me," he said, sitting back into his chair, placing his elbow on the armrest and leaning his chin on his sturdy fist. "Take her away and prepare her as we discussed." He looked away.

Before the Vikings were able to restrain her, Gunnar spoke again. "No wait!" He stood up and walked over to Ailia, grabbing both her arms and pulling her close in to his body. He kissed her passionately, forcing his tongue into her mouth. When he was finished, he let her go softly.

"Now, do you remember the passion we shared?" he asked, his blue-gray eyes searching hers.

She spit in his face. Her eyes burned with wrath and she had not truly hated anyone until this moment. "We had no passion. You wanted me, but I wanted nothing to do with you," she said, remembering the day he had nearly raped her.

"She's all yours, boys," Gunnar said, wiping the spit off his face with a handkerchief—a handkerchief that looked exactly like the one she had found lying next to her on the glaciers.

The Vikings seized her and took her to the back room. She thought they were going to rape her or kill her, but she would rather that than give her will to Gunnar. It was better to die honorably, than to marry a man she hated and be without the man she loved.

The Vikings sat her down on a stool in the back room and took out a pair of shears. It was useless to fight, so she sat still as they chopped off her beautiful dark locks. Tears of anger flowed down her cheeks as they transformed her from a free woman to a thrall.

When they were done, she looked down at the floor to where her dark locks had fallen. *I won't mourn the loss of my hair.*

"Thrall!" the Vikings mocked.

"You are the ugliest woman I've ever seen," one said.

*I don't care,* Ailia thought.

The Viking men took her back outside, but instead of dragging her back to her cage, they headed toward the one-horse enclosed sleigh that had brought her here.

"No!" she yelled, struggling against them. "Let me go!"

"Shut up, wench. You're going to Trollsoe."

Trollsoe? The city was miles and miles away, several days journey. And where was Soren? She looked toward the cages, searching for him. His door was wide open and he was gone. Blood trailed in the snow from where he had been and down the snow-packed path, between two longhouses, and into the woods.

"Soren! Soren!" she yelled, knowing they had hurt him or, fearing even worse, ended his life. "Can you hear me?" Her voice was one of severe desperation in which the most terrifying answer came in return: none.

As they opened the door to the sleigh, she kicked and screamed, knowing if they transported her to Trollsoe to be sold

as a thrall, she might never see her family, or Bergendal, or Soren ever again.

After they had forced her into the sleigh, they locked her in, leaving her in a heap of tears on the floor.

“You’ll be regretting your decision sooner rather than later,” one of the Vikings said. “And your friend there—” he said, looking over at Soren’s open, bloody cage, his hands resting on his hips. “—Good luck ever seeing him again. His dead carcass will be fed to the wolves.”

Ailia lunged toward the small cage window and wrapped her fingers around the freezing iron bars, wrestling to open it. “You will live to regret this day!” she whispered furiously, tears brimming in her hazel eyes. “I will remember you and I will come for you. I’ve imbedded your face into my memory and the day you see me again will be the day you die.”

The Viking laughed. “I guess I’ll be living to a ripe old age then!”

The other Viking had already climbed onto the box seat, and whistled to the horse to start moving. With a jolt, the sleigh took off.

Ailia clenched the bars as she stared back at the disappearing settlement from her moving prison. *I will die with my light still unshed.* For many more hopeless hours, she kept her gaze fixed on the horizon as it vanished before her tear-filled eyes.

### Northlandic Castle

“What a surprise! What are you doing here, Great Sentinor?” Eiess asked when she saw Lucia enter the throne room with Vilda. Lucia had approached the Surtorians at the drawbridge, and told them she was Princess Lucia and needed to speak with Eiess. Recognizing her, the Surtorians had sent for Vilda, and her fat aunt had escorted her to Eiess.

Lucia clutched the infant in her arms as if he were her own, and from the corner of her eye she could see how his blanket shook. Standing before the Empress of Darkness, her words had dried up.

“I see you have brought a child? Is it yours?” Eiess asked, not bothering to rise from her throne.

“No. It is not my child. This is the child of a Viking king,” Lucia managed to say, lifting her chin. “I saved his life and I will raise him as my son.”

Eiess' lips sprouted a devious smile. "Ava's son," she whispered. "It is very courageous of you to come here after all that has transpired."

"I have come to side with you. I believe I have been on the wrong side all along," Lucia said.

"I could have told you that years ago. Why the sudden change of heart?" Eiess asked, her delicate, pale hand caressing her chin.

"My eyes have finally been opened to many lies. I have been taken advantage of and used to promote the other side's purposes," Lucia said. Thinking about their deceitfulness still stung.

"So, Lucia, what can I offer you?" Eiess said.

Vilda stepped forward. "I believe the girl should be asking *us* that question, Your Grace."

"Very well, I will concede to that, Vilda. So?" Eiess said, glaring at Lucia.

"I can offer you information that will open your eyes to the truth instead of the mirage in which we have all been led to believe," Lucia said.

Eiess raised a thin eyebrow. "Are you implying I have been deceived?"

"We all have," Lucia said.

"You presuppose I do not already know the full truth," Eiess said.

Lucia would not be made into a fool—never again. "Are you saying you have no need for my services?" She took a step back.

Eiess looked at Vilda and then back at Lucia. "No, that is not at all what I am saying. This is your home, just as much as it is mine."

"Ha!" Lucia said. "It certainly did not feel like it when you had me locked up in the castle's tower and sent your Surtorians to beat me."

“I regret that it happened,” Eiess said.

“Your cheap apology is accepted,” Lucia said. “But for me to join you and if you expect me to reveal anything to you, I need your sworn protection.”

“How would I know *you* are telling the truth?” Eiess asked.

Lucia smiled. “I have proof and you will know in time. Test me, if you please, and let me prove that I am being truthful.”

Eiess looked at Vilda. “Ready the queen’s chamber.”

Vilda smiled and bowed deeply, her dress flaring wide.

“United we will extinguish the rebellion,” Eiess said.

Vilda escorted Lucia back to her chamber and left straightaway.

*Have I made the right decision?* Lucia thought as she held tightly onto the small infant. *My life and this child’s life, may be in danger.* She sat down on the four-post walnut bed—the same bed she had been born in and the same bed her mother had died in. *I should leave before it is too late.*

Vilda entered the room with two handmaidens who brought a tray of food and a fresh outfit for both Harald and Lucia. Her orange and gold dress made her look extraordinarily large and disturbingly pale. “Lena is bringing in the crib your father made,” she said. “It was the one you slept in when you were a babe.” She stood still for a moment. “I thought I might mention, Eiess named all the handmaiden’s in the castle, Lena—to keep things simple.”

Lucia found that strange, not to mention impersonal.

Vilda placed her hands on her elephant-size hips. “I must let you know, and it is apparent to everyone here in the castle who see me every day, that my heart is shattered because I lost my beloved brother,” she said dramatically.

Lucia gently placed Harald on the cobalt-blue silk bedding. She loved hearing him coo and watching him gnaw on his

clenched fists. “Are you hungry, little one?” she asked, playing with his feet. “Who killed him?” She asked, not taking her eyes off the infant. The memories of her and her father’s last conversation rose to the forefront of her thoughts. *He did give his life for me.*

“Several guards were ordered to end his life simultaneously,” Vilda offered.

“You mean *kill* him?” Lucia said. “Say it—*kill* him.”

“Yes, kill him.” Vilda lowered her eyes. “I never wanted it, you know,” she said, stepping closer to Lucia.

“Perhaps.” Lucia continued to play with Harald’s feet. “But you did nothing to prevent it either, did you?”

Vilda’s face flushed. “There was no other alternative, Lucia.”

“You could have let him live.” Lucia looked over at her aunt. *She is a selfish, fat coward.*

“No, he threatened the Empress’ life. He even threatened my life. That is treason!”

“Treason? Ha!” Lucia barked. “Who is to say what treason is. You stole the throne from my father—your own blood—and made us prisoners in our own home. Was *that* not treason?”

“He was never a great leader and something desperately needed to be done—someone needed to do it. I could not change the man, nor the way he reigned. I did not possess enough power,” Vilda said, her voice rising.

“Is it much better now?” Lucia asked. “Have all the problems of Midgard suddenly disappeared with this new ruler? She rang in the eternal winter. Did you fail to recognize that?”

A handmaiden entered the room with the crib and silk sheets for the newborn.

“There are fewer problems and most things have improved, yes. Eiess listens to her advisors, you will see. She changes



things when needed and she is not deceitful like your late mother and father.”

“We will see,” Lucia said. She pulled Harald’s shirt off and he immediately started fussing.

“I will need more new clothes made for my son,” Lucia said to Lena. “Seven outfits to start with—one for each day of the week. Outfits that are fit for a future king of the Northlandic Kingdom.” She lifted Harald into her arms, feeling his silky smooth skin beneath her fingertips. “I also need a wet-nurse immediately. It has been hours since he has eaten. *I* will need a new wardrobe. Send the tailor in first thing tomorrow morning. I cannot bear to wear these repulsive peasant clothes anymore.”

“One of the Lena’s just had a child. I will summon her, Your Majesty,” Lena said and curtsied. “And we have an excellent tailor who is in charge of all of the Empress’ wardrobes. I will have him here tomorrow morning.”

“Swell, that will be all.” Lucia walked over to the stained-glass window and over looked the fallen snow-white kingdom.

“Eiess would like to meet with you as soon as you are settled in,” Vilda said, stepping next to her.

Lucia glanced over at Vilda. “Ah, Bergendal,” she said, bouncing Harald up and down, patting the crying child on his back. “It has changed much since Eiess has taken over. Not for the better, I am afraid. Tell Eiess I will meet with her in the throne room at sunset.”

“Yes, my lady.” Vilda turned to leave.

“It is ‘Your Highness’ to you,” Lucia corrected, not softly. “I am still the heir to the Northlandic Throne. Your mind seems to be slipping, old woman.”

Vilda’s lips puckered. “I must give you some advice, so that your head is not the next thing to roll,” she said perturbed.

“No, you must not. That will be all,” Lucia said, throwing Vilda a threatening glare.

Vilda huffed and left the room.

Lena came quickly and started nursing the ravenous child. The child suckled at the woman’s full breast until his sleepiness overcame him.

*He is my child, Lucia thought. There is a divine connection between he and I—I can feel it. The gods have brought him to me, so I will have an heir.*

When the sun had gone down, Lucia walked through the corridors. *How can I take back the throne?* It was her throne, rightfully, as granted by the gods, as was right by her bloodline. When she entered the throne room, Eiess was already sitting on her throne in an indigo silk dress.

“Greetings.” Eiess smiled. “May I offer you some food or wine?”

“Food and wine,” Lucia said.

“Lena,” Eiess summoned one of the handmaidens in the room.

Lena stepped over immediately. “Yes, Your Highness.” She bowed her head.

“Prepare repast for us both and bring up a bottle of red wine immediately. We will dine in here,” Eiess said.

“Yes, right away, Your Excellency,” Lena said and departed faster than a galloping horse.

“I can imagine it must have been hard for you to come back here,” Eiess said.

Four Lena’s set up a small table with two chairs in the center of the throne room.

“It was,” Lucia said. “However, I could no longer stay where I was, so the choice was clear.” She would not tell the empress that it was either come here or be left to die.

Eiess stood up and took Lucia by the arm. “You must be wondering how to get your throne back?” She walked them both back to the table.

Lucia was shocked, but she tried not to reveal it. *I should not show my emotion.*

“I would expect nothing less from you. Of course, you are the rightful heiress of the Northlandic Throne. I would be a fool to think otherwise.” Eiess offered her to sit.

“And I would be a fool if I accepted your first offer,” Lucia said.

“Offer?”

Lucia sat down. “You are going to offer me something, are you not?”

Eiess sat down on her chair, her light green eyes reflecting the torches and candles in the room. “Yes,” she said. “You are a smart one.”

“Start with the offer you were going to give as a last resort,” Lucia said.

“Very well.” Eiess smiled and folded her hands on top of the table. “I want the Aesira Jewel, and in return, you will be crowned queen of the Northlandic Kingdom.”

“And—?” Lucia leaned forward, her elbows on the table now.

Eiess scoffed. “What else is there to give you?”

“I want Vilda dead. She betrayed my father and me. She used me to get what she wanted,” Lucia said. “I want Soren dead.” She paused. “And I want Ailia, the Great Sentinor dead.”

Eiess leaned back in her chair and smiled cunningly. Lena came with two gold goblets and poured the wine.

“Ailia is your sister. Do you not have any loyalty toward your family?” Eiess sipped from her goblet.

“You knew?”

“There is not a thing I do not know.”

“If you knew, then why—”

“Together we can be strong. You need me and I need you. Now tell me, why do you want your sister dead?”

“When she saw the opportunity, she betrayed me like her worst enemy. Do I owe her anything?” Lucia shook her head.

Eiess set her goblet down on the table. “No, but she is your sister, after all. The only family you have left besides Vilda.”

“I do not consider her or Vilda family,” Lucia said. “Should I?”

Eiess studied Lucia’s face for a while before saying, “When I left Alvheim and the other three Sentinors tried to bring me back, I refused to listen to them. I could no longer live under their oppressive rules. There was no individuality, no freedom to express, no gratification. I speak of the gratification that comes from creating something unique. All we were to do was protect Midgard and humanity.” Eiess traced the rim of her goblet with her middle finger. “Soon, I found that my existence brought me no fulfillment. All I lived for was to please and help humans and of course the humans were never grateful for my many years of selfless sacrifice.”

“Do you regret leaving?” Lucia asked.

“I regret the relationships I lost. I loved the Sentinors and the oneness we shared. I still love them now. But do I regret leaving and claiming my right as a living spirit to choose my own path?” She leaned forward and looked Lucia intensely in the eyes. “Never.”

“I am like you,” Lucia said.

“You still have time to go back. It is not too late. You can still save your relationships, still fight on the other side.” Eiess drank from her goblet again.

“Would you let me go just like that?”

“Yes,” Eiess said. “ I would be very put out, of course. Together, you and I would be invincible. With your powers as the Sun Queen of the Aesira bloodline and my powers as a Sentinor, we would be as powerful, or even more powerful, than Ailia and Soren combined.”

Lucia’s eyes wandered as she thought about Eiess’ offer. The idea excited her. *This means I will have to make a choice, one that is for certain, without any doubt in my mind.*

Three Lena’s entered and decked the table with mounds of heavenly food.

Lucia had not noticed *how* hungry she was until the aroma hit her nostrils. She gulped all the wine from her cup and held it up for more.

Lena walked over and filled it to the brim.

“Eat,” Eiess offered, gesturing to the food.

After the meal, they walked together to the queen’s chamber. Lucia was relieved to see that Harald was still sleeping soundly in his new crib. A dress and sleeping tunic were laid out for her on the bed.

“I had them bring these in for you to wear, while we are waiting for more to be made,” Eiess said. “They should fit. They were your mother’s.”

Lucia lifted the gown off the bed, squeezed it tight to her chest and smelled it. Her mother’s rose-perfumed scent still lingered in the garment.

“If it is too much to bear, I can have—” Eiess started.

“No, this will do,” Lucia said, clinging onto the dress.

“Good,” Eiess said, gliding over to the door. “Take as long as you want to make your decision. After a decision has been made, I expect it to be a lifelong commitment.”

Lucia nodded. “Of course, as would I.”

“Sweet dreams,” Eiess said as she exited.

Lucia slipped into her mother's sleeping tunic and hopped into bed. *I am the Sun Queen now.* She heard Harald stirring and grunting in his crib, but he remained sleeping. She never thought she would have ended up here today. Eiess' offer had been very generous and she was right: they would be more powerful than Ailia and Soren together.

### Frostland

The creaky sleigh arrived in Trollsoe as the sun made its first appearance of the day. Ailia's fingers and toes were frozen numb, and now that her hair was short, clipped to uneven lengths, her ears and neck were constantly cold. After having eaten nothing but snow for several days, she was wasting away.

Her journey had been long and cold, and had taken her through high, snowy mountain paths and between gorges of ice. When she'd fallen asleep for short bouts, her dreams had been filled with images of Soren's dead body and of Lucia's betrayal. When she had been awake, she had huddled to the corner of her prison, pulled her knees close, and tucked her finger between her legs.

People were busy in the streets, opening their shops in the over-crowded market place. Leathers, furs, wool, clothing, jewelry, fowls, and beasts were among the merchandise being sold. The industrious city had nearly managed to outgrow Bergendal over the last decade because of its port, which was

beneficial for merchants and tradesmen. It had been over a hundred years since Eiess had burned the city to the ground, but now there was no sign of destruction anywhere.

Towering buildings and houses that seemed taller than necessary had popped up recently and the city was expanding by the day. Passing by each road, Ailia could peer down the street all the way to the busy longship-filled harbor. *Where does he mean to take me?*

The Viking steered the sleigh onto the wide path in the middle of the city and headed for the bay. They passed men, women, and children busy about their days, dressed in heavy wool overcoats and furs. Trollsoe seemed a happy city and everyone was probably unaware that Bergendal had just been destroyed by the Vikings. Information traveled slowly and it might even be weeks before the news reached here.

Ailia remembered vaguely the story Soren had told her about her first life. *Is this where I lived with him?* she wondered as she looked around.

Shortly after they had crossed the city border, Ailia noticed a young man following her sleigh. He couldn't be more than in his mid to late teens and he wasn't what Ailia would call large in stature. In fact, he looked like he could be the shortest man in Trollsoe. He kept his black curly hair in a low ponytail and he wore a brown-bear fur coat with the hood down. Sneaking after the sleigh, he waved to Ailia and smiled.

She grabbed the bars of her cage and looked out. "Can you help me?" she asked, not knowing whether he would be able to hear her in the distance with other carts, horses and sleighs rushing by and with the bells tolling throughout the city.

"Quiet!" the Viking yelled back at her. "Or I'll take a beating to you."



Suddenly, the young man took off down the street, vanishing without a trace. Ailia sat back down. *That was strange*, she thought.

The closer they came to the ocean, the sweatier her palms became. *Does he mean to sell me to a fisherman?* She thought of the Nukkern, and of her maredreams where she had drowned. If she were to be sold to a seaman, she would have to live on the water for months at a time. Her pulse rose.

Longships and fishing boats lined the docks and the pungent scent of fish infused the air. Seagulls flew above, squawking for food, diving for fish. The Viking stopped by the first longship and approached an elderly man who was busy bundling rope.

“I’d like to sell a well able, strong, young female thrall. She’s a good worker and has served us well in the past,” the Viking said.

*God, please no*, Ailia thought.

“You will need to go see Mercer,” the old man said and pointed to another man, who was dressed like a nobleman.

The Viking directed the sleigh toward Mercer’s *knarr* and repeated his proposition.

“One silver coin,” the nobleman said in a foreign accent, holding his finger up.

The Viking scoffed. “That’s it?” he said. “You’ll have to do much better than that. She is worth at least ten silver coins, my girl.”

*Only ten?* Ailia thought. *That has become the value of my life?*

“If you want more for your thrall, you will want to go see Erik or his son, Leif. They are Vikings and buy women for much more,” the nobleman said. “Six longships that way and you will find them.” He pointed.

The Viking nodded and followed Mercer's direction. By the time they arrived at the brand new longship, Ailia felt sick to her stomach. The thought of being sold to a Viking—being forced to sea—was the absolute worst thing that could happen.

"Are you Erik?" the Viking asked a man who was directing the crew.

"That depends. Who are you?" the man answered, scrutinizing the Viking. His eyes were a deep blueish gray and never rested too long on any one thing. He was as large as Brander, if not larger, and had silver strands of hair shading his dark blond hair.

"I am Oddvar. I was told you buy thrall women."

The man snorted and spit. "Ah! I am and yes, we do," Erik said, placing his hands on his hips. "But today, we are full. No more passengers will fit on this fine dragonship. It is fine, do you not think?" Different colored shields were lined up on the dragonship's edge and the sides of the ship were painted in mustard yellow, rust red, and deep-cobalt blue. A large dragonhead was at the front of the vessel, and was painted gold.

"Uh, yes. She is young and able and—" Oddvar pulled in closer to Erik and whispered something in Erik's ear.

Erik's eyes lit up. "I see. In that case, we can make an exception for one more girl, ay?" he said. "Leif! We have another passenger!"

Ailia wanted to know what Oddvar had whispered, what had made him agree so quickly to take her along.

Leif came running and looked into the cage at Ailia, who was cowering in the corner. His hair was much blonder than Erik's and he had eyes as blue as the bluest of skies. He stood a few inches shorter than his father, but he carried his weight in his chest, and with a fresh scar down the side of his head, and a missing ear, he was an intimidating brute.

“Five silver coins for the girl,” Leif said.

“Bah, ten!” Oddvar insisted.

“Eight, or we leave her behind,” Erik said, handing him the coins.

“Eight it is!” Oddvar stuffed the coins in his sheepskin overcoat pocket. Oddvar opened the door of Ailia’s sleigh and pulled her out.

“Do you speak our language?” Erik asked, grabbing her arm, holding it with an iron grip.

Standing next to the Viking now, she could tell he was even larger than Brander. She had never met a man so large. But no matter his size, she would not speak to the berserker. She squeezed her lips together and looked away.

“She speaks Norse,” Oddvar said and knocked her on the side of the head.

She wanted to shove him back, but reasoned it would be best not to start a long trip at sea in a bad way.

The young man who had followed her earlier suddenly appeared. “I wish to buy her from you,” he said. “I can pay you ten gold coins.” He jingled a leather purse.

*A far better offer, Ailia thought. And I would much rather go with him.* She couldn’t help but notice how he looked like a dwarf next to the three stout Vikings.

Oddvar nodded to Leif and Erik, his eyebrows eagerly rising up.

“No, she has already been sold to us,” Erik said, pulling Ailia toward him and then shoving her toward the dragonship.

“Twenty gold coins,” the young man said.

Erik’s eyes narrowed. “No,” he said again, more firmly this time.

The young man shifted uncomfortably. "I'm willing and prepared to pay you one hundred gold coins for her," he said and huffed. "You'd be a fool to turn it down."

"What is she to you?" Oddvar asked.

"That's my own concern," the young man replied.

"Load her up," Erik said to Leif.

Leif looked at his father as if he had lost his mind. "But—"

"Load her onto the ship, Son," Erik said sternly.

Leif shook his head but did as his father commanded.

*Who is this young man?* Ailia wondered as Leif took her by the arm and led her toward the dragonship.

"Then I surrender my freedom and am willing to come with you as your thrall on your ship!" the young man said to Erik.

Leif stopped and turned around. There was a pause as the Vikings glanced at each other.

"Leave us be and keep your freedom," Leif said. "Don't waste your life on a thrall girl."

"I'm a skilled worker and have labored on longships before. I would be very valuable to you." The young man moved into Erik's way, standing between the dragonship and Ailia.

*He is mighty bold to be so young and small in stature,* Ailia thought.

"If this is some sort of foolery, I will have your head," Erik snapped. "Now, get out of my way!"

The young man shook his head. "The only thing I desire is to come and serve you, so I can be with this woman here," he said, walking over to where Ailia stood, and taking her hand in his.

"You may come as my thrall and I will need those one hundred gold coins from you." Erik's eyebrows arched nearly halfway up his forehead.

The young man didn't flinch or pause and handed Erik the heavy leather pouch.

Erik's eyes shone like golden stars as he peered greedily into the purse. "All aboard!!" he yelled, grinning from ear to ear.

"Who are you?" Ailia whispered as they boarded the dragonship. She looked up at the massive red sail, which carried a black raven. *Just my luck, more bloodthirsty Vikings.* She felt the ship move on the water's surface and she felt a panic rise inside her. They maneuvered toward the stern of the ship, passing rows of wooden chests lining the deck's outer sides and crates and barrels carrying cargo.

"I was going to ask you the same question," the young man said.

"Why are you doing this? Helping me, I mean?" she asked.

"When I saw your wagon—" He paused.

"What?"

Leaning in, he whispered, "I saw a light coming from it." They passed several horses, cows and goats on the deck.

"Light? Hmm—and that made you follow me and give up your freedom?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I believe I know who you are, but I'm afraid to say."

"Don't be afraid," she said, hoping he would know who she was and that was why he had risked his life for her.

Ailia glanced at the ship's stern, which was carved like a dragon's tail and also painted gold like the head. She turned to look at the massive dragonhead prow.

"Ah, you see the dragon," Leif said, walking up next to her. "It's to keep away the sea demons and Jormundgand, the Midgard Sea Serpent that encircles all of Midgard's waters. You know of him, right?"

Ailia looked at him, the nervous knot in her stomach tripling in size.

“You, sit here, you, here,” Leif said. He grabbed a rope and tied their hands and feet together, which he then tied to a steel ring secured to a beam on the deck. “We treat our thralls the same way we treat our animals. You’ll have food and water, but you have no rights other than to breathe the fresh air and to think your own thoughts. We own you now, just like those beasts over there,” he said, pointing. He marched off and came back carrying a hefty, grey fur throw. He flung it at them. “Prepare to cast off!” he shouted to everyone on board.

The young man turned to Ailia again and wrapped the fur around her freezing body. “You are Light, or Lucia.”

*How does he know?*

“I’m Erlend Junior,” he said, grinning broadly, deep dimples etching his pale cheeks.

Ailia thought for a moment. “Erlend—?” she said. Then she remembered, and she gasped. “Erlend!” she yelled, trying to embrace him. “My grandson!” She felt guilty immediately. “You shouldn’t be here! You need to get off this ship. What about your parents? They’ll worry themselves into the grave not knowing where you are.”

“When I saw you, I ran back to Sorenhall as fast as I could. I searched for my parents, but they weren’t there. So my grandfather gave me money to purchase your freedom. I asked him what to do if they wouldn’t sell you and he said, ‘go and bring Light back, no matter the cost.’ So, you see, I couldn’t just leave you. I must complete the mission I started. I’m not a person who gives up so easily, if I might say so myself.”

“Thank you for what you did. I’m very glad you’re here,” she said, studying his face. His skin was spotted with hundreds of freckles, and his dark brown eyes were nearly as dark as his black, curly hair. “Now, how are we going to get out of this mess?”

“It appears we are headed to Frostland and then Floraland, so we’ll have a long time to think about it,” he said.

“I don’t like the water or boats very much,” she said, trying to keep her emotions at bay.

“I can understand why,” he said. “I’m a great swimmer, so if anything happens, I’ll help you.”

“But, we’ll freeze to death in the icy water.”

“Not likely,” he said. “I can manipulate temperatures and heat the water around our bodies. And the only way you can die, is either by beheading or drowning, right?”

For a short while, Ailia had not thought of Soren’s fate, but with the mention of the beheading, her stomach lurched. “The Vikings took Soren.”

“You were with him?”

“Yes. He had just found out it was me. I had just found out it was me.” She offered a thin smile and then she went on to explain how her parents created a plan to deceive Eiess.

Once Ailia had finished, Erlend said, “Don’t worry about Soren. He never dies.”

She wanted to believe him, but her heart refused to listen. The sixty-four Vikings on board readied the ship for departure. They each sat down on their chests next to their lengthy ores and started rowing out to sea. Their rhythm was steady and sure, impelling the longship forward with each forceful row.

Ailia’s heart sank. How would she ever find Soren again, if he were even alive? Suddenly, she thought she heard her name being called.

“Ailia! Ailia!” The voice echoed in the distance. She tried to stand up but couldn’t as the ropes held her down. *Is that who I think it is?* It sounded like Soren and Silya’s voices.

“Ailia!” Soren yelled.

“Ailia!” Silya yelled.

“Soren!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. *He’s alive!* “I’m here, on the dragonship!”

Erlend started chiming in. “She’s here! Ailia’s here!”

The dragonship had reached further out to sea now. Leif came over and gagged Ailia and Erlend with handkerchiefs. “Shut up! You belong to us, did you forget?” He gave them each a potent kick and headed to the ship’s prow and said something to Erik.

*I don’t belong to anyone other than Soren.* Ailia hoped Soren and Silya had heard them, but even if they had, how would they be able to rescue them? They had no longship. They couldn’t swim after them.

Erik stood at the front of the dragonship. “Listen up, everyone. On the last journey, we had a few troublemakers on board.” He walked up the narrow lane. “They didn’t follow instructions. I would love to see any others try to do the same. Throwing people overboard bound and gagged is one of my favorite things to do.” He glared at Ailia for a moment. “Bring the ores up!” he yelled.

Every Viking lifted his ore in from the water and set it aside.

“Prepare to hoist the sail!” Erik blasted.

Vikings ran to different stations and waited for the next command.

“Sails!” Erik bellowed, and the red sail was hoisted up. It immediately caught the strong wind, carrying the dragonship forward. Waves crashed against the bow, and saltwater splashed over the edges and onto the deck. The ship swayed up and down as it drove forth.

*It’s all lost,* Ailia thought. *We’ll be lost forever in Frostland, never to return home.* Tears rolled down her face, and when Erlend saw, he told her not to worry. But how could she not?



After they had sailed for some time, a Vikings undid their gags. "Time to eat," he said and threw them each a bowl of mush.

"How long until we arrive in Frostland?" she asked Erlend. She took a bite of the food, and it tasted so bad that she had to force it down her throat.

"Much depends on the winds. If the winds are as strong as they are now, we could be there in less than a week."

She took a few more bites before she realized she should not have eaten anything at all. "I'm not feeling well," she said, suddenly acutely aware of the unsettling feeling in her stomach.

"Do you think you're going to throw up?" Erlend asked.

She glanced at him, and as her arms wrapped around her belly, she moaned.

"Sir, sir, could we please have a bucket? She's going to throw up," Erlend said, tugging on the nearest Viking's overcoat.

"We have no extra buckets," the Viking said.

She reached for her mouth and moaned again. "Could you untie me so I can relieve myself?" she said.

The Viking hopped over and cut her and Erlend's ties free. "Suppose you cannot escape now," he said.

She sprinted over to the side of the ship and just as she threw her head over the side of the edge, she hurled into the ocean.

"Not used to sailing?" Erlend said, coming up behind her. He stroked her gently on the back.

"I've never been on a ship until now," she said. "Well, not during this life."

"You'll get used to it," he said. "I sail all the time."

She tried to smile, but the vomit was too fresh in her mouth and she quickly found herself hurling again.

By the end of the day, Ailia had vomited more times than she could count. And though the weather was beautiful and sunny,

the winds were strong and continually swayed the longship back and forth. The day seemed never-ending, but finally, the sun set on the horizon, sending the heavens into a whirlwind of rouges.

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Ailia was in and out of sleep that night. She hadn't slept well in the Viking settlement or in the wagon either, but even though she was exhausted and sleep-deprived, she was unable to relax enough to surrender to a deep slumber. Every time the dragonship swayed a bit too much, catching a particularly rough gust of wind or a steep wave, she awoke, fearing the ocean would swallow her into its depths. The cold night was a ceaseless maredream, for when she slept, she dreamt of Eiess or of Unni and Brander being slaughtered by the Vikings, and when she awoke, she thought she might die.

Finally, the sun rose in the east, sending glorious beams of light onto the red sail. Breakfast was the same mush as yesterday and a cup of milk. Ailia's stomach didn't feel as queasy, so she took a bite and waited to see what would happen. Thankfully, the food stayed down, and she was able to finish the meal. Afterwards, Erlend managed to locate shears and worked on evening out Ailia's hair. Just as he finished, Erik approached them.

"Come with me," Erik said to Ailia.

She rose to her feet and followed him down the narrow lane. Stopping at the dragonhead, he offered her to sit next to him on a chest.

"Where did you say you were from?" Erik asked.

She stiffened, fearing an interrogation. “Bergendal, sir.” She sat down. Again, she noticed how large this man was, how the muscles in his thighs protruded from beneath his trousers, and how his feet were at least twice the size of hers.

“How did you end up being a thrall? You don’t seem to fit the part.”

“I was captured by Vikings when they raided Bergendal,” she said.

“So, you are a native then, ay?” Erik asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Yes.”

“What was the name of your Viking chieftain?” His eyes shifted to his men, studying them carefully.

“Gunnar.”

His eyebrows drew heavy over his puzzled eyes. “Haven’t heard of him. I thought I knew all the Viking chieftains. Must be a rogue.” He leaned closer. “You live close to Eiess, do not you, ay?”

She hesitated for a moment, but then nodded.

“Eiess,” He sat up straight and drew a deep breath. “I work for that dragon, you know. She has sent me out to hunt for the Great Sentinor.”

Her breath caught, and she desperately hoped he didn’t notice.

He grabbed a bottle and took a swing, offering it to Ailia.

She shook her head, but when he insisted, she took a small sip and handed it back to him. The strong drink tasted of honey and mead.

“Eiess is uglier than the Midgard sea serpent, Jormundgand. But she is a generous employer.” He turned back to face her again. “Have you heard about this Great Sentinor named Lucia?”

She swallowed.

“She is supposed to destroy Eiess and put an end to this wretched winter,” he said. “I would like that, ay. But what I’d like even better is to find the Great Sentinor.”

“Why?”

“If I do, Eiess has promised me an unlimited supply of dragonships. *Nothing* would be more rewarding than that!” He laughed wickedly. “A thousand dragonships!”

“I’ve heard of the Great Sentinor,” she said. “But, isn’t she just a myth?”

“No, she’s real.” His eyes widened. “Eiess had her captured in the Northlandic Castle a few months ago, but she escaped.”

“I’ve never met her,” she said.

“Hmm,” Erik said, studying her face for a moment. “No one has. She may have just vanished into thin air, this mysterious Great Sentinor. Or perhaps she had fled the country.” He handed her the bottle again and she took a sip. “She is supposedly guided, you know. Do you believe all men and women are guided?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Guided by a higher power—by the gods,” Erik clarified.

“I... I don’t know anymore. I thought I was, but lately, it seems I have had nothing but trouble.”

He laughed heartily at her reply. “I like you, Ailia from Bergendal.” He paused and then said, “Let me give you a piece of advice. Just know that the sun still shines just as brightly even though it’s behind the blackest of clouds. And usually, I have found, to get to Valhalla, you have to spend some time in Helheim.” He stood up, marched off, and yelled at some of his Vikings.

“It seems like it’s going to be night forever,” Ailia muttered beneath her breath.

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Seven days after departing Trollsoe, Ailia spotted the large island.

“We’ll stay one day only when we arrive in Frostland,” Erik directed his crew. “Remember, no plundering there. This is our regular overlay and we need to keep the relationships peaceable.”

A half an hour later, the dragonship arrived at the harbor. They had landed on the southwestern side of the island in Grindale, and Ailia couldn’t wait to have her feet meet the unshifting soil. Frostland was milder than the Northlandic Kingdom, she noted. The gentle sloping hills were covered in snow, but she was surprised to see splotches of bare earth between the white.

“Remember men, no plundering!” Erik yelled as the crew of Vikings stormed off the dragonship. Before Ailia and Erlend were allowed to disembark, Erik ordered one of his men to chain their ankles.

“Erik is obsessed about protecting his investments,” the Viking said. “You follow him. You run, you die.”

After they struggled out of the vessel, Ailia and Erlend lined up behind the two rows of Vikings. *On solid ground again.* A sense of peace filled her.

“Every man may do as he pleases. I’m going to take a bath!” Erik said. Before they had reached land, Erik had spoken of a hot spring of water they were going to visit. “Azure Lagoon,” he had called it.

The Vikings chuckled.

“Be back tomorrow. That’s when we leave for Floraland. All relieved!” Erik turned around and they started hiking toward the spring. About half the Vikings left the lines, while the other half followed their chieftain.

Ailia could tell just a few steps into the trip that the chain was going to rub her skin raw, unless she did something to prevent it. She tore off a piece of her skirt and stuffed it between her stocking and the metal. After she had finished, she did the same for Erlend.

“Thank you,” he said.

“It’s the least I can do for the man who risked his life for me,” she said, taking his arm. They walked behind Erik and the others as the winds plucked at her overcoat. “Have you been here before?”

“Yes, once,” Erlend said. “With my father many years ago. When we were here, a small volcano erupted.”

“That sounds frightening,” she said.

“It wasn’t much of a volcano, though. No one was hurt,” he said.

The hike to the milky-blue springs was not far at all. At the springs, Erik approached a hefty blond, and when he had finished talking to her, the woman approached Ailia and Erlend.

“Ailia comes with me,” she said, unlocking their chains. “If you try to escape, I will kill you. I am Gilda. Good to meet you. Now come.”

Ailia glanced at Erlend. “Will you be all right?”

He nodded.

She trailed after the spirited Frostlander, weaving her way between a crowd of naked women, and soon they arrived at a small wooden bathhouse. In no time, Gilda had stripped and stood stark naked in the low glow of the hearth, her two thick braids dangling down her back. Rolls of fat sat around her

midsection, and her heavy breasts hung halfway down her midsection like two giant pears. When she noticed that Ailia still remained fully clothed, she asked, “Do you not want to bathe?”

“Uh, yes, I do,” Ailia said and began undressing.

“I will have your items mended and cleaned,” Gilda said, taking them from Ailia and placing them into a basket.

“Thank you.” Unaccustomed to being naked in front of strangers, Ailia tried to cover up as best she could. However, her hands were of little help. “Is there perhaps a towel I can use?”

Gilda grimaced. “For what?” She flung the door open and started for the springs, her pale fat jiggling as she trotted toward her destination. “Come, girl!”

Ailia followed Gilda outside, and when the chill air hit her bare flesh, her skin cringed, turning into a blanket of goose bumps. She glanced across the spring, and on the other side, she saw the men. They were far enough away as to where she had a difficult time seeing anything in detail, but not far enough away to where she didn’t recognize their faces. *Are they watching me?*

She ran toward the water as quick as a cat, afraid someone might catch a glimpse of her—or worse, stare. She leapt into the waist-high water and crouched down until her breasts were no longer exposed. The bath of heat relaxed her entire body, and she even found that she enjoyed being in the shallow water.

After the bath, Gilda handed Ailia an off-white linen under tunic and a light green wool over tunic to wear while her other clothes were being cleaned. After Ailia had dressed, Gilda brought her to her longhouse with her. At the longhouse, most of the Vikings had made their way back from wherever they had been and sat at the long table, devouring massive amounts of food and wine. Gilda brought Ailia over to Erik right away.

“Ailia,” Erik said. “Serve me my meal and then, you may eat all you want in the back room with Erlend.”

She did as she was told and then Gilda escorted her to the back room where Erlend sat with chains around his ankles. Gilda secured the chains around Ailia's ankles, and then she left and returned with two full plates of food. Starving, Ailia inhaled the food and didn't stop eating until she felt so stuffed, she could hardly move.

"Not bad, not bad," Erlend said moaning, his hands massaging his protruding belly.

She smiled. "I'm glad you got enough to eat."

"The food is even better than at home." His heavy eyelids closed as he spoke.

After eating all she could, Ailia settled down to rest, her back propped up against a wood pillar. Gilda brought her overcoat to her, and she bundled it up into a pillow. Shortly after she laid her head down, she fell asleep.



## Death

“Wake up!” Ailia heard someone whisper. A hand tenderly caressed her cheek. The voice almost sounded like Soren’s. *I must be dreaming.*

“Ailia.” An arm shook her and she opened her eyes. *Soren.* This was the perfect dream.

“Wake up!” he said, stroking her arm. His clothes were wet and his dark hair fell into his face.

Ailia heard raindrops beating on the rooftop. “I’m so sorry for all that has happened.” *Maybe he is dead and this is his spirit visiting me.* A sinking feeling set in.

“Come with me,” he said, gently tugging at her arms.

“I love you,” she said. But then, when she heard the rattle of the chains, it no longer seemed she was in a dream.

“You have to wake up!” He grabbed her hand and pulled.

Just then, she realized that she was not dreaming, but that Soren was actually there with her and was trying to bring her

with him unnoticed by the slumbering Vikings. She opened her eyes wide and gasped.

“Shh...” He took her face in his hands, and pressed his mouth to hers. The kiss was innocent and unexpected, yet the feel of his lips on hers lit a fire deep within.

She desperately wanted more, but she knew all too well that they had other things that needed to come first—moving to a safer place being the most important. “Wait,” she said. “Erlend Junior is here.” She shook Erlend and woke him up.

“How did he get here?” Soren asked.

“He found me in Trollsoe,” she whispered.

Soren nodded.

“Follow us,” she whispered, helping Erlend to his feet. She grabbed her overcoat, threw it on, and headed toward the door. The chains rattled in the dark and she immediately stopped moving, worried the sound would awaken the Vikings. Soren knelt down and examined them.

“We will have to remove these later,” he whispered. “Just be as quiet as you can.”

Soren opened the back door, and they snuck out one by one. A heavy, low-lying fog had rolled in and a mist of clouds drifted above the glowing springs. Rain mixed with snow came down lightly, tickling Ailia’s skin as it landed on her face. She tried to move quietly, but avoiding any sound from the chains was impossible.

Soren headed toward the shore, signaling for them to follow him, and after they had passed the bath houses, Ailia saw Ivar and Silya waiting with three horses. Ivar nodded to Ailia, as did Silya, and Ailia nodded in return. They were not yet out of danger, but with three skilled warriors by her side, she breathed a little easier.

Soren helped Erlend Jr. onto Silya's horse, and then he lifted Ailia up to his horse before he mounted it himself. Feeling his arms grip around her waist as if he would never let go made her feel safe. Like thieves in the night they rode in silence toward the harbor. After they could no longer see the longhouse, Ailia finally dared to speak.

"How did you find us?" she asked.

"We followed the Vikings' tracks to Trollsoe and once we arrived there, it was easy," Soren said. "We heard you yelling for us from the dragonship. After we realized we could not get you off the ship, we asked around the port, if anyone knew where the dragonship was headed. Erik, it would seem, has a hard time keeping his mouth shut when it comes to bragging about his adventures and a few pieces of silver was all it took."

"How did you manage to escape? When they brought me back outside, you were gone. I saw a trail of blood and I thought they might have killed you," Ailia said.

"I owe my life to Silya," he said. "The Vikings tied me to a tree, stabbed me in the stomach, and left me in the woods for hours. They then decided they wanted to decapitate me, but Silya came riding up just in time and took them out with her bow and arrow. All three at once."

"Are you badly hurt?" Ailia asked.

"Nothing I cannot handle. Are you both all right? Any injuries I need to know about?" Soren asked.

"No," Ailia said. "Erlend isn't injured either."

"That was a very brave thing you did, Erlend. Thank you for watching after my Ailia," Soren said.

Ailia's cheeks warmed from the way he called her *his*.

"It was the only thing I could do. And to me, there was no other option than to make sure she was safe," Erlend said.

Ailia gave him a soft smile. "Thank you."

“Our *karve* awaits at the bay, and once we reach it, we will leave immediately,” Soren said.

They rode in silence until they arrived at the port.

“This *karve* is no match for Erik’s dragonship,” Erlend said, looking at it. “If he comes after us...” He didn’t finish his sentence.

Not only was the boat four times as small as the dragonship, it looked as if it was coming apart at the seams. *It’s not safe. I’ll drown!* Ailia tried to reason with herself that she’d be protected as long as she was with Soren, but her insides turned to fluid. After Soren paid the portman for the rental of the horses, and after Ivar had removed Ailia’s and Erlend’s chains, they were on their way.

Clouds were still rumbling in the heavens and lightning flashed in the distance, splitting the sky in two. Out in the bay, the fickle wind tossed the *karve*’s sail in different directions, moving it nowhere.

“We need to row,” Soren said, picking up an ore and tossing it to Ivar. The others fetched each their ores and they rowed out to sea.

Suddenly, Ailia noticed a small, moving specks of light off the shore. *Are they...?* Her stomach sank. “Torches.” She pointed to them.

The others glanced back toward land.

“Quickly, get the lights,” Soren said. Ivar killed the lantern at the back of the *karve*.

Erik approached the portman and the portman pointed out to sea in their direction.

“Oh, Mjoelnir!” Ivar gasped. “They are coming for us!”

Erik and the twenty Vikings with him headed straight toward the dragonship, their torches lining up one behind each other.

“Row!” Soren said, securing his grip around his ore.

Everyone aboard the *karve* started rowing for their lives, knowing full well that the odds were sorely not in their favor.

“Stop rowing!” Soren shouted, dropping his oar.

“What?” Ailia said. “They’re going to kill us if we stop!”

“I need to call upon someone for help if we are to make it out alive.” He tore off his overcoat and two tunics and stepped out of his boots before diving into the freezing ocean.

Ailia ran over to the edge of the *karve* and looked for him in the deep. Seconds turned into minutes, but finally, he surfaced a ways away and swam toward them. They hoisted him back into the vessel and helped him dress.

“Who...” Ailia started, but before she could ask who he had called upon, Erlend interrupted her.

“Can I try something?” Erlend asked.

“Of course,” Soren said. “Anything at this point.” His dark hair dripped of saltwater and his entire body trembled.

“I’ve been trying to develop my endowment. I haven’t yet perfected it, but I might be able to speed the ship up with the help of the wind.” Erlend fidgeted where he stood.

“Can you do it?” Soren asked.

“Well, last time I tried it, my boat capsized,” Erlend said and grimaced.

Ailia’s knees grew weak.

“Oh.” Soren nodded and his eyes flared.

“But that was over a month ago and my boat was just a small fishing boat!” Erlend confessed. “I’m much better at it now.”

“Do it,” Soren said.

Ailia’s chest started revolting as she thought about the water and her most recent near-drowning experience. If anything went wrong, even Soren probably couldn’t keep her safe. But there simply were no other options.

Erlend nodded. He breathed out quickly twice and cracked his knuckles. Closing his eyes, he raised his arms into the air and stood like a statue.

They waited. Nothing happened. The Vikings were getting closer—too close.

“Erlend?” Soren said. “They are closing in on us.”

“Wait just a little while longer,” Erlend said, keeping his eyes closed, now squinting them shut. “Now, hold on tight!” he yelled.

Suddenly, a gust of wind caught the sail and thrust the *karve* forward.

Ailia nearly fell out into the water, but Soren grabbed her arm, pulling her back in. Holding on tightly to him, she kept repeating in her mind, *Soren will keep me safe, Soren will keep me safe, Soren will keep me safe*. With the sudden movement, her head spun.

“Whoa!” Erlend said. “This is amazing! I’m simply amazing!”

Ailia heard Soren laugh. She looked into his eyes in the darkness and they both smiled. The *karve* skimmed across the surface of the water and it felt as if Ailia’s stomach was turning inside out. Then, out of nowhere, the wind ceased and the *karve* stalled, its speed decreasing abruptly.

“I don’t understand,” Erlend said. He stood up again and refocused. Nothing happened. He breathed deeply, grunted and cursed the winds that did not bow to his command. The distance between them and the dragonship was great, but the Vikings were gaining on them quickly.

“To the ores!” Soren yelled.

Ailia took her place and started rowing with all her might, but it was of no use. What they needed was a miracle.

Within minutes, the dragonship had overtaken them, and the next thing she knew, the first Viking had jumped into the *karve*. Soren pulled out his longsword, stabbed the intruder in the abdomen, and pushed him into the sea. Two other Vikings jumped in. Ivar pulled his dagger and slashed at one of them. Soren struggled a little this time, but finally sliced off the arm of the other and kicked the Viking into the ocean.

Ailia stood behind Erlend, who had picked up a sword from the deck and moved in front of her.

“I’ll protect you,” he said.

Then, she felt a rope lasso her body and she screamed. When she looked up, she saw that it came from the dragonship, and she was drawn toward the edge of the *karve*. Even resisting all she could, she still couldn’t prevent being pulled out into the sea. Dangling from the rope with her torso above water and her legs below, she screamed again. She looked up and saw that Leif was at the other end of the rope, pulling her upwards.

“You will never escape me!” he roared, his eyes gleaming with rage.

“Soren!” she yelled. “Help!”

Soren immediately rushed to her, but instead of reaching out a hand to help, he slashed the rope that confined her with his longsword so she plummeted into the ocean. Before she could even manage to become furious with Soren, freezing water enclosed her body.

*I cannot swim! I cannot swim!*

She kicked her feet and flailed her arms, but the pull of the water was too strong to fight against. She heard the pounding of the sea, the clanking as longswords met, and the pang of lightening as it flashed in the distance. She opened her eyes, but there was only blackness as far as her eyes could see. Flailing her arms, she found nothing to grab hold of, so she continued to

sink. What had Soren done? Was he trying to kill her? Then, with the strike of the next lightning bolt, she saw a horrifying, yet familiar face in front of her: the Nukkern.

As if the bolt from the sky had hit her, a jolt of fear shot through her. Petrified, she started hitting the Nukkern's chest with her fists. He grabbed her arms and pulled her further under with him. Gripping her face with his cold, wrinkled hands, he placed his blue-ridged lips over hers.

She struggled to free herself, but the more she fought, the harder he gripped her. But then, Ailia felt air fill her lungs from the Nukkern's breath. She inhaled and pulled back in surprise.

He smiled. It was a grotesque smile, but a smile nonetheless.

She exhaled and he pressed his lips to hers again, exhaling air into her lungs. *Is he... helping me? Did Soren beckon for him?* She exhaled.

Yet a third time, the Nukkern came toward her, exhaling air into her lungs. Then, he exploded upwards out of the water and dove back into the sea with four Vikings clutched in his grip.

The Vikings kicked and squirmed, but the Nukkern was too strong for even the four of them. He dragged them down to the deep.

Then, the Nukkern returned and granted Ailia air before bursting to the surface again, only to bring three more Vikings with him. He disappeared into the depths with the savages and returned empty-handed. Grabbing her arms, he pulled her upwards. She gasped frosty air into her lungs as she broke through the waves. Blinking the stinging saltwater from her eyes, she realized she was between the *karve* and the dragonship. The Nukkern swam her toward the dragonship, and just as they reached it, Soren and Silya hauled her out of the water and set her onto the deck.



Ailia felt numb all over and she was helpless to stop the uncontrollable shaking. Her fingernails and toenails ached, and the tips of her ears felt as if they had knives digging into them. Looking around, she was surprised when she couldn't see a single Viking anywhere. *They must have killed them all off and pushed them into the ocean.*

"You've been under for a few minutes. Erlend will help you warm up." Soren offered her his hand and led her over to where Erlend stood.

"Don't you care that I could have died!?" she said, thinking he seemed too calloused for what he had just put her through.

"I would never have allowed that," he replied calmly.

Erlend sat down behind her, and Soren helped Ailia sit between their grandson's legs. When Erlend wrapped his arms around her, heat spread through her body at once.

"Remember, you are a Sentinor," Soren said. "You could have been under the icy water for days and still have survived as long as you had air."

"You could have warned me that the Nukkern was down there," she said, her teeth still clattering.

"There was no time." He spoke with some emphasis.

She huffed, but knew the conversation would go nowhere. Considering from Soren's point of view, she was nearly immortal, but how had he trusted the Nukkern so completely? Only a short while ago, the water demon had wanted to kill her.

"I thought I was going to die!" she yelled.

"But you did not." Soren stared at her for a moment, but then walked off as he wiped blood from his longsword.

Was he ignoring her? That made her even angrier and she wanted to go after him. However, the heat emerging from Erlend felt too good, and being so cold, she could not tear herself away. She would have to talk to Soren later.

“This is all I have,” Silya said, handing Ailia a Sami outfit.

“Thank you,” Ailia said and took the clothes.

Just then, Ivar collapsed onto the *karve*’s deck.

“Ivar!” Soren called. He rushed over and knelt down beside him.

Ailia crawled to the fallen man’s side.

“I think those Vikings got me good, Soren,” Ivar said, uncovering his hand from his chest, revealing a deep gash.

Soren examined the wound for a moment, and then without a word, he glanced at Ailia. Emotion filled his eyes and he shook his head ever so subtly.

“It is an honor to die this way, defending the Great Sentinor. The gods will—” Ivar took a deep breath and looked at Ailia. “—surely welcome me in to Valhalla.”

“Can’t you do something to spare his life, Soren?” Ailia took Ivar’s hand in hers.

“I am sorry, my friend.” Soren cradled Ivar’s head in his lap, and placed a hand over Ivar’s wound.

*Is he relieving Ivar’s pain?* Ailia wondered.

“I fought a good fight,” Ivar said. “You must succeed, Ailia. You must. For me, for your mother, your father, for all us fallen for freedom’s sake, for your sake.” He closed his eyes and a wrinkle of pain knotted between his eyebrows.

Ailia nodded fervently, her eyes brimming with tears. She wanted to say *I will*, but the words became stuck in her throat. *I will. I will.*

Ivar coughed, and blood sputtered from his mouth onto his beard. He took two more labored breaths, and as if seeing something in the distance, his eyes widened. “Amma,” he said with his last breath as he stared into the distance. For a moment, everything was still, and Ailia thought even the wind had ceased to blow to show its reverence for the fallen warrior.

“Ivar,” Ailia cried. She lowered her head to his forehead, and kissed his warm, sweaty brow.

“I cannot do *all* things, Ailia. I am not an omnipotent healer.” Soren brushed his fingers over Ivar’s eyes, closing them.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” she said, her hand reaching for his.

He offered her a nod. “Amma was his late wife. He is with her now.”

They placed Ivar into the *karve*, and sent his body out to sea. When the small longship had drifted a ways, Silya shot nine flaming arrows, setting it on fire, and as it burned off the coast of Frostland, she sang a melancholy Sami melody.

“How were you able to convince the Nukkern to help?” Ailia asked as she watched the flames rise to the heavens. She was still upset at what had happened, but now that her fear had calmed, she could speak of what had transpired without losing her temper.

“He owed me one last favor,” Soren said.

Ailia shifted uncomfortably where she stood.

“I would never have done anything to put you in harms way,” he said, taking a step closer. His tired eyes carefully searched hers. “I forget you do not trust me completely yet.”

“Did I...before?” It felt strange speaking of a past which included him and her, but without having any sort of recollection of it.

The right side of his lips rose and he stroked her hair. “Not at first.” He took another step closer and reached his arms around to her back, burying her in his embrace.

*I am home.*

Standing in each other’s arms, they watched as the bottomless sea swallowed up the great warrior. And after the last of the

smoke had risen to the heavens, the living began their journey home in their new dragonship.

### A New Beginning

Sorenhall stood five longhouses from the bay. Small circular wooden tiles coated the sweeping roof, and the body of the abode was made of stacked stones held together by clay. Other than the Fest Hall in Bergendal, Sorenhall was the largest longhouse Ailia had ever seen. Across the courtyard stood a small, wooden hut, and a barn was situated behind it.

The instant Soren, Ailia, Erlend Jr., and Silya walked through the wooden gate, a blond, middle-aged woman ran toward Erlend Jr., and threw her arms around him.

“That’s Liv,” Soren whispered to Ailia. A trail of goosebumps went down her spine when his lips touched her earlobe. On the way back to Trollsoe, there had been little privacy as Silya and Erlend Jr. were on the dragonship with them. Soren would steal pecks from Ailia, but she knew he was holding back, not wanting to embarrass her or the others with their display of affection. During the week, whenever he had a chance, he had shared with her stories of their previous lives.

She, too, had told him about her life in Bergendal and of how her maredreams had started the day she turned seventeen. She enjoyed their conversations immensely, and they came with the greatest of ease, yet she longed for so much more. More touches. More kisses. More time. With the lightest touch, or the briefest glance, he set her body on fire, and she only imagined how wonderful it would be once they no longer had to restrain their affections.

“I was worried sick, child,” Liv said, tugging at Erlend Jr.’s brown bear fur coat, her eyes filled with tears and her expression one of horror. “Not a word other than that you thought you had seen Light, and then you vanished as if the sea had swallowed you up whole.”

“I told Bestfather to tell you,” Erlend Jr. said apologetically.

Liv gave him a stern look. “Oh, he did tell me, he did, and he told me not to worry my sweet little head, but a mother will worry if her child goes missing for weeks. No man should dare tell a woman to calm down if that happens. And in truth, the old man didn’t know what had become of you. You could have been sold as a slave yourself and I never would have seen you again!”

“There wasn’t time,” he said. “Ailia was being sold to Vikings and they were just about to set sail.”

Liv huffed. “I know. I know.” She turned to Ailia. “And I don’t blame you one bit. It’s just how it had to happen.” She glared back at Erlend Jr. “Just promise me, young man, never, ever do it again.”

“I’m sorry,” Erlend Jr. said.

Relief washed over her pale, slightly wrinkled face, and as if she had become a completely different person, she offered a scintillating smile. “Now, welcome to our home.” Her barely-there eyebrows wiggled as she spoke in an excited tone of voice,

and as she moved with the energy of a five year old. “Please, please come inside. You must all be so very exhausted.”

Liv wrapped her arm around Ailia’s shoulders and steered her toward the entrance. “I’ve wanted to meet you since the day I was born!”

Ailia smiled. “And I, you.”

“Watch your steps,” Liv said as they entered through the door.

The scent of beef stew filled Ailia’s nostril when she stepped inside. The longhouse was warm and uncommonly light, lit by dozens of lanterns and three hearths: two in the main room, one in the kitchen.

“Now, there’s an eastern entrance too, but this door is the main one and leads straight into the kitchen. My husband Otto is out fishing today with Erlend Sr., poor guy. Erlend Sr., I mean, not my husband. Erlend can barely keep up these days. You’ll meet them both later. They’re never late for repast.”

Liv’s casual demeanor helped put Ailia at ease.

“Now, I always, always speak my mind, whether my words make sense to anyone else or not, so please don’t take anything personally or read too much into it. Sometimes, I cannot even make sense of what I’m saying myself,” Liv said with a chortle.

Ailia laughed.

“So, here’s the kitchen and I’ve made beef stew for tonight,” Liv said. “Had I known you were coming, I would have cooked up the fresh salmon, but perhaps we can have that tomorrow. Nevertheless, here’s the pantry and storage room and of course —” she waved them to continue to follow her, “—here is the main room. I’ll have you sleep in here on the benches next to the children over there. Will that suit you? If not, I can—”

“It will suit us just fine,” Soren said.

“Or you can sleep in the cot—or, no—I have a better idea,” Liv said, not divulging it, but grinning excitedly.

Two hearths glowed in the center of the narrow, long room and low-lying platforms lined the walls on either side. The loom and spinning wheel were situated on the left platform next to where the children slept and three longtables decked the platform on the right.

Soren whispered to Ailia, “If you do not remember, Liv and Alva are our great grandchildren. Liv married Otto and together, they have three young children. Alva married his wife Eira and together they have two children.”

Ailia nodded. She wanted to meet them, so she could put faces with their names. *My children’s children.*

“Ah, there you are!” Liv said, welcoming two men as they stepped in through the door. “Erlend Sr. and Otto, meet Ailia.”

“I told you your son would be back without a scratch,” Erlend Sr. said when he saw Erlend Jr. “All that worrying for nothing, woman.”

“Oh, hush, old man,” Liv snapped. “You claim to be clairvoyant, but half the time I think you just pretend to have had a vision so we’ll listen to your nonsense.” But then she offered him a small grin.

“Erlend Sr., Freydis’s son and the patriarch of the family, is slowing down at the ripe old age of seventy-three,” Soren whispered to Ailia. “And although Liv would never admit to it, he is indeed clairvoyant.”

Erlend Sr. headed straight toward Ailia and hugged her warmly. “I have been waiting all my life, just so I could meet you,” he said. He resembled Soren in many ways, but was shorter, had wrinkled skin, and had gray hair instead of dark brown.

“Me too,” Ailia said, tearing up. *Freydis’s son.*



Otto embraced her next. “It’s an honor to finally meet you. Please, our home is your home. You are welcome to stay—well, forever if you’d like.” His thick, black beard fluttered when his lips moved and his kind hazel eyes seemed to smile even though his full lips didn’t.

“Thank you,” Ailia said.

“Perhaps you’d like to rest a little before repast?” Liv said.

“That sounds wonderful,” Ailia said, feeling exhausted after the long, hard trip back. Liv showed them to her and Otto’s box bed, and as soon as her head hit the down pillow, Ailia was out.

\* \* \*

That evening, when everyone had arrived back home, Erlend Sr. took it upon himself to formally introduce the family to Ailia. They gathered around the hearth, sitting on benches, huddling close to the flames.

“This is Stina. She is seventeen and Vidar here is eighteen and, finally, Erlend Jr., named after me of course. You already met him, but he is nineteen, almost twenty and is the eldest of all the grandchildren,” he said, looking proud, sitting in his chair waiving his crooked, old cane. “Liv and Otto are very blessed to have such lovely children. Are they not beautiful?”

“Yes, so very beautiful,” Ailia said. “I’m pleased to meet you all.” They had a special glow about them, she thought, and they had the same black curly hair as Erlend Jr. Did, taking after their father, Otto.

“And here are Alva and Eira’s young ones. Martin just turned eighteen and Solvei is the baby of them all,” Erlend Sr. said, placing his hands on her shoulders.

“I just turned sixteen!” Solvei yelled. “And, who are you exactly?” she asked Ailia, staring her down with an iron glare and less than hospitable demeanor. Her blond, messy hair fit well with her feisty personality.

“Well, I’m your—uh—” Ailia didn’t quite know what to say.

“Aunt will do just fine,” Liv said, standing next to Ailia as she winked at Soren.

Soren smiled and nodded. “Aunt Ailia. I like that.”

Ailia narrowed her eyes at him.

“Watch out for Solvei,” Erlend Sr. said. “She is beautiful as the day is long, but she has the tongue of a dragon!” He laughed until he started hacking and coughing.

“Erlend’s wife, Ida, died last winter of a sudden onset of pneumonia. That is why he still wears his black mourning clothes,” Soren whispered.

*I wish I would have met her too.* Ailia nodded.

Later that same evening, the family sat down for repast to a meal worthy of the gods. As the sun sank into the ocean, the satiated group meandered back over to the two living hearths. Ailia sat beside Soren, and he took her hand in his, holding it on his lap. Shadows of gray played on the surface of the bisque oak walls and intensified as the darkness set in.

“Can I have your attention?” Silya asked the gathering. In her hands she held an item covered in a black linen cloth. “I was able to locate something of extreme value to everyone here. I apologize for not telling you sooner, but I did not because of the risks.”

Ailia glanced at Soren. From his slightly bewildered expression, she could tell he didn’t know what was underneath the cloth either. However, she assumed he was thinking the same thing as she was. *The Aesira Jewel.*

Silya had Liv pull up a table and she carefully placed the wrapped item on it. Then, she unfolded the cloth and revealed its contents: a large, multi-faceted, oval jewel.

“Behold the Aesira Jewel,” Silya said.

A gasp went through the room.

“Where did you get it?” Soren asked.

“From Bishop Peter. After he ran from the church, he hid in the woods, waiting until the Vikings had moved on. Just after Lucia had left, he arrived at Brandersgaard with it, entrusting it in my keeping.”

“Is it a real diamond?” Solvei asked, her eyes trained on the massive jewel.

“The three-hundred and sixty faceted yellow diamond was created in Alvheim by Iluxia,” Silya said.

“I have heard it’s what shifts the seasons. Is that right?” Erlend Jr. asked.

“Yes,” Soren said.

“How was the jewel created?” Solvei asked.

Soren rose to his feet, walked over to the jewel, and picked it up. “Iluxia took one forty facet yellow diamond from each of the nine realms and soldered the nine separate pieces into one. Ailia, come here,” he said, looking at her.

She approached Soren. Standing this close to it, she could see that the Aesira Jewel rested in a gold filigree sunbeam setting and was held in place by nine gold pave-set prongs.

“You have Aesira blood running through your veins, so now the Aesira Jewel is yours,” Soren said to Ailia.

“Now all we need to do is to locate the Aesira Scrolls, so I will know how to use it,” Ailia said. “Silya, do you know if the church was destroyed?”

The Sami woman shook her head, looking despondently angered.

“If the scrolls were indeed destroyed, Iluxia knows how to use it,” Otto said.

“Yes, but we will have to go to him, because I have not seen him since the eternal winter started. He may not be able to enter Midgard because of it,” Soren said.

“Could we travel to Alvheim?” Ailia asked.

Soren nodded. “But first things first. We need to find the scrolls and then—” he took Ailia’s hand in his. “Ailia and I have something we would like to speak to all of you about.”

All ears perked in the room.

“Yes?” Erlend Sr. said, holding his goblet up. Guri filled it with more wine.

“As you all know, Ailia and I are forming an alliance to fight in Ragnarok, to take the throne back from Eiess and destroy her,” Soren said.

Everyone nodded.

“We both had serious doubts whether or not to ask you what we are about to ask you,” Soren said. “Because we worried that your lives would be a risk.”

Ailia steadied her trembling breath.

“We both agreed that you, our beloved family, are the best choice to fight at the forefront alongside us.” Soren looked at Ailia.

“There would be no greater honor than to fight and defeat Eiess, with you on our side, at the final battle of Ragnarok,” Ailia said.

Erlend Sr. spoke up immediately. “What, are you completely senseless? Who do you think we are, exactly?”

Ailia’s heart leapt into her throat. “Well, you see...if—”

“Shut up and listen you two,” Erlend Sr. said, wagging his old, crooked finger at them. A vacuous emptiness of words and

breaths held the previously merry room hostage. No one moved. Not even the youths.

Erlend Sr. leaned forward, his glare fixated in Soren's. "We will not support you in the final battle," he paused. "—only. We will support you in *every* battle from today and until the final battle!" He lifted his goblet, splashing wine onto the oak floor.

Ailia exhaled in relief.

"Hip, hip!" Otto said.

"Hip, hip!" Alva and Eira chimed in.

"Hip, hip!" Everyone in the room cheered with their goblets held high.

"Then the first step of our plan is underway," Soren said, squeezing Ailia's hand.

As everyone settled into quiet conversations around the hearth, Soren leaned over to Ailia. "Would you like to take a walk with me?"

She'd spent the entire week with him, but the thought of being completely alone made her knees go weak. "I'd like that very much." They told the family they were heading out for a walk, and then they slipped on their overcoats and mittens.

Large, but few, snowflakes sailed from the partly cloudy heavens as they stepped outside. Quietness had fallen over the sleeping Trollsoe like a reverent prayer, as if the gods had granted Ailia and Soren this rare moment of serenity. They exited through the gate and took a left at the main road.

"I used to think everything was written in the stars," Ailia said, looking up at the shimmering lights that peeked out in between the clouds. She grabbed his arm and leaned her head onto his shoulder.

"And now?" Soren asked.

"Now, I realize all things are written on my heart."

"Even me?" He glanced at her from beneath his lashes.

“Especially you,” she said.

He took both of Ailia’s mitten-covered hands in his and walked backwards, pulling her along. “I have something I would like you to read.”

“Oh?”

He stopped walking backwards and pulled out an old, yellowed scroll from inside his overcoat.

“What is it?” she asked as he handed it to her.

“Just read it.”

She carefully unrolled the fragile scroll, afraid she might damage it. The words on the letter were blurred and streaked, as if drops of water had bled the ink. *Tears?*

*My dearest Spiritus Amor, Soren,*

She looked up.

His eyes urged her to continue reading.

*Eiess’ longship arrived at the docks today and I have decided to surrender, so that many lives will be spared, including yours and Freydis’. I suspect Eiess will drown me at sea, since she knows it is only by that method I can die. She is still as deceitful as she was when she broke our covenant in Alvheim and descended into mortality in Midgard, violating the deified barrier between mortals and divine beings.*

Ailia breathed. “I wrote this.” A

Soren nodded and she continued reading.

*We should have prepared much better in this, my second life, to conquer her. But how could we have known that she had grown so much stronger than before? You must not blame*

*yourself—promise me you will not. This is not the end, Soren, but the beginning of Ragnarok, which will give us our freedom to love each other forever. This is not the time to mourn our apartness but to plan for the greatest event in our lives. You must continue to plan for my return and gather as many allies as you can. Try to find Eiess' weakness, so we can use it against her when we need to. I will be back and though I will remember nothing of who I am or of our previous lives when I am reborn, I know you will help me remember.*

*Please take care of Freydis. She is so beautiful and I cannot mourn enough that I will not be able to raise her. One day, her children and our descendants may support us and help us in the final battle of Ragnarok.*

Tears spilled out of Ailia's eyes. *When I wrote this, I was with our daughter.*

Soren stepped behind her, kissed her on the cheek and cradled her in his arms.

Her throat had clamped up so much that she could not continue reading out loud. She lowered the scroll, but suddenly Soren started reciting the letter from memory.

*Know that I am always with you, thinking of you wherever I am and waiting to be reunited with you, my Spirit love. Remember what Iluxia said in Alvheim before we clothed ourselves with mortality: our hearts will speak the truth to our souls—that is how we will find one another and remember who we are to each other and to the world. Our love will guide us and help us overcome the destroyer of all freedom, happiness and light.*

*My greatest fear, my love, is not to be tortured or to even suffer death again, but rather that I might not be able to fulfill*

*my destiny in life with you by my side. I do not know when I will return, or when you will find me again, but know that I will be waiting for you to awaken my soul with your voice and your loving touch.*

*The word 'love' does not encompass enough of what I feel for you, for it is so much more than mere love that we share. I am in you and you are in me. We are the creation of two spirits sealed together as one, created for each other for the eternities. When our souls join, they burn with more fervor than the Sun, they move more than the strongest of winds and give life, like the fountain of eternal living waters. Together, we will fight the battles of Ragnarok and together, we will triumph.*

*I will be waiting for you, Soren, so wait for me and keep your eyes and your heart open for the day when I will return to you. And remember, at the end of all things, it will not be hope that will keep us going, it will only be each other.*

*All my love and life, Lucia*

“I have read it a few times,” he said.

“Oh, Soren,” she said, wishing she could remember him. But perhaps she did, though not in the normal sense. Her mind could not recall the memories, but her heart could, for it felt so full, burning with desire, coming alive again with his voice and touch.

“We must plan for our new lives now,” he said, coming around to face her.

“Yes.” She could barely see through her veil of tears. She tried to imagine how difficult it must have been for Soren to wait for her all these years, when after having been with him for so long, she could not imagine living a day without him.



He drew her in close, and they gazed into each other's eyes, their noses almost touching. He caressed her cheek first and then he traced the edges of her lips with his fingers. She could see in his magnificently blue eyes how much he needed her and though she had imagined this moment countless times before, she had never anticipated how blissful a state his touch would send her.

He started showering her neck and face with kisses and she closed her eyes, tilted her head back and let out a sigh. Her spirit merged with his, exalting her into a higher state; yet, she had never felt more true to herself.

Then, finally, he reached behind her head and gently pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was unbelievably sensual. Their faces so near, so sensitive to the touch, sweeping against each other, as their cold noses brushed with each wet kiss. Their breaths mingled warm and close in the chill winter air, together as one. Ailia became lost in her senses, feeling only love coming from him and her loving him back.

*He is mine and I am his.* The kiss grew more passionate and Ailia's desire for her Sentinor had never been deeper. She could feel in his movements that he had been waiting for this moment too, and that he wanted and needed her in every possible way. She wondered if it had been this wonderful during her first two lifetimes, if he had been able to arouse her body to this level of absolute need to have the flames quenched. His arms moved across her back, pulling her closer to him—so close, she could feel his heart beating. She reached to the back his head and locked her arms behind his neck. She tasted his sweet lips, but she couldn't get enough and wanted to be even closer to him still.

Her heart dropped a little when she felt him starting to pull away.

Still embracing her body, he looked into her eyes. “I have something else I would like to show you.”

“What?” she asked, her chest still pounding, her body still yearning so much for his. She didn’t want to be anywhere other than in his arms, kissing him, holding him, making love to him.

“Come with me.” He took her hand and started down the road.

Next to Sorenhall was an empty lot, and in the middle of the snow-blanketed field, Ailia could see timber and the unfinished construction of a longhouse.

They waded through the snow and finally at the incomplete longhouse, Soren said, “Our new home.” He guided her in between the sawdust and logs. “I started building it right before I met you.” He knelt down in front of her, pulled back his hood, and looked up at Ailia. “For three-quarters of a century I have been waiting for you and awaiting the day when we could begin our lives anew. The loss of your life has been the hardest thing I have had to endure, but now, having you stand here in front of me, I realize that the pain has all been worth it, just so I can see you and marry you again. Will you, Ailia? Will you marry me?”

Ailia fell to her knees and kissed him over and over again, tears streaming from her eyes. “Yes, Soren, yes,” she said. “I have always known there was only one person for me, a special someone waiting for me, and now I have finally found you again. I’m already yours, forever.”

Just as she had said the last words, the earth below them started to quake. A worried look flashed across Soren’s face and he quickly lifted Ailia to her feet. “Back to Sorenhall,” he said. By the time they had arrived back home, the quaking had ceased.

“Did you feel the earth move?” Otto asked them when they entered.

“Yes,” Soren said. “It must have been a small earthquake.”

“No,” Erlend Sr. bellowed from his rocking chair. The irises in his eyes had turned white. “Eiess knows you have found each other. She has just sent legions of Surtorians out after you. I saw it just now.”

“How many are in a legion?” Ailia asked.

Soren looked at her, his face ashen. “Six thousand.”

Ailia shrunk. “And how many... legions?”

“Six,” Erlend Sr. said, his eyes still white from the vision.

“Six? That means there will be—” Ailia did the math in her head. “Thirty-six thousand Surtorians.” The only references she had to these Surtorians were from her maredreams and that one incident by the Bergendal Stave Church, and brushing shoulders with only a few of them had nearly shaken her to pieces.

“We must head for Floraland,” Soren said.

“No!” Erlend Sr. stood up slowly and walked toward Ailia and Soren. “You must go to the place where Eiess does not want to go. You must head south where the sun shines nearly all day and all night.”

“The Southlandic Kingdom.” Soren nodded and looked at Ailia, his eyes brimming with sincerity. “Mumtaz will be delighted to have us.”

## **Epilogue**

### **Brandersgaard**

Unni flopped down by the lit hearth, her body aching and her spirit down. Brander, Sigrid, and her had worked on repairing their farm for the last week and the endless piles of rubble blanketing the interior of their longhouse had finally seemed to decrease. The hole in the roof would take major repair and it didn't look like they would receive help from any neighbors, as the other longhouses were in just as bad, or worse condition than Unni's and Brander's.

The night of the raid, the flames had swallowed up most of their wooden benches and any other valuables had been plundered. Fortunately, it had snowed heavily the night the Vikings had invaded Bergendal and the fire on the roof had dwindled on its own. Unni hadn't returned until several days later after she had gone looking for Lucia and Soren, and when she returned, she was devastated to see her hometown and her longhouse completely destroyed by the berserkers.

Brander walked in with soot all over his troubled face. “The last measly chicken just died,” he said, holding the dead fowl up by its legs. “Damn Vikings. And where is Soren and Ivar in all of this?” He sat down on the floor and crossed his legs, plucking away at the chicken’s feathers.

“I don’t know, Brander. They’re probably looking for Ailia,” Unni said. *Always so grumpy.*

It seemed like half of Bergendal had disappeared with the Vikings. Brander and Unni’s neighboring farm had burned to the ground and they considered themselves lucky to have only major repairs.

“Has anyone located Bishop Peter yet?” Unni asked. *Strange how he disappeared.*

“No, he vanished with the rest of the captives. Rumor has it that they were all transported to Trollsoe, immediately to be sold as thralls. He probably joined in that group of unfortunate souls.” Brander wiped his sweaty forehead with his forearm.

“I wanted to visit the church today and help with the clean up. It was a miracle the whole church didn’t burn down.” She took off her apron and reached for her overcoat. “Are you coming with me?”

“You’re leaving *our* house to go help someone else?”

“Precisely.”

Brander grumbled. “I’ll stay here and keep working on the roof. As long as the hole is still there, any warm air is going to escape and we’re going to keep freezing.”

Just then, Sigrid limped in. “I’ll help you, Brander. You go, Unni. The church needs it. Besides, maybe there’ll be some clues to help you find Ailia.”

“Do you have the dagger?” Brander asked. He had given her the day after the Vikings had attacked. “I want you to keep this on your personage always,” he had said. Unni would normally

have objected, but not now, not after all the slaughter she had seen of her people.

“Yes.” She lifted up her skirt so he saw it attached around her ankle. “I’ll be back before dark,” she said and shut the door behind her. She took a shortcut through the woods and soon arrived at the church.

Just as she stepped up to the door, a stranger came out. “Good day, my sister in Christ,” he said and bowed. “My name is Draper. How may I be of service?”

“Good day. I’m Unni. Nice to meet you. Are you new to the area? I cannot remember seeing you before,” she said. “Either way, I have come to be of service and I’d like to help clean up, if that’s all right with you.”

“I am new indeed—a few weeks now, as a matter of fact. Any help would be greatly appreciated.” Draper took her by the arm and led her inside. He smiled broadly, watching Unni closely as he spoke. “Are you Ailia’s aunt?”

“Yes,” Unni said, not wanting to volunteer more information than needed. *Strange that he knows.* Unni noticed that Draper dressed differently than the other deacons. He wore a black tunic linen alb, with a purple cloth over his left shoulder. A golden Thor’s hammer was embroidered on the bottom of the purple shawl. His head was shaved in the center like a circle.

“Ah, the Great One,” Draper said, his voice high-pitched and unusually feminine-sounding.

Unni stopped walking. “What do you know about the Great One?”

“Oh, nothing. I am only a servant of the Lord, my lady,” Draper said, bowing his head humbly. “The outside of the church is barely touched, but so many things were destroyed inside,” Draper went on.

“I see,” Unni said, walking through the chapel. More things had vanished than she had initially noticed. She saw that a few of the stained-glass windows were broken and the floor was covered in rubble and broken candles. All of the silver had vanished and the statues were either decapitated or were missing. *How could they do such a thing to the Lord’s house?*

“We do not have many things left, but we are trying to find the will of the Lord when it comes to finding a new leader to guide the church here in Bergendal. Unfortunately, Bishop Peter has vanished.” He folded his arms across his thick chest.

Unni wondered if Draper had anything to do with Bishop Peter’s disappearance.

“I was here the very night the Vikings struck. What horrible brutes they are. No matter. I will have you start cleaning the rotunda floor first,” he said, pointing her to the back.

“That would be great,” Unni said, taking off her overcoat and folding it over one of the benches. *I will warm up once I get scrubbing.* She studied the paintings on the ceiling and walls while she waited for Draper to bring her the cleaning supplies.

Draper quickly returned and set the water-filled wooden bucket on the floor. “These were the only rags I could find. They will have to do. I will be in the back if you need anything. Oh, and here is the soap.” He handed it to her.

“Thank you,” Unni said, wetting the cloth and brushing it across the soap. She started in the corner and scrubbed until the floor was squeaky-clean. As she moved toward the exit, the cloth became stuck on a splinter in the floor and ripped. *That’s strange,* she thought and tried to even the surface out by pressing on it. As she pressed harder on the angular edge, the other side of the triangle lifted up. Unni wedged her nails between the dark wood and the light wood and pulled. The wood lifted out of its form but plopped down again when she lost hold of the edge.

Her middle fingernail broke off and she let out a small yelp. “Ow —” she said, sucking on her bleeding fingernail.

“Is everything all right?” Draper came out to check on her. “I thought I heard you say something.”

“Everything is fine,” she said and smiled innocently. “Just a splinter.”

He set his torch on the wall. “To help you see better,” he said and then disappeared into the back room again.

“Thank you,” she called after him. Certain he was gone, Unni lifted the heavy wood triangle out of its casing again and pulled as hard as she could. Underneath, and to her surprise, she saw a bronze chest. She looked around to see if anyone was watching. *I’m alone*. She lifted the triangle wood insert up all the way, set it aside, and pulled the chest out. It was unlocked and she opened it. Inside were numerous scrolls sealed with the Bergendal-crest. She gasped.

“What?” Draper said, peeking around the corner again. When he saw what she was holding, his eyes nearly doubled in size. “Give it to me!” he snapped. “It belongs to the church!”

“No, these were meant for Ailia,” Unni said, closing the chest and then tightening her grip around it. “She needs these. Her mother wrote them for *her*.”

“Are you trying to steal from the Lord?” he asked.

Unni thought she saw his eyes darken. “I most certainly am not, but Ailia is the princess and rightfully, this church belongs to her and that includes everything in it!”

“As far as I am concerned, this church belongs to Lucia, the *rightful* heir to the throne, the first-born and only heir. Ailia has no claim to the throne and there is absolutely no proof that she is who she pretends to be.” Draper methodically moved closer to Unni.



“Why, did Lucia set you up to this?” she asked. “Where is she anyway?”

“She has returned home, of course. Give them to me now,” he said, holding his hand out.

*This is going nowhere.* Unni’s overcoat was too far away to grab. She strengthened her grip around the chest and bolted toward the door.

Draper immediately followed her and was about to overcome her, but Unni turned around and socked him in the head with the chest instead. He fell hard to the floor and Unni kept running as fast as she could out of the church and toward Brandersgaard. *Brander is there. He’ll help me—if I make it.* It was colder than Unni had anticipated and she regretted not having her overcoat. She looked back, but she couldn’t see Draper anymore. *Good, I have lost him.* She kept her pace steady. Then, in front of her, came two lynxes. They hunched down as if they were planning to attack. Unni slowed her pace. *I will try and scare them away. They cannot be too fierce.*

“Beautiful creatures, are they not?” Draper said, easing up behind her. His forehead was cut and blood oozed down his pasty troll-looking face. “They are always eager to attack at my command, especially when raw, human flesh is involved.”

Unni turned around to face him. “This chest belongs to Ailia.”

“Oh, the lies you tell, woman,” he said. “This is not a negotiation, now give me the chest!”

*Never!* She sprinted in the direction of the fence bordering the field, climbed over it, and ran as fast as she could through the knee-high snow. “Brander!” she yelled, knowing it was futile. He wouldn’t be able to hear her at this distance. She ran and ran until her lungs burned and her eyes watered. *Nothing will rob my daughter of her victory!* Then, she remembered the dagger.

She lifted her skirt up and pulled the dagger from its casing. As a lynx pounced on her, she plunged the blade into its heart, sending it to its death without delay. The other lynx attacked from behind and clawed her across the forehead, leaving four deep slashes. Blood started dripping into Unni's eyes, but it didn't stop her from turning around and slicing the cat's throat.

Draper came after her now and she forced herself to keep running. *Don't think about the pain. Think about Ailia.* She ran into an abandoned barn and hid as best she could in a back room. *Shadows, hide my body,* she prayed. She tried to calm her frantic breath, afraid the gasping sound would reveal her location to the assassin pursuing her. She found a pushed over cabinet in the corner and hid behind it. *He'll find me. He'll find me.* She heard footsteps coming closer and closer. Cringing and holding onto the chest for dear life, she closed her eyes. *Lord Jesus, keep me safe.*

"Unni?" she heard her husband's voice. Never had she been as happy to hear her husband's voice. She stood up and let out a cry. "How did you know I was here? Where is Draper?"

"Who?"

"The new bishop or deacon from the church. He was running after me, chasing me with his lynxes, trying to steal the Aesira Scrolls. I found this chest and they contain them!" She showed him the chest.

"You found them!" he said, holding his torch up, his jovial face brightening with a wide grin.

"Let's go home before someone finds us," she said. "How did you know to come looking for me?"

"Well, I didn't. The neighbors came over and said they had seen the huldras coming from the castle. We need to get inside *now*. The huldras are on the roam, looking for their next victims."

“So, it’s true. They do exist.” She paused, feeling guilty. “I’m sorry I doubted you. What if they come into our home?”

“The neighbor said to kill a newborn deer and smear the blood of it on the doorframe of our house. That way, they cannot enter.” Brander looked at her forehead. “You’re hurt.”

“Never mind that. I’ll live.” She smacked his arm away. “Where would we get the deer from?”

“The neighbor had extra,” Brander said.

“Oh, thank heavens.” *One less thing to worry about.*

The first thing they did when they came home was to coat their doorframes with the fresh blood of the newborn deer. Then, Brander helped dress Unni’s wounds. “We’ll need to find a healer in the morning after the huldras have passed,” Brander said. “Your wounds need to be sewn up.”

Right as he finished, she grabbed the chest. “I’m hiding it in the floor,” she yelled, running into the back room. “No one will ever find it here. Now, we just need to find Ailia.”

That night, there was no sleep to be had. Cries of Bergendalers with unpainted doorframes haunted Unni and Brander through the night as huldras feasted on mortals’ bodies and lured their souls out with their death-songs.



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