

DANETHRALL
A NOVEL

Excerpt

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Frail as the lily's stem so slender,
Yet like spring roses fresh and fair,
As Freyja's troth-plight, warm and tender,
Thou as the will of the gods art pure.
Kiss me and let my burning passion,
Kindle thy soul to perfect bliss,
Of earth and heaven I lose the vision,
Enraptured by thy melting kiss

Fridthjof's Saga
Esaias Tegnér

PROLOGUE

KINGDOM OF THE EAST ANGLES, BRITAIN

Autumn, 865

THE DAY BEGAN much like any other. I hauled a heavy bucket filled with icy water from a nearby stream. With small thin fingers, I struggled to push away the stray locks blown into my face by the cool breeze.

The warmth and brightness of summer had vanished long ago. The emerald leaves of trees were now faded red and orange, the bright wildflowers that blushed across open fields had browned and crumpled, the balmy breeze had cooled. At that moment, however, the crisp wind was welcomed on my damp skin as beads of sweat slipped down the side of my face.

My village came into view; wattle and daub cottages with deep sloping thatched roofs. Smoke drifted from the chimney pots, animals grazed in the pens and people ambled along the dirt paths.

I reached the sheep pen attached to the side of my home, water sloshing and spilling over the bucket's edge. I plopped it to the ground, opened the gate and heaved the bucket again, slamming the gate shut behind me. I staggered to the empty trough and poured the refreshing water into it for the bustling, bleating flock.

"Aveline," my mother smiled kindly, looking up from her weaving as I entered our home. "Get some porridge, child."

Wisps of steam drifted from the aged black cauldron, hung above a low fire; orange tongues of flame gleamed as they licked the bottom of the pot. I grabbed a wooden spoon and gave the porridge a quick stir before ladling a helping into my bowl, breathing in the scent. My stomach growled fiercely as I shovelled a heaping spoonful into my mouth, immediately absorbing vitality and comfort from the bland breakfast.

I quickly finished my bowl and started scooping more from the cauldron when, suddenly, we heard screaming.

"Hide!" My mother hissed.

Her eyes were wide, and her face had lost all colour. Alarmed, I

froze – I couldn't move! Fear had erupted in every fibre of my being. The yelling and screaming grew louder, foreign voices roared and laughed and bellowed, the familiar tongue of my people screamed and shrieked in terror. Somewhere outside I heard the long, low, eerie howling of a horn.

My eyes were locked on my mother, and my hands trembled as I clutched the bowl and spoon so tight my hands began to tremble. Silent and panicked, she waved vigorously towards the far end of the house where a loose panel on the wall led to the sheep pen attached to our home, just big enough for my scrawny frame to fit through.

“Go!” She barked as she lunged toward me and shoved me roughly towards the end of our home.

The bowl and spoon dropped from my shaking hands and crashed onto the dirt floor.

Then I moved.

My body worked faster than my brain could register what was happening. I pushed the board aside and clambered through the gap, scraping and scuffing myself on the wood and nails as I awkwardly scrambled through. My mother swiftly shoved the board back into place, hiding me away.

I did not feel the searing little red scratches scattered across my arms and legs until after I'd dropped to the filthy floor of the sheep shed. The sheep were agitated and squeezed into the shed with me, bleating frantically.

I shrank into a corner, sitting down as low as I could, hidden by sheep. Between their jostling bodies I could peep through and see the horrors befalling my village. My whole body was shivering and shaking as the cool white sun slowly scaled up the sky. The porridge had climbed up into my throat and I instantly regretted eating so much so quickly. I desperately wanted to throw up, but I had to keep my mouth closed for fear of being found.

Then I saw one!

This invader, he was huge – he was a bear! Like a man-eating ogre of the tales my friends and I had squealed and giggled at. He was unbelievably tall, broad, strapping and muscled.

No laughter fell from my lips now as I studied the monster across from me. He had in one hand, a large, well-used, colourfully painted, round shield, with a domed iron boss in the centre. His other massive hand curled around an axe – a massively long post with a curved blade atop, spattered in dripping red. As he swung the horrendous weapon, his icy blue eyes glittered with excitement and his thick blond hair blazed like yellow fire from his head. His snarling jaws roared ear-piercingly from beneath the mass of his thick reddish blond beard.

He raised the axe.

He jeered.

He cleaved my brother, Kenrick, in the head.

I heard the sickening crack, saw the splash of scarlet erupt from the deep, gaping rend in my brother's skull. Half of Kenrick's face was crushed in; the other half still gasped in horror. The stench of blood filled my nostrils and the copper taste was thick upon my tongue.

That's when I threw up.

I doubled up on my hands and knees and vomited into the straw. Tears streamed down my cheeks, vomit cascaded from my mouth. My stomach wrenched in pain until, finally, it was empty.

Still trembling, still filled with terror, I peered my tear blurred eyes through the legs of the sheep thankful that my brother's broken corpse was not in sight. The smell and taste of his blood lingered in my nose and at the back of my throat, but I couldn't see him.

My head throbbed from the screams that stabbed my ears. The foreigners' weapons crushed and cracked and slammed and slashed upon my friends and family ... all the people I knew ... I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to stop the tears from pouring, but all I could do was keep my mouth closed, my body shuddering from my silent agony.

My mother screamed.

I whipped my head toward the wall of my home. Thuds, slams, and crashes boomed inside. I heard my mother scampering and screeching, trying to get away. The deep voice from the intruder cackled and taunted her in his strange, foreign tongue. My mother wept.

"*Modor?*" I whispered. "*Modor? Modor?*"

My mother, my dear mother, she screamed again, a sudden thump and her heart-wrenching cry told me the monster had hit her. Her screaming transformed to wailing and hysterical sobs.

“No, stop!” My mother howled. “No! Aveline, run!”

A shard of icy coldness impaled my spine, I felt my muscles tense fiercely at the mentioning of my name. I heard fabric tear, the cadence of fleshy thumps and steady blows, my mother sobbed and bawled uncontrollably.

“Run, Aveline, run!” She screeched again, before howling out an ear-splitting scream.

There was a sickening crack.

There was silence.

I ran.

I plunged through the sheep, flung myself through the gate, and launched myself through the village as fast as my little legs could take me. My mother’s screams echoed through my mind, urging me onwards, motivating me to get as far away from this hell as I could.

I darted through the maelstrom of violent turmoil that devoured my everything around me. I raced so hard my lungs burned, my chest tightened like a vice, my mouth was desperately dry and sore from my gasping breath, and my throat still burned from vomit and bile.

As I bolted through our village, I spotted the tiny, limp hand of my baby niece, streaked with red, collapsed in front of my brother’s home.

I ran.

I dashed.

I sprinted as hard as I could!

But unfortunately, I was just nine years old.

I was no match for these huge, full grown monsters.

Suddenly, one of the beasts appeared before me, and I collided into him. He scooped me up from the ground with his arm around my waist. He laughed a deep, bellowing laugh. I hammered my little fists upon him, writhing and wriggling, kicking, and punching. The monster only laughed harder and cooed something to me in a high, jovial voice. He hauled me over to a group his companions,

and all of them laughed and mocked me.

I was a rabbit caught in a trap, descended upon by wolves.

I saw them raping girls only a handful of years older than me, I saw them raping women my mother's age. I saw them beating and murdering men and boys ... women and girls ... I saw the bodies of dead children ... I wept but stopped flailing; I had given up hope of my own survival, instead I tearfully prayed that I wouldn't be tortured and that my death would be quick.

But I did survive.

They didn't beat me, they didn't molest or rape me, they didn't hurt me at all, physically. I screwed up my eyes and my body shuddered as I cried, and the man - the foreign beast, carried me away.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the dirty grey smoke rise from my village. I saw the ethereal orange and red flames grow taller, saw the homes and farms I'd known all my life fade to black and cinders. I watched as the blazing inferno devoured everything I'd ever known. I dropped my head against my captor's chest and heard his heartbeat, steady despite the chaos. I hated everything about this horrid man. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut again, and tried to imagine my father's embrace ...

The foreign man smelled an odd mixture of blood, musky sweat and strong soap, and his large, muscled arms were covered in a thick sweep of dark bushy hair. My father had been covered from head to toe in fuzzy hair, also ... I tried imagining this all not to be real, tried to believe that it was my father who held me and that this all was a dreadful nightmare.

But then he spoke.

His deep guttural voice uttered strange and bizarre words I couldn't understand. I listened to his peculiar language reverberate in his chest as it fell from his wide, thin lipped mouth, killing my wishful dream.

Another tear slid down my cheek as I yielded, heartbreakingly, to this abysmal, devastating event. With no energy left to sob or fight I simply stared forward, not seeing anything, not hearing anything, just staring into nothingness.

A long time went by and my captor dropped me inside a long, narrow ship, waking me from a slumber I didn't remember falling into. Panicked, I whipped my head around, and glimpsed

terrifying, ugly beast heads perched at the tip of either end of the ship, and my body began to shudder and shake all over again. My captor snorted a laugh at me, before he jumped into the ship and stomped down to the end to talk with another of his kind. His companion – I recognised him. He was the one who had killed my brother!

I tried to fathom my surroundings. The blood splattered foreigners swarmed the shores, their ships either moored or bobbing on the waters, so great a number, we hadn't stood a chance. My heart sank painfully in my chest. I turned my eyes away from the shores of my land and gazed down the length of the ship.

To my utter surprise I spotted some familiar faces huddled together down the deck from me. They were mostly women and were all older than me by six years or more; their clothing was torn, and fresh wounds and bruises swelled from their pallid flesh.

My heart stopped, and their mouths fell agape at the sight of me. I ripped my way down the deck towards them, and one of the women, Mildritha, opened her arms to me.

I collapsed into her embrace and bawled and sobbed into her chest, my cries muffled. Mildritha hushed me and stroked my hair, squeezing me closely against her as she prayed quietly.

“O Lord God Almighty,
Pity us the highest favor by preserving and guarding our bodies,
Free us from the savage heathens who devastate our realms.
Though we are lowly sinners, we beg of you, please take us under
Thy shelter.
Repel the evil from us, we altogether implore thee.
We plead on our knees, to the king of glory,
Give us protection.
Praise be peace and glory, to the Trinity who is wholly most-
magnificent for the people.
Amen.”

“Amen.” I whispered.

When I had no more tears left to cry, I soberly peeked down the

deck of the longship. There were chests brimming with coins, glittering jewelry, golden goblets, crucifixes, silks, and countless other treasures presumably stolen from monasteries they'd attacked before my village. They lowered yet more chests and trunks inside, things they'd stolen from my village before they'd burned it to dust and ashes. They even stole livestock!

The foreigners carefully and calculatedly loaded the goods onto their ships before they boarded, their clothes stained with my family's blood, with my village's blood. They arrayed their heavy, round, fantastically decorated wooden shields along the topmost planking of the ship's sides. The rowers got in position on benches, sixteen men on each side, they raised the vertically striped sail and the longships began to move.

"Mildritha, where are we going? Who are these people?" I stammered, clutching the fabric of her dress so tightly my fingers turned white.

"These are the Danes – the Norsemen!" She said gravely, her eyes darting amongst the foreigners. "And they're taking us to their land."

CHAPTER ONE

ROSKILDE, DENMARK

Winter, 870

MY EYES SNAPPED open, darting to the large rectangular raised fire pit in the centre of the room. The flames that had roared there the night before had smouldered down to nothing more than embers and ashes, allowing the bitter coldness to permeate my home.

Lifting my gaze to the small smoke hole in the ceiling above the pit, I spied snow whipping and whirling in the grey morning sky.

This was my sixth winter in Roskilde, Denmark.

The warriors of Roskilde had attacked my home in the Kingdom of East Angles in autumn, five years ago. They had slaughtered most of my village but had spared a few lives to take as slaves, and I had been of those few.

It had taken two terrifying weeks at sea before the Norsemen moored their ships in the harbour of Roskilde Fjord. We had arrived on the cusp of winter, on my tenth birthday. Afraid and with aching eyes, I had watched the Norsemen unload the stolen goods, before they forced their captives to disembark.

My fifteenth birthday had passed just a month or so ago. I lived in a small farm, the adopted daughter of the very man who had kidnapped me, a warrior named Birger Bloody Sword.

I sat up in my bed, groggily acclimating myself with the cold. I had slept in a linen shift, thick woollen socks, and was swathed with fur blankets, but still I shivered. The chilled air raised goosebumps upon my flesh and clouded breath streamed from my shivering lips. I took one of the furs and wrapped it around my shoulders. My back ached faintly from sleeping on the hard, wooden bench, but it was better than the unforgiving packed dirt floor.

This time five years ago, I had been a captive in the Jarl of Roskilde's hall. There had been no space for me to sleep on the

benches with the thralls, so I was forced to sleep on the cold, hard dirt floor.

I'd lived in the Jarl's fine hall for almost two months while my fate had been debated and bartered over by Birger Bloody Sword and the Jarl, Alvar the First One, the chief of the town.

The Norse had many kings – Guthrum, Ivar and Halfdan, for example – and then there were the jarls.

The jarls were rich, and held their wealth in property, followers, treasure, ships and estates. Alvar the First One had a mighty fleet of ships and owned masses of land in Roskilde. He also owned many thralls who had been taken and enslaved from different raids in various countries, to work it for him. When Jarl Alvar died his son, Vidar, would become the next jarl of Roskilde – should no one manage to gain enough support to oppose him, that is.

Karls were the next down – the 'average' people, the landowners, the freemen, the farmers, the smiths. Birger was a karl, a farmer by trade but more revered as a warrior.

Birger and Jarl Alvar were childhood friends and the closest of companions, which afforded Birger the ability to argue my fate with the Jarl. Though I hadn't known any of their Norse tongue, from Birger and Jarl Alvar's staring eyes and pointing fingers, I knew they were speaking about me.

It wasn't until the final night of their twelve-day long winter celebrations when Birger, a victorious grin blazing from his face, took me to his home. Alvar had finally *allowed* me to live with my kidnapper.

Birger had not taken me as his thrall, though. I had seen how thralls were treated by these people ... I may have cooked, cleaned, and tended his livestock, but I wasn't a thrall like the other Anglo-Saxons that had been captured.

Thralls were the lowest of the Norse societal ranks. They were slaves with no rights, or bondsman working off debts or crimes to those they'd wronged. I was somewhere in between, a thrall by my Anglo-Saxon heritage and a karl through my adoption to Birger. Some townspeople would refer to me as *Danethrall*, a cruel name that mocked my 'thrall' heritage and Birger's determination to have me accepted as a freewoman.

Birger had spent hours every evening carefully and patiently tutoring me in his language, among other things, to help me adapt

to my new life. He had been patient with me, kind, his voice gentle and soothing. Within two years of his tutorage, I had finally become proficient in the Norse tongue and I had immediately asked him why he had taken me.

“Well, little Aveline,” Birger had said, gazing at me with his huge, deep blue eyes. “A long time ago, I had a daughter. You and she are incredibly alike ... same button nose, same big amber eyes, same dark hair ... same high cheekbones.” He’d examined my face with fond reminiscence glazing his eyes – it was not me he saw before him. “By the gods, you even had my Astrid’s scowl! You were so much like my daughter I couldn’t leave you. Astrid died from sickness when she was nine ... four winters later, I raid a foreign country and find my daughter there already! I couldn’t leave you.”

Birger Bloody Sword hadn’t taken me to be his thrall, he had taken me to be his daughter. At first, I was horrified he’d stolen another man’s daughter to replace his own, but in a twisted sort of luck, his yearning, mourning and heartache for his beloved dead daughter had saved me.

“Is – is that why you and Jarl Alvar argued about me when I first arrived?” I had asked him meekly.

Birger nodded to me.

“Alvar refused to let me adopt you at first, because he was sure I would be driven mad. He thought I was chasing the ghost of my daughter. As I said, you and she are identical ...” Birger had explained. “Alvar also thought it too dangerous to give you freedom, my people and I had just raided your village and I had stolen you away from your home – what if you sought vengeance against me?”

“I was willing to take the risk. I know you’re not Astrid, but seeing your face brought me happiness I hadn’t known since she had fallen sick. It took a lot of convincing, but Alvar finally granted me permission, and I’m glad he did.”

Steady, deep snores rumbled from the bed closet across from me. Birger was still asleep. I was glad Alvar had given Birger permission, too. Birger was the only person in this town who was kindly towards me.

Sure, Jarl Alvar had warmed out of respect for Birger, and Freydis the Jarlkona – ‘Jarl’s wife’ – had been very welcoming to me, but others in the town also thought Birger mad to be so eager to adopt me, believing the same as Alvar, that Birger was chasing his daughter’s ghost.

I rose and shuffled to the chest where my clothes were kept. I dropped the fur, unlatched the chest, and slipped my long, ankle length dress over the top of my shift. I shook the fur and folded it, before placing it neatly on the bench then I stuffed my feet into my leather shoes. Finally, I grabbed my thick woollen cloak and wrapped it securely around me, snuggling into its blissful warmth.

Quietly, I pulled open the door just a crack and the frigid air tore through. I lingered in the doorway for a moment, shielding myself from the ferocious wind with the door, reluctant to step into the frozen morning. With a longing glance back toward the fading embers, I took a deep breath and timidly stepped outside.

The snowflakes were small and hard, like smashed white pebbles tossed through the air. I clutched my hood tight with a shivering, naked hand, and charged through the relentless weather to the sheds a little way from the house, in search of chopped wood so I could tend to the fire inside my home.

I banged the door of the wood shed shut and leaned against it, recuperating from my arduous walk. I panted; puffs of white cloud streamed from my quivering lips. My cheeks, nose and hands were pink, throbbing and bitten by the chill.

“Aveline, *góðan morgin*.” A soft voice said.

My eyes darted around the shadowed shed and I spotted the tall, broad, fur covered frame of a man. He stood by the high piles of split wood, basked in charcoal-grey darkness.

“Vidar ... *góðan morgin* to you. I was just coming to collect the—” I stuttered from nerves more than trouble with the language or the coldness of the season.

“Let me help.” Vidar offered warmly, taking a log from the pile.

In the dim light his icy blue irises seemed almost white. Mesmerised by his gaze and the sweet, subtle curve of his smile, I stepped towards him and reached out to take a split log from the large stack. My shivering hands, dry from the coldness, stupidly let slip the log and it clattered to the ground.

“I’m sorry!” I squeaked, lunging down to pick up the wood.

Vidar chuckled softly at me as I rose, the firewood cradled in my arms like a baby. My face felt suddenly flushed and was significantly warmer than when I'd entered the shed. In embarrassment I avoided his gaze, instead I maintained a firm stare with the shadowed floor of the shed.

"Did I scare you?" Vidar asked, his concerned voice barely a whisper.

Vidar was double my age, an experienced, successful, well-travelled Dane, a remarkable warrior, an incredible hunter, and the Jarl of Roskilde's son. Vidar Alvarsson was an icon in his world, he was the apple of his father's eye and was in line to take his father's place as jarl when the time came. I was a fifteen-years-old Anglo-Saxon, young and clumsy, foreign, and unimportant. *That* was why his kindness intimidated me.

"*Nei, nei.* I'm – I'm just cold." I finally said, still staring at the floor.

The cold, dry tips of Vidar's long fingers gently urged my chin up, until I looked him in the eye. And what beautiful eyes he had: around the outer edge of his ice blue irises was a cerulean ring, such a stark but beautiful contrast in colour, and the golden eyelashes that framed his eyes were long and thick.

In awe of Vidar's handsomeness though I was, nervousness still gripped my heart, and my fingertips had turned white from how tightly I grasped the firewood. It wasn't safe for me to be alone with a Dane.

Though Birger was my protector, I was constantly apprehensive around the Danes, especially without Birger by my side. What if one were to disregard the immunity Birger had bestowed on me? Thralls weren't protected from attack like Danish women were ...

"I have a meeting with your father this morning," Vidar said as he reached for another split log. "And I realise, though our fathers are good friends, this is the first time we've ever truly met."

"*Já* – it is." I agreed, picking at the bark of the log I held.

"I wonder why that is?" Vidar continued, arranging the firewood in his arms.

"Poor timing?" I peered shyly at him.

"It must be." Vidar said, a crooked grin beaming from his face.

Unable to stop myself, I lowered my eyes to the firewood in my arms and smiled

“Let’s hope this is the end of our bad timing,” Vidar said.

He rested his hand on mine and, so surprised by his sudden touch, I dropped the wood. Deftly, Vidar caught it and smirked at me again.

“I caught it this time.” He winked at me. “Our timing is improving already!”

Vidar took a few steps backwards, his eyes sparkled with mischief and that roguish smile still curved his lips. He turned and left the wood shed. I stared at the closed door for a few minutes, my lips parted slightly.

Suddenly I realised my arms were empty, Vidar hadn’t returned the log to me. I rushed to the door, whipped it open and saw Vidar disappearing in the snowfall, in the direction of my home.

I stared, unbreathing, for a few moments as his bulky silhouette disappeared before I snatched a few more logs from the pile with numb fingers. I clung to them with one hand and gripped my slipping hood with the other, trudging outside after him.

The snow storm had grown fiercer. Vidar’s legs were long and strong, he had marched through this whirling nightmare with ease. I, however, stumbled slowly through the blinding snow as it whirred in a ferocious vortex about me. The howling wind thrashed my skirts against my freezing legs and my face and hands throbbed from the piercing cold.

Finally, I staggered through the door of my home, shivering, and thickly frosted with snow, to find Birger and Vidar standing beside the fire pit in peaceful conversation.

Vidar’s faded bronze flesh glowed from the radiant copper of the flames in the pit. His long, thick golden hair dripped with melted snow, and tiny droplets slid down the side of his face. His head had been shaved but for the thick, dark blond hair on the top of his head, which he had grown long and had braided back.

Upon his strong, square jaw was a thick, neatly trimmed beard, full of gold, white-blond and pale brown hues. Vidar was thirty years old and subtle lines were beginning to show around his icy blue eyes, more from the stress of life than from age.

He had removed his furs and hung them over a low beam close to the fire to dry. Without the thick bear skin cloak encasing him,

Vidar's figure was less hulking but brawny still. He was broad in shoulder and his tunic sleeves were tight around his large, muscled arms.

The men laughed softly about something Vidar had said in a tone low enough I couldn't quite hear his words, then both turned to face me, beaming.

"*Góðan morgin*, Aveline." Birger smiled, striding to me. He took the wood and tossed it onto the fire. "How are you today, my *dóttir*?"

Birger had called me *dóttir*, meaning 'daughter', soon after the Jarl had granted him possession of me. I used to prickle uncomfortably every time he referred to me as such, the image of my real father appearing in my mind, but I never argued with Birger over it. As time went by, I found that I didn't begrudge the word anymore, instead I felt an odd mixture of comfort and guilt.

"I'm good, *þakka*. I'm fine." I murmured, eyeing the floor, and avoiding Vidar's warm gaze.

Birger squeezed my shoulders quickly with his worn, calloused hands, before pulling the sodden, bedraggled fur from me. He tossed the fur over the beam, beside Vidar's. I smiled appreciatively to him and rubbed my pink hands together briskly. I glanced around the room, briefly catching Vidar's twinkling eyes and half-smiling lips, before clearing my throat and hurrying to the back of our home.

Birger watched me, smiling, as I went about my chores. Thankfully he didn't comment on the pink glow that burned on my cheeks – he must have mistaken my blazing blush for the bite of cold on my face.

Livestock pens were located through a doorway by Birger's bed closet at the back of the small house. After quickly peeping through, I realised Birger had already let our little herd of sheep out for the day, so I rushed back to begin breakfast, gathering from the pantry cheese and bread and dried fruits to prepare, my wet skirts slapping against my lower legs.

"Vidar, eat with us, would you?" Birger said, waving a large hand in the direction of the bench by the fire. "Aveline made a delicious stew last night and we have plenty leftover to share for breakfast."

“I’d enjoy that a lot.” Vidar replied, seating himself on the bench closest to me, watching me cut the bread and cheese and arrange them neatly next to the dried fruit on wooden plates.

The stew simmered in a plain, handcrafted clay pot, hung on chains above the fire that Birger had lit while I was out. The flames grew considerably as they ravenously devoured the logs Birger had added, the damp logs spitting and hissing occasionally. I glanced in the pot and carefully tossed a few of the heated cooking stones into the stew, to help it warm up faster.

Quietly I handed the two men their laden plates, nodding to their thanks. Vidar’s finger grazed mine discreetly. I blushed fiercely but ignored him and rushed to retrieve bowls from the cupboard, and a ladle for the stew, all the while hiding my burning cheeks. Once the stew began to bubble, I scooped some into the bowls, and Birger began speaking again.

“Vidar has come to me with an offer.” Birger said slowly, his voice muffled by a large bite of cheese.

“Oh yes? What offer?” I replied as I handed Vidar his bowl.

I stole a glance at the blond Jarl’s son as Birger paused to swallow. Vidar’s ice blue eyes glinted with the firelight and his handsome face was covered with a vague contentment, a small mysterious smile, nothing more.

“There’s to be another raid ...” Birger said carefully, avoiding my wide-eyed stare. “I have the honour of attending it. You will have to stay here, however.”

“Where are you raiding?” I asked softly.

“Since I have no living kin to look after you, Vidar and Freydis have kindly and graciously offered to watch over you while I am gone.” He said, ignoring me as he began to pace around the room, ingesting huge mouthfuls of his stew from the bowl clasped in one hand.

“Where are you raiding?” I repeated sharply.

Vidar’s effect on my nerves waned as I grew agitated with Birger.

“I don’t know if these bastards will leave you be with me gone, so Vidar will take my place caring for you. This way I know they will not touch you. With the Jarl’s son and the Jarlkona watching over you, you should be fine.”

“Where are you raiding? Why isn’t *he* going?” I interrogated, much like an impudent daughter.

Luckily my cheek was ignored.

"My father is going on the raid. He's left me to run Roskilde in his place." Vidar explained nonchalantly.

"Where is the raid?" I glared eye to eye with the thirty-year-old warrior and Jarl's son.

"You know bloody well where." Birger snapped suddenly, pausing his pacing. "We're going to the Kingdom of the East Angles."

Hearing my old home's name out loud made my blood run as cold as the blizzard outside. Heinous memories flooded through my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut for a long moment, slowly opening them to give Birger a steely glare.

"You'll be staying at the hall with Vidar."

"I want to stay here."

"*Nei*, you'll stay with him. It is safer for you." Birger answered, pacing again.

"How ironic it is that you speak of my safety considering you are going to attack my homeland." I spat.

"In the name of all the gods, quiet girl, and know your place!" Birger barked, slamming his fist upon the table top. "You'll do as I command!"

I gawped at him, horrified. He'd never spoken to me like that before.

Vidar stretched his back and rolled his shoulders, apparently not at all bewildered by Birger's outburst. He tossed a dried strawberry into his mouth and chewed it quietly, eyeing Birger and me amusedly.

Fury surged through every fibre of my being.

"*Do as you command?*" I scowled at Birger. "Like a thrall? What happened to *dóttir*? Or am I only your child when it suits you?"

"*Dóttir* or thrall, I should whip you for your disobedience." Birger said sharply, glowering at me as deeply as I scowled at him. "Can't you see I'm trying to look after you? Whatever the irony, whatever the anguish you're feeling, you're mine! As my *dóttir* or my thrall, it doesn't matter which, you will do as I say. You will stay with Vidar while I raid your *old* land. That's it!"

Flushed red with rage, Birger stormed out of the house, bowl

of stew still in his hand, though most of it was sloshed across the floor. It was silent save for the howling wind outside. I could feel Vidar's gaze rest heavily on me.

"I know it's hard for you. It's hard for him too, you know." Vidar said.

I spun around and glared at him.

"He's racked with guilt over your past, but he's trying to protect you, as he has done for all of these years. You shouldn't be so quick to bite the hand that feeds." Vidar remarked.

A big, dark shadow of shame lowered over me. My hands began to shake slightly as I stared at the floor, my face still and lips pursed tightly. Vidar stood up silently and placed his empty bowl on the cupboard next to me.

"If you want to stay here while he's gone, you can. Wait until his ship has sailed from our view. Then you can return here, to your home. But you would do well to apologise to Birger and make things right before he leaves. They sail in three days to Skargerrak, to meet with the Norwegian fleet, then on to the East Angles. Make peace with this, Aveline, you can't change the past."

I stood cold to him, listening to his words but not moving. Vidar waited for a moment in silence, before he left me alone in the house. I was frozen in spot for an age.

I hadn't wanted to anger Birger. Birger had always been kind to me. He had saved me from certain death in my village by taking me. I had never been a thrall to him, only his daughter. Those that had even referred to me as Birger's thrall in passing had received swift retribution from Birger – he was unafraid to defend me from anyone.

Most would only refer to me as Danethrall behind Birger's back – most were not stupid enough to say so to his face, lest they suffer the fury of Bloody Sword. One of Birger's friends had made the mistake of mocking me to Birger a few months after I had turned thirteen, and he had paid dearly for it.

Birger had taken me to Jarl Alvar's hall, where he, the Jarl and a few of their companions were drinking one evening.

"Bloody Sword, your little Danethrall is growing to be quite beautiful!" One of his companions had commented, taking a lock of my long, chestnut hair, and admiring it. "I see why you were so

adamant to keep the girl, I wouldn't mind having her around either."

As his friend had begun to laugh at his crude insinuation, Birger had lunged at him and began pummeling him with his fists. It had taken Jarl Alvar and two of their companions to haul Birger from the one who had insulted me.

"Aveline is my *dóttir*!" Birger had roared. "Don't insult her again, or I'll rip out your tongue!"

That had been the first and only time I'd seen the 'Bloody Sword' side of Birger. His actions had terrified me, but deep inside me was relief – relief that I was protected, and this fearsome warrior was my defender.

Since then, no one dared touch me or say anything untoward about Birger's little *Danethrall* – at least not to my face, and if Birger had heard anything derogatorily said about me, he handled it and never told me. Birger was my shield, he was my shelter, he was the dearest person I had in this foreign land.

Snapping me from my thoughts, my large, long haired, black cat Svartr crept out from Birger's bed closet, the door left slightly ajar since Birger had awoken. He twined himself around and through my legs, purring loudly. On the ground a little way from my foot was a hunk of stew meat, which had been flung from Birger's bowl during our argument. The gorgeous, fluffy feline spotted it and happily began to feast on it.

"Oh, Svartr." I sighed sadly, bending down to stroke him, his purring pleasure infinitely louder. "What am I to do?"

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS NIGHT time before Birger finally returned home. I had changed into clean clothes, washed my filthy dress, scrubbed the bowls and cupboards, swept the floors, spun wool until my hands ached, made a fresh batch of stew, baked some bread, and fed and watered the sheep before herding them back into their pens.

I was combing out a wad of fleece on the bench by the fire, the occasional bleat of a sheep puncturing the silence, when Birger stomped through the door. He held the empty and cleaned bowl and spoon in his hand. I looked up at him, timidly.

“Stew?” I offered meekly, putting my work aside and rising.

“*Já*, please.” Birger replied, matching my tone as he gingerly handed me the bowl.

I took it from him softly then stopped and looked up at him with big shining eyes.

“I’m sorry, *faðir*.” I said, my voice just above a whisper.

Birger’s mouth grew into a wide smile before he wrapped his arms around me, and I threw my arms around his waist returning his hug tightly.

“Me too.”

After a long while in his embrace, I felt the weight of my sorrow lift from my shoulders. Comforted, our loving grips relaxed, and I skipped to the pot while Birger took a seat at the table. I ladled huge scoops of stew into his bowl and took it to him with a plate of the fresh, warm bread. I sat beside him closely; I was so relieved to have peace between us again.

“*Dóttir*,” Birger said, cutting a slice from the loaf. “You must understand that your way of life and ours are different . . . We raid because we must, it’s part of us. We are a warrior people – war is in our blood, it’s the only way we can reach Valhalla in the afterlife! To us, raiding is an honourable challenge to fight where I either gain my place in Valhalla, or I win the spoils.” His deep voice explained in hushed tones. “We *had* to raid your village. My kings

dream of ruling Britain ... so we raided the churches on the cliff tops and moved further inland, raiding the villages we reached ...”

“But it was my home.” I whined quietly and pathetically. “My family ...”

“I know, child, but there was nothing I could do to stop their deaths. By the time I saw you, your family was already dead, and I knew I couldn’t leave you. You saw what happened to the other women and girls – I wanted to save you from their fates. If I had left you alone, someone would’ve raped you and killed you. So, I took you.”

Silence fell over us. Birger stared into his bowl on the table, absentmindedly tearing his bread into chunks.

“If I hadn’t looked like your daughter, would you have saved me?” I asked tearfully.

“I may be called ‘Bloody Sword’, but I *don’t* kill children or women, Aveline.” Birger said staunchly. “Not all feel the same as me, however ... I bare not to think of what would have happened if you’d not resembled my Astrid ...”

I thought suddenly of Mildritha. She was the woman who had cradled me, a bawling nine-years-old child, on the ship as we sailed from our home with our heathen captors. Her three young children and her husband had been murdered by Danes. She had taken it upon herself to look out for me as best as she could on the ship and in Roskilde.

Mildritha had been in her mid-twenties when she was captured. She was very beautiful, pale as the moon with light brown hair and dark brown eyes and was bought as a thrall by the Jepson family. The older head of the family, Glúmr, was widowed. He had paid a decent amount for her, attracted to the lovely woman though she was decades younger than him, and had forced her into his bed every night.

He treated her badly, not caring if some other townsman would take her when they’d see her in the streets trading goods on his behalf, or when she was hanging washing to dry outside their home. Even Glúmr’s sons, who were her age and a few years older and all of them married to Danish women, would rape her.

Mildritha became pregnant a few times within the first three

years of living in Roskilde. In a rage, Glúmr would beat her. Another thrall in the town would smuggle some special herbs to her, to kill the child in her belly, and thus stop the beatings from her owner.

The herbs worked, but the fourth time Mildritha became pregnant was her last. I wasn't sure if it was the herbs or the beatings, or even the birth that killed her, but Mildritha had died and her baby was tossed to the wolves.

When news of her death had reached my ears, I remembered not being surprised. In fact, I had shockingly felt comforted by the news. Mildritha' had lived in Roskilde for two terrible years, but thanks to her death, she would never be abused again.

"It's hard to understand ... This is our culture. I raised you Danish to save you." Birger said. "I know my lands and ways are still strange to you, but it's your life now. You must adopt it and accept it to stay alive. Nothing will take away the pain of losing your family, but I hope that one day you'll accept me as your family, just as I hold you as my daughter. All I want is to protect you."

"Aside from my appearance, I am not Astrid, but because of my appearance, you rescued me. Do you truly hold *me* as your daughter? Or do you just protect me to keep the image of your daughter alive?" My voice was brittle as I questioned him.

"Astrid is dead, Aveline." Birger replied in a low, husky tone. "I will always love her, but she has been dead for almost a decade. I may have rescued you because you look like her, but I love you because you are Aveline – *my* Aveline."

I didn't answer immediately. His words rang in my mind. The somewhat clouded faces of my mother, father and brothers swirled before my eyes. I understood Birger, I truly did – I had already accepted him long ago. But, as he had said, nothing would take away the pain of losing my family. As I gazed into his deep blue glistening eyes, I realised nothing would take away his pain of losing his family, either.

I sighed deeply.

"What would you have me do?"

Birger heaved himself upwards, straightening from his slumped position in the chair.

"I would prefer it if you stayed in the Jarl's hall with Vidar. He is a very honourable man and has given his word to keep you safe

while I am away. I will be gone for a long time – this isn't just a raid; we are joining the Great Army. Many different clans and towns are coming together to take on the Mercians and the Angles." Birger explained, still avoiding my gaze. "I need to make sure you won't be hurt while I'm gone. A lot of our people have accepted you as my daughter, but not everyone ... I won't be here to defend you from the few who haven't – I need to make sure you aren't hurt. Vidar has promised to send thralls to tend to the sheep or at least aid you tending them. He's vowed he will do everything to assure your safety."

"Okay." I replied, hurriedly adding, "I appreciate that."

"I think it would be wise for you – for you to be married. You *are* fifteen." Birger said delicately.

My eyes shot open, as wide and round as plates.

"Married? To who?" I gasped.

"I won't be here to help you decide. Vidar could help you, if you'd consider marriage a possibility ... Is there – is there anyone you have your eye on?" A light pink rose on Birger's pale skin – he was completely avoiding my gaze.

"Ah, well, no." I stuttered, shocked to my very core. "I haven't even thought of marriage."

"Of course not ... well. Vidar can help." Birger cleared his throat gruffly.

"I'm the *Danethrall*. Who would want to marry me?"

"You're not the *Danethrall*. You are Aveline Birgersdóttir!" He said firmly. "I may not be a jarl, but I am a great warrior with a good name. I'm not rich, but we have land, a good home, livestock ... you'd have a decent dowry. You've accepted the gods—"

My heart skipped a beat at this comment. I had hardly accepted his gods, I attended and participated in their rituals because I had to, not because I had faith in them.

"—You know our language, you have learned our ways, your maidenhead is intact – that in itself would fetch you a husband ... You'd be a good wife, Aveline. I'm sure Vidar will find you a suitable and acceptable husband."

I didn't say a word; I was far too surprised. Of course, even in my homeland marriage would be considered around my age. I had

seen a lot of fresh-faced wives in Roskilde who were my age, or even a year or two younger. Some were with child, others had one already. I was of perfectly acceptable marrying age.

“How long will you be gone?” I asked.

“I don’t know, *dóttir*.” Birger sighed. “A time to be sure. Months, maybe a year or two. I’d like to be here for your marriage, but ... just in case the Valkyrie take me to Odin’s table, I’d like you to be safely wed while I’m away.”

“And you don’t care to whom I’m wed?”

“Someone with money to them, would be nice.” Birger chortled. “Someone you trust to protect you is what I want most. Be critical, be careful, be sure you’re making the right decision.” He nudged my arm with his elbow and added, jokingly, “The life of a divorced mother would be hard.”

“Mmm.” I murmured, giving him a small uncomfortable smile.

“Perhaps you’ll meet Jarluf’s oldest son? He is unwed, he’s but a handful of years older than you – I’m sure you two would get along, he would make a fine husband! Perhaps Vidar will help, he’s good friends with Jarluf’s son – *já*, I’m sure he’ll be able to help.” Birger yammered, though I didn’t know whether he was trying to convince me or himself.

I stood on tiptoe and kissed Birger on his cheek. He looked at me surprised.

“I’m going to wash the dishes, then go to bed.” I announced.

The front door opened, and one of Birger’s friends showed his head through the doorway.

“Birger! Come drink with us! In three days we sail to war – we must celebrate!” The loudness and cheeriness of his voice suggested he’d already begun drinking.

Birger glanced at me, and I smiled and nodded my head. He stood, dropped his spoon in his empty bowl and grinned at me quickly.

“Will be right there, friend.” Birger said, grabbing his fur cloak. He turned to me. “Will you come, my child?”

I shook my head, smiling still.

“Enjoy your night, *faðir*.”

Birger made his way to the door and paused to glance at me.

“I’ll tell you more of Jarluf’s son in the ‘morrow.” Birger promised with a grin.

I laughed and scuttled over to him quickly, placing another kiss on his cheek.

“Goodnight, *faðir*.” I smiled, carefully closing the door on his beaming face.

I couldn't help but laugh, turning my back on the door. I unhooked the empty cooking pot from above the fire fetched the bucket of water from across the room. I hung it above the fire to boil so I could clean the items from dinner.

As I watched bubbles appear and pop on the surface of the water as it boiled I thought of Birger's recommendation ... Marriage. He thought it wise that I should marry ...

“*Perhaps you'll meet Jarluf's son?*” I murmured under my breath as I pulled the bucket carefully from the fire.

Birger was right, I was of more than reasonable marrying age and I did have some qualities to offer my prospective husband. As well as speaking the Norse language and managing the farm well, Birger had taught me to hunt, read the sky and read runes, and had taught me the way of their gods. Whether I believed in the Norse pantheon or not, I could at least maintain the ruse that I did.

Birger did have a very good name, he was recognised far and wide as a loyal, fearsome warrior. Unfortunately, it was also well known that if anyone ever said anything disparaging to or about me, chances were high that he would beat them within inches of their lives. With that type of fearsome reputation, I wondered if anyone would dare agree to meet with Birger's daughter in fear of Birger's rather if they decided they didn't want to marry me after all?

Even if Birger did manage to sway Jarluf's son to meet with me, the idea of marriage ... it was petrifying to me. I was fifteen, I was naïve – I had no idea how to find a suitor. I hadn't managed to even make a friend in Roskilde, how would I convince a man to take me as his wife? I had never been in a romantic situation before, I didn't even know how I was I meant to act in that type of circumstance. I had never kissed before, never even been alone with a man that hadn't been some form of family member ... Except for today when I was alone with Vidar Alvarsson.

Intimidated by his handsomeness, his station and the very fact that he was a Danish man, I had dropped every log I'd handled, stuttered through every word I'd uttered, and blushed ferociously throughout our entire conversation. Thank goodness it had been a short conversation ...

If my reaction to Vidar was anything to go by, I wasn't sure I'd ever marry unless I was lucky enough that my suitor would find my ridiculous clumsiness and shyness endearing.

I sighed deeply as I scrubbed a bowl with a dampened rag.

Would I be betraying my people and my deceased family if I married a Norseman?

What if I were to wed and discover my Danish husband had murdered my family when they had raided the Kingdom of the East Angles all those years ago? What if he had killed my brothers or father or had been the one who raped my mother? What if his father or his brother or uncle had murdered my kin and companions?

Though Birger concerned for my safety and saw marriage as the perfect way to guarantee me protection while he was away ... I couldn't. Among all these reasons, my naivety, my shyness, my guilt and my fear, the very reason for marrying hung heavily over my head.

What if Birger did die? What would I do without him? I didn't want to marry to replace Birger as my protector. Most of all, I didn't want to lose another father.

