



SWORD
of
PROPHECY

WARRIOR'S CLAIM BOOK THREE

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 2 ~ Bersi](#)

[Chapter 3 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 4 ~ Bersi](#)

[Chapter 5 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 6 ~ Bersi](#)

[Chapter 7 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 8 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 9 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 10 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 11 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 12 ~ Bersi](#)

[Chapter 13 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 14 ~ Torunn](#)

[Chapter 15 ~ Torunn](#)

[Epilogue ~ Bersi](#)

[More from Avery Maitland](#)

CHAPTER 1 ~ TORUNN

Her legs ached, but stopping wasn't an option.

Her tears had frozen on her cheeks even as they had fallen.

There was no time for tears. No time to process what she had seen. The healers were dead. The people who had been receiving their care were dead. Everyone who had stood to support her was dead... And now she ran from the only home she had ever known. From her own brothers.

"Wait," she hissed.

Bersi, supporting Varin's weight, was too far ahead to hear her, but Iri paused.

"What?"

The darkened forest was unfamiliar. She had ranged far from Skaro while hunting, but never like this. The thick forest that surrounded Iarund's house seemed darker, colder, than anything she had experienced before.

"I—"

What did she want to say? What words could match the swirl of emotion in her chest. Fear. Anger. Betrayal. Horror. All of it. She felt sick. The smell of the old healer's blood lingered in her nostrils.

"Stay here," Iri said. He ran ahead to catch Bersi.

Torunn leaned against a tree and pressed a shaking hand against her cold cheek. What happened now? What was she supposed to do?

The men argued in muffled tones, and Varin's groan of pain pulled Torunn from her frozen state. She braced herself on the tree and turned her head to watch them as Bersi shifted the other man's weight. Varin leaned heavily on his friend; the wound in his side was taking a greater toll than he wanted to admit. Proud bastard.

Iri gestured at the trees that surrounded them. "We've come far enough for tonight. We should rest. It's almost dawn."

"Not far enough," Bersi growled. "We should be through the forest by now."

Varin grimaced. "Just say I'm slowing you down."

"If you hadn't gotten yourself injured—"

Torunn pushed away from the tree and strode through snow-covered underbrush. She was cold, exhausted, and heartsick.

"I need to rest," she said sharply. "And Varin does, too. We need to stop."

"It's not safe—"

"And it won't be any safer in a few hours," Torunn snapped. "We can rest."

Bersi glared at her, and then Varin, before he nodded. "Fine. But no fire."

Torunn's mouth fell open, but Iri shook his head. It would do no good to argue with him. And he was right, she knew that much. The risk of being discovered wasn't worth it.

Hallvard would send scouts after them. She was still valuable, and Jarl Sigurd didn't seem like the sort of man who would care that he had been given an unwilling prisoner as a bride.

She shivered slightly at the thought of what she had avoided, and her hands tightened into fists at her side. "Fine." She fixed Bersi with a fierce glare, but it was wasted. The big man was surveying their surroundings, ignoring her.

Bersi gestured ahead of them. "There is a clearing, but we'll stay in the trees. Our path will be easy to find unless the snow starts again."

Although winter was fading, Torunn hadn't realized how cold it still was until they had stopped moving. Varin groaned as Bersi shifted his hold on the old warrior's torso.

"Careful," he croaked. "I have an invitation to Freya's wedding that I don't want to miss."

Bersi chuckled. "You'll make a charming bridesmaid," he muttered.

Varin's answering laugh was strained, but Torunn tried to see it as a sign that the man's wound was not too grievous. Only time would tell, but they would have to get him to a healer sooner than later. He would not survive the journey to—

"Where are we going?" she asked suddenly.

"You wanted to rest," Bersi replied shortly. "We're finding a place to rest."

Infuriating man.

"No. Where are we going," she repeated. "We need warriors, we need—support if we're going to strike at Hallvard and Asgaut. They won't stop treating Skaro's people like cattle... and now that I'm gone—"

Bersi stopped shortly. "If you had stayed in Skaro, you would be leaving with Jarl Sigurd, and the people you claim to care so much about would be under your brothers' rule regardless. What did you think you could do? Did you think your minor rebellion would end with you in the Jarl's seat?"

His eyes blazed, and Torunn's breath caught.

He wasn't her slave anymore. But she had a distinct feeling that he never really had

been.

“I—”

Torrun struggled for an answer. He was right. She knew he was right. Damn him. If she had stayed in Skaro, there would have been nothing she could have done to delay the wedding. Jarl Sigurd would have packed her into his ship like a bale of furs, and she would never see her home again. Her house. Her servants. Her life before that day would be nothing but a meaningless memory.

“Let me go,” Varin grunted. He reached for a low tree branch to keep himself upright as Bersi released his hold. “We’re stopping now.”

“Just a little farther,” Bersi urged, but Varin shook his head and spat a mouthful of blood onto the patchy ice-covered snow at his feet.

“I’m not moving from this spot.”

Bersi’s expression tightened, but he helped Varin to slide down the tree trunk so that he could stretch out. Iri was silent as he set down the pack he carried. He passed Torunn a waterskin, and she took it gratefully, sank down on a fallen log and pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

She was still stunned that she had escaped with her life. Others who had stood up for her hadn’t been so lucky.

Iri had not moved away, and Torunn could feel his eyes on her.

“Thank you,” she said haltingly. “You did not have to—”

“I did,” he said.

Torunn regarded him carefully. Since they were children, Iri had always acted in his own best interest. If he could escape punishment or make himself appear as the hero of whatever story being told, he would do whatever it took to make that happen. Not much had changed except the scale of the games being played.

“The gods are watching you,” he said in a low voice.

Tears pricked her eyes as she thought of her father. “Are they?”

“I believe it,” he said firmly. “How else do you explain—”

“She got lucky,” Bersi interrupted. He left Varin at the base of the tree and pulled the waterskin out of Torunn’s hands. She glared up at him, but the words she needed wouldn’t come. “Hallvard would have gladly watched us all bleed out on the floor of that hall.”

“But— the attack that had planned against Jarl Sigurd... Was that forgotten?” Torunn’s voice sounded strangled even to her own ears, and Iri grimaced as he shook his head.

“The Jarl’s plans had not changed,” he said.

“Don’t call him that,” Torunn snapped. “My father was the Jarl, Hallvard isn’t fit to lick the mud from the heel of his boots.”

Rage burned in her chest. Impotent, white-hot rage. It festered and clutched at her ribs and dared her to forget what she knew. Remembering kept her anger alive, and she needed every shred.

Her brothers had caused her father's death. She believed it with every bone in her body. She would make Hallvard admit it... aloud... Even if it was the last thing she did with her life, it would be worth it.

Iri cleared his throat. "You took him by surprise, Torunn. It is my guess that the attack would have come after the wedding ceremony was completed. At the feast."

She smiled grimly. It made the most sense. The old Jarl would have been drinking, relaxed, secure in his victory. It would have been the perfect time to strike.

"I ruined Hallvard's plans," she snorted. "At least I accomplished something."

"You have accomplished more than you know," Iri said. He might not be someone that she trusted, but Torunn had needed to hear words like that. Some kind of affirmation that she hadn't made the worst mistake of her life.

Bersi held the water skin out to her, and Torunn snatched it away. She took a drink and wished that it was mead to wash away and blur the horrible images that replayed in her mind every time she closed her eyes—the children, slaughtered on the floor of the healer's house... Iarund... She shook her head and passed it back to Iri. There would be time enough to drown her memories when they reached—

"Where are we going?" she blurted out. No one had told her anything. They had just followed Bersi blindly through the forest with terror snapping at their heels.

She didn't want to think about what would have happened if her brother's men had caught them.

Bersi rubbed a hand over his beard, as much in frustration as exhaustion. He had needed to rest, too, she could see that, he just couldn't admit it. "As far from Skaro as possible."

Verin coughed and spat another mouthful of blood into the dirt. "Myrka. We're going to Myrka."

The hair on Torunn's arms prickled and her mouth went dry. "Why would we want to go there?"

"You'll be needing the favor of the gods to take back your father's seat," Varin choked out. "Myrka is where you'll find it."

"You need to stop talking," Bersi grunted. He grabbed the water skin from Torunn's hands and went to Varin's side. The wounded man drank gratefully and coughed again.

"You know it's where we need to go," he said. His eyes were glassy and Torunn hoped that it was just from the pain. She didn't want anyone else to die because of her.

"Myrka is a long way from here." Iri's voice was grim. "And the path will be difficult."

The people are not expected there for another five years—the godsmen will not be expecting visitors.”

“Then we will surprise them,” Varin chuckled.

“Or not,” Bersi grumbled.

Torunn looked at her hands, stained and crusted with dirt and dried blood. It had been a long time she had stepped foot in the sacred forest. Her father had held her hand while the sacrifices were made. She hadn't hidden her face like Asgaut. Her father had been proud of her.

“You will be a warrior for the glory of the gods someday.”

That was what the priest with the bloodstained smile had told her. She remembered that as clearly as if it had happened the day before.

Her father had been so proud.

The cross that had been taken from around her father's neck felt heavy against her chest.

“What if they reject me...” she murmured. “My father—”

Two quick strides brought Bersi to her side. “Trust that the gods can see who you are,” he whispered.

She longed to take a moment to lean against him and take comfort in his steadiness. But she pushed her shoulders back and sat up straighter. As much as she wanted to believe him, her father's blasphemy had been a grave one. He had gone to Valhalla under false pretenses—and probably against his own wishes. The priests had bought Jarl Arnd's passage into Odin's mead hall. The gods would know. Such an insult would not be forgiven easily.

“I cannot be certain of what to trust anymore,” she said stiffly.

Bersi's hand hovered above her shoulder, but he did not touch her. She wanted him to, but she also wanted to push him away and scream in his face that he had been wrong. He had been wrong about everything. What if Hallvard had not planned to kill Jarl Sigurd at all? Would he still have allowed her to be taken from Skaro?

She knew the answer to that.

Hallvard wanted her out of his sight. Out of the sight of the people. They would forget her, and everything she had done for them. She was the last reminder of Jarl Arnd... the last reminder of her mother. Their legacy would disappear with her absence.

Varin grunted and tried to sit up against the tree trunk, and Torunn's jaw tightened as Bersi moved away to help his friend. They were an unlikely pair. A rebel and a warrior of the old ways... A partnership that should never have formed. Much like her and Bersi. An unlikely pairing that would never have borne fruit.

But everything was different now. She had made sure of that. Iri had made sure of

that.

"You should rest," Iri said. He hovered nearby, but his gaze darted around the woods, seeking shapes in the darkness. They were vulnerable here—but they would be in danger's path until they reached the sanctuary that Myrka provided.

"We must move again before dawn breaks," Bersi said firmly. "Myrka, if that is our destination, is beyond this forest... and we must hurry."

"It is our destination," Varin said with a grimace. "It is our only refuge."

"Sleep while you can, old man," Bersi grumbled. Varin chuckled and said nothing more as his eyes closed.

Torunn knew that sleep was dangerous when men were wounded so gravely. She could only hope that Varin was right—and that the gods were watching them.

Sleep seemed like an impossibility, but exhaustion threatened to take away the last shreds of her resistance. Her mind and body had been on high alert for too many hours, and the refuge of sleep was tempting...

Bersi straightened and nodded to Torunn as she eased herself to the ground and gathered her cloak around herself. "I will keep watch," he said.

"And I," Iri chimed in.

"Do not kill each other," Torunn said absently. Bersi chuckled, but Iri's eyes widened slightly.

They moved away through the trees, one watching the other warily as Torunn settled herself against the fallen log she had been seated upon. She was reluctant to close her eyes, but she had demanded rest, and she would have to take it—there was no way to know what lay ahead, or when she could sleep again.

The trees closed in around her.

Naked trunks and sharp branches.

Rough bark and pungent needles.

They tugged at her cloak, struck her face, and made her cry out in pain as the rough bark scraped over her palms and made them bleed.

She ran. Endlessly. The air was choked with smoke and ash rained down from the burning branches above her head. The crackle of wind and fire echoed through the trees and she pushed herself to run harder. Faster. But roots and fallen logs made her path almost impossible to navigate. She tripped, stumbled, and her eyes ran with tears of frustration and stung with the acrid smoke.

The trees were unfamiliar, but they were all the same. Trunk after trunk with the

same patterned bark. Her cheek scraped against the bark as she pushed herself away from the tree she had fallen against.

Keep going.

Keep going.

Run.

Run!

But she was tired. So tired.

Shouts echoed in the trees behind her. All around her. Men. Women. Calling her name. Laughing.

The sound sent terror streaking through her body, and Torunn pushed her legs to move. But the underbrush was thick and tangled, and she felt trapped and betrayed by her own body.

"No," she whispered.

"Torunn! Torunn, where have you gone!"

"Come out, little sister!"

Hallvard. Asgaut.

Calling for her. Chasing her. Taunting her.

She was ten years old again, running from her brothers as they pretended to hunt her through the trees.

"Where has the little deer gone?"

Her throat felt tight, and she tasted acid in her mouth as she pressed herself against a tree.

Smoke stung her eyes and filled her nostrils.

She shook her head and rubbed at the tears that streaked down her face. Her breath came in panicked gasps as she looked for somewhere to hide. Anywhere.

Through the trees she could see a fallen log, braced on a pile of rocks that had no business being in the middle of a forest... Ferns and moss dripped over the log to create a hiding place—just large enough for her to fit.

With a grateful sob and a whispered prayer to Freya, Torunn ran for the rocks. She stumbled and almost fell as the underbrush clung to her breeches and pulled at her cloak, but she forced her way through and dove beneath the log.

If you cannot see them, they cannot see you.

She pressed herself against the damp rocks and relished the cool wetness of the moss under her cheek and fingertips. The stinging cuts on her hands were soothed by its cushion.

She closed her eyes and tried to keep her breathing steady. The ferns hid her from sight. The rocks were her shelter.

Freya, protect me... Keep me hidden.

The thunder of her brothers' boots echoed on the hard ground as they ran after her. Confused shouts rang through the trees as they realized she had disappeared.

"She can't have gone far!"

"Look over there!"

Torunn held her breath and pressed tighter against the wet stones. The scent of the fire was gone. Only the wet moss and decaying leaves of her hiding place. The soft scuttle of insects whispered against the rotting wood.

Her eyes squeezed tighter as the sound of footsteps drew closer.

"Come out, little deer... You are wanted for the feast! Our father commands it!"

She could hear the sneer in Hallvard's shout and gritted her teeth. His mouth always twisted when he spoke to her, as though he was constantly trying not to laugh. She hated him.

"I can't see her!"

Asgaut's shout sounded far away, and hope flooded her. Perhaps she would escape after all. Torunn dared to open her eyes just a little, but all she could see was the emerald green of the ferns that surrounded the entrance to her hiding place and the dark gray of the rock she clung to.

Her lungs ached for air. Slowly, she exhaled, pressing against the rock as Hallvard shouted again to their brother. "She's here... We'll find her and bring her back to father trussed up and ready for the priests to sacrifice!"

Fear streaked through her again, and the pressure on her legs built to a painful stiffness. Shifting slightly, she readied herself to run again.

Suddenly, an eerie calm settled over the forest and Torunn froze. She hardly dared to hope that her brothers might have given up their terrible game.

Last time they played like this—she had told their father about it, but he had not been angry with them. Not angry enough.

If they brought her back tied to a stick like a stag—maybe then he would be angry enough to beat them. Shame them in front of the village like they deserved.

Her boots scuffed against the damp dirt as she pushed herself closer to the entrance. If she was alone, she would run—back in the direction of the village and the safety of her father's presence. Haldi's stern glare would keep her brothers away, but only for a short time.

She edged closer and blinked away the last of the stinging tears that blurred her vision. The air was damp, and the smoke wasn't as thick... she couldn't remember how the fire had started. Only that she had to get away.

A quick breath, and then she reached for the stone to haul herself out from her hiding

place.

“Got ya!”

Hallvard’s triumphant voice rang in her ear as his hand clamped down on her arm and jerked her forward.

“I found her!”

But the voice was unfamiliar, and Torunn’s scream of anger was cut off as she was dragged forward.

“I found her! You! Keep looking for the others! The rebel cannot be far away! He would not leave her alone for long!”

Torunn struggled against the iron grip on her arm, but the fingers dug deeper into her flesh. Her eyes flew open as she was yanked bodily from her dream and into an actual nightmare.

A pale face peered down into hers. Dark eyes, black as night, bored into hers. The smile on Ragna’s face was cold and predatory. Just like Hallvard’s always had been.

“Let me go!” Torunn shouted. She spun away and tried to pull her arm out of the woman’s grasp, but Ragna held on like a dog and dug her heels into the soft dirt. Her laughter was piercing as panic coursed through Torunn’s mind.

Where was Bersi?

Iri?

They were supposed to be keeping watch—

Warriors crashed through the underbrush, swinging swords and spears against tree trunks as they went. The noise was deafening and Torunn reached for the axe she had worn on her hip, but it was gone.

“Looking for this?” Ragna taunted her. She held Torunn’s axe in her free hand and waved it mockingly. Torunn lunged for it, but Ranga held it just out of reach and pulled her off balance. She fell to one knee and grimaced at the jolt of pain that rippled up her thigh.

“You’ll pay for this,” she hissed.

“Oh, no, my lady, it is you who will pay for your betrayal,” Ragna snarled. “I will be rewarded, and I shall watch your execution from a seat at the Jarl’s side.”

“Do you think you will be spared?” Torunn cried. “Hallvard is cruel, he has always been cruel. Soon it will be your head—”

Ragna’s mouth twisted, and she slammed the flat side of the axe into Torunn’s head. She tumbled forward into the dirt and lay there, stunned, as shouts from the men filled the air.

“Nothing?” Ragna shouted angrily. “How could you have found nothing?”

“They abandoned her,” one of the warriors replied. Torunn rubbed a hand over her

face and felt wetness on her fingertips.

"Take her," Ranga snapped. "One prize is better than none."

Torunn struggled weakly as they hauled her to her feet, but her knees buckled and strong hands caught and held her upright.

"Carry her, you fool," Ragna shouted. "The Jarl will celebrate our speedy return."

Torunn groaned as they lifted her up and slung over the shoulder of one warrior. Her vision was blurred by blood and pain, and she struggled to keep her wits about her.

She tried to scan the forest for any sign of Bersi and the others, but she could see nothing.

"There's blood here," one man shouted.

"What?" Ragna crashed through the underbrush to see what the warrior had found, and she knelt in the dirt to inspect it. "The wounded warrior—the old man. Varin. They will move slowly."

She straightened and pointed out three of the men. "You, go onward. Find them. Kill them. Bring their heads back to your Jarl."

"And what of Iri Hundolfsson? The Jarl's counselor is also missing..."

Ragna snorted. "That coward? He could not be with them. No rebel would allow him to keep his life."

Torunn struggled against the hold her captor had on her legs, but the man's arm tightened cruelly around her and held her roughly against his shoulder. "Let me go," she snarled as she reached to her hip.

"Watch—" But Ragna's warning shout came too late.

Torunn pulled the knife from her belt and slammed it into the side of the man's neck. His choked scream was almost musical, and she smiled briefly as he crumpled beneath her. His grip relaxed as he fell to the side, and she pulled away as they tumbled to the ground.

Her boots hit the ground at a strange angle, and she struggled to regain her balance. Swiftly, she pulled her knife out of the man's neck and left him twitching in the ferns. On unsteady legs, Torunn crouched with her knife held out in front of her, daring anyone to come near.

The men backed away, but Ragna laughed. "Still so brave?" she mocked her. "The Jarl will not be so amused by your rebellion. Jarl Sigurd may well withdraw his promise of marriage—"

"Do you think I care about such things?" Torunn spat. "Hallvard is not fit to take my father's seat. I would sooner die than take a vow to Jarl Sigurd."

Ragna's smile was hard and thin. "You will get your wish, my lady."

She nodded to the warriors that stood around her, and Torunn lashed out with her

knife, but there were too many of them. The butt of a spear smashed into the back of her thigh, driving her to her knees. She blocked another strike and slashed at the man with her knife. He screamed in pain as his spear fell to the ground. She reached for it, desperately, but even as she moved, the third man's spear crashed into the back of her head—blinded by a flash of white, Torunn cried out, and then fell forward into the dirt succumbing to the darkness that swept over her.

CHAPTER 2 ~ BERSI

"You can't just stand there," Varin growled.

Bersi tightened his hold on his friend to keep him upright. It was by the grace of the gods that they had slipped away unnoticed.

"I can, and I must," Bersi said quietly.

"Torunn will never forgive us for leaving her."

"We will get her back," Bersi promised. He could hear the shouts of the men that had come looking for them as they echoed through the trees. They weren't even trying to be quiet. So sure of themselves. So confident.

They would all die choking on their own blood.

"Who is that woman?" he asked Iri.

"Ragna," Iri said through clenched teeth. He was having just as much difficulty watching as Bersi—he wondered for the hundredth time if the Jarl's advisor was in love with her. "She is Hallvard's woman... one of many."

"She is just as ruthless," Bersi observed. "They make an excellent match."

"A terrifying match. She was a slave when he found her... she will never be a slave again. And if she brings Torunn back—"

"Torunn will not survive the night," Bersi said darkly.

Varin growled something Bersi couldn't hear, but it didn't matter. They were all watching as Torunn was thrown unceremoniously over the shoulder of the big man who had smashed his spear into the back of her head.

Ragna bent and pulled Torunn's knife out of the ferns. She wiped the blood on her forearm and looked down at the dead man in the dirt.

"Bring him!" she shouted and then spat on the corpse.

Varin shifted, and Bersi could feel the tension coiled in his body.

"She sent three men to look for us," Iri said thickly. His eyes were trained on Torunn as she was taken through the trees. "What do we do about them?"

Bersi shrugged out from under Varin's arm and helped his friend brace his weight

against a tree.

"We'll have to kill them, obviously."

Iri dragged his eyes away from Torunn's still form and stared at him.

"Otherwise we take the risk that they'll come up behind us."

Varin chuckled softly. "Always with a plan."

"We have to move quickly," he said. "I do not intend for those bastards to take her back to Hallvard."

Iri nodded, but he did not seem convinced. His fingers plucked at the string of the bow that he wore across his body.

"How many arrows do you have?" Bersi asked.

"How many do I need?"

Bersi snorted. "Three, if you're a decent shot."

Iri's smile was tight as he watched the three men who had been sent to find them moved through the underbrush. They laughed together and did not seem to take their assignment seriously.

Varin peered at Iri curiously. "I've never seen you with a weapon," he said. "Should I take the shot?"

Iri didn't even glance in his direction. "You can barely stand, old man," he said stiffly.

Varin chuckled, and Bersi scowled at him. This was not the time for arguments or pride. "Be quick about it," he snarled. "We are running short on time."

"Did you father teach you to shoot," Varin asked as Iri pulled the bow from over his shoulder and drew an arrow from the pouch at his hip.

"My father taught me nothing," Iri snapped. "And you know it well."

He nocked the arrow, stepped out from behind the tree, and drew the bow up. His aim was quick, and the arrow whistled through the trees. Iri ducked back behind the tree and Bersi crouched low to the ground as a strangled scream echoed through the forest and the men who had been sent after them shouted in confusion.

Varin smiled. "A lucky shot," he whispered.

Iri crept to the left, nocked another arrow, and stood in a fluid motion. His shot cut off the shouts of a second man, and before the third could run more than a few steps, Iri loosed a third arrow that took him down like a stag. Bersi smiled grimly as the man thrashed in the underbrush. Iri slung the bow across his body and strode through the trees toward his prey, and Bersi watched in muted surprise as the Jarl's advisor pulled a knife from his belt and slit the man's throat.

"Did you know he could shoot like that?" Bersi asked.

Varin chuckled and shook his head. "I didn't. I didn't think he'd have the stones to kill a man, either."

Iri stood over his victims and wiped his knife blade on his forearm. His expression was unreadable, but Bersi could see something different in his eyes. What else was the Jarl's advisor hiding?

He knew that the man was loyal to Torunn, but there was something unpredictable about him that Bersi could not bring himself to trust. He changed allegiance quickly, and there was no telling how long he would be an ally.

For the moment, they needed him. Torunn needed all of them.

"Come on," Bersi said. He pulled Varin off the tree and forced him to stand. Varin grimaced, but nodded grimly.

"I don't need a mother," he growled.

"Then keep up."

Working together, they stripped weapons from the bodies of the three warriors. Axes, a sword, knives... it was enough to change the odds. To give them a fighting chance against Ragna's men. There were only six of them now, a fair fight.

Iri said nothing about his aim, or his kills, and Bersi had no intention of praising him. After all, he had not committed to his support of Torunn until it was almost too late. He did not deserve any accolades for doing what he should have long ago.

The Jarl's advisor seemed to understand this, too, and he was silent as Bersi motioned them forward in pursuit of Torunn's captors.

They crept through the forest together, trailing silently behind Ragna and her warriors. They kept their distance, staying just within earshot. Hallvard was too sure of his victory, and his men were raucous and in a celebratory mood as they crashed through the forest with their prize.

The sky overhead had lightened, and the pale light in the forest made eerie shapes from the shadows that clung to the forest.

Without saying a word, Iri pulled his bow free and took aim. Bersi motioned for him to wait, but it was too late, Iri loosed the arrow and it sailed through the darkness towards its target.

Bersi swore under his breath and tightened his grip on the axes he held. There was no time to wait for a better position. An arrow slammed into the back of a warrior's neck, severing the man's spine, and sent him kicking into the dirt. Bersi took the man's death as his cue and launched himself forward with a roar.

Varin followed, sword raised high, all care for his wound forgotten in the heat of the moment.

Iri felled two more warriors before they had time to draw their weapons, and Bersi's axe crashed down on the shoulder of the warrior standing nearest to the man who carried

Torunn.

With Bersi's axe lodged in his shoulder, the man fell to the side as his legs gave way. Torunn's captor whirled around and dumped her unceremoniously into the ferns to free his hands for battle.

Bersi left his axe buried in the fallen warrior and stepped on his chest to bring him closer to his quarry. He swung hard with the second axe and caught the unprepared warrior in the ribs, relishing the muffled crack as the sharpened edge splintered the man's ribcage through the leather armor he wore.

Without pause, he wrenched his axe from the man beneath his feet and swung again, cutting down the big man in front of him with a powerful strike to the side of his neck.

Torunn lay, unmoving, in the dirt, and Bersi paused for only a moment before charging toward another warrior who blocked Varin's desperate swing.

The side old warrior's tunic was soaked with dark blood, but Bersi attacked with a roar that took them both by surprise. Varin's sword came up under the other warrior's shield and pierced his woven breastplate, biting deeply into his chest.

Varin's smile was ghoulish as he drove the blade home, and Hallvard's warrior slumped over the sword.

Two men remained, and they circled warily, weapons drawn.

"Where is that coward?" Varin grunted. "He should be in the fray—"

An arrow ripped through the trees and caught one warrior in the throat. He fell backwards into the underbrush and Bersi smiled. "He is close enough."

The remaining warrior should have backed down and run for his life, but he charged with his axe and shield raised.

Bersi met him head on and blocked his strike easily, knocking his weapon aside so that Varin could lunge forward. The old warrior drove his sword up into the man's chin, spilling his blood over the ferns as he tumbled to the ground.

"Stop there!"

Ragna's shout was desperate, and Bersi turned slowly. Hallvard's woman knelt in the dirt. Her hand was wrapped around Torunn's dark braid and jerked her head back, exposing her pale throat. Torunn's own knife glittered in the other woman's hand and Bersi's eyes narrowed. A cruel insult to kill her with her own blade.

"The Jarl demands justice for her betrayals," Ragna cried. Her dark eyes were wide and full of anger, but there was fear there, too. She was outnumbered, but she had Torunn's life in her hands.

Bersi dropped his axes into the ferns at his feet and spread his hands wide. Varin did the same with his sword.

"You can let her go," he said. "Tell Hallvard that we escaped... We overpowered your

men and allowed you to live to tell Hallvard the tale of our flight... You can tell him whatever you wish."

Ragna spat into the dirt. "You think I would return to the Jarl with anything but my prize? I would bring back her head and he would still reward me."

"But if you return alive, surely he will be grateful for that—"

"You know nothing," she snapped. "You are a slave... if I kill her, you are free. I will do you a kindness, rebel."

His eyes narrowed. He had ceased to be a slave the moment they had left the healer's house.

"I do not need your permission to be free," he growled.

"No, but you need the blessing of the Jarl," she said. A small smile hovered on her thin lips and her eyes glittered in the strange light of the early morning.

"Let her go," Bersi said. "There is an arrow aimed right at your heart." He hoped that it was true, but he could not see Iri, and he could not take the chance to glance behind him to confirm it. He had to keep Regna distracted until he was close enough to disarm her and pull Torunn to safety.

Ragna's hand tightened on Torunn's hair, jerking her head farther back. A thin line of blood trickled down her neck and stained the collar of her tunic. Bersi gritted his teeth, but stepped forward carefully.

"Stop moving!" Ragna cried.

Torunn's eyelashes fluttered and Bersi swung around, attempting to stall a little longer to give Torunn a chance.

"What will Hallvard give you as a reward for this?" Bersi asked. "Do you think he will make you Queen in Skaro?"

Ragna's chin lifted. "I was destined for great things," she sniffed. "But I do not need to justify myself to you."

She adjusted her grip on Torunn's hair and glared at him with fierce eyes.

"Perhaps not," Bersi cautioned. "But if Hallvard will punish his sister in such a way—what would he do to anyone else who wronged him?"

Ragna laughed sharply. "They would deserve their punishment," she said. "The Jarl knows he can trust me."

"And if the gods have forgotten Skaro?" Bersi pressed. "The All Father does not look down kindly on those who kill their own kin."

"You know nothing of the gods," she spat bitterly.

"I know enough."

Ragna's gaze slid to Varin and then back to Bersi. "The priests have made the proper sacrifices."

"But the gods do not forget," Bersi said solemnly. He did not know what he believed anymore, but he knew the stories, he knew what was expected... and he knew what others believed—fiercely.

"There is no forgiveness for the murder of a father," Varin cried. "Even you will be soured by it. There will be no Valkyrie to carry your soul to Valhalla."

"Shut your mouth, old man," Ragna snarled. "You know nothing. You have been cast out. Hallvard would reward me three times over if I were to kill you where you stand."

"You sent men to do exactly that, and they failed," Bersi countered with a bitter smile. "You are all alone, Ragna..." He gave her a moment for his words to settle into her mind, and he could see the change in her eyes as she realized how vulnerable she was.

"If you kill Torunn, you will not leave these woods alive," he whispered.

Ragna licked her lips quickly; her nervousness gnawed at her, he could see it in the darkness of her eyes.

The blade at Torunn's throat faltered and dropped away. He took another step forward, keeping his eyes on Ragna. She did not shout at him again, but her eyes narrowed. "You will not make me give her up," she hissed. "Jarl Hallvard made a promise to—"

Before Ragna could finish her sentence, Torunn twisted in her grip. With a cry of surprise, Ragna lurched to the side. Torunn's right arm swung hard, and Bersi glimpsed a sharp rock held tightly in her hand.

It smashed into the side of Ragna's face and turned her surprised shout into a choked wail of pain. Like a wounded animal.

As Ragna fell, Torunn rolled on top of her and brought the rock down again, and again onto the other woman's face.

She flailed in the dirt, but Torunn held her down with her body weight and pinned her shoulders to the ground with her knees as the blows rained down.

All at once, Ragna's screams stopped, and her arms twitched limply in the underbrush. Torunn threw the rock aside and rolled off Ragna's body.

Bersi ran through the underbrush toward her and crouched at her side. Her face was speckled with Ragna's blood, and he laid a hand against her pale cheek.

"Torunn—"

Her breath came in small gasps as her eyes opened and she looked up at him defiantly. "Get me out of here," she whispered.

Bersi smiled grimly and helped her to sit up. She ignored Ragna's body and held Bersi's arm tightly as he pulled her to her feet.

Wiping her hand over her blood-stained face, she bent to retrieve her knife from the gore-splattered ferns.

She wiped her knife on her sleeve and tucked it back into the scabbard at her hip.

"You look terrible," she said to Varin.

"And you look like a Valkyrie," he said with a bloodstained smile.

Torunn shook her head and wiped at the blood on her neck. She strode past Ragna's body without looking at her and walked through the trees. Iri slung his bow over his shoulder and nodded to her.

She looked back at Bersi with an eyebrow raised. "What are you waiting for?" she asked. "Take supplies and weapons from the dead and let us be gone from this place."

Varin chuckled and then grunted as he leaned against a tree trunk. "Quickly," he said. "I should like to die within sight of the mountain if I can."

"You will not die," Bersi growled. But Varin's skin was pale and gray in the early morning light. He needed food, rest, and a healer. Three things that were in short supply.

"How far is Myrka?" Torunn asked.

"Too far to reach by nightfall," Varin replied. "We will need to make camp at the edge of the forest."

Torunn nodded and looked at the carnage they had left behind. "How long will it take Hallvard to realize that his plan failed?"

Bersi shrugged. "Nightfall. By then we should be far enough away..."

"I won't feel safe until we're at the borders of Myrka," Varin said. He groaned and pushed himself away from the tree trunk. "We should start walking."

Iri and Bersi moved among the bodies, gathering water-skins, weapons, and warmer cloaks.

"You won't be left on your own again," Varin said as he passed Torunn. "Hallvard will not give up his chase. He promised Jarl Sigurd a high born bride—and you are the only one he has to bargain with."

"I will not marry that old goat," Torunn retorted sharply.

Varin laughed. "You've made that very clear." He choked on his laughter and spat a mouthful of blood on the ground. "You're a rebel now, my lady. Best get used to the idea of being on the run."

Torunn didn't laugh, but she put her shoulder under the old warrior's arm to help support his weight.

Varin was right. She was a rebel, and it did not appear that realization sat well with her. She had spent her life fighting against people like Bersi. But now that she had stood against her brother... Her position in Skaro was forfeit, and even if she returned to the village of her birth, her life would be in danger. Her house, her servants, all of the wealth and power that had come with her position as the daughter of the Jarl, and then as the Jarl's sister—gone.

He wanted to ask her if she was all right, if the wound on her throat needed tending—but there was no time. As much as he wished he could pull her into his arms and press his lips to hers there was no time for tenderness, or comfort.

They had a good distance to walk, and Bersi didn't think he would feel safe until these woods were far behind them. Varin was determined to lead them to Myrka—but there was no telling if he would survive the journey. And when Hallvard discovered what had happened here, his retribution would be swift.

They had to keep moving.

No matter what stood in their way.

CHAPTER 3 ~ TORUNN

The forest seemed endless, and the farther they walked, the more she worried they were going in the wrong direction.

Varin remained convinced that they were not lost, but the old man was wounded, and the loss of blood could have been making him delirious. It was difficult to refrain from being angry with him. His words simmered behind her eyes and stoked the anger in her belly.

A rebel.

She wasn't a rebel.

But she was—everything she had done since her brothers had returned to Skaro had been a tiny rebellion. Every word she had spoken against them. Every defiance.

And now.

She had killed Hallvard's woman. There was no way to know how attached to Ragna he had been, but Hallvard was not the type who needed an excuse to take revenge. When they had been children he had always lashed out with a fury that far surpassed the insult he had borne. He had only grown more angry, more vengeful, as they had grown older. She had seen his cruelty on display far more often than his kindness.

No matter how he had felt about the woman she had killed, she had given him an excuse for vengeance. One thing she knew for certain, his vengeance would be swift and terrible.

Daylight had rushed over the forest as they walked, and Bersi seemed as eager to leave the forest behind as she.

"How far?" she asked as they broke through another stand of trees.

"We should reach the edge of the forest soon," Varin answered. He leaned against a trunk and took deep breaths. Torunn didn't like the look of the dark blood that had soaked through his tunic.

"Will you let me look at your wound?" she asked.

She reached for his tunic, but he slapped her hand away. "It is nothing. I need some

food and some rest. I'll have both soon enough."

Bersi squinted up at the clouded sky overhead. "We need to keep moving."

Around them, the forest was filled with birdsong and the occasional crack of an animal's movements. But each sound set Torunn's teeth on edge. She expected her brother's warriors to burst through the trees at any moment. Or for arrows to streak out of the brush and take them down where they stood.

Iri appeared through the trees ahead of them. "The trees thin ahead," he said breathlessly. "Not much farther."

A partridge hung from his belt, and Torunn's stomach rumbled. She had eaten nothing at the feast the night before, and her hunger gnawed at her. Fear and anger had kept her feet moving, but now that the prospect of rest was ahead of her, her body began to betray her.

"Come on, old man," Bersi grunted. He braced Varin's weight on his shoulder and half-lifted his friend who grunted in pain.

They hurried through the trees to follow Iri who stayed ahead of them.

She wanted to ask Bersi what his plan was—but she had a feeling that the rebel's plans had ended outside the healer's house. Everything else that happened was in the hands of the gods.

The thought was as comforting as it was terrifying.

As the trees thinned, Torunn's apprehension grew. They would be exposed at the edge of the forest. At least in the trees they could conceal themselves... but the threat of Hallvard's warriors nagged at her. If they stopped for too long, they would be even more vulnerable. Varin could not survive another attack. And he had already given her too much of his blood.

Blood she might never be able to repay.

She could see it in his face, and the knowledge of the breadth of his sacrifice weighed on her. How could she make this right? They were here because of her. Iarund, his healers, his acolytes, and all the people who had been in his house... They were all dead because of her.

No. Not only her.

She had to reassure herself of that.

Hallvard had done this. Both of her brothers had done this... gleefully.

She had just stepped in at the wrong moment.

All the death that she had witnessed had been planned—she had merely herded it along with her impatience.

Her jaw tightened as an image of the blood-stained floor in Iarund's house flashed into her mind.

“Torunn—”

She glanced up, shaken by the vision. Her hands were still stained with blood, and her fists were sticky with it as it dried and crusted on her skin.

Bersi stood at the edge of the trees, and Torunn could see the blur of dark green beyond the rough trunks of the thinning trees.

His expression was hard, and her stomach felt tight as she looked at him. He should not have come. He did not have to. But if he had not... if he had stayed behind, he would not have survived her flight.

“Iri has started a fire,” he said.

Torunn paused. “Is that wise?”

Bersi shrugged. “We will have to take the chance. We need to eat, and to warm ourselves.”

Of course. They would not last until nightfall without proper rest.

“Have we come far enough?”

“Hallvard will not know what has happened for a few hours yet,” he said. “But when Ragna and the rest of her men do not return to Skaro, our time will run short—and quicker than I would like.”

If he found them, when he found them, Hallvard would not hesitate to kill her. It was hard for her to fully accept the depths of her defiance and her actions. Everything she had done, she had done on instinct. She had put her life in the hands of the gods and trusted that they would lead her in the right direction. If this was Freya’s plan for her, then so be it.

She pushed through the trees and stood next to Bersi. On an impulse, she leaned against his shoulder. He grunted and she felt him flinch, but couldn’t decide if it was because he wanted to hold her, or push her away. Whatever he had meant to do, he stood still and supported her weight and she was grateful.

The sharpness of smoke, lit with wet moss and shredded bark, stung her nostrils. It would be a smokey fire. They would have to be careful.

“If there is a village nearby we can ask for supplies... even a healer for Varin,” she said haltingly.

“We won’t be stopping,” Bersi growled. “It is too dangerous.”

Torunn leaned away from him and frowned, staring into his eyes. “You would let Varin die because you were too stubborn to ask for help?”

Bersi’s expression hardened as he glowered back. “I would let Varin die in the ferns if it meant keeping you out of danger.”

“A loyal friend, indeed,” she snorted. “Varin will not thank you for that.”

“He will not thank you for putting yourself in danger needlessly,” he retorted.

"I do not know of any villages beyond the forest," she said. "Laxa is the only one—"

"You are a fool to think that the world is so small," Bersi interrupted her. "How do you think Skaro's markets survive? Laxa is only one of many villages in your father's Jarldom."

Torunn wanted to argue with him, but kept her mouth closed. She knew better. Her father had told her about the villages that acted as part of Skaro's sphere—Laxa was only one of many villages that paid tribute and contributed to the markets that kept Skaro wealthy.

Her cheeks burned with sudden embarrassment. She should know these things. How could she expect to lead if a rebel like Bersi knew more about her father's Jarldom than she, his own daughter, did?

Torunn tore her gaze away from Bersi's angry eyes and shoved past him. The sky overhead was clouded and a faint mist of rain brushed against her cheeks as she stepped out of the protection of the forest. Close to the edge of the woods, Iri crouched over the small fire he had built as Varin lay back against one of the packs.

The old warrior's eyes were closed, and his face was pale beneath his dark beard. He looked ready to take his place at Odin's table...

She pulled her cloak tighter around her as she approached. Iri looked up from the fire and smiled at her, but from the angle she stood at, it looked more like a grimace.

"I did not think to see you with a bow." She crouched beside the fire and held out her hands to warm them over the tiny flame.

Iri grunted and plucked at the bow string across his chest. "It has been some time since I have held one of my own."

Torunn remembered it vividly. Only fourteen summers would have passed when her brothers had first begun to fight about who would go with their father for the first raid of the season. Iri, a few years younger, the same age as she, was proud of his new bow, and was determined to go raiding with the Jarl.

Hallvard had laughed in his face, kicked him to the ground, and taken Iri's bow from his hands. Forcing him to stand by and watch, Hallvard broke it into a hundred pieces, chopping at it with his axe until it was fit for nothing but firewood. Bastard.

Both of her brothers had gone raiding that year, and she had never seen Iri hold a bow since that day.

"I did not know—"

"No one did," he said shortly. "That was how I wanted it."

She could only nod. Iri was entitled to his secrets, but she did not like how many he kept... they made it difficult to trust him. The knowledge that her father had trusted him so implicitly weighed on her—but so did the knowledge that he had trusted Hallvard and Asgaut, too. And they had betrayed him without a second thought.

The all too familiar feelings of anger flooded through her.

How could her father have been so blind?

But, more importantly, had he misjudged Iri, too?

Iri pulled the partridge off his belt and set to skinning and dressing it with his knife.

Torunn looked away, but only briefly. Her stomach growled.

She would have eaten the wretched thing raw if she'd had to.

"There is a village nearby," Iri said casually. He gestured with blood-slicked fingers into the distance and Torunn swallowed thickly as the scent of the blood overpowered the smoke that writhed up from the fire he had made.

"Is there," she managed. She glanced at Varin, but the wounded man had not moved since she had approached the fire.

"We'll go around," Bersi said gruffly. He dropped to one knee beside the fire and tried to coax it into a higher flame by adding some dry tinder that he had gathered from beneath the trees.

Iri did not look up from the bird, but Torunn turned to glare at him. "We'll go to the village," she said firmly. "Varin needs proper rest, and a healer."

One of Varin's eyes opened slightly and then closed again. "I don't need any coddling," he croaked. "I need some mead."

Bersi chuckled, but he did not look up from the fire or meet Torunn's furious stare.

"How far is it?" Torunn demanded.

Iri glanced over his shoulder at the big man who crouched over the fire and shrugged as he gathered the bird's viscera together and dug a small hole in the dirt with his knife.

"It has been a while—"

"Iri," she snapped. "I need to know. If we go around the village, we could risk being caught, anyway. If Hallvard and his men—"

"You don't need to tell me what will happen if Hallvard finds us," Iri interrupted her. His jaw was tight and Torunn realized that his punishment would be almost as severe as hers. If not worse. He had betrayed the Jarl... A traitor to his leader and the village he had been born into. He had held a trusted position and abused that trust to help... her. If Hallverd found them, he would turn Iri into an example.

She bit her lip and looked away. He was right to be angry.

"Do you think you made a mistake in helping me?" she asked quietly.

Iri tossed the pheasant guts into the hole, stood up, and pushed dirt over it with the side of his boot. "No. I don't. But do not make me regret it by being a stupid girl."

Torunn's eyes widened. Iri had never spoken to her like that. And he'd never called her a 'stupid girl.'

Rage boiled in her stomach, and the need to stand up and punch Iri right in the face

battled against the knowledge that she owed their escape to him. He had killed Hallvard's men. And now he had brought down and dressed a pheasant to feed them.

She had never expected to depend on her father's advisor so completely. Iri was many things... Infuriating and irritating? Obviously. But useful? Dependable? Never.

She could feel Bersi's eyes on her as Iri moved past her to stand over the fire. Bersi had coaxed it to burn hotter, and Torunn could feel the change in the air as it grew. Varin grunted softly as he shifted closer to the fire and Torunn sat down heavily in the grass. There was nothing she could do. No argument she could make. She would have to wait... and she hated waiting. Hated not being in control. But if there was anything she had learned from the last hours—control was an illusion. Only the gods knew what lay in wait for her.

That surety held little comfort, but there was no one to complain to about it. No one who would listen to her.

She narrowed her eyes at Bersi and Iri as they worked together to stretch the pheasant over the fire.

"I can smell that bird already," Varin grumbled. "I'll whisper a prayer to Loki that he turns the other way and keeps our enemies distracted..."

Torunn smiled briefly, unable to stop herself. She was worried for Varin. He hadn't allowed her to look at his wound, but from the way he moved she could only guess that it was deep. That Bersi was willing to put his friend's life in more danger didn't sit well with her. If there was something she could do to help him. She would do it without question.

The smell of the cooking bird had clearly put Bersi on edge. Though he ate with gusto, he kept his eyes on the trees, watching for any change in the scenery or a hint that something wasn't right.

Torunn tried to help Varin with his share of the meal, but he had knocked her hand away with a growl and chewed the meat she had given him with a defiant air.

Iri sat with his back to the fire, his gaze on the horizon.

He had said nothing more to her, and Torunn was growing impatient with the silence that had fallen over the group. They were supposed to be helping her, but Iri was acting for all the world as though they were marching into Hel itself.

Torunn pushed herself to her feet and walked over to where Iri sat. "May I sit with you?"

Without waiting for an answer, she sank down beside him and put a piece of pheasant into her mouth. The meat was good, the bird had been unexpectedly plump, and the fat

had sizzled in the coals as it had cooked. The smell had been intoxicating, and she had only worried faintly that someone else might have noticed it in the wind.

Mist hugged the forested hills that surrounded them, and Torunn inhaled a deep breath of the cool air. It had to be almost nightfall, but she couldn't be certain. Everything looked the same in the mist until the sun fell behind the hills and darkness crept in.

"Where is the village?" she asked quietly. "You mentioned it before."

Iri glanced at her in surprise and then gestured with the leg bone he held in his fingers. "There. You can see the smoke."

She squinted at the blanket of mist and then swallowed her mouthful of food and almost choked on it. "So close. How are we so close? Does Bersi know?"

He nodded. "He had hoped you would not see."

Resentment reared up again in her mind. Of course he had not wanted her to see.

"We could reach it in a day's time," she said eagerly. "I could go down and ask them for food and supplies—they would take pity on me."

"Would they?" Iri asked mildly. "The daughter of a dead Jarl on the run from her brothers and her husband... I think not."

She glared at him. "He is not my husband."

Iri shrugged. "He would have been if you had not acted so rashly."

Torunn pushed at his shoulder. "Do not mention him again."

"As you wish, my lady."

"And stop calling me that."

Iri shrugged, put another piece of pheasant in his mouth, and stared out at the mist once more.

A commotion behind them drew Torunn's attention as Bersi ran down the gentle slope toward them. He stomped on the fire and threw dirt over the coals and the remnants of the pheasant even as Iri cried out for him to stop.

"Shut your mouth," Bersi hissed. "There are men coming."

Torunn spat out her mouthful of food and scrambled for the axe she had left at the fireside. The men dropped to the ground and Varin grunted as he rolled onto his stomach. His fist was gripped tight around a knife that was as long as his forearm. Torunn held her breath and listened carefully.

There was no sound save for the weak crackle of the fire as it struggled to survive its abrupt suffocation. Bersi crouched low, ready to strike, and they waited for what felt like years for any sound to echo across the hill, but there was only the wind in the trees and Varin's labored breathing.

"Heill!"

The shout was faint at first, and then came again, louder the second time.

Beside her, Iri seemed eager to move and she willed him to be still. His elbow flexed, and she glanced at him as the stranger called out.

"Iri—" she whispered, but before she could say anything more, Torunn's blood froze in her veins as Iri stood and called back to them.

She grabbed for his leg, but he strode out of reach.

Bersi swore under his breath as Iri walked boldly to the edge of the hill.

"Heill, friends," he cried.

Torunn pressed her forehead down into the lichen and whispered a prayer to Freya. Protection. Support. Hope. Anything.

If they had seen the smoke from their fire, smelled the cooking bird, and now Iri had gone out to meet them. It was stupid to hide. She pushed herself to her feet and shoved the axe into her belt.

"Torunn—"

She kicked at Bersi's reaching hand and forced a smile onto her face.

Iri stood down the hill, talking animatedly to three men who were dressed in hunting gear. Pheasants hung from one man's belt and another carried a fresh roll of deer skin under his arm that held smaller cuts of meat than the hind leg that the third man set on the ground as she approached.

"Heil ok sæl," one man said with a smile. "Your wife?" he asked Iri.

Iri smiled awkwardly and shook his head. "My sister. Sigrit."

Torunn blanched slightly at the use of a false name, but she hoped her smile had not slipped.

"Do you travel alone?" the man asked.

"No," Iri replied quickly. "Two others are with us. A servant and our father. He was wounded while hunting. Gored by a deer we could not bring down."

The man with the roll of deer skin grinned broadly and shifted his hold on the meat he carried. "We felled this beast at the edge of the forest. It had been pierced by two arrows —"

Iri swore. "I thought I had missed it with the last shot."

"We would be happy to share it with you," the man said. "Your father will be happy to see the beast dead after such an insult."

"He would, indeed," Torunn agreed. She wondered what Iri's plan was, but there would be no way to know. "Where have you come from?"

"Gata," the leader of the trio said. "You must come with us. Surely, your father will be in need of a healer."

"No, I thank you—"

"Nonsense, brother," Torunn interrupted him. "Our father will be more than grateful."

And we need rest. We have traveled too far today.”

The men’s eyes lingered on her for longer than she was comfortable with, and she remembered her hands were still covered in blood. She looked down at them and grimaced. “Our father’s wound is grievous. And beyond my skill to heal.”

The men nodded even as Iri fixed her with a hard stare before he smiled.

“You are gracious,” he said. “Wait here, we will follow you to Gata.”

Torunn thanked them again and followed Iri back to the dampened fire. “What have you done?” he hissed.

“Saved us,” she hissed back. “You will thank me when you are sleeping in a comfortable bed with a belly full of mead.”

Bersi was on his feet, axe in hand as they came over the gentle rise. “What are you doing?” he snarled as he grabbed a handful of Iri’s tunic and hauled him forward. Iri pushed at the big man’s chest.

“It was the only thing I could do,” he said as he pried Bersi’s fingers off his tunic. “I would have greeted them and sent them on their way with some lie or another, but Torunn—”

Bersi whirled on her, but she ignored him and helped Varin struggle to his feet.

“They are taking us to Gata,” she said firmly. “Our father needs a healer. And I will not hear any arguments... from any of you.”

Bersi’s eyes burned with anger, but his lips pressed into a thin line and he didn’t argue with her. Varin laughed, but it was a choked sound.

“Your father, eh?”

“Yes,” Torunn said. “And you will call me Sigrit.”

“That is your mother’s name,” Varin said softly.

She did not reply. Iri had chosen it, not her.

“I gave them false names,” Iri said in a low voice. “Torunn is my sister, Sirgit. You, Bersi, are our servant. Haldr.”

Bersi growled but said nothing more as Varin chuckled again.

“And you, Varin, are our father—Gunnar. You were wounded by the deer that these men felled in the woods. I shot at it while we were walking, but thought I had missed. The creature was wounded so I am glad they brought it down.”

“Damned beast,” Varin said through clenched teeth. “No healer will believe that this is a wound caused by a wounded animal.”

“We will have to take that chance,” Iri said quickly. He glanced over his shoulder as the men called out to them.

“Having trouble?” one of them shouted.

“No! We are coming,” Iri shouted back.

“And what do we call you?” Torunn asked. “We cannot keep them waiting.”

“Kol,” he said quickly.

Torunn blinked at the familiar name, but she could not remember why she knew it. There was no time to ask. Bersi took Varin’s weight from her shoulder and she pulled one of the packs onto her back as they made their way down the hill toward the three men from Gata.

Bersi was furious. She could feel it radiating off him. She only hoped that he could hold his tongue and follow the plan—whatever that was.

She took a breath and smiled at the men as they led them down the hill toward the village.

Behind them was Skaro, Hallvard, Jarl Sigurd... and certain death.

The more distance that was put between her... that? The better for her. She had to trust that her destiny did not belong on the edge of her brother’s sword.

There was no turning back now.

CHAPTER 4 ~ BERSI

The hardest thing Bersi had ever done was keeping his mouth shut as Torunn did her best to ruin every single plan he had made to keep her safe. He had intended to take them around Gata—far enough to keep them out of sight.

The hunters could have passed by without noticing them, but they had not. Iri could have stayed down on the ground and they could have ambushed the men and taken them down. No witnesses. Plus they would have deer meat to take with them on the trail. Varin would understand their need to press on.

He had no way of knowing what Iri had planned when he went down the hill to speak to the hunters. Maybe he would have turned them away and they could have continued on after a short time... but Torunn had taken matters into her own hands.

Gata's village gate was small, and their fortifications looked as though they had been built with hasty, unskilled hands. He remembered Gata well enough from his travels, and had thought never to return to this place.

He ducked his head and shifted Varin's weight on his shoulder.

"This way," one man said as he passed the deer skin to a servant who ran up to meet them. He grabbed a boy who ran past, pulled him to a stop, and pointed to Bersi. "Take them to the healer."

The boy nodded and beckoned to him and Bersi gritted his teeth. He had left his role as a servant and a slave behind him the moment they had stepped through Skaro's fortifications. He had no intention of returning to that life, and he would cut down anyone who tried to stand in his way.

Once his promise to Torunn was complete, he would leave. That was his plan. But as he locked eyes with Torunn his resolve crumbled just a little. If they survived...What if she left with him? Would she abandon everything she had fought for?

If they survived.

A sobering thought that dampened any hope he might have had for an unreachable life. She was the daughter of a Jarl, and, as far as he was concerned, she was the rightful

ruler of her village and those that surrounded it. Including Gata. Why would she give that up for him?

He didn't like being separated from Torunn. He didn't trust the men who had brought them into the village—and trusting Iri was something he had not quite gotten used to. The Jarl's advisor was cunning, he could admit that much, and his skill with the bow had given them an unexpected advantage over Hallvard's warriors. But Bersi wasn't fond of secrets, and Iri seemed to be full of them.

Varin felt heavier against his shoulder, and guilt stabbed at Bersi's stomach. He had spoken too callously of leaving the old warrior to die in the trees. He would never have forgiven himself if it had come to that, but he could not admit that Torunn had been right to seek shelter... He owed them both an apology.

"Careful," Varin rasped. "I am steps way from the healer and you would let me fall in the mud now?"

Bersi shifted his grip on his friend and smiled briefly. The boy leading them turned slightly, but said nothing to them.

Gata was noisy for such a small village. Women, children, and animals were everywhere, but there was a lean and hungry look to them. The menfolk were sparse, and Bersi could only guess how many of them had departed for Skaro to raid with Jarl Arnd and never returned.

If they discovered who Torunn was, it was unlikely that their hosts would remain quite so generous. His fear for her only increased as they moved farther into the village, but there was nothing he could do. Torunn could look after herself—but Iri... Iri was unpredictable. Moreso than she ever would be.

Torunn might have been hardheaded and stubborn, and prone to acting impulsively; but impulses could be counted upon. Iri's sly nature was more... untrustworthy.

"That pheasant was not enough," Varin grumbled. "But the venison... perhaps that will give me back all the blood I've lost today."

"A fitting revenge on the beast that gave you this wound," Bersi said loudly enough for the boy to hear.

Varin chuckled. "As you say."

The healer's house was indistinguishable from the others that surrounded it. Rough-hewn walls and thick black smoke spiraling out of the chimney. The only sign that there was anything different behind its walls were an assortment of animal bones and dried herbs that had been hung outside the front door.

He thought it strange to see a healer living among the people, but perhaps he had never noticed before. Skaro's healers separated themselves from the rest of the village, preferring to remain at a distance. But after his interactions with Iarund, he had grown to

learn that had had more to do with the preference of the man himself, and his opinion of the gods, and nothing to do with tradition.

The boy smashed his clenched fist against the wooden door loudly before he turned back to grin at them.

Bersi watched him take off running as fast as his skinny legs could carry him with some bewilderment. The door of the house opened to reveal a wizened old man with a long white beard stained dark with—Bersi did not want to know what it was.

“Yes?”

Bersi blinked at the old man for a moment. He had thought the boy would have stayed to tell him what they needed, but the little rat had disappeared.

“My master, he is in need of your help,” Bersi said firmly. “We are travelers and were brought here by some of Gata’s hunters.”

The old man’s gaze was focused on Varin’s blood-soaked side.

“Bring him in,” he said briskly as he beckoned to them and then disappeared into the house.

Without hesitating, Bersi pulled Varin across the threshold and into the healer’s house. He blinked hard as his eyes adjusted to the thin light that filtered through the cracks in the walls and illuminated more bundles of drying herbs and medicinal plants.

“How was he wounded,” the old man asked as Bersi eased Varin down onto a small cot.

“A bastard of a deer,” Varin choked out. He flinched in pain and Bersi hovered nearby as the old healer crouched down in front of Varin and pulled at the bloodstained tunic.

“A deer, you say,” he murmured.

“We’ll be eating him tonight,” Varin chuckled, and then gasped as the healer prodded the wound with a gnarled finger.

The healer nodded and waved at Bersi dismissively. “You may leave him with me.”

“I will come back for you soon, Gunnar,” Bersi said, but it did not appear that Varin was listening to him. He hated to leave his friend, but Varin was in expert hands—hopefully.

He departed the healer’s house with apprehension gnawing at his guts. Gata seemed safe enough.

Smaller than Laxa, this village seemed more focused on the happiness of its people than anything else. Children shrieked and played in the streets, and Bersi dodged out of the way as a herd of goats galloped past with three small boys at their heels.

He could not give in to paranoia. The eyes that followed him were curious, not malicious, and he tried to shake off some of the edge that threatened to overtake him. He still wore an axe at his hip. At the very least he had that.

He spied one of the hunters who had brought them into the village and strode across the street toward him.

"Ah, Kol's servant," he said with a smile. "Your master is with the healer now?"

Bersi remembered at the last moment to avert his eyes and show some deference. "He is, I thank you. Can you tell me where they have been housed?"

The man nodded and pointed toward a long building that had, no doubt, been constructed as a version of a Great Hall. Where else would Gata's leader entertain his guests?

"There," he said. "They have been given washing water and fresh clothes, so you do not need to worry."

Bersi thanked the man and turned to leave, but a hand fell upon his shoulder. "You should be with the other servants to help prepare the feast," he said. He tilted his chin at another building that stood close to the Hall and Bersi gritted his teeth. Still a servant. Even now. But as much as he wanted to spit in the man's face and break the hand that lay upon his shoulder—he had to play the role.

"Of course."

The man clapped him on the back and Bersi strode as quickly as he could toward the Great Hall.

Gata's layout was similar to the oldest section of Skaro. Houses clustered around a well, with paths and dirt roads radiating out like a cart wheel. The village had expanded little past a third circle of houses, and Bersi wondered just how old the village was—or if it had been founded by people who had left Skaro for some reason or another. Gata was still within the reach of the Jarl, but it also seemed likely that it was small enough to have been forgotten on more than one occasion.

He made his way through the village and though he wanted to go in search of Torunn, he knew he would be turned away by whatever servants had been assigned to her. Women from the village, no doubt, who would not look kindly on a male servant being alone with their guest.

Torunn had taken liberties in Skaro that she could not take elsewhere—especially under a false identity. He could not do what he wanted, either. In Skaro, he had been a slave and had been bound to her commands. But now that they had left Skaro behind, he could take what he wanted without giving a thought to what his position might be. He would claim her as his own and kill anyone who challenged his right to do so.

But even as the thought took root in his mind, he pushed it away as foolish. Torunn's destiny was greater than anything he could offer her. They both knew it, but he had to come to some kind of peace with it. Just as he had many times since leaving Skaro, he forced himself to push his desires out of his mind.

“Ah, Kol’s man,” someone cried as he approached the Hall. “Come, this way. There is firewood to chop, and you seem like a man who knows his way around a woodpile.”

A cheery face greeted him, and Bersi forced himself to smile. “I know my way around an axe well enough,” he replied.

“As good a skill as any,” the man laughed.

He thought he heard Torunn’s laugh and cast a glance over his shoulder at the Great Hall, but he could see nothing beyond the wooden walls and the smoke that rose from the hole in the roof to mingle with the mist that swirled over the hill the village nestled against.

“As you say.”

He followed the abrasively cheerful man toward the wood that needed chopping for the night’s feast and gritted his teeth. This would be the last time he would take orders from someone else. They would have to move on soon... at dawn. No later.

Night approached quickly, and their time dwindled. By now, Hallvard would have realized that his warriors had been unsuccessful—he would not wait until dawn to strike out to locate them.

Why did time always have to run so short...

Mead spilled from cups, and the smell of roasted lamb and venison filled the air. Bersi lingered at the fringes of the feast and kept his eyes on Torunn. She had been washed and dressed in a clean tunic, but her axe was still at her hip, and her eyes were wary even though she drank deeply from the cup she had been given.

“Now, tell me again, where is it you are going?”

Gata’s leader was a large man with a barrel chest, and a gray beard that made his face look even rounder than it already was. In his youth, Bersi guessed that he might have been a great warrior, and he bore the scars to prove it. Now he was lord of a small, but happy village, and seemed content to be so.

Varin belched and raised his cup to be refilled. He, too, had been dressed in a clean tunic, but Bersi could see the linen of the bandage that wrapped his chest beneath the collar. The old man was still vulnerable, though he would never admit to such a thing.

“To Krossa,” Varin said loudly. “My daughter is set to be married, but I cannot say that I approve of the journey thus far.”

The people around him laughed and Bersi looked down at his boots. As a servant, he should stay out of sight with the other servants, but the thought of leaving Torunn for too long was difficult for him. She needed him there, whether or not she knew it.

Bior of Gata stroked his beard and hummed thoughtfully. "Krossa," he said. "I have not heard that name."

"It is a forgettable one," Varin laughed. "If he had not paid so much for her hand, I could be forgiven for forgetting as well!"

Torunn dropped her gaze and smiled demurely, as though such conversation was beyond her and Bersi nearly laughed aloud. If they only knew what she was really like.

Varin sighed heavily and laid a hand upon Torunn's shoulder. "But now that the snows are melting away, I have no choice but to hold up my end of the bargain and deliver my precious daughter to her new husband. My son is determined to open trade between Krossa and our own village." He shook his head and chuckled fondly. "Traders will never cease in their search for opportunity, even on the heels of an auspicious occasion such as this."

Iri's smile was faint, and he raised his cup to Varin who grinned at him.

The old man was enjoying his role far too much and Bersi only hoped that he could keep up the act—and that he did not overindulge on mead after losing so much blood to that wound.

"A worthy journey," Bior laughed. A toast was raised to Torunn's health and future happiness and Bersi wondered for the fifth time that evening what kind of toast would be raised if they knew who she truly was. "And where have you come from?"

Too many questions. Too many.

"Holar," Varin said too confidently.

"Another village I have not heard of," Bior said with a shake of his head. "It seems that my travels have not taken me as far as I should like. But perhaps we can find some common ground—your Jarl. Tell me of him."

Varin shifted in his seat and drank deeply from his cup. "Jarl Arnd," Varin said finally. Bersi's jaw tightened as Bior's eyes widened.

"You have not heard of his death?"

Varin choked on his mead, as though his surprise at the news was genuine. "His— I had not. We have not been to Skaro in some years. The last I saw of him was... beyond my memory now. Since my daughter was young."

Torunn drank quickly and held up her cup to be refilled.

"But you must have heard the rumors," Bior pressed. "The... blasphemies." His voice was lowered, but whispers began in the room. Of course they had heard of such things here. Skaro was not so far away that such news would not travel swiftly.

Varin nodded solemnly. "We have heard of such things," he said.

Bior seemed satisfied and leaned back in his chair. "His funeral was well attended, but I have heard that there was much more ceremony to it than usual."

Varin braced his elbow upon his knee and leaned forward as though he were eager to hear the tale. "How so?"

"That the priests sacrificed one of their own to guarantee the Jarl's entrance to Valhalla." The old leader shook his head. "There would not be enough sacrifice that could bring that man to Odin's table."

Bersi watched Varin's fingers tighten on his cup. Stay quiet, old man.

Torunn's face was a blank mask as she drank from her own cup.

"Then it is wise that you did not attend," Iri said suddenly. "For all of the men who attended the funeral, they will be tainted by his blasphemies... Tainted by the fact that they tried to hide what was so plainly visible from the gods' sight."

Torunn flinched, and Bersi hoped no one had seen it.

Bior nodded gravely. "I have heard others say the same."

"Has your village been struck by the same omens as ours?" Varin asked. Bersi edged closer as Gata's leader glanced at one of his men and then back to Varin.

"Omens?"

Varin's expression hardened. "Stillbirths. Strange illnesses that could not be explained. Monstrous livestock... failed crops. My brother had a cow that birthed a lamb..."

It would have been laughable if such rumors had not been spreading like wildfire. Bersi had heard such things even before he had passed through Laxa. He'd seen a deformed foal that had been brought to the counsel as proof of the curse that the gods had set down upon them.

Bior of Gata drank deeply from his cup and called for more mead. While he waited, his gaze rested on each of their party before coming to rest on Bersi.

"And what do you think?" he asked and beckoned Bersi forward. "I am always curious to know what servants believe," he said to Varin. "They are the ones who hear the truth behind the rumors."

This was a trap. It felt like a trap. But if he did not step forward and answer Bior's questions, their little ruse would be over.

Bersi stepped through the crowd and halted just before the ring of guests. Torunn was to his right. Close enough to touch. Close enough to grab and pull her from the hall and carry her to safety.

Bior raised his newly filled mead cup to Bersi. "So? Do you believe the land is cursed?"

Bersi swallowed thickly and lifted his chin.

He could feel Torunn's eyes on him, but he did not dare to look at her. One look would give him away.

"I do," he said firmly.

CHAPTER 5 ~ TORUNN

The bone cup flexed under her grip as Torunn glared across the fire at him.
How dare he.

She had never asked Bersi how he felt, never asked for his opinion on her father, never—

Fuck.

“Bold words for a servant,” Bior chuckled and gestured at Torunn. “Your mistress does not seem pleased.”

“My daughter is not always so judicious in her reactions,” Varin laughed.

Hurriedly, Torunn lifted her cup and drank to hide her anger at Bersi. He had been the one she had been most worried about when it came to their ruse. Varin played his role beautifully, and Iri—Iri was just silent and watchful, as he always was. All she had to do was stay silent, like a biddable, dutiful daughter. But even such a small requirement was beyond her.

Odin take him.

“My mistress has good reason to be angry with me,” Bersi continued. “It is not a topic that is spoken of in my master’s house. Jarl Arnd is—was—a good man who cared for his people.”

Bior grunted and held out his mead cup to be refilled. The big man could hold his mead well, he did not seem drunk at all, if anything, he seemed more cunning.

“His leadership will be missed,” he said thoughtfully. “But surely, your master agrees that there needs to be a return to the Old Ways. The gods are displeased with us, you all sense it.”

Varin nodded gravely and Bersi had the presence of mind to step back. He didn’t blend in, at all, but at least he would be out of focus. Torunn’s heart beat heavily in her chest, and she felt breathless with each thud against her ribs.

“There must be a return to the gods,” Varin agreed. “A powerful leader who will nurture the land and raise up the worship of Odin above the presence of this new...”

blasphemy.”

“There is already talk of those heathen priests walking abroad in Daneland,” Bior said. He spat on the ground beside his great throne and glared around the room. “I can tell you that if they step foot in Gata they will leave it without their heads or their hands.”

Raucous laughter accompanied the leader’s pronouncement and Torunn allowed herself to smile. Varin was working for his own ends, but he was speaking on her behalf as well.

“And what of the new Jarl,” Varin asked after the noise had died down. “We have had no word in Krossa of who has been chosen to replace Jarl Arnd. His daughter—”

“His daughter was to be married to Jarl Sigurd, of Bitra,” Bior snarled. “A loathsome man with no honor. He is well-matched with Jarl Arnd’s sons... It is they who have taken over the mantle of power in Skaro.”

The venom in Bior’s voice was gratifying.

Varin leaned forward. “What if the Jarl’s daughter were to take control of Skaro?”

Bior’s eyebrow rose and he scratched at his beard. “I would not challenge it,” he said. “I have not met her, but heard of her care for the villages during her father’s absence.”

One of the hunters who had led them into Gata approached quickly and leaned down to whisper something into the big man’s ear. Bior’s expression hardened and his gaze flickered to her, and then to Bersi before he met Varin’s eyes once more. “And the rebellion— Did you hear of the rebellion in Krossa?”

He said the words casually as the hunter stepped away, but Torunn’s throat tightened. Something was wrong.

“We did,” Varin admitted.

“And did that bastard come calling at your doorstep for supporters of his cause?” Bior snorted. “Calling for brave men to rise up against a heathen Jarl who had given the promise of his worship and sacrifice to the new god from across the waves? The Saxon filth that now permeates our shores.”

“I—” Varin could not answer quickly enough for Bior of Gata.

“He came to my Great Hall and spoke honeyed words into the ears of my brave sons. Drove them to go against their father’s will. I would not challenge the Jarl, but they, they would go on my behalf and make Gata’s displeasure known. They would take our concerns to the Jarl’s representative in Skaro and demand justice. Demand that the gods be appeased and worshipped as they deserved.”

“I do not understand—”

Varin glanced at Torunn, desperation and confusion written plainly in his eyes, but she could offer him no comfort.

“He walks with you, my friend,” Bior said calmly. He raised his cup in Bersi’s direction

as his men stepped through the crowd to take hold of Bersi's arms. "Do you not know your own man?"

Varin looked down at his cup of mead thoughtfully, and then drained it in one gulp.

"Or would you lie to me and say that this is not the rebel leader who took my sons from me?"

Torunn looked into the leader's eyes boldly, and to a small pleasure in his surprise as he met her gaze.

"He is the same," she said. "He came to Skaro under cover of night. He and his followers. His rebel force. They attacked us." She turned to glare at Bersi, but he wasn't looking at her, and the anger she had thought she had forgotten flared in her belly once more. "But he was defeated and taken prisoner."

Bior of Gata rubbed at his beard as he stared at her. "You have lied to me many times since your arrival in my village, Sigurt Gunnardottir," he said. "But now I am to believe that you are not an innocent young bride, but the daughter of this cursed Jarl?"

His chuckle was thick and cruel, and Torunn felt a shiver run down her spine.

"I am," she said firmly. "And I mourn for the sons you lost, just as I mourn for my father."

The old man snorted and poured his mead out onto the rushes that covered the floor of the hall.

Silence fell over the gathered villagers, and Torunn swallowed hard. She could not falter. Not now.

"My father was killed in Saxon lands. But he did not die in battle as he should have. He died at the hands of his own sons. My brothers. And now my brother Hallvard sits upon the Jarl's seat in Skaro. A murderer. A blasphemer."

"And what do I care about any of that?" Bior asked. A smile tugged at the corner of the old warrior's mouth and she saw his beard twitch slightly as he fought against it.

"You should care!" Varin blurted out. Bior's eyes widened in surprise at his outburst, and his meaty hand tightened on his cup.

"And why might that be?"

"We are taking her to Myrka," Varin said firmly as he forced himself to his feet. He swayed slightly before finding his balance. Torunn reached out to steady him, but he pushed her hand away. "She will be blessed by the gods—cleansed of her father's wrongs."

Torunn reached into her tunic and pulled out the rough wooden cross she had taken from the healer's hands. She held it up and tried to keep her fingers from shaking, but it was useless to try.

"You were right to doubt him," she said through clenched teeth. Tears pricked at her

lashes and she blinked them away before they could fall and betray her weakness. "This was taken from his body before he was brought to his funeral pyre... He died a heathen. Odin will never greet him at the gates of Valhalla. He will never drink the sacred mead from the hand of the Valkyries. I will never see him again."

Those last words hurt to speak aloud, and she had never intended to say them.

Varin shook his head. "Will you give us shelter for the night and let us pass through your lands to reach Myrka," he asked.

Bior reached out and snatched the cross from Torunn's fingers. She grabbed for it, but the old man was too quick for her. She lurched out of her chair, but a heavy hand pushed her down and held her there. Torunn glared up into Varin's face, but he was not looking at her.

"Bior. We are not who we said we were—but you must believe that we are on a sacred journey to set right all the wrongs that have been done since Jarl Arnd's heart was turned away from the gods."

"And you think you will find such a thing in the depths of Myrka?" Bior of Gata laughed loudly and held up the wooden cross. "A symbol of the treachery in Jarl Arnd's heart." He glared at Torunn. "And what if his daughter carries the same stain? Some things cannot be washed away, even by the grace of the gods."

He grunted as he threw the cross into the copper brazier in front of him. One that was stamped with similar symbols—a piece of plunder from Saxon lands.

With a strangled cry, Torunn pushed Varin's hand away from her shoulder and leapt at the brazier. She kicked it over, knocking burning logs and a shower of coals and spark onto the dry rushes. The hall erupted in shouts of surprise and anger as men all around her moved forward to protect their leader. But Torunn didn't care about him.

Glowing coals scorched her fingers as she snatched the cross up from the embers and clutched it tight in her fist.

A bucket of water splashed over the burning logs before it could light the rushes, followed by another. The small deluge soaked into Torunn's boots and she gritted her teeth as she glared at Bior of Gata.

"This does not belong to you," she snarled.

The big man's laughter echoed in the hall and all eyes turned to him as smoke and steam rose from the doused flames at his feet.

"Now, I believe you are his daughter," he said through his mirth. He waved a dismissive hand. "Take them away. I do not wish to look upon them any longer."

Hard hands grabbed Torunn's arms, and she fought against their grip, but the axe she carried was ripped away from her hip before she could strike out and defend herself.

"Will you let us pass?" she shouted. "Bior!"

"Perhaps. I will decide in the morning," he replied.

Torunn fought against her captors, but could not break their hold on her. Iri pushed the hands of Bior's men away, but followed them willingly as they led him out of the hall. Torunn glared at him as he passed, but he would not look at her. She did not like the secrets that Iri had been keeping from her, and her trust in him was wavering.

Bersi was pushed from the hall, but he put up more of a fight than Iri had, and it took four men to restrain him and drag him through the door and into the darkness beyond the hall.

Varin, still injured, was treated with more civility, but he still resisted the hands of the warriors who held him.

"I am disappointed in your lies," Bior said as Varin was led away. "I had thought to be treated with more respect in my own house. Especially by the likes of you, Arndottir."

Torunn glared at him. "If you do not allow us to pass through Gata, you have murdered us all. My brother will come to Gata in search of me, and if he finds me here, my life is forfeit."

"Then perhaps the young Jarl will reward Gata for its loyalty," Bior snorted. "It would be a welcome change from the indifference that was so often paid to us."

Torunn shook her head and laughed softly. "My brother's rewards will not be to your liking," she said.

Bior grunted and turned his attention back to his mead. Torunn's captors tightened their grip on her and pushed her from the hall. This time, she did not struggle. What use would it be? Even if she was able to free herself and run, where would she go? She was unarmed save for her knife and had no provisions. She may as well wait for Hallvard and his men to arrive. At least then her death would be quick.

She stumbled along with the men who pulled her through the village and barely looked up as Bersi shouted her name. The men were taken in a different direction, but she did not even notice where. Her fate was sealed... perhaps the gods had truly abandoned her.

A door creaked open, and she was shoved into a small, dark, cold hut with a packed dirt floor that smelled of pig shit and wet dogs, and her stomach churned as the door slammed shut behind her.

If there were worse places to die, she couldn't think of any. She swayed on her feet and looked up at the decaying roof above her head. The beams and thatch had broken away, and between the sticks that had been hastily tied in place she could see the velvet black of the night sky.

A single spark of light twinkled down at her, and hot tears pricked at her eyelashes. Perhaps, even after everything she had done, Freya had not forgotten her.

She rubbed her fingers over the hilt of her knife and then brushed the tears away from her cheeks. Bior would decide in the morning, and her fate would be decided—death, or freedom...

She was ready for either.

CHAPTER 6 ~ BERSI

“Did you really think you could come here without being recognized?” Varin snarled.

The old warrior slammed his boot into the wooden door and the sound drew laughter from the men who had been stationed outside. They were prisoners now. At the mercy of a man who would have every right to give the order that would end his life. Maybe all of them. He had put all of them in danger by coming to Gata. But he had not wanted to come to this place at all.

“I did not want to come here!” Bersi said firmly. “I would have gone around the village.”

“And left me to die on the hill, is that it?” Varin raged. “As much as I disagreed with this plan, if it even was a plan...” he laid a hand on his ribs and shook his head. “This is madness. If you had just—”

“What?” Bersi challenged him.

“If you had just kept your fool mouth shut and stayed in the shadows. Why were you in the hall? You should have stayed outside with the servants!”

“He doesn’t think he should be a servant,” Iri said in a toneless voice from the opposite side of the room. “You see how he looks at Torunn. He doesn’t think the rules apply to him.”

“Watch your mouth,” Bersi growled.

He had seen how Iri watched Torunn’s movements. He worshipped her, though he would never admit it.

“It’s because of her we are here,” Iri continued. “If she had stayed at the fire, we would follow your plan. I was going to distract the hunters, send them away, but Torunn —”

“She saved my life,” Varin said grimly. “I will not hear you speak against her. She did not intend for this to happen.” Bersi felt the sharpness of the old man’s gaze, but didn’t turn his head to acknowledge it. “You should have told us the truth.”

“You’re right,” Bersi said angrily. “Should I have mentioned it when we were running

for our lives from Hallvard's men, or when I was dragging you from the forest? Or when we were following Gata's hunters back to the village? Perhaps when I threw you into the arms of their healer? When I was chopping firewood for hours while you and the others bathed and caroused with the leader of the village? When, Varin? When should I have told you?"

Bersi could have put his fist through the wall of the hut. His face burned and his stomach was tight as rage boiled through his veins. This was not his fault.

It was not Torunn's fault, either. He knew that. But he could not help but be angry—Varin's jaw tightened, and he leaned on the wall of the hut for support. "What does it matter," he said flatly. "If Bior decides that we have insulted his honor, then we will all be put to the axe or given over to Hallvard's men when they arrive. They will have discovered the bodies we left behind in the forest by now. It won't be long before they see the smoke that rises from Gata and come searching for us."

"No. It will not be long," Iri said. He pushed away from the wall and strode to the door. He pounded his fist against it and shouted for the guards who stood outside.

"What?" came the muffled reply.

"I need to speak to Bior!" Iri shouted.

The men outside laughed and Bersi's hands tightened into fists. He could break down the door if he had to. Torunn was being held in a hut not far away. It would take no time to cross the village, find her, break down the door and take her away into the woods—

"He'll speak to you in the morning, liar," one man shouted back. "You'll be lucky if he allows you to leave Gata with your heads."

More laughter.

"Excellent work," Varin growled. "It is a good thing that you did not manage negotiations for the new Jarl. He would not have approved of your work."

Iri glared at Varin over his shoulder and focused on the door. "I can speak to him about Jarl Hallvard," he said loudly. "I was a close confidant to the Jarls of Skaro. What to expect when Hallvard's men come to Gata. Without me, he will be unarmed against them."

There was silence outside the hut, and Bersi held his breath. If Iri could somehow talk Bior out of sacrificing them to the gods for their insults, there may be some hope for them yet... but if he could not...

Worse still, what if he traded them away to Hallvard for his own freedom? It was unlikely that the Jarl would ever forgive him for allowing Torunn to escape. If Bior allowed him to run into the forest and leave the others behind, he had a chance at making a new life for himself.

The bastard.

It was a cunning plan. And one that he might have entertained himself had he not been at the center of Bior's anger.

And if Torunn were not involved...

Torunn.

"What say you?" Iri shouted. "Will you take me to Bior?"

There was no answer and Bersi paced the hard dirt floor. What was happening to Torunn? They had taken her axe, but he knew that she still had her knife. That, if nothing else, gave him some comfort. She would not be separated from that blade for long, and if her attack on Ragna had been any indication, she would do anything to get it back if it were taken from her.

Iri's head dropped, and he slammed his fist against the wooden door in frustration before he turned away.

All they could do now was wait. No matter what was said or done, when the sun rose, their fate would be decided.

"Keep your distance from me, cur." Varin glared at Iri as he walked by. "If I had a weapon you would be choking on your own blood by now."

"Then I am a luckier man than I deserve," Iri said mildly. "Loki watches over me, of that I am certain."

"I have no doubt," Varin sneered. "I would say that you have much in common with your patron, but that would be an insult to the Aesir."

Iri inclined his head and said nothing more. He leaned against the back wall of the hut, crossed his arms over his chest, and lowered his head.

"Are you really going to sleep?" Varin snorted.

"I am," Iri said without looking up. "What else is there to do? Unless you'd like to tell me stories about your great battles and conquests?"

Bersi bit back a chuckle as Varin glared at the Jarl's former advisor with a look that could have melted the iron buckles on Thor's armor.

Varin grumbled something that Bersi could not hear, but Iri's point had been made. They could do nothing but wait.

Bersi hated waiting, but he had become used to it... For the first time in a very long time he wondered what the gods had planned for him. There was no chance, only inevitability. No luck, only destiny. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on Torunn. Would she be able to forgive him—or would it matter at all?

Varin's shout of pained surprise woke Bersi out of a sleep he never should have taken. His breath was choked off as the wooden shaft of one spear was pressed against his throat and the sharp iron point of another was aimed at his face.

Two angry faces peered down at him and Bersi lay as still as he could, his breathing shallow and measured while his eyes adjusted to the pale morning light that filtered through the roof and the open door.

There was the sound of a scuffle as Varin fought against the men who held him and then a sharp cry of pain that halted sound of the desperate movements.

Fool. Stay still, old man.

"You," a voice barked. "Bior wants to speak with you."

Surprise flooded through Bersi's mind. Iri had been granted his audience. But what would he ask for? Would he beg for their lives? Try to reason with the angry old man? Or would he take Torunn and escape with her... and leave them behind.

She would never accept such a bargain.

Or would she? How desperate was she to escape her brother's vengeance?

Footsteps as Iri was led from the hut, and a foot slammed into Bersi's stomach as the spears were lifted away. He let out a grunt of pain and curled inward to deflect any other blows, but none came. He opened his eyes slowly as the door thumped shut and the scrape of the iron lock echoed in the space as it was jammed into place.

"Varin—"

"Shut your mouth," the old man hissed through clenched teeth.

Bersi sat up, half-expecting to see Varin doubled over in pain, but the old warrior crept across the floor toward the door.

He laid his ear against it and beckoned for Bersi to do the same.

"What—"

Varin ignored him, and Bersi heard muffled voices outside the door. He scrambled to his feet and moved across the room as silently as possible. Varin grabbed his tunic and pulled him against the door and Bersi laid his head against it and tried to concentrate on what was happening just outside.

"What is it that you have to tell me, Iri, son of Hundolff, that I have not heard already?"

"Jarl Hallvard," Iri said firmly. "He is raising an army, but not to raid like his father."

"Good. I have no interest in the Saxons, or their treasures."

"Hallvard is planning to raid his neighbors," Iri said quickly. "His friends and allies. There will be no more leaders, no more villages like Gata. There will be only Skaro."

There was silence for a moment as Bior considered Iri's words. "And why would you

tell me this?"

"Because I do not think that it is a wise course of action," Iri said. "It is not how our great society was built—Hallvard believes that the Saxon kings are greater than any Jarl. He wants to wield that power. One king, over many lands... There would be no need for allies, no need for trade agreements or marriages to solidify alliances. There would only be his laws, his armies, his fleet of ships. His warriors."

There were small shouts of derision from the gathered men and women. They had elected Bior to be their leader; they did not want a king...

"And why should I believe you?"

"Because I have heard their plans," Iri said. "I have— I have helped Jarl Hallvard and Jarl Sigurd plan their attacks. It would happen within the year. Before the snow flies once more. In summer, or perhaps when men's minds are turned toward the plow—"

"Ridiculous," Bior laughed. "An impossible task. No leader of any village would agree to it. Even Laxa's council, Skaro's lapdogs... Even they would scorn such a thing."

"Do you really believe he will give you a choice?" Iri asked.

The silence that fell over the men who had been gathered outside the hut was punctuated by shouts and the wail of a small child. Varin clutched at Bersi's tunic, and his eyes were wide and full of anger and fear.

"Is it possible?" he whispered.

"I would not doubt it," Bersi replied through clenched teeth.

"If you let us take Torunn to Myrka, she will be blessed by the gods—and she will return to Skaro to take her rightful place upon the Jarl's throne. She would never betray your people in this way. She would never betray her allies. She needs your support, Bior. Please. If you do not allow us to leave Gata—Hallvard will not let her survive."

"I am a patient man, Iri Hundolffson," Bior said slowly. "But I am not a fool who stands against his Jarl. The men who travel with you—they have dealt me a great insult. That rebel. That rebel saw my two sons murdered... murdered for standing against their Jarl. Would you ask me to do such a thing again? Would you ask me to pledge the warrior sons and daughters of this village to this cause? A cause that I cannot—"

"I only ask that you consider what I have said," Iri interrupted him. "It will not be long before Skaro's scouts pay a visit to your gates and you will have to decide where you stand. Do you want a future for your village, or the future that Hallvard has planned for you?"

"Get him out of my sight," Bior roared.

Bersi pulled Varin away from the door and staggered back as the latch scraped over the rough wood and the door was flung inward. Iri stumbled through the doorway, pushed by one of the men who had dragged him out. Another man kicked him squarely in

the back, sending Iri tumbling to the ground. Bersi had expected laughter to follow, but there was only a strained silence.

Iri's words had stunned everyone who had heard them, himself included.

Neither he, nor Varin, moved to help him and Iri pushed himself to his knees, and then to his feet. He rubbed a hand over his beard and brushed the dirt from his breeches.

"Is it true?" Varin asked darkly. "Is that Hallvard's plan?"

Iri nodded. "His attack on Jarl Sigurd was only the beginning."

Bersi couldn't hold his anger back any longer. He reached out and grabbed Iri by the neck of his tunic and hauled him close.

"And you were going to just let it happen," Bersi said softly.

Iri didn't flinch. "I do not know."

"You would have watched Torunn be married to that—"

"What was I supposed to do?" Iri snapped. "Hallvard would not have allowed Jarl Sigurd's ships to depart Skaro's shores."

Bersi let out a restrained roar of anger and pushed Iri away. "You worm," he snarled. "You would have stood by through the whole mess. As long as you were spared any inconvenience and you could remain out of harm's way. What position did Hallvard promise you after his plan went into action?"

Iri straightened his shoulders and his jaw tightened.

In two quick strides, Bersi stood chest to chest with him. He was taller, but Iri's gaze was steady and his stance was firm.

"Did he promise you Torunn?"

"What if he did?"

Bersi wanted to laugh. He wanted to pull back his arms and drive his fist into the other man's face and not stop punching until he was twitching on the floor. He wanted to —

"I'd be tempted to watch you try," Bersi said. He felt a smile twist across his lips, and finally—Iri flinched.

Bersi pushed him back and relished his stumble. His smile became a sneer as he looked at Iri. "She would kill you before you touched her."

"Are you finished?" Varin hissed. He gestured toward the door.

"Has Bior made his decision so soon?"

Iri's expression had a hopeful edge that Bersi wanted to beat out of him with his own fists.

"I do not think so," Varin said. "I believe there are some unexpected guests at Gata's gates."

Bersi grabbed Iri's shoulder and pulled him back. "You, stay where I can see you."

Iri glared back, but did not challenge him, and Bersi spat on the ground at his feet. Coward.

He went to the door and pressed his ear against the rough wood. Varin was right, there was something happening in the village. Whatever it was, it would not end well for them.

CHAPTER 7 ~ TORUNN

She was angry, but she refused to admit that she was afraid. Her knife was a reassuring weight against her hip, and Torunn kept it hidden beneath her tunic. They had already taken away her axe, and she had put up a fight when the women who had been sent to act as her jailers had tried to take away her father's wooden cross. They had left, bruised and bloodied, and Torunn expected them to return at any moment to take their revenge.

She would have done the same if her own prisoner had dared to act as she did.

The women who stood guard outside her hut were silent, and Torunn knew better than to beg for them to tell her anything. She already knew that they would have nothing to tell her.

Bior of Gata was no fool. Separating her from the men she traveled with was the smartest way to keep them all compliant. Though the truth of it irritated her, she would not survive long in the wilds without them. And without her, they had nothing.

"Bastard," she muttered.

She paced the floor of the hut and kicked at the bucket of water that had been brought for her. She had eaten little at the feast and regretted the amount of mead she had drunk instead. It would have been nice to have something solid in her belly.

Anxiety tore at her mind. Bior had been too quick to listen to their story, and even quicker to turn on them when he discovered the truth. And Bersi—a liar and a rebel. But she could have expected nothing else of him. She had been a fool to let him get so close.

A rebel's heart was like a wolf. It could be made to act like a dog, could eat with the family, play with the children, but it could never be tamed... A wolf would always hunger for wild places, and turn in an instant if cornered or given the opportunity to let its nature take hold.

But would she want him if he could be brought to heel?

Would she want to be possessed by him if he were like every other man she had ever known?

She knew the answer, and it burned in her chest.

Infuriating.

A moment of weakness. A moment of lust and desire. Mistakes that she would willingly make again, and again if she could.

She kicked at the bucket again and sent water splashing up the side of the hut.

The iron lock scraped against the wood and Torunn jumped back as the door flew open.

Three women rushed in and took hold of her arms. She struggled against them, but it was useless and they overpowered her easily. She was weakened from their journey, and exhausted by all the stress that had been piled upon her shoulders, but if there had been fewer of them, an opportunity for escape, and more room to move—she would have given them trouble. But there were more men outside the door, and the village leader's wide shadow fell across the entrance to the hut. She had been granted an audience.

"I have spoken to Jarl's traitorous advisor," Bior said sharply. "He tells me that there were plans in place to overthrow the governance of the villages—to take it for himself and absorb our lands into Skaro's domain."

Torunn's throat tightened. Iri had told him this? It had to be a lie.

"I do not understand," she croaked.

"Do you not?" Bior cried. "Such a move would make Skaro the most powerful village in Daneland. A kingdom all for your brother. He would be a king, like those vile Saxons your father loved so much. You would be a princess... a Queen!"

She shook her head. "No. It is impossible. Hallvard—"

But she could not bring herself to say the words that would defend her brother. He would do such a thing. Ragna had carried herself like a queen... as though she already wore the crown upon her head. A slave who would be on the right hand of the most powerful man in Daneland... Torunn blinked hard to push aside the vision of Ragna's face as she had brought the rock down upon it.

"Who told you this?"

"Iri Hundolfsson was more than willing to tell me everything I wished to know," Bior said with a confident chuckle. "He begged me to consider the fact that you would not be such a leader."

Torunn stared back at Bior in surprise. "Of course I would not. The villages are the only reason that Skaro survives, and in turn the Jarl supports your claims to your leadership, sends aid when rebels and raiders attack... provides shelter and protection. A market for your goods— I would not take that away."

Bior frowned as he glared at her. "And what kind of assurance could you give me? What promise that Gata would not be forgotten when you take your father's seat in

Skaro? If I let you live.”

Torunn’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. What could she promise him? What token or assurance could she give?

“I— I have nothing,” she said finally. “Only my words.”

“Words?” Bior snorted. “Words mean nothing. You came to Gata telling lies—your words mean nothing to me.”

He tugged at his beard as he looked at her and stepped forward to place a finger on her jaw. “It is a pity I have no sons left, or I would have been happy to arrange a marriage in exchange for your freedom...”

Torunn turned her face away from his touch, but kept her eyes locked on his. Her hands tightened into fists as she fought to retain control. Anything she wanted to say in response to such an insult would have guaranteed her death.

He frowned when she did not reply and the gentle stroke of his finger became a hard slap. Lightning fast. It caught her off guard and her head rocked back with the force of it. “I wonder what reward your brother will offer me for your safe return,” he mused as the warriors who stood behind him chuckled.

Torunn tasted blood and smiled at him before she spat in the dirt at his feet. “My safe return,” she snarled. “My ‘safe return’ will mean my death. My brother will lie to you, too,” she continued boldly, “but his lies come with the edge of a sword at your neck when you least expect it. He might reward you for my return, but how long will it be before he decides that he does not need Gata—or you.”

“Bah!”

Bior turned away from her in disgust, and the women who held her threw her back into the hut. She stumbled and fell, landing roughly on the hard dirt floor. The door slammed shut and the lock rasped across the wood once more as it was locked tight.

Torunn pushed herself off the floor with a grunt and wiped her hand across her face. Bastard. He would deserve whatever punishment Hallvard had in store for him.

But Bior’s words stuck in her mind like a burr to her breeches. Hallvard’s plans—Iri would have known everything. Why had he not said anything to her? Why had he been so secretive?

But something else chilled even deeper.

Iri had always had his own interests at heart. What would Hallvard have promised him to keep him silent? What had been the price of his compliance and assistance in making such devastating plans?

If Hallvard were King in Daneland—what would that mean for her?

But what would it matter if she were dead.

She could not stay here forever. She could not wait for these men to make their

decisions and determine her fate. Her destiny had already been decided, but this was not it. She had to trust that Freya would not allow such things to happen.

She had to.

Hours passed, and Torunn paced the floor. With every movement outside the door, she readied herself for battle, but when the noise quieted she was left on edge. She could not relax, not now. Bior had not yet decided, but she could only cling to that for so long.

The hole in the hut's roof provided some guide to the passage of time, and when the sky darkened once more, she made the only choice she could. She would not wait any longer. If she was going to die, let it be in battle. Not trussed like a sacrificial lamb awaiting her brother's knife in the dark.

She crept toward the door and pressed her ear against it.

"Bior will not give her up," one woman said with confidence. "She is too valuable."

"Perhaps the rebel, then?"

A third woman laughed, and Torunn heard the metallic clank of her weapons as she stood up. "Bior will see the rebel punished. He should have been killed for his attack on Skaro. Bior will carry out the Jarl's justice as it should have been. Why keep him alive?"

"Did you see the way he looked at her?" the first woman said. "I'd keep him alive, too."

Torunn's cheeks burned as the women outside the hut laughed loudly.

A shout cut their laughter short, and Torunn backed away from the door. Hoofbeats pounded over the ground and she pressed herself against the wooden wall of the hut and closed her eyes as they cantered by.

The women shouted, and Torunn listened carefully as they ran after the strangers on horseback. It could be anyone, but she knew, somehow, that it was Hallvard. Scouts would have been sent by now. Probably to all the villages near Skaro. They would all be looking for them.

Looking for her.

She waited, trying to breathe as shallow as possible so she could listen for any sound over the pounding of her heart in her chest.

Silence.

Without hesitation, Torunn ran for the bucket she had kicked over. She set it down on its edge beneath and hole in the roof and stepped up onto the solid wooden base. She reached up and her fingers scraped against the broken sticks that made up the roof. Bits

of bark and thatch fell down around her shoulders, but she pulled relentlessly until there was enough space that she could fit through.

At least, she hoped she could fit.

She glanced back at the door quickly, hoping that she was still alone, and then clenched her teeth and jumped.

She was tall enough that it took little effort to reach the sticks she had exposed, but as she dangled in the air, she knew that her escape would be more difficult than she had initially expected.

Her legs swung in the air, and she kicked to give herself some momentum. Her shoulders screamed with pain, and her old injury made her arm shudder, but her grip was strong and she hauled herself up through the hole in the roof. Broken sticks scraped against her cheek and stabbed into her neck, but she didn't stop. She grunted as her head broke through the roof and the cool evening wind tugged at her hair. She held herself there for a moment, half in and half out of the building, as she gathered her strength. If anyone would have opened the door, they would have just seen her legs dangling down from the roof.

Ridiculous. How dignified.

The village was quieter than she had expected, and the quiet was not comforting.

Whoever had come to Gata had drawn the attention of far too many people. And that did not give her any confidence.

With a determined grunt, she pulled herself through the roof and lay flat, staring up at the darkening sky as she panted with the exertion. It had been far too long since she had climbed anything, and her muscles would not thank her for it.

Satisfied that she had gained her freedom without drawing any attention, Torunn rolled onto her stomach and slid down the roof to where the low edge provided enough cover that she could drop to the ground safely.

But as she lowered herself down, her hand slipped on the thatch and she fell backward. Torunn landed on her back, hard, and could not stop the surprised cry that left her lips.

"What's that!"

She gasped for breath and scrambled to her feet as the voice called out again. She pulled her knife from her belt and held it at the ready. But instead of a rough warrior, a young boy came around the corner of the hut.

His face was smudged with dirt and his chin shone with animal fat—she could smell cooked meat and her stomach growled.

"What're you doin'?" the boy asked. His eyes were wide as he stared at the knife in her hands.

"I'm leaving," Torunn whispered. "Can you keep a secret?"

The boy shook his head. "Not supposed to."

Desperation streaked through her veins. She couldn't kill him. Bersi might have. Varin would only have hesitated for a moment... But she couldn't do it.

She beckoned to the boy. "Come here."

He looked at her warily. He must not have seen her in the great hall, otherwise he would have raised the alarm by now. Or shouted for someone. "Why?"

"I have something for you," she said.

The boy looked skeptical, but he edged forward anyway. Curiosity was a powerful drug.

She pulled a silver ring from her forefinger and held it out to him. It was a thick band, set with a dark green stone. She had found it on the ground, dropped from a pile of plunder that was taken from one of the holy places in Saxony. No one had missed it, but she had been drawn to the depth of the stone—the color of a summer sea. "If you tell me where they are keeping the rebel," she whispered. "I'll give you this."

The boy's eyes widened as he looked at the stone, and she wondered if he had ever seen the ocean, or heard any stories about the monsters that dwelled beneath its depths.

"Where are they being kept?" she asked again as the boy reached for it. She stood still as he rubbed one finger over the smooth roundness of the stone.

The boy's eyes flickered to her and then back to the ring. "A hut near the western wall of the village," the boy said.

"How many men are watching them?"

The boy hesitated, his hand just inches above hers. "Why?"

Torunn's fingers closed over the ring, and the boy frowned. "Will you tell me, or shall I give this to another boy? Do you have a brother?"

He nodded. "Maybe your brother will know... will you fetch him?"

The boy grabbed her closed hand. "No," he said firmly. "My brother doesn't know anything."

"I thought so," Torunn said with a smile. She opened her hand again, and the boy snatched the ring off her palm.

"Four men," he said. "Four men watching the door."

"You are so brave," Torunn said. "Now, you take that... and do not tell anyone that you have seen me."

The boy nodded and slipped the ring over his fingers until he found one that fit. His thumb. He grinned proudly.

"Hide that away," Torunn said. "Unless you want it stolen from you. I had to hide it from my brothers, too. They were always taking what wasn't theirs."

“Mine too,” the boy whispered solemnly.

Without another word, the boy turned and ran away between the houses, and Torunn breathed a small sigh of relief. She had loved that ring, but it was a trinket that could be replaced, and that boy would remember that moment for the rest of his life.

She stayed low as she moved through the buildings. Four men on guard. There had been three women outside her hut. And they had all disappeared to see what the commotion was in the great hall. Perhaps the other guards had abandoned their posts as well.

She could only hope for such luck.

A small prayer to Freya, whispered breathlessly as she pressed herself against the side of a stone house, gave her some comfort. It would have to be enough. They had no time. If Hallvard’s scouts were in Gata, they would be everywhere by the time the sun rose the following morning.

She crept forward and listened carefully for the sound of voices, but there were none, save for the murmur of those at their evening meal behind the walls of their small houses.

The smell of pipe smoke stung her nostrils as she drew close to the western wall of the village fortifications. The hut the boy had spoken of lay just ahead, separated from the residential houses just enough to mark it out as different. It was probably used to store trade goods like the one she had been kept in. Gata would have no need for a prison, as Skaro did.

One man sat in front of the hut. Pale smoke rose from the pipe clenched between his teeth and she swallowed hard to keep from coughing as the smell reached her nose again.

She could hear muffled voices from behind the latched door and wondered what was being said. After what Bior had said, she could not imagine that Iri was very popular with Bersi... or Varin.

Her fingers tightened around the hilt of her knife. She could handle one man. Quick and quiet. And then they could slip out of the village before anyone noticed.

She took a deep breath and ran across the narrow street. There was no movement from the man outside the hut. Torunn pressed her back against the wood walls of the hut and crept behind it. She could hear Bersi’s voice—low and angry—as he argued with someone. If they were planning an escape, that was not the way to do it.

Men.

Torunn moved quickly around the side of the small hut and stepped out behind the guard who had remained behind. Without thinking, she rushed forward and slammed the handle of her knife against the side of the man’s head. He let out a grunt of pain and

slumped to the side, and Torunn helped him fall to the ground without causing too much noise.

Her hand throbbed, but her veins pumped with victory as she strode to the door of the hut and fumbled with the latch. She pulled the door open and came face to face with Bersi. The big man towered over her, and his angry expression changed the instant he saw her.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

"What does it look like? Move!" she whispered back angrily.

"Who came into the village?" Varin asked from behind Bersi. The old warrior pushed his friend out of the way and stepped through the door.

"I'm not waiting to find out," Torunn snapped. "Now, hurry. Iri, come on."

Varin kicked the guard who lay on the ground as he passed, but the man barely moved.

"Is he dead?" he asked casually.

"No," Torunn hissed.

Bersi emerged from the hut and glared at the guard on the ground. No one was moving fast enough.

"Iri," she hissed again. "Hurry. We're leaving. Now!"

Her childhood friend came forward slowly. "Torunn— I—"

"What?"

There was no time for talking, and she was growing more and more irritated with every passing second.

"He can stay here and Bior can decide what to do with his worthless hide," Bersi snarled. He and Varin disappeared around the corner of the hut to make their way to the village gate.

Iri's eyes burned with anger, but he could not look at Torunn. "Fine," she said. "Come, or don't. I don't care."

There was a shout from behind them and Torunn could see the glow of torches on the side of the houses farther into the village.

Without another word, she turned and ran, but as she ran past the guard she had knocked out, a hand reached out and grabbed her ankle. She let out a choked cry and fell to the ground. The rough dirt scraped at her cheek, and the grip on her leg was hard and painful. She kicked out, struggling to get free, but there was no escape. The man's face was covered in blood from a wound over his eyebrow, and his pale blue eyes burned with rage as he pulled on her leg and dragged her toward himself.

Her knife had fallen out of her hand, and she scrabbled in the dirt to try and find it.

Bersi and Varin were too far away to hear her, and if she cried out, Bior's men would

only come faster to see what was happening.

She kicked again, this time her boot connected with the man's face. She half-expected him to let go, but his grip on her ankle only tightened. Desperation twisted her stomach as her fingers brushed against the blade of her knife.

"Help here!" The guard shouted. "Help!"

No. No. No.

Torunn grabbed for the blade and gasped as the edge bit into her fingers. She pressed her lips together and pulled it toward herself, but before she could take hold of the hilt, the knife was pulled from her grasp.

She twisted around as the man who held her ankle let out a strangled cry. His grip released, and she pulled her leg free.

Strong hands pulled her to her feet and Torunn did not have time to think about anything but the way the dirt soaked up the dead man's blood.

Without a word, Iri pulled her away from the hut, and Torunn finally found her feet as they ran through the village.

Bersi and Varin had not waited at the gate, and Torunn felt a twinge of desperation as she looked for them.

"This way," Iri hissed. He turned toward the forest, but Torunn hesitated.

"Are you sure that's where they went?" she asked quickly.

Iri's eyes narrowed. "We need to get away from the village now!"

Shouts could be heard over the fortifications. They had found the dead man, and the empty hut.

There was no time to negotiate. She grabbed her knife out of Iri's hand and shoved it back into the scabbard at her hip. His lips pressed together in a thin line, but she did not care what he was thinking.

"The forest," she said. Movement in the trees caught her eye, and relief flooded her chest as she recognized Varin's face. Without hesitation, she ran toward him.

"Where was he taking you?" he asked as she careened through the trees and came to a stop at his side.

"Into the woods," Torunn gasped. "But—"

"Do not go anywhere with him," Varin said darkly. "Not without us."

Torunn glanced over her shoulder as Iri plunged into the trees.

"Where is Bersi?"

Varin made a vague gesture. "Watching our backs," he said. He glared meaningfully at Iri, but the Jarl's former advisor did not look at him. He pushed through the underbrush and continued into the trees.

Angry shouts echoed from the direction of the village, and a chill shuddered down

Torunn's spine.

"We should not wait for our hosts to come and collect us," Varin said. His smile was twisted, and Torunn wondered if his wound was giving him trouble...

"No, we should not," Torunn agreed.

The darkness would give them some cover, but it would not be long before Hallvard would be on their trail once more.

Myrka. They would only be safe when they reached the borders of the sacred forest. Until then, they would be hunted...

CHAPTER 8 ~ TORUNN

"I've seen this tree before," Torunn whispered.

"Are you certain it's this way?"

Bersi's grunted words made Torunn shake her head. Her thoughts weren't clear, her vision was blurry...

She was thirsty.

Hungry.

Exhausted.

Terrified.

The sky above them had lightened and darkened twice since their flight from Gata. Iri had remained silent for much of it, and the words he did speak were short and clipped. Something had happened between the men while they had been imprisoned, but she could not bring herself to ask what.

Not yet.

Not while they were still in so much danger.

Varin had led the way—he seemed to know the forest and made the path forward with confidence. But as time had passed, and the trees seemed to stretch on endlessly, Bersi began to question his friend's sense of direction.

"We're almost there," Varin declared. "Unless you'd like to lead the way?"

Bersi snorted and slapped his hand against the trunk of a tree as he passed. "We have been walking for too long," he said. "Have we doubled back somehow?"

"Did an owl tell you we were going the wrong way?" Varin snapped. "Or a squirrel?"

"I'd rather follow a squirrel than an old man who couldn't navigate his way out of a livestock pen."

Varin stopped short and scowled at Bersi.

Torunn moved to step between them, but before she could raise a hand to stop their argument, Varin laughed.

"It was one time, and I was drunk."

Bersi shook his head, but Torunn could see the hint of a smile beneath his beard and she breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Bersi is right," Iri said abruptly. "We have been walking for too long. Hallvard's scouts would have abandoned their pursuit by now. We should try to find a road—"

"A road?" Varin snorted. "We are not safe on any road. If you believe Hallvard has given up his chase, you are a bigger fool than I had imagined."

"Then where is Myrka? How are we to find anything when every tree looks the same?" Iri said. Frustration and anger were clear in his voice, and Torunn could not help but agree with him. Everything did look the same.

She had been a child the last time she had taken shelter under Myrka's trees. For all she knew, they had passed it in the night. Or missed a turn in the path that would have taken them in the wrong direction.

Her stomach ached, and she plucked a leaf from a nearby bush and put it in her mouth to have something to chew to distract herself from her hunger. They could not take the chance of lighting a fire—and they had no weapons to hunt. She had her knife. That was all.

The spring berries had not yet emerged, and the mushrooms had been foraged by Gata's women for the winter months... even the wildlife in the forest seemed to know that they were unarmed and even the deer came insultingly close as they foraged for their own food.

"We are nearly there," Varin said eagerly. "I can hear it— No, that is not the right way to describe it. I can feel it..."

"That was not any better," Bersi growled.

"Can you not feel it?" Varin's eyes were almost desperate as he looked at Torunn, and she couldn't decide whether he was delirious or if he was actually serious. She hadn't felt anything but anger and fear since they had left Skaro. She wasn't thinking about the trees.

"No," Bersi said flatly. "We have to keep moving. Feel—whatever you need to, old man, but get us to Myrka. If Hallvard and his men don't catch up with us, hunger will."

Varin nodded and set off through the trees again, bearing in a different direction.

"Why did you—"

"Water," Varin called back over his shoulder. "There is water this way. Myrka is just ahead. Trust me."

But it was not 'just ahead.'

All that lay ahead of them were more trees—each one blending into the next.

"This happens sometimes," Varin said. There was an edge to his voice now.

Frustration. Desperation. "If those who seek Myrka's sanctuary are not worthy—"

"Are you saying that Torunn is not worthy?" Bersi snapped and Torunn gave him a hard look.

"No. Of course not," Varin argued. "But perhaps we are not all destined to step across its borders."

"Just say it," Iri shouted. "Say what you mean to say!"

Torunn grabbed hold of the tree trunk beside her. She had never heard Iri raise his voice. Even when they were children and her brothers had beaten him black and blue—he had never cried out or screamed for help. He had just... taken the beating.

Varin's jaw tightened. "You should not be here. If Torunn knew—"

"Knew what?" She didn't like the tone of Varin's voice. Or the way Iri's eyes blazed with anger.

"Yes, by all means. Tell her," Bersi chimed in.

They were baiting him. Like dogs baited a bear that had been drawn from its cave.

Iri's chest heaved as he looked up at Torunn. And all at once, she didn't want to hear whatever it was he had to say.

"If Iri has anything to say to me, he can do it when he's ready," she said sharply. "I will not be forced to sit in judgement over the man who saved my life."

Varin stepped toward her. "But if you knew why—"

Torunn shook her head and planted a hand against his chest to push him back. "I said, no!"

They stood in angry silence, and Torunn fixed each of the men with a stern glare. "We have been walking, running, and hiding for two days. It is almost dark. Varin promised us water, and shelter, and we have neither. I can hear the creek—you three stay here and try not to kill each other. I will find the creek and come back for you. We will camp there for the night. I am tired of walking in circles."

"But we have not been—" Varin protested.

If she could have spat venom at him, she would have. "Shut. Your. Mouth."

Varin's head dropped, and he leaned against a tree.

She expected Bersi to challenge her, or move to come with her, but he stayed still.

"As you say," he whispered.

"It is as I say," she snapped.

She closed her eyes and tried to focus on the sound of the creek. It was faint, but

close enough that she felt confident that she could find it. They had been walking for too long and every muscle in her body ached and cried out for food and rest.

A deep breath.

The feel of the bark against her palm.

The sound of Bersi's breathing.

It was all so far away, and she felt so detached and separated from everything. How had this happened?

Her eyes flew open as she pushed away from the tree angrily and marched into the forest.

With steps that were more confident than she truly felt, Torunn moved through the trees in the water's direction. Her parched throat was tight and the claws of hunger and desperation had hooked into her stomach. Water. Like the Sæhrímnir that was served to the gods every night... It would sustain them into the morning. Give them the strength to carry on to Myrka.

What if Varin was right? What if it was close?

But what if they had missed it in the darkness?

She stumbled forward and leaned against the trunk of a slender tree. Varin and Bersi argued, their voices mingling into a confusing jumble as the light faded, and Torunn rolled her eyes skyward where the last traces of daylight still lingered.

"Freya—"

The plea was tugged from her cracked lips as she stumbled forward. All confidence was gone in an instance. If they died in the forest, what would it matter? Hallvard would win. He would be Jarl and the people would suffer. If what Bior had told her was true— And Iri had known all along. Is that what they had wanted him to admit to her? That he had known? That he had betrayed all of them to keep that secret?

Water.

The sound of it rushing and burbling over rocks and fallen branches filled her ears.

Yes.

Finally.

A desperate sob was caught in her throat as she pushed through the underbrush and her ears were full of the sound of the water.

A choked noise escaped her lips as the trees gave way to smaller vegetation, lush and green, and finally... the creek.

Bright water rushed by and Torunn let out a cry of desperate happiness as she fell to her knees at the water's edge. The water was ice cold, but she plunged her hands into the stream and brought her cupped hands, full of fresh, cold water to her mouth. She drank greedily, not caring as it spilled down her chin and over the front of her tunic.

Goosebumps rippled over her skin as she dipped her hands again and drank deeply.

She had never tasted anything so sweet, and she closed her eyes in rapture as the cold water soothed her cracked lips and dry throat.

But as her eyes closed, the exhaustion and stress of the last days swept over her, and before she could stop herself, she tumbled forward.

The darkness took away any thought of fear or pain, and Torunn felt only relief that she was free from all of it.

Finally.

Bersi—

"I do not think so, sister... But you would know better than I."

The voice was strange, and it pierced through the darkness to send shivers up Torunn's spine. She was cold. And wet.

Had it rained?

No. She had gone to find water...

"No, no. Not dead... but almost."

Torunn forced her eyes open and grabbed for her knife, but her arm was pinned beneath her, and her face was half-submerged in a puddle of icy water.

She scrambled up to a sitting position, sending rocks and wet sand flying as she did so.

Strange laughter followed her movements, and she pulled her knife from its scabbard and held it out in front of her.

"Very much alive, I think," the voice said.

Torunn pushed wet hair out of her eyes and tried to focus on the dark trees. "Where are you?"

"Shall I speak to her?" the voice asked.

"Come out!" Torunn shouted. "Come out or I—"

"What will you do?" the voice asked. The words were full of mirth, and the knowledge that whoever was stalking her found her situation amusing only made her angrier.

She grabbed hold of a root in the side of the creek bed and pulled herself up to her feet. Her legs were steadier now, but the rocks and sand were slippery and uneven.

"Come out so that we may talk," Torunn said. She tried to put some calm into her voice. There was no sense in attacking something she could not see, and whoever was out there had an advantage. And he probably was not alone. Like she was.

Where were they? They should have been suspicious that she had been gone so long

and come looking for her.

"Yes, I think so, sister," the voice said. There was movement in the underbrush and Torunn swung her focus toward it.

A lithe figure moved in the darkness and she sucked in a breath as it jumped down from the bank to land in the creek bed. The figure crouched, dark against the pale gray stones. It dipped a hand in the water and brought it up to its mouth to drink. Torunn could feel eyes on her, and she wondered where his companions were. Close by, no doubt, weapons trained on her.

"Who are you," she said and hoped that her voice sounded stronger than it did to her own ears.

"I should be asking you the questions," the figure said as he straightened up. He was slender and moved like an animal, careful and precise. "Why are you in the godswood?"

"The— Myrka," she blurted out. "We found it?"

"My questions," he repeated. "Why are you here?"

"I— My companions and I, we are seeking the protection of the priests of Myrka."

The man laughed softly and the sound made Torunn's throat tighten. It did not sound human... Strange and unnatural.

"Protection? And why would one such as you need protection?"

She held her knife out in front of her, fingers tight on the hilt. "You will take me to the priests," she demanded. "I must speak with them."

"She carries something that does not belong here," the man said. "I can feel it too, sister."

"Where is your sister?" Torunn cried. Fear clawed at her stomach. Unexpected. Sharp. Dangerous. "To whom are you speaking? Let them step out into the open and ask me their questions?"

"My sister will not speak to you," he said. "She only speaks to me... but you will answer her questions before I will take you anywhere."

"I—"

Did she have a choice?

The man stepped closer, and the moonlight illuminated his face for the briefest of moments. Sharp angled cheekbones, cheeks marred by twisting tattoos, and eyes that glittered black.

"Who are you?" she demanded again. "Tell me your name and I will tell you mine."

She was stalling for time. Stalling so that Bersi and the others could hear her voice in the woods and find her. She did not need rescuing, but the support would have been welcome.

The man paused. He stood in the midst of the rushing water and did not seem to

notice the cold. "Shall I tell her, sister?" the man asked. He waited a moment and then nodded.

He's insane. Speaking to shadows in the dark woods.

Where were Bersi and Varin?

"My sister tells me that I can trust you," he said. "But I am not certain of it."

"Your sister is very wise," Torunn choked out. "Please, my companions and I only seek passage to Myrka... we have no quarrel with anyone."

There was a crash in the underbrush behind her, and Torunn flinched, but did not look away from the strange man who stood in the middle of the creek, nor did she relax her hold on her knife. Bersi shouted her name and relief flooded through her. Finally.

"Where did she go?" Varin's shout echoed through the trees above her and Bersi's answering growl was a warm reassurance.

A ghostly smile flickered over the stranger's face as her companions thundered through the trees and burst through the underbrush just downstream.

"There!" Bersi shouted.

The man's gaze did not move from Torunn's face as her companions ran toward her.

"I am Eyvid," he said. "And you have found Myrka... or, rather, she has found you."

CHAPTER 9 ~ TORUNN

Torunn's relief was punctuated by apprehension and suspicion as they followed Eyvid through the trees. Even in the dark, the strange man seemed to know the way without need of a torch. Bersi walked beside her, his presence was comforting and everything in her wanted to reach out to him and pull him close, but she could not.

Not yet.

Eyvid muttered to himself and then laughed softly.

"Who is he speaking to," Bersi whispered.

Torunn shook her head. She had thought that the man had companions hidden in the trees, but as they walked onward, she realized he had been alone the whole time and she was embarrassed that she had been frightened of him.

"I speak to the gods," Eyvid said loudly. "They whisper to me, but sometimes they shout so loud it shakes the trees."

"Ah," Bersi said. He turned to glare at Varin over his shoulder. "An excellent plan, friend. I feel more confident with every step."

"You should," Eyvid laughed. "They have been talking about you for days now." He paused, and the rest of them halted their pace as he reached out to touch the trunk of a tree beside him. "You are very late," he said sadly. "I hope there is enough time."

"Time? Time for what?" Iri sounded impatient, but Torunn could not be sure what the source of his agitation was. He had barely spoken to her, or any of them, in days.

"To petition the gods," Eyvid said without looking at Iri. "Hurry. We must reach the heart of the forest before dawn."

"What happens at dawn?" Bersi did not look impressed, but Torunn couldn't be certain that he had any fear or respect for the gods—he had never spoken of it, and he definitely did not seem impressed by Eyvid's pronouncements.

But Eyvid only smiled and continued walking. His pace was quick, and Torunn had to concentrate to keep up.

Varin had been quiet, but Torunn suspected he was basking in the knowledge that he had been right—they had been within Myrka's borders all along. It was only a matter of time before one of the priests had found them.

Is that what this man was? A priest?

If he was, he had most definitely been alone in the forest for far too long.

Torunn's legs were weak, and her stomach growled. Wherever Eyvid was leading them, she hoped there would be food... and mead. She would give anything to be drunk and sleeping. Perhaps with Bersi beside her.

That thought made her smile, and she ignored the curious look that Bersi gave her.

The surrounding trees began to thin, and Torunn's heart leapt in her chest as she smelled the smoke of a cooking fire.

"I knew it," Varin breathed.

Torunn rubbed a hand across her eyes as they entered the clearing. She had not been to the sacred heart of the forest since she had been a little girl. Her memories were faded; and she remembered only the way she had felt. The way her father had held her hand tightly as the rituals were performed. The taste of the blood on her tongue and the smell of the meat and mead... nothing more. Pleasant memories, to be sure, but nothing more. She felt safe here, that had not changed.

"Can you feel the presence of the gods?" Eyvid asked.

Varin grinned broadly and dropped to his knees. "It has been too long, All-Father," he said in a choked voice.

Carved trees rose before them, representations of the gods. Freya, wreathed in flowers; Thor, stained dark with the blood of sacrifice; Odin... A raven croaked, and she looked up in surprise to see one of the great black birds perched atop the carved head of the great god's head. She blinked hard, unwilling to believe what she had seen, and when she opened her eyes, the raven was gone.

"This is a strange place," Bersi muttered.

"Strange to you, perhaps," Eyvid said with a crooked smile. "But the gods have been waiting for you Bersi, son of Hagi."

Bersi stopped short and stared at the priest. The only sound in the forest was the wind in the branches and the crackle of the torches that burned in the holy space.

"What did you call me?"

Eyvid chuckled and shook his head, but did not answer Bersi's question. Torunn laid a hand on the big man's shoulder, and she could feel the strain of his muscles beneath her palm as he struggled to hold himself back.

"Wait," she whispered. "This is a strange place, not everything is what it seems."

"She is right," Eyvid said. He wagged his finger at Bersi. "Patience, rebel. Patience."

Something you have never learned... It would have served you well."

"I will not listen to him," Bersi said through gritted teeth.

"No, no, sister," Eyvid said absently. "You are right, I have spoken too much. They are tired and hungry. We shall feed them."

Bersi let out a growl of frustration but did not pull away from her touch.

Eyvid looked up at Torunn and held out his hand. "You carry something that has no place in these woods," he said. His voice was dark and heavy, and Torunn's heart lurched in her chest.

"I carry nothing," she whispered.

But she did. It burned against her chest.

Eyvid stepped forward, his hand outstretched toward her. "I must take it from you," he said. "You cannot keep such a thing here. It is an... affront to the gods."

Torunn swallowed hard and reached into her tunic. The little wooden cross was heavy in her hand and she rubbed her fingers over its smooth edges as she brought it out and clutched it tightly in her fist.

"My father—"

"The All Father has seen... everything..." Eyvid said. His eyes glittered in the torchlight, black and bottomless. With a choked whimper, Torunn slammed the cross down into the priest's palm.

"Take it," she gasped.

Eyvid's fingers closed over the cross, and all at once, his demeanor changed. Gone was the darkness, and in its place was his bright smile. He gestured toward a long wooden structure, and Torunn realized for the first time that there were buildings in the space. Tents and huts, built by people who had come to Myrka seeking the blessing of the gods.

A fire burned in front of the larger of the houses, and the smell of cooking meat filled her nostrils.

How was he doing all of this? And alone? Surely, he was not alone.

"Come to the fire," he said. "There is meat, bread, and mead waiting for you. Then you will sleep. In the morning, we shall talk."

Varin scrambled up off his knees and almost ran to the fireside.

Iri followed with a little more hesitation, but Bersi looked to Torunn.

"We should eat," she breathed.

"Should we? I do not trust it."

"You do not trust anything," she said. She was teasing him, or attempting to, but he did not seem to take it that way. "We have been on the road too long to argue," she insisted. "We will eat, and then sleep, and in the morning you can decide whether to trust

this... priest." She gestured at the fire. "Varin is already eating."

Bersi snorted as he watched his friend bite into a hunk of meat that he had pulled from the spit that hung over the fire. "So he is. I do not believe there is much in this world, or the next, that would keep Varin from eating."

Torunn's throat tightened as he looked down at her. "I was afraid—" he started, but she shook her head.

"So was I."

They walked to the fire together, and Torunn could feel the eyes of their companions, and their host upon her as she took a seat beside Bersi. Iri sat to the side, his back to the house, and he watched all of them warily as he ate.

A cup of mead was pushed into her hand and she accepted it gratefully. She knew that she should have had some sense of caution, but her hunger overwhelmed every other instinct. Bersi seemed to have abandoned his suspicions the moment he bit into the meat Eyvid gave him.

There were no words exchanged. Only the relief that they had found Myrka, and that they were safe.

"You are safe here," Eyvid said loudly. "I can feel your worry, and your apprehension. The gods watch over you in this place—there will be no scouts. No warriors. No betrayals."

His words sounded as much like a warning as they did an assurance.

"The gods will protect you here. They will hide you from the eyes of your enemies... all of them."

Relief washed through Torunn's body as she drank deeply of the mead. It was sweet, and strangely spiced, but it was better than anything she had ever tasted. And the meat was rich and fatty, perfectly cooked... She did not care how it had been done, or how Eyvid had found them. None of that mattered. What mattered was that everything Varin had promised her—it was all within her reach.

She slept hard that night. Carried away by mead, exhaustion, and desperate relief. Her sleep was strange and dreamless, and she awoke with a start, her hand wrapped around the hilt of her knife.

Bersi stood over her, fully dressed, his face a mask of concern.

"You called out in your sleep," he said.

"I did not," she said defensively. "What— what is it?"

"It is well past midday," he said. "The priest is calling for you."

She groaned and dropped her knife onto the blanket. Her clothes were piled on the floor of the hut she had been given, and sunlight streamed through the hole in the roof. She squinted up at the coldness of the blue sky and the pine branches overhead. She could have slept for days.

Happily.

She could stay here forever. Why did they have to return to Skaro? What if she gave her life over to the gods, instead...

"Torunn. You have to get up."

Bersi's deep voice lit something inside her, and she fought the urge to reach out and pull him down onto the bed with her.

"Fine."

"There is water—"

She gestured with her knife. "Get out."

Bersi hesitated, and Torunn felt an immediate flash of regret. He was not her slave any longer, and he did not have to obey her commands.

But he did not argue, or growl at her, he simply turned and stepped through the open door and into the blinding sunshine beyond.

Torunn groaned and fell back on the bed.

She stared up at the ceiling and the sunshine that filtered through the cracks. The forest was quiet and comforting, but there was more to the feeling. Something that vibrated through the earth and into the trees that surrounded her.

Torunn sat up and pushed herself off the bed. She stood on the packed dirt floor of the hut and closed her eyes. There. She could feel something under the soles of her feet. A thud, like a heartbeat, or the pulse of a drum...

But then it was gone.

She set her knife down on the bed and pushed her hands through her tangled mess of her hair.

She needed a bath.

Her clothes were stiff, but she pulled them on and braided her hair quickly. There were no combs or pins to hold it in place, so she had to hope that what she had done would keep it out of her face long enough to see what the priest wanted.

As much as she hated to admit it, Torunn struggled without help from serving women. Even when she had been on raids with her father, there had been other shieldmaidens, and even some servants, to help her prepare for battle. She had so much to learn about everything, and she was grateful that no one was there to remind her of it.

The spring sunshine felt different in the forest. In Skaro, everything had felt colder, and the daylight had been dim. But in Myrka, everything seemed brighter. It was

impossible, of course. Her eyes were not used to the strange light in the trees... that had to be the reason.

Everything looked different in the daylight. Thor's fearsome carving seemed haphazard and unskilled, and the notches of the axe that had been used to carve out the thunder god's face were clearly visible under the paint and smears of sacrificial gore.

Freya's carving, however, was an entirely different piece... the strokes of the blade that had formed the goddess' delicate features were lovingly drawn, and the flowers that tumbled over the wooden forehead were real, growing from the trunk of the tree itself to twine around the trunk and cascade down to the forest floor.

"Beautiful," she murmured. She touched the moss-covered wood gently as she passed, and felt the same mysterious vibration pass through her fingertips. She paused, startled by it, and pressed her palm against the tree.

She held her breath. Waiting.

But there was nothing else. No other feeling. No pulse.

"You're imagining things," she whispered. "Delusions... A Jarl should not have delusions."

But her father had them. He had spoken often of his dreams—his conversations with Odin and his ravens. She had thought he was teasing her.

Hallvard claimed to see such things—but he had used his visions to mock her and play tricks on his own brother and their friends. She could not believe that the gods would touch someone like Hallvard. It was more likely that he was lying—manipulating them.

She had never seen anything at all. No prophetic dreams. No visions in the forest when she was alone. But perhaps she had been unwilling to see.

"This way, Torunn Arndottir." Eyvid's voice came to her clearly, and she turned her head toward the wooden longhouse. He stood in the doorway, but he was not alone, and Torunn breathed a small sigh of relief to see three acolytes, clothed in dark woollen robes, standing behind him.

It would have been far too strange for Eyvid to be all alone in the forest.

Impossible.

Unless—

No.

Those are stories, she scolded herself. The gods did not walk on Midgard's soil.

Torunn lifted her chin and walked toward the house with measured steps. She was not afraid, but the apprehension of what was to come gave her reason enough to pause.

"Are you afraid?" Eyvid called out.

"No," she retorted. "I have nothing to fear from you."

Eyvid smiled thinly. "And what of the gods? Do you have reason to fear them?"

"Every man should," she replied honestly.

He held up his hand, and Torunn's breath caught in her throat. Her father's cross rested against his palm, the leather string draped over his middle finger.

"Your father feared something different," he said.

She stood just outside the doorway, her eyes level with his. "I am not my father," she said. "I have come here to beg the forgiveness of the gods."

"And that is what we shall do," he said.

He stepped aside to allow her to pass, and Torunn took a breath before she walked through the door.

The hall was long and empty of tables or furniture. She had thought this was where the holy man slept, but there was nothing save for the fire. Wood had been stacked around the walls, and the scent of the fresh cedar and pine boughs that lay upon the floor tickled her nostrils and mingled with the sweetness of the smoke.

It was hazy, and hot, and the fire burned high in the center of the room.

Eyvid murmured softly, and the acolytes walked ahead of her and stood near the fire as he took his place before it.

He motioned for her to come forward, and Torunn hesitated for only a moment. She had not seen Bersi, Varin, or Iri... and she suddenly felt very alone.

She stopped in front of him, and Eyvid laid a hand upon her shoulder.

"Why are you here?" His voice sounded strange—layered—as though he was not the only one asking the question. She glanced at the acolytes, but their faces were hidden by the hoods of their robes.

"I— I am here to beg the gods for their forgiveness. To lift the curse that they have laid upon my father's lands. I am here to beg for the lives of the people who love them..."

"And for yourself?"

"I wish to be worthy to lead them," she said haltingly.

"Do you? Why should the gods believe you? You have shunned responsibility—"

"I have," Torunn admitted. "I did not want to lead. I was angry with my father for leaving me behind. But I have changed since then."

"In so short a time?" Eyvid chuckled and anger rose in Torunn's belly.

"Yes," she said shortly. "When the rebels attacked the village—my only thought was for the people."

"But the rebel attacker... he is the one you have taken into your bed." Her eyes widened and Eyvid's black gaze met hers. "The gods see everything. They hear your whispers in the dark. Freys knows the secrets you hold in your heart, Torunn Arndottir."

"Then she knows my dedication to my people. And that I will not abandon them to Hallvard's cruelty. Their love for the gods is not reflected in the actions of my father, or

my brothers.”

“And what did your father do?” Eyvid asked. The question was teasing, and she could see the hint of a smile upon his thin lips.

“He gave his heart to the Saxon god,” Torunn blurted out. “That cross... it was taken from his body by a healer.”

“Do you believe you will see your father in Valhalla?”

Torunn blinked away the sharpness of her tears and shook her head. “No. I know that I will not drink with him at Odin’s table. The priests lied. They sacrificed one of their own to secure his entrance to Valhalla. But I know it would not fool the All Father.”

Eyvid nodded. He held out the wooden cross. “Take this— It does not belong in this place.”

Her hand shook as she reached for it, but Eyvid’s fingers tightened around the cord before she could pull it off his hand. “You must cast it away,” he said softly. His voice echoed strangely in her ears as she pulled the necklace out of his grasp.

The fire burned hot, and she blinked hard as she stepped toward it. She had carried the cross as her last connection to her father. But she could not keep it... she knew that. He would forgive her, but she could not forgive him for abandoning her to the cruelty of her brothers, or abandoning their people.

With a shuddering breath, Torunn opened her hand and dropped the cross into the fire. The flames scorched her cheeks, but she would not step back. She could see it, in the hottest part of the fire. The wood blackened and then burned as she watched it. The flames changed color, shimmering as she stared at it, but then it was gone and the shape of the cross disappeared.

A hand fell upon her shoulder. Gentle but firm.

“You will need to prepare for your journey,” Eyvid said in her ear.

“Yes, I will need to return to Skaro—but I will need weapons, and warriors...”

Eyvid chuckled softly. “You must take another journey first,” he said.

She turned to look at him and was stunned to see that his eyes had changed color. The blackness was gone, replaced by a warm brown tone, flecked with green. “I do not understand.”

“You have made your intentions known,” he said. “But you must take your pleas to the gods themselves.”

Torunn wanted to laugh, but the young priest’s face was serious, and she could not risk insulting him and ruining everything that had been set into motion. If this was what was required of her, then it was what she must do.

“I will do whatever you ask,” she said.

Eyvid smiled.

“Rest. And then we will talk of your journey.”

The acolytes led her from the hall, their hands gentle, but firm, on her elbows as they walked with her to the hut she had been given.

New clothes had been laid out for her, and a basin of steaming water had been brought.

She wanted to thank them, but before she could do so, they had left. Torunn sat down on the bed and pressed her palms against her hot cheeks. Watching the cross burn had severed her last connection to her father, and this time, when the tears came, she did not brush them away.

CHAPTER 10 ~ TORUNN

Eyvid had not said how long it would take to 'prepare' for the journey he had promised her.

But after two days, Torunn began to feel restless. Each day that passed was another day for Hallvard to come closer to discovering them. They might be safe within Myrka's boundaries, but if Hallvard did not respect such things, what would he care if such rules were broken?

As they sat around the cooking fire, Torunn tossed a pheasant bone into the coals. "What should I... do?"

"About what?" Varin asked. "When the time comes, you will not have time to think about such things."

She leaned forward and pointed her knife at the old warrior. His wound had finally started to heal, and while she was happy to see him looking, and sounding, more like himself, she didn't like riddles... or guessing games.

"But... what—" Her words dissolved into a frustrated noise and she rubbed her sleeve across her mouth. Eyvid had not spoken to her since their 'meeting,' and Iri seemed to have disappeared. Varin and Bersi had only given vague explanations as to his whereabouts, and Torunn didn't think they actually cared where he had gone.

"Are you finished eating?" Varin asked.

Bersi chuckled. "Do you think of nothing else?"

"When I'm not running for my life? Yes. Unless there are some women around— Have you seen any?"

She shoved the last of her pheasant back onto the serving plate and rose from her seat. He grabbed for it with a grin upon his face and Torunn laughed. "You can have the bird," she said. "But I'm taking the mead."

Varin grumbled, but did not demand that she leave it behind. Torunn drained her cup and refilled it as she stood by the fire. She could feel Bersi's eyes on her, and she dared to glance in his direction.

He had been by her side for much of their time in Myrka, and though they had not been alone together, she was grateful to have him nearby. Whatever happened, she was glad he was there. But what could lie ahead for them? A Jarl could not have a rebel at her side... or in her bed.

Torunn walked back to her hut not knowing whether to be angry at herself for her impatience, or with Eyvid for keeping her waiting.

Varin would say that the gods could not be pressured into action, but that thought only made things worse.

She pushed open the door of the hut and kicked at a wooden stool. The force of her kick sent it skidding across the packed dirt floor and she set down the jug of mead with a heavy sigh. Impotent rage wouldn't solve anything, but it was all she had.

She was not tired, but she could not have sat in the men's company any longer without saying something she would have regretted. Bersi's gaze was almost too much to bear, and she could no longer hide the fact that he was not far from her thoughts. Or how often she thought about the pleasure he had given her when he had been her slave—

A fist pounded against the wood frame of the hut's door.

"No!" She shouted the word without asking who it was that had come to see her. A sudden thought that it was Eyvid or one of his acolytes streaked through her mind and she leapt toward the door.

"Wait—"

But the face she saw as the door opened was not Eyvid, or one of his acolytes. It was Bersi. Her breath caught in her throat.

"What do you want?" Her eyes raked over his body and then met his gaze boldly.

There was a maddening sense of arrogance about him as he stared back silently. Knowingly. Bersi had the ability to evoke both desire and fury in her in a heartbeat, and he seemed to know it. He unnerved her and it scared her.

"Well?" she snapped, struggling to regain a semblance of control over herself. The moment was broken and her fingers brushed against the hilt of her knife.

Bersi still refused to answer her and instead stepped into the hut fully and pulled the door shut behind him. His broad frame filled the small space and her heart lurched strangely in her chest.

In one fluid motion, he tugged his cloak off his shoulders and tossed it over the small wooden table. He glanced around, his eyes landing on the upended stool. A small smile cracked his lips and he strode forward, picked it up, and set it down next to the table. He sat down and looked at her. Still silent.

Shadows played over his muscular frame in the candlelight as he sat and watched her. A jolt of awareness flooded her as she studied his warrior's physique. Night after

night she had dreamed of him coming to her exactly like this. She could still recall the taste of him—the feel of his powerful arms holding her...

She shook her head, clearing the thoughts from her mind.

He had been her slave then. She had commanded him to attend to her needs. Nothing more.

Things had changed. No matter how much she might secretly long for him. Whatever was between them had to end. He knew it. She knew it.

Bersi had to leave.

She lifted her chin, strode to the table and pushed his cloak onto the floor. He watched her carefully. A smile twisted his mouth beneath his beard. She lifted the jug of mead she had brought and re-filled her cup. In one motion she drank its contents and then filled it once more.

The mead fortified her resolve and she turned to face him.

"Was there something you needed? I did not ask for you to follow me, and I am not in the mood for visitors. Leave." She hissed.

He rose from the stool and stood over her. "No." The deep rumble of his chest vibrated as he spoke. His dark eyes captured her utterly, and she struggled to look away.

Anger flared in her chest and she choked on her words. "It was not a request."

He raised his head to meet her angry gaze, and she fought another shiver of arousal.

"I am not your slave to command any longer," he said.

She narrowed her eyes at him and took a step back to point at the door.

"You may not be my slave, but I can still command you," she snarled. "Get out. Now."

He stepped closer and left no space between them. Chest heaving, she glared up at him and eased her knife out of the sheath. She pressed the point against his ribs.

She smiled up at him sweetly. "Do not make me repeat myself."

Bersi laughed. The sound echoed through the hut and startled her for a moment. That moment was all he needed. A powerful hand covered hers and latched around her wrist, forcing her arm back and squeezing her wrist until she was forced to drop her knife. His other arm circled her waist and pinned her against his hard body.

She kicked and fought against him, but she might as well have tried to fight a mountain. The only sign that her blows affected him at all was an occasional soft grunt.

He looked down at her with a predatory gleam in his eye. His dominance was unexpected, but the challenge secretly thrilled her. A rebel could never be a slave—not really. She had known from the beginning that keeping him alive would be dangerous, but she had expected nothing like this.

She renewed her attempts to free herself and slammed her forehead into his broad chest.

He coughed and stumbled backwards, but his grip on her remained sure.

"Stop," He ordered, spinning her around and pulling her back up against his chest. His arms immobilized her and she let out a huff of outrage.

With her back pressed against him, Torunn became acutely aware of the hard bulge in his breeches and the heat of his body. Her pulse quickened and her body stilled.

"Bersi," she warned. She bit her lip to stop herself from leaning into him and taking the comfort he offered.

"Torunn." His voice was husky and his hot breath tickled her ear.

Bersi relaxed one the arm that held her against him and ran the other down the side of her body. He stopped when he felt the small dagger she kept strapped to her thigh.

She knew she should fight back and escape his embrace.

But she didn't.

He pulled the dagger from its sheath with practiced ease, and with a flick of his wrist, sent it sailing through the air. It struck the door with a thud and stayed there, quivering, its tip buried in the wood.

He repeated the same examination on her other side, and she hated herself for allowing it. Impotent rage warred with crushing desire and rendered her motionless. A prisoner of her own making.

Her overwhelming need for him blotted out all sense of reason. Why else would she allow the rebel to hold her prisoner, divest her of the weapons she carried, and press his advantage?

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and weighed her options. She wanted to touch him, to taste him. To take what he offered and damn the consequences.

The ache between her thighs grew more and more insistent. One word from her and she could lose herself in him for one more stolen moment. One more night in her bed.

The idea of giving in to this need was tempting.

"Give yourself to me tonight, Torunn."

His words flowed over her, teasing her and tempting her.

It would be so easy to do.

Give in.

Give him control.

But she had fought for too long to submit easily.

She dropped her head and let out a heavy breath. The sounds of the men outside around the fire drifted in through the cracks in the wood.

"Make me," the words slipped out in a whisper but she knew he heard her. His entire body stiffened and she thought she could feel his heartbeat against her back.

His hands gripped her shoulders and whirled her around roughly to face him. She

gasped at the feral look on his face and arousal flowed like fire through her veins. Gone was the face of her insolent slave, her companion, her protector.

In his place was a warrior ready to take his prize. It thrilled her when he crowded her, forcing her back until she hit the rough-hewn wooden walls of her hut.

"Is this what you desire, Mistress. To forget yourself?"

Her mouth was too dry and words were impossible. She wanted this more than anything, and now that it was in front of her, she felt strangely reluctant to admit it.

Bersi studied her for a moment before he leaned in and pressed a rough, calloused hand against her cheek. His direct gaze unsettled her.

With his thumb, he traced the outline of her lips. She snapped her teeth at him, nipping his finger, and when he pulled his hand away quickly, she smiled wickedly.

His eyes darkened, and she swallowed hard.

"Get on the bed," he ordered as he stepped away from her.

"And if I do not?" She countered.

Bersi glanced at her and grabbed the hilt of the dagger he had thrown at the door. He wrenched it from the wood and advanced on her until the blade was pressed against her the delicate skin of her throat.

"Then I'll take you on the floor, Mistress."

Torunn swallowed hard and dropped her eyes to the blade before she smirked up at him. She stepped forward, pressing herself against the sharp edge—enough to cause discomfort but not yet break the skin. With one hand, she reached down between them and cupped his hardened cock firmly. His sharp inhale was music to her ears.

"Will you?" She asked, she stroked him through his breeches roughly, all without breaking their eye contact.

"Get. On. The. Bed." he snarled and pressed the flat of the blade against her neck.

She released her hold on him and turned toward the bed, moving as quickly as she dared. He matched her, step for step, and the chill edge of the blade never left her skin.

Her fingers fumbled with the ties to her clothing and she let her belt drop onto the dirt floor. When her calves struck the edge of the bed, she stopped and cocked her head at him. He growled at her and prodded her to keep moving.

A flash of annoyance crossed her face as she did as instructed. Giving up control of any kind did not come naturally to her.

"Remove your tunic," he ordered.

"Or what?" she snapped back.

"Or I teach you how to obey, Torunn."

"You'll do what? Beat me? You'll be dead before the second strike," Torunn warned. She meant those words, but she knew she had crossed a line as soon as they had left her

mouth. In penance, she did as she had been ordered and pulled the tunic over her head and threw it to the floor before she crawled backward, away from him, on the bed.

Bersi looked down at her, shocked by her words. He ran a hand through his wild hair in annoyance and narrowed his eyes.

Without looking, he threw the knife down on the bed beside her and she flinched as it bounced on the furs.

She watched him with wide eyes as he lifted his tunic up over his head and threw it to the side, revealing a chest marred with a tangled web of scars.

He kicked off his boots, unlaced his breeches, and shoved them down his hips.

Torunn almost forgot to breathe as she ran her eyes up and down his powerful frame. This was what she had longed for, night after night.

He joined her on the furs, but instead of reaching for her, he braced his back against the wall and looked at her.

"Do you trust me?" he asked finally.

She thought for a moment.

Bersi had saved her life. Fought alongside her. Protected her. Trust was the least complicated of her feelings for him.

"Yes." she answered simply.

He looked at her for a long moment before smiling at her. "Good."

Before she could say another word, he lunged and pinned her to the bed with his body. His hands trailed along the curve of her hip and thigh, and she moaned as his lips found hers in a bruising kiss that devoured her and set her soul on fire.

She writhed beneath him, relishing the heat from his body as it pressed her deeper into the furs. He wound his fist in her hair and pulled, forcing her head back.

The pain morphed into pleasure and Torunn gasped again and arched her back to press her breasts into his hard chest.

"Your breeches."

Eagerly, Torunn tugged at the leather ties that held them to her hips and he shifted slightly to allow her to push them down and kick the offending garment away.

"She does follow orders," he teased.

His rough hands palmed her bare breast and tweaked her nipple hard enough to cause thrills to run up and down her body while his mouth possessed hers. She wrapped her arms around his broad back and relished the feel of him. His hand slid lower, a feather-light touch over the smooth expanse of her stomach, and she arched into him, daring him to go lower.

He moved his lips to her neck and pressed small kisses to the hollow of her throat while his hands roamed up and down her body. His chest hair tickled her as he moved

slowly down her body. When his mouth fell to her breasts, her eyes fluttered closed, and she bucked against him. When he finally settled between her legs, anticipation and raw, primal need shot through her. She moaned again and Bersi chuckled.

"You can have what you want, Mistress. I will not deny you. But I would have you admit you feel for me as I feel for you." He pressed a soft kiss to her inner thigh, and she squirmed again. She bucked her hips into him, trying to force him to give her what she wanted, but he resisted.

She did want him. She longed for him. But to admit that would be to admit weakness. Those words would allow him to have some power over her, and she could not bear that. She was to be a leader—but more than that, she would not be controlled by any man. Not even him.

Her fingers searched over the furs until she found the dagger. Her fingers closed over the hilt and she rose up to bring it to his throat, just as he had done to her.

"I want your body, Bersi. Give me that and let us forget the rest of the world for tonight."

His gaze slid from the dagger's point to her eyes and back down to her aching core.

As easily as though he were plucking fruit from a vine, Bersi took the dagger from her fingers and shook it at her playfully.

"Shall we play this game again?" he asked.

She let out a low moan as he ran his finger down her slick heat, teasing her and denying her the touch she desperately needed.

"My body is all you desire?" His swirling fingers spread her wide, and she bucked again. Each touch was like an exquisite torture designed by the gods.

"What else would I want?" she retorted, panting.

The touch of the knife blade against her inner thigh was enough to make her flinch, but the desire in her belly roared to life as he pressed the edge against her skin.

"I am not your slave," he repeated.

No. She was his.

"Say the words."

But she could only cry out softly as the sting of the knife against her skin made her vision blur.

With a growl, Bersi dipped his head between her legs, his tongue teasing her as his fingers made her ache for him. Dimly she heard the clatter of the dagger as it hit the floor, but it was lost in the swirl of need that almost overwhelmed her.

Jolts of pleasure exploded in her senses with each swipe of his tongue. She draped her legs over his shoulders and her thighs tightened around his head, pressing her core into his face as he ravished her.

Sensation after sensation built, and she shoved her arm over her mouth to muffle her cries as she raced to the top of the pinnacle of pleasure.

Just as she reached the tipping point, he wrenched free from her legs and sat up, leaving her gasping and unsatisfied.

"Admit this, Torunn. Admit what we have between us!" His chest was heaving and his eyes were wild. She let out a frustrated growl and propped herself up to glare at him. He leaned forward and pressed a brutal kiss to her lips as he hooked her knees over his shoulders and pulled her forward.

In one powerful thrust, his cock was buried deep within her and she cried out against his mouth. His girth stretched her, but she pressed her hips up to meet his. He groaned and withdrew briefly, only to slam into her again. His wild eyes found hers each time he drove into her and his fingertips dug deep into her hips, bruising her with the force of his passion.

Torunn felt the fury of his deep strokes filling her, and the resurgence of her interrupted pleasure mounting once more, and she finally let go. Giving up control terrified her, but losing Bersi was too much to risk.

"I am yours, tonight," she whispered as she brought her hands up to rest above her head in submission.

Bersi paused and looked down at her, a flash of tenderness crossing his features as he leaned down to press a kiss to her forehead.

He pinned her wrists to the bed with his hand and Torunn closed her eyes and gave herself over to him. With each thrust, she felt her pleasure rising higher and higher. With a cry, she finally found the release she craved.

Bersi followed her with his own release, his body stiffening as he let out a roar of satisfaction before he collapsed on top of her.

Torunn's heart pounded in her chest and her mind raced, but she pushed it all aside. As Bersi rolled off her, she let her body relax next to his. He caressed her hair gently and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. Her eyes fought to stay open as he pulled the deerskin over her.

"Stay?" she whispered, her eyes half-closed in exhaustion.

Bersi grunted, and she heard him drop his boots back on the floor. Soon, his warm body slid under the deerskin next to her and his arms surrounded her. She curved her body into his and they lay curled together, in each other's arms. Her half-lidded eyes slid closed as he breathed her name.

Bersi's skin was warm beneath her cheek, and her fingers curled into the hair on his chest as she snuggled against him. He was no longer her slave, but he had made it clear that he belonged to her in more ways than she was ready to admit... And she belonged to him in return.

She blinked against the pale sunlight that streamed through the smoke hole in the roof. It was still early, and there was a chance that she could get him out of her bed and back to his own hut before Varin noticed. Somehow, the last thing she wanted was for Varin to know what was between them.

Bersi's arm tightened around her waist as she tried to roll from the bed, and he growled gently as she pushed against him. "Get up," she whispered. "It is morning."

"So? It was morning yesterday, too," he said without opening his eyes. "What is so special about this one?"

"You... should be somewhere else."

"Why?"

Torunn looked up into his bearded face, but his eyes were still closed. He was more stubborn than she was. That made her smile.

She pressed her lips against a scar on his ribs and pushed away from him again, but this time he let her roll off the bed. Her tunic lay on the dirt floor next to Bersi's breeches. She stepped over them gingerly and grimaced at the line of blood on the smooth skin of her inner thigh.

Her body still throbbed and the dull ache of pleasure at her core made Torunn breathless once more as she looked back at the man in her bed.

She bent to pull her tunic from the floor and eased it over her head, relishing the slight stiffness in her limbs as her body moved.

A fist crashed against the wooden frame of the door, and she jumped back slightly.

Bersi grunted and rolled over, and the deer hide that had covered his lower body slipped down and onto the floor. The knock came again, and she reached for the leather latch and pulled the door open.

Eyvid stood outside the hut and his eyes drifted from her to the figure on the bed behind her.

"It is time," he said.

Torunn swallowed hard. "Now?"

"Now."

There was movement behind her, but she did not turn. She could feel the heat of his body behind her, and Bersi's hand was warm and firm on her hip.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

Eyvid smiled briefly, and then his eyes darkened. "There is no time," he said in the strange voice.

"He comes with me," she said firmly as Eyvid turned away with a shrug.

"Hurry," he said without looking back at them.

Bersi's fingers tightened on her hip and she pressed her lips together to keep from choking on the sob that threatened to burst from her lips. She was not ready for whatever lay ahead. But she had no choice.

CHAPTER 11 ~ TORUNN

She felt stronger with Bersi beside her. She hated to admit it, hated the feelings that welled up inside her as she and Bersi knelt on cedar boughs in front of the fire. Eyvid's acolytes, each one holding a stone bowl in their hands, stood beside them. Motionless. Like the carved representations of the gods that loomed over the holy place.

"What are we supposed to do?" he whispered.

"I don't know, but be silent," she hissed back.

"The gods are looking for you Torunn Adndottir, but they cannot find you..." Eyvid's voice echoed strangely, and a shiver rippled up Torunn's spine as he walked through the hall and took his place in front of them.

The priest's face was painted with white clay, and his red-rimmed eyes were black. Unblinking beneath the ghostly paint.

"How can they find me?" she asked.

"With my help," Eyvid replied softly. The acolytes moved forward and placed the stone bowls on the floor in front of them. One filled with liquid, and the other with a cluster of white mushrooms—long-stemmed, with a delicate, smooth cap.

She had not seen them before, and she looked at Bersi in confusion as the big man chuckled.

"What?" she hissed.

"You want us to find the gods with these?" he asked.

"You will not find them, Bersi, son of Hagi," Eyvid replied. "They will find you."

Bersi glared up at the priest and grabbed the mushrooms. He examined them closely and then shoved them into his mouth. He chewed violently and then grabbed for the bowl of liquid and drank it down. Torunn's mouth fell open as he grinned at her and wiped his hand across his mouth.

"It is nothing," he said. "Just mushrooms."

Torunn looked up at Eyvid, but the priest's face was unreadable.

“Religious nonsense,” Bersi said. He sat back on his heels and gestured at the bowls. “Come on, don’t make me be the only one to suffer from foul guts.”

Torunn smiled and looked down at the mushrooms. It seemed impossible that Eyvid would keep them here and then give her something so innocuous. If Varin were here—perhaps he would know what they were.

“What are you waiting for?” Eyvid asked. “If they are nothing but mushrooms, then you can be on your way... If the gods do not come to you, then your decision will be made and you and your lover can disappear into the forest—”

Her eyes widened, and she looked at Bersi quickly before looking back to the priest. “How—”

Eyvid tapped a finger against his temple as Bersi laughed. “My sister hears many things...”

Torunn grabbed for the mushrooms and pushed them into her mouth with a desperation she had not expected to feel. She had not spoken those thoughts aloud, but to hear Eyvid say the words... Perhaps that was what she wanted.

She chewed and forced herself to swallow the bitter sponginess of the mushrooms. She had eaten mushrooms in the forest before, but none like this. She choked on them and pressed her hand over her mouth as she grabbed for the stone bowl of water and gulped it down.

She swallowed hard and coughed before drinking again, draining the liquid. The bowl fell from her fingers and clattered to the floor as she sat back on her heels and gasped for breath.

Bersi reached for her hand, his movements slow and clumsy. “Is it true,” he asked. “Do you want to run away into the forest—”

She wanted to say yes, but instead of words, only laughter burst from her lips. She grabbed his hand and squeezed his fingers. “Let us see if the gods want to speak first,” she whispered.

Bersi smiled, but it looked strange to her eyes. He reached for her and pulled her against his chest.

“What if I do not want to hear what the gods have to say,” he murmured. He traced his fingers over the side of her face and down her neck. “What if I only want to hear you calling my name while I fuck you...”

“Torunn—”

She turned her head and pulled her face away from Bersi’s kisses. It was nothing but a temptation to stay here with him. If they had been alone, she would not have hesitated in letting him explore her body again, but they were not alone, and someone was calling her name.

"Wait here," she whispered.

Bersi grumbled as she pushed against his chest and rose to her feet. He fell back on the cedar boughs and laughed softly. She glanced at Eyvid, confused, but he stood still as stone. Unmoving and unblinking as she walked toward the open door.

Early morning sunlight streamed through the trees, and Torunn squinted as her eyes adjusted to the brightness. But there was a strange, hazy quality to the light, and little motes of dust sparkled at the edges of her vision.

"Torunn..."

The voice beckoned her onward, and she walked without fear through the holy site, past the fire where Varin sat with a cup of mead in one hand and a joint of meat in the other.

"Always eating," she murmured as she passed by.

"Where are you going?" he called out to her, but she did not turn her head toward him. Though her stomach rumbled and the smell of the cooking meat was enticing, she was on a mission. The voice that called to her could not be ignored.

As she stepped through the trees, Torunn was vaguely aware of the feel of the dirt between her toes, and the prickle of fallen needles under the soles of her feet. She did not know when she had taken her boots off, but she smiled down at her bare toes and wiggled them in the green grass.

Rich colors vibrated through everything in the forest, and even the moss glowed with a strange light. The laughter of a child drew her attention, and she pressed herself against a tree as she saw a flash of a dark head, and heard Iri call out.

"Kol, this way... you must not run ahead of me!"

Curious, Torunn moved closer, but Eyvid's clay-smeared face loomed above her.

"I must see—" she blurted out.

"Iri keeps many secrets from you," he whispered. "This is one of them."

"The boy." She pointed into the trees where Iri and the boy laughed together. "He is not here—"

Eyvid shook his head. "This is Iri's waking nightmare. To be with the son who can never know his name."

"I— I did not know."

Eyvid's black eyes glittered in the sunlight. "No one knows."

"He should have told me," she muttered.

"You must not speak of it. A time will come when he must tell you what he has hidden for so many years, but this is not the time."

Iri and the boy moved farther into the forest, and Torunn pushed away from the tree to follow them.

"Will you deny the voice that calls to you?" Eyvid taunted her.

Torunn glanced over her shoulder, suddenly remembering the path that she had been following. The grass was warm under her feet in that direction. Cold and prickly in the other. Her path was clear, but she could choose—

"Torunn!"

She felt the words rather than heard them. Sweet and melodic.

Iri and his secrets could wait.

"My sister calls to you," Eyvid murmured.

Torunn's eyebrow rose as she looked at him. "Your sister— I begin to wonder who it is that you speak to when you are not speaking to us."

"The gods, of course," he said simply. "Do you not speak to the gods?"

She chuckled and shook her head. "Not in the same way," she said.

"Why not?"

"The gods are unknowable. Everyone knows that. They are to be feared and respected."

"But are they not also to be loved?"

She frowned slightly. "Of course..."

Eyvid shrugged as though it were the most natural thing in the world to speak to the gods in such a casual manner.

"Are you—" She hesitated, unwilling to speak aloud what she had wondered since she had first met him.

"Touched by the gods?" he asked with a smile. "Most certainly. I was given to the keepers of Myrka when I was a child... I belong here, with the gods as my companions."

Torunn wanted to ask him more questions, but the voice in the woods called to her again and Eyvid pushed her forward gently.

"Go. She has been waiting for you."

Without hesitation, Torunn strode forward. She ignored the sharpness of the stones and the rough roots beneath her feet. There was only the voice, and she needed to find the owner of it.

Through the trees, she caught a glimpse of pale hair, a flash of sunlight reflecting off a sword or the tip of a spear, and the musical sound of laughter.

"Wait," she called out. "Wait for me, I have been looking for you!"

"It is I who have been looking for you," the voice replied. It was closer now, loud in her ears, and Torunn blinked in surprise. The shafts of sunlight seemed to pulse in time with her heartbeat and she swallowed thickly. The mushrooms... She was desperately thirsty.

A woman stepped out from behind a tree and leaned against it. She held a bright

golden apple in her hand and took a bite of it as Torunn came closer. Her mouth watered at the sight of it and she reached for the ripe fruit without thinking.

"One of Idunn's apples," the woman said as she set the apple into Torunn's hand. "A gift for a leader..."

Torunn looked at the apple with wonder. The skin was smooth and unblemished, and the bite the woman had taken revealed pale white flesh that smelled like honey and fresh milk.

Idunn's apples. She almost laughed at the thought.

Impossible. They were a story.

"How can they be a story if you hold one in your hand?" the woman asked with a smile. "Take a bite. If it is not real, it will disappear..."

Torunn's eyebrow rose slightly, but she was hungry, and thirsty, and the apple smelled so good—so real.

She closed her eyes, took a bite, and moaned as the sweetness of the fruit flowed over her tongue.

"Very real?"

Torunn nodded as she chewed and tried to wipe the apple's juice from her chin without looking like a child as she did so.

"But I am not a leader," Torunn said. "And certainly not fit to walk among the gods... Why would you give me this?"

The woman smiled and pushed away from the tree. "But you are a leader," she said. "And a worthy one."

Torunn laughed and shook her head. "I have been a poor one," she admitted. "I was defeated and thrown out of my own home by my brothers—"

"Treachery, secrets, blasphemy," the woman said darkly. "These things follow you like a cloud, Torunn Arndottir."

Torunn struggled to keep up with the woman's long strides, and she kept her eyes on the spear that was strapped to the woman's back.

"But how can I escape them?" she asked. "Please... tell me if the stain of my father's betrayals can be washed away."

The woman turned, and the smile upon her beautiful face was sad, but only for a moment as her eyes brightened. "Another bite?" she said.

Torunn did so eagerly, relishing the taste of the fruit and the crisp richness of it. It had been so long since she had eaten an apple... Long enough that she did not recall where it had come from, or how old she had been when she had eaten it. She marveled at the gift in her hands as she chewed and swallowed, and then passed the fruit back to the woman who stood in front of her.

"Can you help me?" Torunn pleaded. "I only wish to know that the gods have forgiven me for wrongs that were not of my doing. My father— My father was misled by the Saxons."

"Arnd Reinsson was a wise leader," the woman said with a sigh. "But his heart was empty— The death of your mother... You and your brothers were not enough to fill it once more. The Saxon god makes promises that cannot be fulfilled in a mortal lifetime. But it was what he needed to hear."

"Are you not angry with him? Odin will turn him away from Valhalla. I will never see him again."

The woman shook her head. "I cannot change the All Father's mind. Or his rules."

"I would never ask it of you."

"But how will you go forward from this challenge?" the woman asked. "How will you tell your child of what has brought you to this place?"

Torunn's mouth dropped open. "My— No."

"I can see into your heart, sister," the woman said. "You will be the leader your people deserve. You will be the mother your child needs..."

"But—"

"You have come to this place to beg forgiveness of the gods. But as I see you now, you have nothing to beg for."

"I do not understand..."

The woman reached out and smoothed her hand over Torunn's cheek and brushed away a smear of apple juice from the corner of her mouth. "What is there to understand? You have given yourself to the man you love, you have given yourself to the gods... all that remains is to give yourself to your people."

The woman looked up over Torunn's shoulder and smiled. Torunn turned to see what she was looking at, half-expecting to see Eyvid's strange eyes glittering in the sunlight. But the figure in the trees was tall and broad, and she would know it anywhere.

"Bersi."

She looked desperately at the goddess who stood before her and fell to her knees. "I cannot do this," she said as tears filled her eyes. "I am not strong enough— My brothers. Jarl Sigurd. They will not rest until I am dead."

The goddess crouched down and took Torunn's hands in hers. "Then you must want to live all the more," she whispered. "Show them what it means to challenge the will of the gods. Show them what it means to carry the blessing of Freya with you."

Torunn could fight against it no longer. The touch of the goddess' hand on hers was warm and cold all at once, and her veins felt as though they were filled with liquid fire, igniting her from head to toe. She let the goddess pull her to her feet and when she met

Bersi's gaze, she only felt stronger; not weaker as she had feared.

The goddess reached for Bersi's hand, and his smile was a mixture of bewildered awe and confusion as her fingers touched his. She joined his hand with Torunn's and drew a small knife from her belt.

With a quick motion she nicked the skin on the side of their joined palms, and Torunn took a sharp breath as she watched the dark red of their blood mingle together and seal their bond.

"It is done," Freya said, and her voice held a finality that felt more like a blessing. "Go now, together."

Bersi pulled Torunn close and bent his head to press his lips against hers. Torunn's eyes drifted closed as the heat in her veins flowed through her body and filled her chest with a white-hot light that threatened to consume her utterly. She clung to Bersi's hand, desperately. If she was destined to burn to a crisp in the middle of the forest at the feet of a goddess—so be it.

But all at once, the light faded, and the heat that had enveloped her ebbed away. Torunn groaned at the loss of it and struggled to open her eyes.

She was no longer in the forest. She was lying on the floor of the great hall, her cheek pressed against the cedar boughs that had been laid down by Eyvid's acolytes. The scent of it filled her nostrils and she gagged as her stomach convulsed.

Dimly, as though he were far away from her, Torunn heard Bersi retching and she felt her own stomach lurch. She groaned and tried to roll over, but faceless hands helped her to sit up, held a stone bowl under her chin as she vomited up the mushrooms she had eaten.

Bersi roared and swore as he vomited again.

"Water! Mead! Anything to wash away this horseshit," he snarled.

Torunn coughed and spat into the bowl before pushing it away. She leaned back against the hands that held her, gasping for breath.

Eyvid's clay-smearred face swam before her eyes. "You did well," he whispered. "My sister is pleased with you. Come—you must come with me."

CHAPTER 12 ~ BERSI

His legs felt unsteady, but the cup of mead that Varin shoved into his hand felt solid enough.

“What did you see?” Varin nudged his elbow into Bersi’s side and made him choke on his mouthful of mead.

“What?”

“What did you see?” he asked again.

“When?”

“Just— You are a carbuncle on Thor’s backside, boy. You ate the mushrooms and drank their blasted tea.”

“Tea?” Bersi made a face at the memory of the taste of it. “I never want to drink tea again.”

“So you will not tell me?” Varin scowled at him.

Bersi shook his head and took another gulp of mead. “No. I won’t.”

Varin grumbled something Bersi could not hear, but he didn’t care. He wanted to find Torunn.

“Where did they take her?” he said aloud.

Varin gestured vaguely toward another long wooden house across the clearing from where they stood. Smoke poured out of the hole in the roof, and the insane priest’s acolytes had been positioned near the entrance.

Bersi shoved the cup of mead at Varin and strode toward the house. The acolytes stepped in his way, barring him from entering the house.

“Let me pass,” he growled.

But the acolytes did not answer him, and their hands were stronger than he had expected, and held him back with little effort.

Eyvid appeared in the doorway, and he smiled at Bersi. The white clay had been washed away from his face, and his strange green-brown eyes were wide and friendly. “Bersi, you do not need to be here. You should rest. My acolytes will take you and bathe

you. It will take some time to recover from the effects of your vision.”

“I need to speak to Torunn,” he snarled.

“And she will want to speak to you, but not yet.”

“When?”

“Very soon, I promise it.” He blinked and smiled. “Yes, sister, he is impatient.”

Bersi let out a growl of frustration and backed away from the acolytes. At a gesture from Eyvid, two of them followed him and led him away to the hut he had been given.

A large wooden washtub had been filled with steaming hot water, and a small meal of bread and meat had been set aside next to a jug of mead. Bersi glared at the acolytes, expecting them to scatter now that their work was done, but they stood still, watching him and yet paying him no attention at the same time.

Unsettling bastards.

He grunted, lifted the jug of mead to his lips, and drank deeply. The mushrooms had left his throat dry and his belly rolling with cramps and hunger. He put down the jug, wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his tunic and tore a hunk of bread from the small loaf that had been left for him.

He chewed it thoughtfully as he eyed the bath water and then pulled his tunic over his head. The acolyte nearest him did not flinch as Bersi kicked off his boots and threw his garments at him.

Bersi snorted, grabbed the jug of mead, and climbed into the tub. He groaned as the scalding water enveloped him and wished for the thousandth time that Torunn could be in the water with him.

He wanted to take her, lithe and wet, against the edge of the tub, and then make her gasp for air while she choked on his cock before he spilled his seed deep inside her as she moaned his name.

Impossible dreams.

She had made it clear enough.

She had been his for one night. But a rebel was not the same as a slave. A Jarl could bed a slave and apologize to no one. But he was more than that. He wanted her—but as a man. Not as her property.

He took a gulp of mead as his cock throbbed at the memory of her submission to him. The softness of her lips as she had whispered his name in her sleep.

“Fuck.”

He struck the water with his hand and sent a shower of it at the acolyte standing closest to the tub. The man didn’t flinch, and Bersi chuckled softly as he leaned against the wooden wall of the tub.

What did you see?

Varin's question had been unexpected. That is, he had not expected that he would not want to answer it. The old warrior had told him of what happened in the grip of the mushrooms. Some men laughed for hours and came away from the experience with nothing but a headache. Others saw visions that struck them dumb for days and turned their hair white. Still others spoke of walking with the gods and receiving answers to the questions they longed to ask someone greater than themselves...

Bersi had only one question that had to be answered, but he did not need to hear the truth from the mouth of an Aesir.

His mother. That was who he had wanted to see.

She was the only one who could answer his question.

And Varin did not need to know such things. Bersi did not often keep secrets, but there were many things that he would keep to himself when they returned to the world. He still had not decided whether he would stay in Skaro or not—Torunn had made her decision. He knew it already. She would be marked by the priest and sent back to Skaro to fulfil her destiny. Any dream he might have had that she would run away with him into the forest—it was nothing more than that. A dream. And a foolish one at that.

When he finally emerged from the bath, Bersi felt no more enlightened than he had when he'd entered. The effects of the mushrooms were still playing tricks on his mind, and he could not be certain what was real and what was not. All he wanted was to have firm ground beneath his feet, and Torunn's body under his hands.

Firm ground was in ready supply, but Torunn was unreachable.

Now, more than ever.

While she had been under Eyvid's care, they had shaved the hair from one side of her head, and a dark tattoo stood out against the pale skin of her scalp. The black ink shone in the sunlight, and he could see the redness of it even from where he stood. He remembered how it had felt when his head had been tattooed. It had burned like fire and he had gotten blackout drunk afterwards to forget the sting of it.

But Torunn seemed unbothered by all of it.

She looked fierce and proud, and ready for war.

"Do you see, the mark of Freya—" Varin said. He pushed against Bersi's shoulder.

"The villages will have no choice but to follow her now. Hallvard will run like the whelp he is."

Iri stood silently beside them, and Bersi wondered what the other man was thinking. More likely as not, he was wondering what position Torunn would grant him when her

brothers were defeated. If Bersi had his way, as soon as they returned to Skaro, Iri would be swimming for friendlier shores and they would never see his face again.

"The symbol of your leadership must be taken from the hands of the one who sits upon your rightful throne," Eyvid said loudly. "The gods have granted you their blessing. And you leave this place with signs of their favor, and the symbols of your trials."

Eyvid placed a sword in Torunn's hands and her stoic expression slipped just a little as her fingers flexed around the hilt of the sword.

The acolytes placed weapons into their hands, but Bersi narrowed his eyes as Iri was gifted with a bow and a quiver of arrows.

"I will watch you closely," he said. The words were a warning, but Iri did not flinch. If he had not hated the man so much, Bersi might have respected his bravery.

In another life, perhaps.

Eyvid pressed a kiss to Torunn's forehead and smeared the spot with a swipe of red clay. "You will travel to the villages—and return to Skaro to face your destiny. If you fail in your task, know that your place in Valhalla is secure."

The priest's words should have been comforting, but Bersi's skin itched and his hands tightened on the handle of the axe they had given him. All he wanted was to bury the blade into Hallvard's grinning skull.

The sooner they departed, the better.

Varin seemed to carry himself with a lighter step, and their progress through the forest took far less time than Bersi had expected. His friend showed no sign of how grievously he had been injured not so many days ago and Bersi had to push away the thought that the stories he had heard about the magic that was hidden in Myrka.

His village had not taken part in the pilgrimages to Myrka—or, if they had, he and his mother had not been included in them. She had shielded him from too much. But he had no doubt in his mind that she had never intended for him to discover just how much she had kept secret.

"We will go to Gata first," Torunn said firmly.

"Why Gata?" Bersi asked. He was stunned by her confidence. "Bior would have sold you to Hallvard if he had been given the chance."

"That may be so," she replied. "But if I know my brother, he has already made the wrong kind of impression."

Bersi chuckled. That was more likely than anything. From what Bersi knew of him, Hallvard did not waste any time in hiding who he truly was. The fact that he had been able to keep his motives a secret for so long was a mystery to him. But Bersi was also

certain that some credit for that secrecy belonged to Iri.

When they passed through Gata's fortifications, Bersi had expected to be met with spear points and shouted curses. But Bior surprised him by welcoming them with open arms and a feast that would have embarrassed Odin with its richness.

"Your brother—he is not a Jarl. None that I would follow," Bior exclaimed over another jug of mead.

Bersi knew better than to trust the rotund man, and he had drunk only a little, but ate his fill. Torunn seemed similarly cautious, and he only saw her sip at the cup she had been given.

"But you— You are much changed since last I saw you."

Torunn's smile was faint, but Bior seemed not to notice.

"Has my brother come to Gata?" she asked.

"He has sent emissaries, and warriors disguised as scouts. They went into the forest in search of you, but I did not see them return."

Bersi chuckled into his cup and exchanged a glance with Varin. If Torunn had not wandered in search of the creek and found Eyvid, they would have continued to wander the forest. They would have died there, as Hallvard's warriors must have.

"Do you believe what I told you," Iri asked. It was the first time he had spoken more than two words in as many days, and Bersi was surprised to hear his voice. Torunn's eyebrow rose slightly, but she said nothing as Bior of Gata rubbed a hand over his greying beard.

"Now that I have seen Hallvard's 'scouts' and spoken to his emissaries... I do not have any doubt that what you have said is the truth." He leaned closer to Torunn. "I would not have sold you to Skaro," he explained. "I only meant to hold you in Gata for a short time... Until I had made a decision."

"I am sorry to have forced your hand," Torunn said. "But I do not doubt that my brother would not have allowed you to live if he had discovered that I was here."

Bior spluttered something unintelligible into his mead and then called for more meat and more drink.

"Will Gata stand with us if I march on Skaro?" Torunn asked boldly.

The room fell silent as Bior shifted in his great chair. He owed her allegiance. For the villages that did not support her would feel her wrath when she held the Jarl's seat. Torunn was not a cruel woman, but she knew the meaning of justice—and how to appease the leaders and counsels of the villages under Skaro's control. If they saw any sign of weakness, as they had seen in her father, they would strike against her without hesitation.

"Gata will be with you," Bior said. "But—"

Torunn leaned closer. "But?"

"But, you will consider one of my nephews for a seat on your council," he exclaimed.

Torunn pointed her knife at one of the shieldmaidens who stood nearby. "I will take one of your nieces," she said. "That one."

Bior laughed as the young woman nodded. "Giving orders like a Jarl already," he cried. "I will send riders to Oss, and to Laxa," he said over the roar of the warriors in the hall. "They will look to our coming... and we will ride together to the gates of Skaro."

Torunn raised her cup high.

"Skol," she shouted, and it was echoed by a hundred throats. Bersi locked eyes with her as she drank her mead and slammed the empty cup down on the wooden table.

This was her destiny. But every step that brought her closer to taking her rightful place as leader of Skaro took her farther away from him, and his heart twisted in his chest as he tried to smile.

Bior sent them off with horses to speed them on their journey, and a large cadre of warriors to follow behind, including those who would stand for her council. If they survived the battle to come, Torunn could have her pick of the greatest among them. They would all be vying for her favor, but she rode at his side.

As Bior had promised, the leaders of Oss and Laxa awaited their arrival with warriors at the ready and the guarantee of their support once they reached Skaro's gates. Hallvard had been busy while Torunn had been carefully secreted within the protection of Myrka's trees, but his reassurances had fallen on deaf ears.

These villages did not want a king, and word of the new Jarl's treacheries had traveled faster than his emissaries with their honeyed words.

Words were not gold, but Bersi was not certain that these men and women would have sold their freedoms for any price that Hallvard could name.

As their allies gathered, Torunn was every inch the leader she should have been. While in the eye of her followers she was stoic, proud, and grateful for their support. But in private she would not be parted from him, and as soon as they were alone, she devoured his body and lost herself in the pleasure he gave her.

But it was bittersweet, and every night brought them closer to Skaro's gates. He could not beg for her to wait, could not beg her to reconsider—it was too late for his pleas. All that awaited him was battle, and the knowledge that he had put her on the throne he had once sought to topple.

A rebel and a traitor. He could never hope to share her bed when this work was done. It kept him awake at night as Torunn sprawled across his chest and he clung to those

moments of surrender and sweetness. If he believed in the gods, he would have prayed for the hours to pass more slowly, but those pleas would have fallen on deaf ears. He did not deserve their indulgence, just as he did not deserve her.

He had pledged her his sword, his axe, and his heart. But the first promises were all that mattered.

She had made that clear enough.

And when their final day together dawned, he would welcome the chance to show her just how much those pledges meant to him.

CHAPTER 13 ~ TORUNN

Bersi was awake. He was always awake, and as hard as she tried to stay conscious, it was impossible to battle the exhaustion that dragged her away.

She would not be parted from him.

But as eager as he seemed to be at her side, there was something lingering in his touch, something behind his eyes that set her on edge. She did not know what it was—or how to ask him what was wrong.

He had not spoken of what he had seen while in the grip of the priest's mushrooms. But neither had she. The vision was for her alone, just as his was. If she told him what she had spoken of with the goddess, he would laugh at her foolishness. Apples. Fire in her veins. The child...

The child.

She was still uncertain what to believe. Her body felt no different, but the words of the goddess echoed in her mind and made her sure that there was truth to the seed that had been planted within her.

A seed.

It would only take one little seed to grow a mighty tree.

She smiled and pressed her lips against Bersi's ribs. He stirred, and she regretted waking him. He would need all of his wits about him for what was to come.

She and her followers had set up camp outside Skaro's fortifications. Laxa was behind them. Oss had sent more men, and Gata more horses... Some had come from even farther away, and she was grateful for them all.

There was a strangeness to being there. She had only ever defended Skaro from her enemies. She had never thought to be the enemy at the gates...

What would her father say if he could see her—

He would laugh. That was what he would do. He would laugh to see the look on Hallvard's face as he peered over the fortifications at the army she had gathered.

The rebels who stood behind her.

The rebel at her side.

The rebel in her belly.

"You should sleep," she whispered as Bersi grunted and pulled her close.

He kissed her forehead and turned toward her. His cock was already hardening as it pressed against her thigh and she laughed softly as she opened her mouth under his.

She pulled away and placed her hand against his chest. "I have to get up."

"So do I," he growled against her neck.

"Do you forget what day it is?"

"You are mistaken," he said as he pulled her against his chest.

Torunn groaned and leaned into his kiss, and he devoured her lips hungrily as she reached under the pillow and withdrew the knife she always kept there.

As soon as he felt the tip of the knife against his chest, he broke the kiss and released his hold on her, but reluctantly.

His eyebrow rose slightly. "Are you prepared for the consequences of your actions, Mistress?" he asked.

Her mouth twisted even as her desire for him flared in her belly. "If we survive until nightfall... we might revisit this."

He moved his hips slightly and Torunn bit her lip. Not now. Gods, she wanted him just one more time before—

No.

She could not think of it.

"I have to meet with the councilors," she said through gritted teeth. "I am expected. And so are you."

Bersi grumbled, but finally released his hold on her. She slid out from under the furs, reluctant to leave the heat of his body and ignore the throb between her legs. But there was work to be done, and a rebellion to lead.

She laid the knife down upon a small wooden table and pulled a tunic over her head. She would have to meet her brothers and Jarl Sigurd—the formality of negotiation. The facade of honor. Hallvard was not honorable. Asgaut was not honorable. And she had no doubt that Jarl Sigurd would sooner stick a knife in her throat than speak to her in civil tones.

Her departure had denied him a bride, and the alliance that he sought. An alliance that would spite the memory of his old enemy more than it would satisfy any need he might have had to expand his territories or enrich his treasury...

Filthy old bastard.

"Torunn?" A voice outside the door of her tent startled her, and Bersi launched himself off the bed to snatch his axe from where he had dropped it the night before. His breeches

remained on the floor where he had dropped them, and Torunn smothered a smile with the back of her hand before she laid her palm against his chest.

"Get dressed," she murmured and let him see how much she wanted to stay with him in the way her hand lingered on his skin before she crossed the tent to the door flap. She pushed it aside and blinked at the early morning sunlight.

"What is it?"

Bior's niece, Karra, smiled as Torunn emerged from the tent and pulled her cloak around her shoulders.

"Your brother has sent a reply to your message," she said. "The village leaders have gathered to read it together."

Torunn nodded shortly and slid her knife into the sheath at her hip. The comfort of its weight was a reminder of her father's presence—he may not await her in Valhalla, but he was still with her.

She walked at Karra's side as the young woman explained how their attack would be structured. Everything would depend on Hallvard's reply.

If he agreed to her challenge, it would be simple. Bersi would be her champion—he and Varin had argued bitterly for the honor, but she would have no one but Bersi to stand in her stead.

It did not matter who Hallvard would send to take his place in combat. Bersi would be the victor. It was not even a question. It was a certainty.

But if he declined, or demanded different terms, then their plan of attack would change.

Torunn was prepared for any eventuality, but she secretly hoped that Hallvard would peer over the fortification walls, see the strength of their forces, and surrender the Jarldom.

But it was a foolish hope.

Hallvard would never surrender.

Not without a fight.

Not unless he had no other option.

"Where is Iri?" she asked suddenly.

A look of confusion crossed Karra's face, and then she shook her head.

"I have not seen him," she replied.

A small spark of worry flared in Torunn's stomach. She had not spoken to him since they had left Myrka—and he had said nothing to her. He spoke on her behalf with the village counsellors, but when his work was finished, he melted into the shadows once more. Silent, but watchful, just as he always had been.

But there was no time for worry—there was too much at stake.

The councillors of each village stood around a fire; shoulder to shoulder as they shared cups of mead and spoke in low voices.

They parted as Karra approached them, but Torunn's smile faded as she realized that their faces were hard and angry.

"What is it?" she asked. "Hallvard sent a reply—"

"He says no," one man replied flatly.

Torunn froze in place. "No?"

Karra's eyes widened as the men stepped aside so that she could see what reply Hallvard had sent.

She saw the dark stain before she realized what it was. Blood. Her jaw clenched as she stepped forward to see what had been wrapped in the pale woolen cloth.

A pair of hands. Small and graceful.

The bastard.

She turned to the man to her left. "Your son—"

The man's face was red and his hand shook as he rubbed it across his mouth. "My son begged me to let him be your messenger," he said. "He knew the danger of it."

Torunn laid a hand on his shoulder and met the gaze of each man and woman that stood around the fire.

"My brother has sent us a bloody reply to our message of peace. He has made his decision, and we will be ready when he comes."

The man at her side nodded grimly and stepped forward to re-wrap the severed hands of his son and carry them away. One by one, each of the village leaders turned away and strode through the camp to gather their warriors.

Torunn watched them all go with a heaviness in her gut that she had not felt before. It was not regret. It was not sorrow. It was not anger. But a mixture of all of those painful emotions.

Hallvard was a coward.

He had always been a coward. Unnecessarily cruel. Needlessly malicious. Their father would never have named him to be his successor. She knew that now. When they had returned from raiding, she had not argued with his announcement. But she had been afraid—afraid of her brothers. Afraid to face the truth of what had happened.

She was not afraid any longer.

Bersi and Varin stood behind her, lending their strength to hers as she stood in the middle of the battlefield to await her brothers.

Representatives from each village had come to show their strength, and she murmured a prayer to each of the gods who watched over their people to keep them safe until the battle began.

They approached slowly with a small knot of loyal supporters, but as they drew close, Torunn realized that she did not recognize any of the men who had come. They were Jarl Sigurd's men, every one of them. Reinforcements from Bitra.

These men would fight for whoever was holding the strings of their payment purses. Mercenaries. Battle hardened and eager for a fight.

Skaro meant nothing to them.

The Jarldom meant nothing.

Their loyalty had been purchased, and that realization brought Torunn a small amount of satisfaction. Money only bought so much loyalty, and if she knew her brothers... there would not be much gold left to distribute when all was said and done.

Hallvard's smile was broad, and she could hear his laughter across the field. Asgaut was at his brother's shoulder, but his face was twisted in a smile that held no mirth—only cruelty. Raiding had changed Asgaut, and Torunn did not like the result.

She had no doubt that the maiming of the messenger she had been sent had been his work.

Jarl Sigurd had not changed, and she narrowed her eyes at him as he glared back at her.

Hallvard spread his arms wide as their party came to a stop a short distance away. "Sister!" he called out. "It does my heart good to see you alive. The gods have heard my prayers and kept you safe until the day I could see you again!" He looked her up and down and Torunn lifted her chin boldly and met his stare.

A thin red scar traced across Hallvard's face and Torunn smiled as she remembered how it had felt to slam her boot into his face on the night she had escaped from Skaro.

"You have changed, sister," Asgaut said loudly. "What have you done to your hair..."

"I have been to Myrka," she replied in a firm voice. "I have walked the forest with Freya and been given the blessing of the gods."

Hallvard laughed loudly.

"Then why are we here?" he shouted. "If the gods have blessed you, then you should be able to strike me down without raising that sword at your side— I could have stayed in bed!"

The men with her brother laughed roughly, but Jarl Sigurd's jaw tightened.

"We did not come here to trade barbs," Torunn snapped. "You have dishonored my challenge—"

"Your challenge," Hallvard snorted. "You believe that I should give you our father's crown?"

Torunn's hand tightened on the hilt of her sword. "Our father never wore a crown."

Hallvard reached up to touch the golden circlet that he wore. "You are right, sister. He did not. But if he had lived... he would have worn one. We spoke of it often in the night... He saw how the Saxon kings ruled their people and he wanted that power for himself." Hallvard shook his head. "Sadly, he was too short-sighted..."

"These people do not want a king," Torunn cried. The warriors behind her roared their support of her words, and she felt the surge of their anger as her own flared.

How dare he taunt her like this.

How dare he drag their father into this conflict.

"You killed our father," she continued. "You murdered him and lied to our people... they will all know the truth."

Hallvard shrugged. "Bold words, sister, but it was not my knife that ended our father's dreams—It was Asgaut."

Torunn's gaze leapt to Hallvard's twin, and she felt cold as Asgaut smiled at her. "An accident," he said casually.

She bit down hard on her cheek to keep from crying out in rage and frustration. This was what they wanted. This maelstrom that boiled in her chest and threatened to tear her to pieces—that was how they would defeat her.

She could not allow it to happen.

"You talk too much," Torunn cried.

Hallvard shook his finger at her. Mocking her. "And you do not listen enough, sister. Where is Iri? I have not seen him since the night you ran from your wedding feast—Jarl Sigurd is prepared to forgive your betrayal, did you know? But he may change his mind if the rumors that you have taken that filthy rebel into your bed are true."

Hallvard's smile was cold, but Jarl Sigurd's eyes held nothing but murderous rage as he looked at her.

Behind her, Bersi chuckled. Torunn pushed her shoulders back and drew her sword.

"Then Jarl Sigurd must accept the truth of the rumors," she said loudly. "I do not offer my apologies for his disappointment. If I had known such a thing would turn his affections aside, I would have acted upon my desires more openly."

Jarl Sigurd made a choking sound and Torunn smiled as the surrounding warriors began to laugh.

"A rebellion is at your gate, brother," she shouted. "And you are not strong enough to

turn it away!"

She raised her sword as Hallvard mimicked her and raised his own axe high above his head. His gaze was trained on her and over his shoulder, Torunn saw Skaro's gates open wide. At the head of the warriors that poured from behind the fortifications was a figure she knew well. Tall and slender, with a sword in his hand and shield bearing Hallvard's standard—Iri.

There was no time to register what she had seen as a familiar roar began behind her. She gave herself over to the beat of the blood in her veins as she ran toward her brothers.

CHAPTER 14 ~ TORUNN

Freya.

Be the edge of my sword.

Guide my blade with your own hand.

Bersi charged ahead of her, axes swinging, with Varin following close behind. Something inside her pulled toward Bersi. But he had his own mission, and she could not stand in the way of it.

Hallvard was the only one she could see, and he was waiting for her with a twisted smile on his face.

He blocked her first strike, and his smile became a grimace.

"It has been too long since we sparred, sister," he said. "I had not—"

Torunn was in no mood to talk. She bared her teeth and swung her sword again, this time aiming for his head and the crown he wore so haughtily. She did not want the crown. It was her father's torc that she wanted. The heavy silver ring that her brother wore around his traitorous neck.

Battle raged all around her while Jarl Sigurd shouted orders to his mercenaries and warriors. She had lost sight of Bersi, but none of it mattered while Hallvard still lived.

"Did you see Iri?" Hallvard grunted as he blocked another of her strikes. She had come close to disarming him twice, but somehow he always regained his footing and was able to bring his axes up in time to save himself. "He returned to Skaro sometime in the night. I am grateful, as always, for his counsel."

"A snake to serve you," Torunn snarled. "You should be used to vermin at your table."

Iri's betrayal had surprised her, but the wound she felt was not as keen as it might have been. Iri's secrets would be his undoing, not hers.

Hallvard let out a strangled cry and pushed back against her sword.

"What would you know of loyalty," he snarled. "A rebel in your bed, traitors for allies—What will our father have to say to you when you arrive in Valhalla?"

She reared back and drove the pommel of her sword into Hallvard's sneering face. His nose broke with a satisfying crunch and she smiled as he staggered back while blood poured down his face and stained his beard.

"We both know he will not be waiting for me, just as he will not be waiting for you," she said. "But there will be no place for you at Odin's table, either, brother."

Hallvard's teeth were stained red with his own blood as he roared at her and launched himself forward. But Torunn was ready. She dodged his wild attack and slashed low with her sword. Her blade caught him in the thigh with enough force to spin him around and put him off balance.

Her smile was grim as her brother fell hard on the grass. His axes flew from his hands as he landed and his crown tumbled from his brow. He scrambled to grab the golden circlet, but she placed her foot on it to prevent him and leveled her sword at his throat.

Hallvard swallowed hard and looked for his brother. Asgaut stood over one of Torunn's allies, his axe buried in the man's chest.

"Now!" Hallvard shouted.

Asgaut wheeled around and wrenched the axe from his foe's chest. Torunn watched in horror as her brother pivoted and flung his weapon at Jarl Sigurd.

The blade caught the old Jarl high on his shoulder and he reared back with a cry of pain. Bersi, who had been locked in combat with the Jarl and one of his men, was caught off guard by the Jarl's reaction. The blade of the Jarl's champion bit deeply into Bersi's ribs, and Torunn lurched toward them as Hallvard laughed.

Her brother's laugh jarred her back to reality, and Torunn planted her feet and glared down at her brother with hatred boiling in her gut.

Jarl Sigurd bellowed like a wounded bull, and his warriors were distracted just long enough for Torunn's allies to press their advantage. Swords and axes rose and fell in a terrible rhythm as Torunn tried to decide what to do.

Hesitation was death.

But she could not allow Hallvard to be killed on the battlefield. He needed to answer for his crimes and face justice in front of the people.

She needed help.

Desperation coursed through her, but her focus was torn away as one of Hallvard's mercenaries struck at her. She blocked his blade and slashed back at him, trying to keep her eye on Hallvard as she did so, but it was almost impossible.

The warrior advanced on her, teeth bared and eyes wild as he stabbed and slashed. Torunn narrowly avoided his strikes, but her answering blows sent the man stumbling backwards until she was finally able to strike home and send him kicking into the grass where he took his last gasping breath.

Blood stained the grass, her boots, her tunic... everything. She could smell it in the air and feel its stickiness on her hands and in her hair.

All around her, the sounds of battle threatened to deafen her. Bersi's roar of rage was pain-tinged and she could not bring herself to watch him as he battled against Jarl Sigurd's champion.

The Jarl, himself, lay motionless in the grass as Asgaut loomed over him.

What was happening?

Why would they turn on their only ally?

"Brother," Hallvard cried.

Torunn whirled around desperately as Asgaut came to his brother's side. But something was wrong. A long knife glittered in Asgaut's hand, and as he bent down, Torunn shouted a warning just as Asgaut stabbed at his brother's back.

Hallvard heard her shout, and though he twisted away, the blade caught his side and he let out a scream of pain.

Torunn charged forward with her sword raised, ready to strike Asgaut down, but before she could strike, her brother tumbled to the ground.

An arrow protruded from the back of his neck and his blood stained the grass beneath him as Hallvard ripped the knife from his brother's grasp and plunged it into his motionless body. Asgaut writhed once and let out a choking noise as Hallvard stabbed, and then he was still.

"Bastard!" Hallvard shouted. He held the bloody knife out toward Torunn as he struggled to his feet, but he fell awkwardly as he tried to put weight on his injured leg.

The noise and anger of the surrounding battle dimmed, and Torunn realized that something had changed.

Jarl Sigurd's men, realizing that they had lost their leader, had turned on Hallvard's followers.

They were winning.

"Stay down," she snarled at her brother, and Hallvard sank to the grass obediently, but his gaze was fixed on the dead body of his brother rather than her.

The arrow in Asgaut's neck was familiar. The fletching unlike anything she had seen on any other battlefield or in the possession of any other warrior.

Iri.

No loyalty to any man, even at the end.

Bersi, covered in blood, but very much alive, raised his axe in salute to her as the battle died and shouts of victory echoed across the field. Relief flooded through Torunn's veins and she finally allowed herself to take a deep breath.

They had done it.

She had done it.

Torunn looked down at her brother as revulsion and anger bloomed in her chest. Her work was not finished yet.

They did not enter Skaro right away.

Victory was bittersweet as the dead and wounded were gathered and the healers from every village lent their skills to those who had survived the battle.

Torunn counted many familiar faces among the dead, but there was one face she did not see.

Iri.

Torunn was standing close to Bersi as the wound in his side was bandaged when Karra emerged from the healer's tent and beckoned her forward. "We have him, my lady," she said.

Torunn laid a gentle hand on Bersi's shoulder and then followed Karra into the tent. "He was found on the battlefield, crushed beneath a horse."

Torunn swallowed hard as she was led between the wounded and dying. Iri lay upon the grass, his head propped up on a roll of woollen fabric that was stained with his blood.

She sank to her knees and reached for her friend's hand. His face was pale and gray, and his eyes were bloodshot when he opened them to look up at her. But she knew that he could not see her face.

"Iri—"

He tried to speak, but his words were choked, and blood flecked his lips as he coughed.

"He will not be long for this world," Karra said. "I can already see the gates of Valhalla in his eyes."

Torunn nodded. She did not know if she forgave Iri for all that he had done—all the secrets he had kept—but she could try.

"I will find your son," she said. "I will find Kol and bring him to Skaro. He will be raised well. He will know who his father is."

Iri's eyelids fluttered and his mouth twisted as he tried to speak.

"Forgive me," he choked out.

Torunn winced as his fingers tightened on hers, but she could not say the words. She could not forgive him, not yet. Not until she knew that what had been done could be mended and set right.

Iri's grip relaxed as his breath rattled in his throat and Torunn pulled her hand away

and stood.

"We have much to do," she said softly, and Karra nodded. "Skaro awaits us."

She waited two days for the wounded to be stabilized, and the dead to be gathered. Pyres were set out on the field for the warriors who had fallen in battle. Jarl Sigurd's men, those that remained, begged her indulgence to allow them to return to Bitra to honor their lord properly.

They had come to her with bent knees and lowered eyes to make their request.

"Return to your home," she said. "With the blessing of the gods. But without my forgiveness. Bitra has stood against its rightful Jarl in the past, and I demand compensation for this betrayal, and the many insults that were dealt to my father in his lifetime, and after it..." She paused, but the men did not move. They knew that Jarl Sigurd's words and actions were justification for his death. If he had survived the battle, his fate would have been the same as Hallvard's. His death had been a kindness.

"You will send warriors to Skaro," she said firmly. "Boys and girls, twenty of each, to be raised under our care. They will not know Bitra, or its history, and they will be loyal to their Jarl."

She did not need their acceptance, only their compliance. She could have demanded more, she was owed more, but it was not necessary.

They departed Skaro with their dead Jarl, and an escort of her own warriors who would see her orders carried out.

Let them burn Jarl Sigurd and see the error of the old man's ways. To stand against Skaro again would be their undoing. She would see their village razed to the ground and forgotten.

When they finally entered Skaro, the sky behind them was filled with the smoke of the funeral pyres, and the droning songs and drums of the priests who had come to give the dead their passage to Valhalla.

Asgaut's pyre was among them, but she had not burned his body.

Only his hands.

The rest of him would be buried outside the village fortifications.

The same fate awaited Hallvard.

She should have felt sick at heart to think of her brothers' deaths, but she felt only vindication.

CHAPTER 15 ~ TORUNN

On the morning of the third day, with Bersi beside her, Torunn entered Skaro on foot.

Leaders from the villages that had stood with her were joined by others who had traveled from farther afield to pay tribute and pledge their villages to Skaro once more.

When Hallvard had taken their father's seat he had been sloppy—he had done nothing but drink and feast with his men when he should have had a care for the villages that supported Skaro's wealth.

Torunn had no intention of forgetting such things. Without the support of the villages, Skaro would starve, and they knew it as well as she did.

"When will you do it?" Bersi asked as they ascended the dais where her father's chair had been set. Torunn frowned at the chair. Not so many months ago, she had hated the sight of it and the responsibility it represented. But as she sank down on it, she felt only the rightness of her position, and the weight of her service to the people she governed. The battle had only been a small part of her destiny—the real work would come soon enough.

She stared out over the beach and the boats that lay along the shoreline. The dark water of the bay reflected the morning sunlight. As the days lengthened and warmed, the warriors that had been left behind would clamor to go raiding... but she would not allow it. Summer in Skaro would be a time of renewal.

She wanted to reach for Bersi's hand, to feel the comfort of his calloused palm against hers, but it was not the time, and he seemed detached and far away even as he stood at her side.

"At sunset," she said. After the priests have done their work.

"Do you trust them?"

She could hear the derision in his voice, and she smiled briefly. "Of course not, but they will do their duty."

Her position was not secure—but it would have to do. Her mother would be proud. Her father... she hoped that he would support her. She had no way of knowing what her father's wishes might have been for his succession. And she would never be able to ask him.

"I must speak to my brother," she said suddenly.

"Is that wise?"

She glared up, and Bersi as she stood. "It is what I must do," she snapped. He met her heated stare boldly and all Torunn wanted to do was press her lips against his. She craved his heat and his anger, and the feel of his body beneath her hands.

She had been too busy to indulge in his presence—too distracted by policy and protocols. But she was Jarl now, she could take what she wanted without remorse or guilt. And she wanted him.

But first—there was Hallvard.

"Take me to him," she said through gritted teeth.

Bersi's shoulders straightened, and then he nodded. "As you say."

Varin followed behind them as Torunn and Bersi strode through the village to the house that had been converted into Hallvard's prison.

The old warrior had refused to leave her side, and now, out of frustration more than anything, Torunn had allowed him to act as her bodyguard.

As they approached, Torunn had to remind herself of her new position. Hallvard was her prisoner, but he was still the son of the Jarl, and her eldest brother. He had been heir to everything their father had left behind, but he had squandered it, angered the gods, and alienated his own people.

The house was a prison fit for a nobleman, with a bed, and some privacy. She had granted him that much. But the doors were guarded by loyal men, and no one was allowed in or out. The healers had approached to do their duty, but Torunn had been advised that Hallvard had sent them away with shouted curses.

"What will you do with him?" Varin asked. Torunn knew why he was asking. The Blood Eagle was the punishment that Hallvard would be expecting. An ancient ritual, a barbaric torture that would allow a noble the chance to ascent to Valhalla despite their sins.

Their father had told them of the men who had been maimed and broken under such an honorable death. The ones who screamed and shamed themselves, and the ones who stayed silent and shuddering beneath the blows. He remembered all of their names, and the deeds that had led them to kneel before the Jarl's axe to accept their terrible punishment.

Hallvard did not deserve that notoriety.

"He will meet the axe," Torunn said flatly.

Varin nodded. "I will do this for you," he said.

Torunn shook her head. "No. It must be at my hand."

She could feel Bersi's eyes on her, but she did not look up at him. She had to do this herself.

Varin's jaw tightened, but he did not argue with her. He knew as well as she did that there would be no other way to end Hallvard's reign. Asgaut and Iri had paid the price for their betrayals. Iri had redeemed himself, at least in her eyes; how he would fare at the gates of Asgard would be his problem.

But Hallvard would never see them.

The guards at the door bowed their heads as she passed, and Bersi reached for the iron latch that held the door closed.

"Are you certain?" he asked softly.

Her chin lifted, and this time she met his gaze. "I am."

Bersi lifted the latch and pulled the door open, allowing a shaft of sunlight to pierce the darkness of the house. There was no fire in the room, but the prisoner could not be trusted with such luxuries. She knew Hallvard well enough to know that her brother would set fire to the house as soon as the guards turned their backs.

"Traitor! The Jarl has come to see you," Varin snapped. "Show your face and pay your respect to her."

"She is not the Jarl yet. Are you, sister?" Hallvard's voice came from the shadows. "I have not heard the priests and their droning nonsense, or smelled the cooking fires— I do not think I left you much meat to celebrate with. And the mead will be running low..."

"Why did you refuse the healers," Torunn interrupted him. She did not want to listen to his ramblings. She had only come to do her duty.

"What need do I have of a healer when I am to be murdered by my own sister in the morning?" he laughed. "What did I ever do to deserve such treatment?"

"You know what you did," Torunn snapped. "You murdered our father, took his Jarldom—"

Hallvard sighed heavily. "I have done ever so much more than that, sister," he said. "The people will always remember when they could have had Hallvard, son of Arnd as their king." He stepped forward and looked her up and down. "You look like a Jarl, I will say that much. Father would have been proud to see you like this. But I do not think you will have the stomach for what you intend to do."

"And why is that?"

Hallvard's breeches were stained dark with blood from the wound she had given him, and he braced himself against the wall as though he could not bring himself to put weight on the leg. His hair and face were caked with mud and blood, some of it his, some of it

Asgaut's.

A father's blood on his hands. A brother's. And he would have spilled hers without thinking twice.

He had committed so many sins against the gods; they were almost beyond counting.

"The blood eagle—" he said airily. "It is harder than you might think to perform such an act. Father's descriptions of it were... mild in comparison to what must be done to satisfy the gods and give your foe the glorious death he deserves."

Torunn recoiled slightly. "What would you know of such things?"

Hallvard shrugged. "It would have been short-sighted of me to ascend to my kingship without the knowledge of such things," he said. "Asgaut and I needed to practice."

Torunn stepped back, reeling at the thought of her brothers hacking away at innocent men to hone their skills.

"And who would you have had to prepare such things for?" she asked.

Hallvard grinned and gestured vaguely at Bersi and Varin. "You seem to collect traitors, Torunn."

"I seem to be related to some," she said shortly. "Be careful, brother, making threats against the Jarl's companions will not do you any favors."

Her brother's snort made her lip curl. She wanted nothing more than to step forward and smash her fist into his smug face, and she was fairly certain that Bersi would be quick to follow her.

"Favors? What need do I have of favors?"

"Will you beg for the forgiveness of the gods?" Torunn asked. It was a courtesy to even ask. But if he requested a priest, she would send one.

Hallvard spat on the dirt floor and glared at her.

"Or have you given your heart to the Saxon god as our father did?" It was more of a challenge than a question, and she did not know how Hallvard would answer it.

But whatever she had expected, his laughter took her by surprise. It was a strange sound, choked and strangled. Inhuman.

"Our father did no such thing," he gasped. "The rumors... the signs..." he shook his head and wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "It worked better than we could have hoped."

"What?" Torunn whispered.

"Jarl Sigurd—" he said. "He hated our father. Hated his wealth and position. Hated his success—his family. He wanted your mother for his own bride, but Arnd took her from him."

Torunn shook her head. "No. That is not—"

"That is not what he told you," Hallvard said bitterly. "And why would you question

it?"

"But the rumors— That the land was cursed. I saw it with my own eyes."

"Crops sour as the land changes," Hallvard said dismissively. "Cows give birth to monstrous young when there is not enough breeding stock. Superstitious peasant mutterings... and father did nothing."

Torunn stared at her brother with wide eyes. "But— The cross. The healer gave it to me."

Hallvard nodded absently and then grimaced in pain as he tried to change his position and shift his weight. "Asgaut wanted to give our father a final insult. To give some weight to all the rumors that he had worked so hard to spread throughout the village—his own warriors did not trust him by the end. Half of them thought we had been sold to the Saxons as slaves before we escaped onto our ships."

Torunn was speechless. They had done this. They had done all of this.

"So, no, I will not be asking for forgiveness, sister. So you may keep your priests and their stinking rituals... I would have brought our people out of this madness and into a different world."

"A world made of your lies," Torunn snarled.

"Your precious rebel was part of it," Hallvard said conversationally. "Iri let him into the fortifications... His little raid? It was planned. Though, we did not expect you to survive."

Next to her, Torunn felt Bersi stiffen and her hands tightened into fists at her sides as she fought the urge to turn on her lover and scream in his face to demand an explanation.

"Your lies will end at dawn," she said in a voice that shook more than she wanted it to.

"The people will always remember me," he said with confidence.

She turned away from her brother and strode toward the door. "No," she said as she paused in the shaft of sunlight that spilled over the packed dirt floor of Hallvard's prison. "They will forget. I will see to it myself."

"Torunn! Torunn— wait!" Hallvard's cry was desperate, but she did not turn to look at him, and when the wooden door slammed shut, she walked faster. There was much to prepare, and there were questions that needed to be answered...

Questions she was not ready to ask.

Why will you not see me?"

Bersi's voice was muffled by the wooden door, but Torunn could see him pacing

outside.

"You know why," she snapped back.

"Will you let me explain?"

She was only half-dressed, but that did not matter. She let out a frustrated noise and dropped the ceremonial tunic that had been laid out for her.

The women who had been sent to help her dress, even Heldi, Torunn had sent them all away. She could not bear the touch of their hands, or their sudden wariness around her. She had never been given special treatment. When she was a child, Heldi had wielded a switch against her backside on more than one occasion—to have them acting so strangely in her presence was more than she could manage.

She might have been on the verge of being declared Jarl of Skaro, but she was still Torunn. And she was still angry.

Bare-breasted and furious, Torunn wrenched open the door and glared at Bersi, who stood in front of her, open-mouthed in shock as he stared back at her.

"What? What do you have to say? What do you need to explain?"

Anger heated her skin and made her hands shake, and she hoped that he could not see the tremor in her fingers as she gripped the edge of the wooden door.

"May I... may I speak to you in private?" Bersi asked, suddenly nervous as he glanced at the other people in the room.

"No. I think not," she snarled in reply. "As you can see, I am in the middle of something important, but, as what you have to say will not wait—speak!"

Bersi's lips pressed into a thin line as his jaw clenched. She expected him to turn on his heel and stomp away from her, but he held his ground.

Fine.

"What Hallvard said—about the raid."

His eyes darted to the servants who milled about the room. They were only pretending to work. Torunn knew they were listening. But she did not care. Bersi needed to learn his place again. He may not be a slave, but he was not a great man yet. That depended upon what he said next.

"Are you going to tell me that you did not know?" she prompted him. This was growing tiresome.

"No."

She blinked at him.

"No?"

He shook his head. "I was passing through a village, I do not remember the name now—and heard the rumors your brother spoke of. The first time I had heard anything of Jarl Arnd. There was a man speaking to the village council. He was angry and looking for

justice.”

“And you took his stories, his... lies... for truth?”

Bersi glared at her. “I was angry,” he said. “I needed something to believe in.”

“So you raised an army of other angry young men and marched on Skaro,” she snapped.

“I did.”

“And did he tell you to kill me?” Her skin burned with the anger that coursed through her veins and slammed against her chest.

“No,” Bersi replied simply. “He told me that Skaro would be undefended. I was to bring my men through the fortifications, and Iri would take over... I would be paid, and I could go on my way.”

Torunn laughed, and the sound was bitter in her ears. “Undefended? And Iri would just... hand over whatever gold you demanded.”

Bersi nodded and then rubbed his palm against his thigh. “Skaro was not undefended.”

“It certainly was not,” she retorted. “And you almost lost your life in the discovery of it.”

“Would you have killed me?”

“Why shouldn’t I kill you now?” she countered.

Bersi opened his mouth to argue and then shrugged. “You can do as you like,” he said. “I have said what I came to say. I make no apologies for what I have done. I believed what I had been told—”

“And if you had known that it was all a lie? That the rumors about my father were false?”

“Then I would not have come,” he said.

Torunn gritted her teeth and backed away from the door. “Leave me,” she said softly.

Bersi’s shoulders straightened, and his serious dark eyes met hers. “Unless you say the word, I will be at your side when the time comes,” he said.

Torunn crossed her arms over her bare breasts and met his gaze without flinching. “I will expect it,” she said. “Your loyalty has never been in question... I just needed to know the truth. And as Iri is not here to defend himself, or face any punishment for his betrayals—I shall have to make my own decisions.”

Bersi’s eyes closed briefly, and she had to turn away to keep from leaping into his arms. If she stalled any longer, she would be late for the ceremony, and the priests could not be kept waiting.

Not today.

“Change out of that tunic,” she snapped as she turned away. “You stink of stale

mead.”

“I do not,” he said in a somewhat dejected tone as the door closed in his face and Torunn finally allowed herself to smile.

In a few short hours, the nightmare that had begun on the day her father had left Skaro’s shores for the riches of the Saxon lands would end, and she would be able to live her life the way she wanted.

She pressed her hands against her stomach and took a deep breath. Freya’s promise of a child had never been far from her mind, and if she had not been pregnant when they had arrived in Myrka, she most certainly was now.

The healers would confirm it, but she felt certain that she already knew the truth. With a deep sigh upon her lips and a lightness in her heart she had not felt for many months, Torunn pulled her tunic from the bed and slipped it over her head. Heldi had clicked her tongue to see that Skaro’s first female Jarl had chosen breeches and a tunic instead of the fine dress she had set aside for Torunn’s wedding—but Torunn would not be denied.

It was a laughable suggestion—what Jarl had ever wielded an axe to behead her enemies while wearing a wedding dress?

“Burn the dress,” she commanded as she strode from the room and fastened her fur-trimmed cloak with the silver pin she always wore. She had lost everything that she had taken from Skaro—except her knife, the long silver pin... and Bersi.

Varin grinned at her from the doorway and fell into step behind her as she passed. The early morning light was comforting, and the sunrise would bring the dawn of a new world. No just for her... but for Skaro, and all of the people her new life would touch. Hallvard would not have understood. He had been angry, small, and bitter. And his pressure on Skaro and its surrounding villages would end.

EPILOGUE ~ BERSI

She could have killed him.

And for a moment, when she stood to pass sentence on her brother, he thought that she might speak his name next.

But she did not.

Varin seemed surprised and received an elbow in his healing ribs for his trouble.

Torunn stood tall and unwavering on the dais as the traitor she had called 'brother' was dragged from his prison and forced onto his knees.

A gentle wind from the harbor tugged at her dark hair, and Bersi ached to reach out and tuck it back into the intricate braids that she wore.

Her chin lifted as she stared down at the prisoner. "Hallvard, son of Arnd. You have been accused, and admitted to crimes and atrocities against the people of Skaro. You have been party to the murder of its nobles and conspired to overthrow the Jarldom and the freedom of the villages that live beneath its protection. You do not plead for mercy. You have admitted these crimes freely and without contrition."

Hallvard's face was crusted with dried blood, and his answering grin was ghoulish as his pale eyes stared back at her and then moved over the others who stood on the dais with her.

The people of Skaro and the warriors who had stood with them against Hallvard and Jarl Sigurd stood silent as they watched the proceedings. The charges were a formality. They all knew what was to come.

"Get it over with, sister. Secure my legacy and burn my image into the memory of Skaro. Let the helpless, faithless gods watch my ascension to their ranks..." His laughter was hollow and Bersi felt a swell of pride to see that Torunn had won the love of the people just as she had hoped.

Hallvard had nothing. And she would take his final revenge from him, too. That thought gave him a selfish joy.

Let the bastard rot under the village fortifications, separated from his foolish head for

all eternity.

Torunn shrugged out of her fur-trimmed cloak and let it fall to the dais. With determined strides, she crossed the platform and took the axe that Varin offered her.

It was large, but you would not know it to see her hold it so firm and steady.

Hallvard's eyes widened as he was pulled forward.

This was not what he had expected.

"Torunn— what is happening?" he cried. "I was promised."

Torunn stood at his side with the axe cradled in her hands. He craned his neck so that he could look up at her, but the men who held him twisted his arms and Hallvard cried out in pain and surprise.

"I was promised—"

"I made you no such promise," Torunn said loud enough for all to hear, "and may the gods curse you as I do."

Without hesitation, Torunn lifted the axe high into the air and brought it down with crushing speed. Hallvard's scream was almost animal as the blade bit deep into his neck. His blood spurted wildly and Torunn wrenched the weapon free and struck again. This time, her stroke was clean, and Hallvard's head tumbled from his shoulders and fell into the puddle of blood that flowed from the twitching corpse.

Bersi did not look at the corpse. He could only look at her.

Flecks of blood, like freckles, dappled her skin and her eyes were fierce and determined as she looked back at him.

She did not flinch as her brother's lifeless body was dragged away, or when buckets of sea water were dumped over the platform to wash away his blood.

A fierce Jarl to defend Skaro and her people.

She would be the leader they deserved.

He had no doubt of that.

But where his place was—that he doubted.

With her brother's blood staining her boots and her face, Torunn was blessed by the priests and oversaw the sacrifice of the animals that the holy men had prepared. The ceremony was long, and droned on—but Torunn sat still and stoic in her father's chair as, one by one, her new council was announced and paid their respects.

Her council would be made up of representatives of every village—they would all have a say in how they were governed, which crops and livestock would be raised... the governance of the people would fall to her, and she would dispense the Jarl's justice. But the weight of it all would not rest upon her shoulders alone.

It was what her father should have done.

He would have been proud of her. But he could not say it. It would mean nothing to come from his lips.

As the sun sank below the horizon, and the cooking fires were lit, mead flowed.

Torunn rose from her chair and laid her hand upon his shoulder. "I wish to bathe before the celebrations begin," she said.

Varin leapt to his feet to accompany her, but she smiled and gestured for him to remain seated. "You will stay, and drink," she commanded.

Varin laughed and accepted the cup that she took from a nearby servant and pressed into his hand. "I shall always do as my Jarl commands," he cried as he raised his cup to her.

More shouts echoed Varin's and Torun smiled for the first time that day. He hoped that was a good sign.

Or perhaps it was a terrible one. If she was going to kill him, best to do it where there were no witnesses—he had to be on his guard.

"Will you attend me?" she asked. "As you used to?"

He met her eyes unflinchingly. "I am no servant," he said.

She inclined her head slightly. "I am aware."

He rose from his chair and followed her across the platform and down the wooden stairs, ignoring the confused glances, and the knowing ones, that followed them as they walked through the crowd together and took the path that would lead them back to the Jarl's house.

Torunn had been reluctant to take it as her own, but once Hallvard's possessions had been removed and burned upon the beach, she had finally agreed to make it her own.

"Heldi should have the bath prepared," she said as they came to the door.

"And what will you have me do?" Bersi said. "Fetch firewood and make sure that you are not disturbed?"

Torunn laughed.

"You have said yourself that you are no longer a servant."

"I am not."

"Then why would I treat you as such?"

Bersi was silent. It was impossible to know what she meant—and his thoughts and emotions were so disordered that he could not make any decisions about which ones would win out. Only hours ago he had thought that she would kill him where he stood. And he would not have moved except to give her a better target for her aim.

The Jarl's bathhouse was grander than the one Torunn had installed in her own house, and he was surprised to see that the wooden tub was large enough to hold more than

two people comfortably.

As Torunn had said, the tub was full, and the fire that burned beneath it was well-tended. He looked around for a servant, but saw none.

“Undressed,” she commanded.

She was already pulling at her clothing and Bersi struggled to keep pace with her as his cloak, boots, tunic, and breeches were abandoned on the floor.

Torunn’s smile was wicked as she looked him over and then stepped close. Her fingers trailed over his stomach and over the scar on his thigh. The scar she had given him. The wound that had festered and almost taken his life.

“I knew you were mine on that very first night,” she whispered.

“You tried to kill me.”

“But I did not,” she scolded him. She pushed away and climbed into the wooden tub. He looked down at the floor and tried to take a measured breath. She was infuriating, and he wanted nothing more than to possess her for himself. It was—impossible. And yet...

“A Jarl may choose anyone,” said suddenly.

He looked over his shoulder at the tub. She was leaned upon the edge as she had used to when she teased him with glimpses of her body. But she was not teasing him now. Her tone was serious, and so were her eyes.

“For what?” he asked as he climbed into the tub with her. The water was scalding, and he eased himself in carefully, aware of every inch of his skin—and hers.

“To marry,” she replied.

“This is true,” he said thoughtfully. “I have heard of Jarl’s who have taken wives from among their own daughters or close family—though you may have difficulty with that.”

Torunn splashed him, and he chuckled. “I am being serious,” she said.

“So am I. A Jarl needs no explanation for their choice of a husband or wife.”

“Then I choose you for mine,” Torunn said simply.

Bersi blinked at her as surprise coursed through him.

“Well? Will you let me call you husband in the dark... before the gods?”

“A rebel—you would choose a rebel for your husband. And how do you know that I will not betray you.”

She grabbed his shoulders, and he pulled her into his lap. She was light, buoyed by the water, and all of his fantasies and daydreams about taking her like this flooded into his mind.

She smiled as she felt the thick head of his cock press against her inner thigh and she reached down to guide him into her silken entrance. Her eyes closed and he groaned as she slid down his hard length and gripped his hips with her knees.

"You would not betray the mother of your children," she breathed.

His hands tightened on her hips.

"What—"

He reached up to rub his thumb across her cheek, washing away flecks of dried blood that marred her skin. She smiled and leaned forward to kiss him, teasing him with the movement of her body, and he groaned against her mouth.

"The healer will confirm it," she said. "Freya promised me this very thing... All of this blood. All of this sacrifice and pain. It will be repaid to us in the blessings of the Vanir. I am Jarl of Skaro, and I will have you for my husband. Rebel or not."

She rose up on his cock and he closed his eyes, relishing the feel of her body against his. She belonged to him as surely as he belonged to her.

"I am not only a rebel," he said.

She stopped moving and looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"When Eyvid welcomed us to Myrka, he named another man as my father. I did not believe it— But... the mushrooms."

Torunn laid her fingers against his lips. "You do not have to tell me," she said.

He nipped at her fingers. "I do. When I dreamed... I dreamed of you. But I also dreamed of my mother—as she was when she was young. The man who raised me gave me his name. But he was not my father... My father was a Jarl in his own right. A great man from a village that I will never visit. You do not have to believe me, but I have heard the truth from my mother's own lips."

Torunn nodded slightly and leaned forward to kiss him again.

"Then, Bersi Hagisson... will you stand beside me? As my husband? As the father of my children?"

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against his chest, splashing water over the floor as she squealed.

"I will," he said against her neck.

"When will we announce it," she breathed, but her words became a moan as he thrust up into her.

"Let us make them wait," he growled. "I have dreamed of this moment for far too long."

Torunn sighed, and her head fell back as he pressed his mouth to her throat. It would be like this for them always. He knew it. His hard-headed, stubborn woman would be a strong leader, a fierce mother, and she would challenge him every day of his life—and as she gasped his name and dug her nails into his shoulder, he knew that he would have begged the gods for nothing less.

THE END

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