

**RISE TO FALL**

**Excerpt**

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Now all goes hard for me.  
I see Hel, the goddess,  
Foe to duplicity,  
Waiting on the headland.  
Nevertheless, joyfully,  
With a jocund will  
And a heart that fears nothing,  
I await my death.

***Sonatorrek***  
**Egill Skallagrímsson**

# PROLOGUE

AROS, DENMARK

*Spring, 880*

IN THE SUMMER of 878, Vidar Alvarsson of Roskilde killed my husband, Jarl Erhardt Ketilsson of Aros, and took Erhardt's jarldom as his own. Vidar led a surprise attack against Aros and defeated the town with ease. Vidar had given the people there a choice, swear fealty to him or face the consequences. Many promised their loyalty to him, and those who refused were enslaved or killed, locked inside Erhardt's hall and burned alive.

I stared at the new hall before me, cradling my baby daughter in my arms. I followed every line of grain and every knot in the great hall's wide oak door, admired the fine iron ring pull and the long, thin iron strap hinges. The hall that had stood here before hadn't been half as fine as the one before me now.

This new hall was far bigger than all the longhouses in Aros. Like a longship flipped upside down, it was slightly oval shaped and built with planks from hundreds of oak trees. Posts were evenly spaced along the tall outer walls, tilted against the building to support it, with gorgeous images of animals, knotwork and scenes imagined from various tales carved into them. The entire hall was painted white with quicklime, from the posts to the walls, a vivid status symbol easily spotted from afar. Only the massive, sloping wood-shingled roof remained its warm, natural colour.

I had lived in the previous hall with my first husband, Jarl Erhardt, for five long years. Now the ashes of that hall, the only remnant of the building, were interspersed in the packed dirt floor of this grand new hall. Memories of my past life in Aros and my marriage to Erhardt flittered before my eyes, and a deep sigh of relief fell from my lips.

That chapter of my life was finally closed for good.

“Do you like it?” Vidar Alvarsson asked, appearing beside me.

Vidar rested his hand on the small of my back and I looked up at him. He gazed at me with bright, unblinking eyes, keen to hear my opinion on the new hall he had built for us and our children. I admired the beauty of Vidar’s eyes, his irises were blue like ice, almost transparent in their paleness, rimmed with cerulean. They gleamed from his bronze skin like diamonds in sand.

“*Já*,” I smiled. “I do.”

“Shall we go in?”

I giggled at his eagerness and nodded.

“Young Birger, Sander, come my sons! Let me show you our new home!” Vidar called, and our two young blond sons dashed over to us, just as enthusiastic as their father.

We stepped into the hall and surveyed the interior. Young Birger and Sander, six and three years of age respectively, scurried about our new home, exploring every inch of it. Their bright blue eyes ogled the decorations and furniture, their little fingers touched every surface, probed every nook and cranny. Vidar even had the inside of our home painted white with quicklime, and gorgeous furs and pelts of bears, wolves and the like hung on the walls, alongside a collection of Vidar’s beautifully painted and well-used round wooden shields.

A fire crackled and popped as it burned low in the long rectangular fire pit running the centre of the main room. The comforting yet pungent scent of smoke drifted from it, permeating the large space. I watched the small orange and gold flames flicker and dance, and the wood burn black and grey as the flames devoured it.

Mesmerised by the fire’s dance and the quiet crackle of its song, the sound of my sons’ laughter faded from my ears, the crunch of Vidar’s footsteps on the hard dirt floor vanished, and even the soft sound of my daughter’s breath as she slept in my arms disappeared.

I was apprehensive about returning to Aros. I wanted to stay in Roskilde for the rest of my life, but a jarl must rule his jarldom, and Aros now belonged to Vidar. Vidar had let me remain in Roskilde with our children, living in his parents’ hall with his

mother and father, while he rebuilt Aros and constructed this grand new hall for us, but now it was time for us to come to Aros, to stay and live and rule.

My heart yearned to return to Roskilde. Memories haunted me, shivers had skittered down my spine at the very mentioning of our move to Aros, and at night I would dream of my previous life there. Though I feared leaving Roskilde, feared moving back to the town I had been trapped in for so long, I would not be separated from Vidar again. I would live in Aros once more, but this time was different. This time I was with Vidar.

I turned my gaze to my husband, who was chasing after Young Birger with Sander atop his shoulders, the three of them laughing like madmen. I grinned at the sight of my husband and sons.

Yes, things were very different now. With Vidar at my side, I could go anywhere, do anything, and I would be safe and happy. Vidar had destroyed all evidence of my past life in Aros, he had done everything he could to erase any landmark that might remind me of the torturous five years I had lived here as the forced-wife of Jarl Erhardt Ketilsson.

Vidar would take on all the *jötnar* of Jötunheimr and all the gods of Asgard to protect our family. Vidar and I would never be separated again. He was my haven, he was my heart, he was my bliss. Deep inside me though, always a shadow in the back of my mind, I feared the end of my paradise.

In idyllic moments such as this, watching Vidar laugh and play with our children, I feared the end. In the wild laughter of our children as they played like wild cubs, feral and raucous; in the serene silence of every morning, wrapped in my husband's warm embrace; or when, in the darkness of night, we'd pant together, our flesh glistening with the sheen of sweat after loving one another wholly and completely ... I always feared the end.

The end had not yet come, but that caused me to fear it more. The light of good fortune had never shone on me for long. I would find myself in the embrace of bliss, but always it would shatter. Since that fateful day when the Norsemen of Roskilde had sacked my village in the Kingdom of the East Angles and

kidnapped me, a nine-year-old child, I realised peace did not last forever.

I had learned I would always rise to fall.

I thought of my family – my first family from the Kingdom of the East Angles. My life had been arduous, it had been simple and peaceful until the Norsemen of Roskilde had come. Fifteen years had passed since the Danes had attacked – since they'd murdered my family, burned my village and stolen me away to their land.

I couldn't remember my family's faces clearly anymore, but I had long since forgotten my guilt.

Birger Bloody Sword, the Dane who had kidnapped me, had saved me from death and adopted me. Birger had raised me and loved me as though I were his own flesh and blood. I had formed a love for him, and with that love came an overwhelming shame, as though I was betraying my Anglo-Saxon family by adoring him.

That shame had consumed me for so long, but I had risen from the ashes of my Anglo-Saxon life. I had risen and accepted my new life as a Dane.

Birger had died many years ago, and my heart ached for him as it had for my biological kin. I had not forgotten his face, though, and I had named my firstborn son after him. Roskilde became my home. I had found love with Vidar; I had found that much sought-after peace once again.

But I fell.

Serenity had not lasted long, and fate had me stolen away from Vidar soon after his and my engagement. Fate had tossed me like meat to the wolves; when Vidar had left for a few weeks to trade in the Danish town of Ribe, the town of Aros besieged Roskilde. Vidar's own mother, Freydis, had been coerced into marrying me off to Jarl Erhardt Ketilsson to end the feud between the two towns, and to save her son's life.

The feud had never really ended, of course. Jarl Erhardt had succeeded in taking Roskilde and controlling it. Most of the Roskilde townsmen and warriors had been fighting with the Great Army in Britain when Aros attacked, and the remaining

townspeople had been outnumbered and powerless to fight against Aros. Those who tried to rise against Erhardt and his people were slain.

I was married to Jarl Erhardt for five years, beaten and raped by him. Erhardt had mockingly titled me 'Danethrall', but my Anglo-Saxon weakness had long faded from my body, and inside me smouldered the courage to endure all he put me through. I found a way to survive my harrowing marriage; I had drawn strength from my prayers to the Norse goddess, Frigg, and learned to do things I never thought I could do ...

Only Vidar and I had known I carried his baby in my belly when Freydis had me married off to Erhardt. I was forced to raise Young Birger as Erhardt's son – had he known Young Birger was Vidar's, Erhardt would have exposed the child, tossed him into the wilderness at birth and left to him die.

Vidar and I had conceived our second son, Sander, during a chance meeting a few years into my marriage to Erhardt. Again, I had to lie, had to pretend Sander was Erhardt's – but not for long. A year after Sander's birth, the day had finally come when Vidar set me free. No sweeter kiss had come from Vidar's lips than on the day he came to me, drenched in my first husband's blood, announcing my first husband's death.

It had been two years since then. I had lived in peace since then. Vidar and I had welcomed our third child, our beautiful daughter Æsa, we had married and now ruled as Jarl and Jarlkona of Aros.

I watched Vidar direct our thralls as they carried in our trunks of belongings, Sander still sitting upon his shoulders and Young Birger held under his arm like a sack. I was ready to put the past behind me and start this new life, but I feared – no, I *knew* this happiness would not last forever. It was only a matter of time ...

As I stared at the fantastic hall before me, the hall that was mine and my husband's, and I shuddered. My past had proven I would rise to fall, and I had risen higher than I could have imagined. I knew my fall would be devastatingly immense.

# CHAPTER ONE

## AROS, DENMARK

*Early Spring, 882*

I SHIFTED MY daughter higher on my hip. I stood at the edge of a flat glade surrounded by forest and watched my husband and sons, who were a few feet away. Vidar was teaching our boys archery.

The snow had melted a few weeks ago, leaving the greenery of Aros dull and muddy. The sky was constantly overcast, with frequent showers. It had been mild as of late, and Aros had been swept in shrouds of fog and mist. Today was no different. Clouds filled the sky, heavy with the promise of rain and as grey as the blade of the utility knife that hung from my husband's belt. It was nearing evening time now and the sparse sunlight that slipped through the clouds was fading fast.

Vidar and our two sons stood in a row, each holding their own elm and horn bows, aiming through the grey light at a round, red-painted shield hung from a tree maybe a hundred paces in the distance. There were already a handful of arrows piercing the shield and a number more sticking into the ground beneath it.

Young Birger, our eldest son who had seen eight winters, took a step forward and nocked an arrow into place. The boys' bows were smaller than Vidar's but of equally fine quality. Young Birger drew the bowstring back until it kissed the tip of his nose and lips, and I smiled at the determination on his face.

As Young Birger aimed, he chewed his bottom lip, just like Vidar. The father and son were very like-minded; calm, quiet and hardly separated. Although he was only a boy, Young Birger was the epitome of Vidar, from his mannerisms to his appearance.

Sander, three years Young Birger's junior, may have looked like his father and brother, but he was not as composed as them. Sander was noisy, naughty and mischievously playful – and he delightfully brought out the joker in Vidar.

The father and sons complemented each other in every aspect. Both of our sons took their features from their father, from their silky sheets of golden hair and their startling ice-blue eyes to their faded bronze skin. They were duplicates of Vidar.

I rubbed my large tummy with my free hand and the occupant inside me wiggled, sending jolts of discomfort through me. I wondered whether this child would resemble Vidar as well? Or would the child hold some of my features like Æsa? Our only daughter, Æsa, had inherited her pale flesh and amber eyes from me, but soft strands of straight, pale blonde hair cascaded from her head, identical to Vidar's mother Freydis's tresses.

"Don't aim with your bowstring drawn, Young Birger," I remarked. "Also, your legs are too far apart, and you keep moving your back foot between shots – your *fadir* isn't teaching you the importance of a consistent stance."

A smirk on his face and one eyebrow cocked, Vidar glanced over his shoulder at me. Young Birger lowered his bow. He and Sander glanced between us, their ice-blue eyes alight and wide, smiles brimming on their little faces.

"I'm not teaching him properly?" Vidar asked, amusement in his words.

"He can shoot an arrow well enough, but his stance is incorrect," I explained. "He would do better if his legs weren't open as wide and he kept his feet rooted in the same spot."

"His stance looks good to me."

"He stands with his legs too wide, and his back leg is sticking out too much. He needs his feet shoulder-width apart, no more – no less."

"He *is* standing shoulder-width apart."

"He needs to move his legs closer together, he's *too wide*."

"You're being pedantic, little fawn."

"You're a good shot, my love, but the difference between your leniency and my strict attention to detail is what makes me the better archer."

Vidar's jaw dropped, and his eyebrows shot up his forehead. Suddenly he doubled over in raucous laughter, and a furious blush burned on my cheeks.

“I *am* better at archery than you!” I barked.

“Your *móðir* thinks she can best me at archery.” Vidar said to the boys, wiping his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“I don’t think, I *know*.” I remarked, shifting Æsa higher on my hip. “If you’re going to teach our sons how to use a bow, you should at least teach them the correct way to stand.”

“I’ve been shooting longer than you’ve been alive, little fawn,” Vidar grinned, holding his bow out to me. “But by all means, show me where I’m wrong.”

“Come fetch our daughter and I will.”

Vidar sauntered over, holding a hand out to our darling Æsa. The two-year-old girl beamed at her father as he neared her.

“Your *mumie* thinks she’s a better archer than me,” Vidar cooed to her. “What do you think about that?”

Æsa giggled, covered her cheeks with her pudgy little hands and rocked side to side, her wispy ivory locks of hair tumbling into her face with every turn.

“*Já! Mumie, mumie, mumie!*” Æsa squealed.

“Ha!” I grinned victoriously, planting a noisy kiss onto my daughter’s cheek, much to her delight.

“Unfair advantage – of course a daughter will side with her *móðir*.” Vidar protested in mock offence.

“We will see if she’s right, won’t we?” I replied, curling my slender fingers around his bow.

It was a gorgeous bow made of elm, with reindeer antler on the tips. A small smile played at the corners of my lips as I admired the fine crafting of the weapon. Vidar had made it himself. He could craft all sorts of items from wood and bone – toys and trinkets to intricate chests and elegant bows like this.

Vidar took our squirming daughter from me, and she giggled wickedly as she clung to his cloak, her legs wrapped around his side. Æsa stopped giggling when she spotted her older brothers snickering behind us. She jabbered at them in a variety of pitches and sounds, with a few intelligible words in between. She wriggled to be free and gently Vidar lowered her to the ground. Immediately the small girl tottered off towards her siblings.

“I’ll need arrows.” I smiled coyly, stepping close to him.

I rested my hand on Vidar's chest, gliding it lower down his body. Vidar rested his hands on either side of my swollen stomach and grazed his lips against mine as I pulled an arrow from the leather quiver hanging from his hip.

Our eyes locked and radiated so intensely with excitement, I could almost feel the heat burning between us. Vidar's smirk deepened, and he leaned closer offering me his lips once more. I brushed my lips against his, but before I could place a kiss upon them, he pulled away yet again.

"You're teasing me." I barked. "Are you afraid I'll beat you, *mighty Ullr*?"

"Show me your skill, Skaði." Vidar winked; his voice soft.

I scowled at him, turned on my heel and marched towards our sons. Vidar wasn't riled by my mocking comparison of him to Ullr the god of hunting, instead, he strolled along behind me, humming a light-hearted tune. Though we were just jesting with each other, I knew I was as skilled as the huntress goddess, Skaði, and I planned on proving it to Vidar.

"Alright," I said to the boys as Vidar took Æsa's hand and ushered her back to the tree line. "Your stance is an important part of archery. The stance I'm going to teach you is the easiest, and simple enough for you to reproduce – it's the best stance to learn when you're beginning. It will help you maintain your balance and keep your body steady as you shoot."

The smirks slipped from the boys' faces and they returned to their spots, an arm's length apart from each other.

"I want you to keep your body relaxed; align your feet – keep them shoulder-width apart – perpendicular to the target – your left foot forward." I explained, moving into position as I described it to them.

"Do as your *móðir* says." Vidar called to the boys.

I glared at him from over my shoulder. Vidar crossed his arms over his chest, the long sleeves of his blue tunic stretched over the swell of his muscles, that damn smirk fixed to his face. I stuck my tongue out at him before turning my attention back to our sons.

"Come, boys, stand as I do – it's not difficult." I barked.

The boys imitated me.

“Sander, your stance is beautiful, but I want your *left* foot forward, not your right. That’s it, turn around – align your feet again – yes, that’s it! Young Birger bring your back leg a little closer – a little more – *there!* Stay like that.”

I nodded at them in approval, smiling at their forms. They had recreated my stance wonderfully – now all they had to do was practice it, so it would become a natural position for them to stand the moment a bow was in their hands.

Moving on from standing positions, I brought Vidar’s bow up, gripping it with my left hand, and extended a finger to point at the shield in the distance

“Hold the bow in your non-dominant hand,” I instructed though both boys were already doing so. “Raise the bow – your finger, wrist and arm should all be aligned and pointing at the target. It will feel a little odd at first,” I added for five-year-old Sander’s benefit. “But it will become comfortable to you in time.”

Both boys shifted a little, making sure their fingers pointed at the shield, turning their faces to me when they were ready. I curled my finger back around the bow and nocked an arrow into place, gripping the string with the tips of three fingers, the arrow rested between my forefinger and middle finger.

“The arm that draws the string is an extension of the arrow. Keep the hand drawing the string in a straight line behind the arrow from your fingertips through your wrist, out to your elbow. Draw the string to the point when your middle finger touches the corner of your mouth – and do this *every time*. It will help you maintain a consistent draw length. To be a good archer, you need a combination of *consistent form*,” I emphasised loudly, answered by a snort from Vidar. “And intense focus on your target.

“You must focus on the smallest point on your target and maintain that focus until after the arrow has struck. Focus on the target as you draw your bow. The moment your middle finger touches the corner of your mouth, release the arrow. Do *not* aim when your bow is at full draw. Do you understand?”

“*Já, móðir.*” The boys said in unison.

This was not their first archery lesson, in fact, Young Birger himself was a fair archer. The moment they had each seen their fourth winter, Vidar would take Young Birger and Sander with him on every hunt. He taught them archery, trapping, fishing with both nets and hook and line, and much more.

The boys had caught more prey with traps than they had with arrows – though Young Birger had shot a handful of birds or squirrels on each of the various hunting trips he had attended. Regardless, Young Birger and Sander were diligent in their learning and with time I was sure they would be fantastic archers. They were comfortable with their bows, though not at all refined, they paid careful attention to everything Vidar and I taught them.

When I was a child, I had been much the same.

My Anglo-Saxon father had taught my seven brothers’ archery and swordplay, he had taken them hunting, and practised fighting with them. I pined after their knowledge, craved to learn what they did – their lessons were far more enjoyable than cooking, cleaning, making and mending clothes or spinning wool with my mother. My father had found my tantrums amusing, though my mother had not, but eventually my father allowed me to participate in my brother’s lessons regardless of my mother’s staunch disapproval.

Like a fish to water, I mastered archery with ease. I was a natural! I had quickly outshot the youngest of my brothers, Bryni and Oswin, much to their disdain, which of course increased my enjoyment. My father had been so proud of me – even my mother reluctantly admitted I was skilled.

It warmed my heart to see my sons gazing at me so attentively, absorbing all the knowledge I shared with them – just as I had with my father. I heard Æsa’s shrill laugh in the background ... Yes, when she saw her fourth winter, she would be here too, and learn archery and hunting alongside her brothers, just as I had.

“Come then, little fawn, show me your skill.” Vidar heckled impatiently. “Then give me back my bow!”

I ignored my husband and stared at the red shield hanging from the tree. I drew the bow and –

*Wait, what was that?*

Amidst the brush and bracken behind the shield, I spied a dark patch of ashen-brown and a flash of light-grey. Was it foliage? Was it a shadow? Only that little square of colour was visible, but I was adamant it wasn't there before.

I took a chance. I stared at that patch, drew the bowstring back until my middle finger grazed the corner of my mouth, relaxed the back of my hand and released the bowstring. The arrow soared. My body froze, my hand still raised to my face, my eyes locked on that mysterious patch in the brush. The arrow sliced through the air, past the shield and pierced the square of colour. The moment my arrow struck, the colour vanished, and I dropped my hand.

“You missed, oh mighty Skaði! It seems Ullr is the better archer after all.” Vidar teased, though there was surprise in his voice – I had never missed my target before, let alone one that was still and hanging from a tree.

“Don't be so sure.” I grinned.

Vidar's bow still clutched in my hand, I dashed across the glade clutching my belly with my free hand, my children's confused voices calling after me. The grass was long and damp from the day's rain, and it slapped across my legs as I ran.

It took only a moment for me to reach the shield. I peeked behind it, eager to see what I had shot, but I couldn't see anything. I hooked the bow over my body and shoved through the bracken.

Only a short way into the clutch of trees and I found my shot. There, laying on the ground was an excellently sized stag. It had already shed one of its antlers, and the beams of its remaining antler were wide and long. It still had its grey-brown winter fur, but there was a ruddy hue to it, and its underside was a mixture of light-grey and creamy white. My arrow was sticking out of its side behind its front leg; a perfect shot, I had pierced its heart.

“What–” Vidar spotted my stag and his mouth dropped.

“*Mumie!* Look, deer!” Æsa exclaimed from her father’s arms, pointing at the stag.

“It is.” I grinned. “I didn’t miss at all – I suppose Skaði truly is the better archer. What say you, Ullr?”

“Well done, my love,” Vidar said sincerely, pressing a sweet kiss to my lips. “He’s a very fine stag.”

I leaned my head against Vidar’s shoulder, as we admired my kill.

“How are we getting it home?” Young Birger asked abruptly.

Vidar and I glanced at each other blankly for a moment.

“Fetch Ebbe and Hallmundr, my sons.” Vidar said. “They will help.”

Young Birger and Sander nodded and tore away. As they bolted off on their mission, Vidar turned back to the stag and took a few steps closer to it.

“We will eat finely in a few days’ time, and we will stock our cupboards well. There’s a lot of meat on this.” Vidar admired, yanking the arrow out of the stag with his free hand. He held the arrow out and twirled it, and Æsa giggled as she watched the feathers on the end of the arrow spin. “Maybe we’ll even make something pretty from the antler for my lovely girl?”

“*Ja!*” Æsa grinned.

“And for my beautiful wife.” Vidar added, returning to my side and offering me the arrow.

“And we will have a delicious meal made for my wonderful children, and my handsome husband.” I purred.

Vidar pulled me against him with his free hand, claspng me tight against his side. He kissed my head and as he did so, Æsa wrapped her arms around my neck. I took her, and Vidar knelt beside the stag, pulling his utility knife from its sheath.

“You shouldn’t run when you’re this far along with child, you know.” Vidar commented as he heaved the great animal’s front leg up to commence gutting it.

“*Hush,* mighty Ullr.” I smiled, rolling my eyes.

I LEFT VIDAR to tend to my stag while I took Æsa home. Night had fallen by the time Vidar, our sons and Vidar's friends Ebbe and Hallmundr had arrived at the hall with the stag. Vidar had gutted it while Æsa and I had been at his side, and he had left the innards for nature to take. Other than the innards, the stag was still in one piece, skin and all.

The three men had taken the stag to a shed behind the hall to hang the animal for a day or so. We were now thankful for the cool spell of weather we were having – it was far from hunting season and we could not age the deer for long at all. Vidar, who despised the texture of venison when butchered straight after being killed, was adamant it would be fine to hang the stag for a day or so, but we wouldn't push it further in case the weather warmed.

Vidar had been right, the weather had stayed cool, and the storms of the night had come to rage into the day. A day and a half after I had killed the stag, the stiffness of death had subsided from its body, and I spent most of the day skinning and butchering the animal with Caterine, our house thrall, at my side.

Caterine and I first removed the stag's remaining antler for Vidar, then we skinned the animal while it hung and set aside the hide for tanning. After that, we set onto the long task of butchering. I had been lucky with this kill; the stag had a fair amount of meat on it considering it was the early days of spring.

We obtained a vast amount of meat from the stag – loins and tenderloins, roasts and steaks, shanks for stewing, and a mountain of scraps to dry. As we made our cuts, we trimmed away the fat, tendons and silver skin from the meat. We would render the fat down into tallow for baking, cooking and soap making.

We cut a portion of the shanks into cubes and set them aside to marinate in ale for a day – it would make us a fine dinner tomorrow evening, with mushrooms, carrots, potatoes and leeks. We separated the other cuts for drying, salting or smoking.

Every muscle in my body ached, my feet throbbed from standing for so long, and my legs were stiff. Night had fallen a while ago, the air had thickened, and dense cloud hid the moon

and stars from sight. It was a lot of work for Caterine and me, but we finally had the stag meat set. We didn't eat deer all that often, and it wasn't the best time of year to be hunting it, but it was a grand stag – well worth the effort of preserving and preparing. I didn't regret killing it at all.

The rain that had been looming all day cascaded from the blackened sky, and I welcomed it. Caterine and I were soaked with blood and residue from the stag, sweat stuck our hair to our faces, and we stank of salt, smoke and carcass. As the downpour drenched us, I felt cleaner, cooler.

Caterine stumbled beside me, wincing at the sudden crack of thunder and flash of lightning. In my peripheral, I glimpsed her pale, timid face – she was so pretty, her features looked as though they'd been delicately painted on her porcelain flesh. Caterine was desperate to find shelter, but I didn't quicken my pace, I enjoyed the cool respite of the rain and the mild night air far too much.

“*Madame*, the storm.” Caterine quaked.

“We're almost home, we'll be fine,” I said. “Go ahead, if you'd like.”

Just as brief as the lightning in the sky was the consideration to dash off ahead of me that flashed across Caterine's face. She stayed at my side, silently impatient and nervous, but with me all the same. I smiled and took her hand in mine.

“I truly don't mind; I just don't have the strength to run right now.” I said warmly.

“We will get there when we get there.” She said though dismay lined her words.

As fast as my heavily pregnant and exhausted body would take me, I finally staggered into the hall with Caterine behind me.

“Do you need my assistance?” Caterine asked.

“I'm fine, should I need help, I have Vidar.” I answered.

Caterine nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Well aren't you quite the sight to behold?” Vidar mused as I dropped myself into a chair across from him at the table.

“Oh, don't tease me – I'm not in the mood.” I groaned, tossing my head back. “I need to bathe ... I need to sleep.”

“You need to eat.” Vidar added.

In the middle of the table was a plate of cheese, dried fruits and bread I assumed Vidar had been nibbling on over the course of the evening. Vidar rose from his chair, took the plate and placed it in front of me.

I smiled up at him in thanks and watched him cut a small chunk of cheese and stab it with the end of his knife. Carefully, he brought it to my mouth, and I pulled the cheese from the knife’s tip with my teeth. I ate it gratefully, not realising how hungry I was until the pungent odour of the cheese drifted up my nostrils and the strong, delicious flavour danced on my tongue.

Vidar handed me the knife and rubbed my shoulders as I ate. He kneaded the knots from my tightened muscles, and a wave of gorgeous relief washed over me. I dropped the knife on the table top and paused mid-chew, so engulfed with relaxation. Vidar worked my shoulders, massaging my back and down my arms to my wrists, following this cycle thoroughly, my stiff joints and tense muscles popping and crackling in release. I swallowed hard and moaned, enjoying Vidar’s firm and soothing touch.

“Where are the children?” I murmured.

It had taken me longer than I liked to admit, lost in the bliss of Vidar’s tender doting, to realise that my children were nowhere to be seen.

“They’re asleep already,” Vidar said. “They all went to bed hours ago; it’s late.”

“Then why are you up?” I asked, struck with sudden guilt. As Vidar ran his fingertips over my chest, I touched his hands and turned around to face him. “You didn’t need to stay up, I don’t want you tired on my account.”

“I couldn’t sleep without you in bed with me.” Vidar said, placing a kiss on my sweat dampened forehead.

“Ever the romantic, aren’t you?” I grinned, though I was pleased to hear him say so.

“I don’t know about that, but I do know I’m ready for bed now you’re here.” Vidar winked. “Let’s get you clean so we can go to sleep.”

I rolled my eyes at him. Caterine, still filthy and sodden, appeared with a deep bowl of steaming hot water in her hands and a small basket of soap and rags hanging from her arm. I thanked her as she placed the items on the table before me and shoed her off to clean herself up in the kitchen, giving her permission to eat and go to bed when she was done.

The moment her skirts whipped around the kitchen doorway, I unpinning the white kerchief from my hair and the brooches from my apron dress straps. With a sparkle in his eyes and an eager smirk on his face, Vidar watched me remove my sodden clothes. I shoved the wet garments into his hands with a wink and sauntered over to the bench closest to us. Naked, I laid upon a pile of soft furs on the bench and stretched out my leg, pointing to the bowl of water on the table with my toe.

Vidar chuckled for a moment, but he did as I indicated. He dropped my clothes on the chair, picked up the bowl and basket and brought them over. He placed them beside the bench and knelt on the dirt floor beside me.

Without a word, Vidar rolled up the sleeves of his tunic, revealing the tattoos etched in black upon his forearms. He dipped his hands into the hot water, soaping them and rinsing away the suds, his sight flickering between my impatient gaze and the bowl as he washed his hands, a smirk growing upon his handsome face. I poked him with my toe and, chuckling, Vidar took the rag and soaked it in the water. He wrung out the excess and delicately scrubbed my feet.

Vidar took his time, tenderly washing between each toe, up the arch of my petite foot, around the heel. Frissons of warmth tingled up my leg as he delicately, meticulously worked. He rinsed the soap from the rag and wiped the suds away, placing a kiss on the sole of my foot when his task was complete.

With identical methodical tending, he cleaned my other foot and kissed the sole, then moved to my lower legs, slowly and thoroughly washing away every ounce of dirt and sweat. Maybe I was consumed by the pleasure of being pampered, but my skin tingled and seemed to glow like polished ivory from his scrupulous care.

A warmth brewed inside me as Vidar brought the warm, damp rag over my thighs with a firm but mindful pressure. His ice-blue eyes bore into my amber ones as he inched the rag further up my inner thigh, and a sputtering sigh tumbled from my lips.

Vidar chuckled, and I felt my cheeks burn red. He brought his lips to mine and kissed me gently. I cupped his bearded jaw with one hand, the golden hairs soft like silk, and shivered as ripples of desire flashed through me as his tongue brushed against mine. Slowly, Vidar enclosed his hand around my arm while I held his jaw as we kissed, running his thumb of the sensitive inner flesh of my wrist, whilst dragging the damp rag delicately between my legs with his other hand.

All of a sudden, he broke our kiss and scrubbed my arm.

“You tease!” I cried out, glaring at him.

Vidar laughed heartily, which infuriated me further. He may have thought it was funny, but I hadn’t at all.

“Ah, even when you’re mad, little fawn, you’re so beautiful.” Vidar grinned, calming himself from his fit of laughter.

“I’m pleased you find my scowl so attractive – that’s the only look you’ll get from me for the rest of the night.” I grumbled. “How dare you tease me so!”

“Let me make it up to you, little fawn.”

Vidar dropped the rag into the bowl with a splash, still smirking at me, a chuckle falling from his lips every now and again. He rose, unbuckled his belt and tossed it to the ground, then pulled his tunic off and threw it on top of his belt.

The glower contorting my face relaxed as I watched Vidar undress. Only the smattering of silver in his golden beard and the few lines scattered across his face betrayed his age; Vidar had seen forty-three winters, but he remained as agile and strong as a man half his age. Broad and chiselled, Vidar exuded power and strength, his breathtakingly brawny body exquisitely sculpted from his life of battle, fighting and seafaring. I admired the planes and hollows of his body, the smooth lines of his limbs, the tautness of his stomach, the hardness of his muscles. Vidar’s arms and legs were strong and strapping, his calloused hands were large and steady.

Upon Vidar's bronze flesh he proudly bore the silvery scars of many battles and dispersed across his body was his vast collection of tattoos, some recent, others aged and faded. Vidar's tattoos consisted of various beasts, figures and Norse knotwork patterns. Fabulously detailed, Yggdrasill, the great tree of life, was Vidar's largest and most grand tattoo, which he had etched into his flesh just a year ago, and it covered his entire back. Yggdrasill's luscious branches extended across Vidar's broad shoulders, its thick, mighty trunk ran down his spine, and its three roots reached across his lower back. Surrounding Yggdrasill were images of the creatures that live inside it, the squirrel Ratatoskr, Níðhöggr the dragon and his bitter enemy the nameless eagle, and the four stags named Dáinn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr and Duraprór.

I smiled as Vidar bent to pull off his trousers. His bottom was plump and firm, and I blushed as I admired it, even though his body had belonged to me for so many years.

"What else are you going to do to apologise?" I asked, attempting to hold up my sulk as he laid beside me on the bench, resting his head on one of his hands.

Vidar ran the fingertips of his free hand over my chest and shoulders, and I arched my back as he drew his fingertips between my breasts.

"Wait and see." Vidar smirked, bringing me into a kiss.

Vidar cupped one of my breasts, squeezing it gently. He ran his thumb over my nipple, drawing it hard like a pebble before softly pinching it between his finger and thumb, sending sharp twinges of pleasure shooting through me. I purred as Vidar leaned over me, his soft golden tresses dancing on my body, and took my nipple lightly between his lips, flicking his tongue over it and sucking it, massaging my other breast with his hand.

I ran my hand down Vidar's body and reached between his legs. My heart skipped a beat as I held him, ran my hand along the whole length of him, applying gentle pressure as I did so. Vidar was hard, tantalisingly solid in my grip, and I couldn't help but smile smugly because *I* was the cause of his great arousal. Heavily pregnant, the stench of stag carcass and sweat mingling

with the faint scent of lye soap and my feet swollen to double their usual size, my ego received a well-needed boost by Vidar's physical eagerness to enjoy my body.

Vidar's breath quickened, warm on my breast, and a quiet moan of pleasure slipped from his lips. I delighted in his enjoyment, he sucked on my nipple a little rougher as I increased my speed, and I grinned. Vidar Alvarsson, fearsome, bloodthirsty Norse warrior, mighty Jarl of Aros, not to mention the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes upon, was loyal and faithful and *mine*. Only I could satisfy him – even while stinking of a dead stag.

With a *smack!* of his lips, Vidar released my nipple and moved to the other, suckling it, squeezing my breast. I took his jaw in my hands and urged his lips to mine. Slowly I sat up, and Vidar sat up with me.

"Where are you going, little fawn?" Vidar whispered, his lips tickling mine while he spoke.

"Wait and see." I grinned.

I climbed over him awkwardly, holding my massive belly with one hand, but I didn't let my huge protruding bump dampen my eagerness to pleasure him. I knelt on the ground between his legs, holding his cock with both hands, taking it into my mouth and closing my lips around it.

A soft sigh of pleasure rolled from Vidar's throat. I peeked up at him, spotting his icy blue eyes glint while he watched me. With a blush upon my cheeks, I closed my eyes. My head bobbed up and down between Vidar's legs, my cheeks hollowing from the suction as I pleased him. With a sneaky glance, I saw Vidar's eyes were closed and his head tilted up, pleasure rife upon his handsome face. Vidar moaned, deep and husky, leaning back on one hand to steady himself, tangling the fingers of his other in my hair. With one hand I cupped his balls, squeezing them gently, and with my other hand, I brushed my thumb along the ridge that ran down the underside of his cock, all while sucking him in a steady rhythm and constant speed.

It thrilled me that I could satisfy him, that my affection, my actions, my body was what Vidar desired above all other women

– Vidar who was so important in the Norse world ... I drew almost a sense of power from it. Vidar, a man who ruled an entire town and various settlements surrounding Aros, who led armies to raid and battle, depended on *me* for his pleasure.

“I thought I was going to show you how sorry I am for teasing you?” Vidar said after a while, his breath quick and shallow.

“Would you like me to stop?” I asked innocently.

“*Nei*,” Vidar smirked, smirking as he watched me draw my tongue over the full length of him. “But you should if you’re going to let me apologise to you.”

I giggled and let him pull me to my feet. Vidar kissed my huge, round belly, gripping my buttocks in his rough, calloused hands then dragged them over the back of my thighs. Gently he urged me to lay back down on the furs covering the bench. Vidar knelt on the floor where I had been moments ago, opened my legs and rested them over his shoulders.

Vidar kissed my inner thighs, the hairs of his beard tickling me. I hadn’t realised I’d been holding my breath until he drew his warm, smooth tongue over me in one long, languid stroke and a deep sigh cascaded from my lips. Vidar drew his tongue over me again and again, gradually changing from long licks to drawing little circles with just the tip of his tongue. I grabbed fistfuls of the furs, gasping in shallow breaths as Vidar flicked his tongue up and down, rotating between the tip of his tongue and the full flatness of it, maintaining the perfect pressure between rough and tender.

The knowledge that Vidar craved physical gratification from only me was exciting, but the knowledge that Vidar craved to physically gratify *me* thrilled me even more so. I glanced down at him, his head buried between my thighs, his hands roaming over me, caressing me as he tended me, and I grinned smugly. Vidar Alvarsson, fearsome, bloodthirsty Norse warrior, the mighty Jarl of Aros, wanted to pleasure *me*, wanted to be the object of *my* desire, wanted to satisfy *me* in ways no other man could. Vidar Alvarsson could’ve had any woman in Denmark, but he wanted *me* – he had literally killed for me! Vidar’s heart

was mine and his body was mine, he had proven time and time again that he would do anything for me – and he always would.

My heart raced faster, and my palms moistened as heat rushed through my body. I squirmed, twitching with pleasure, and Vidar tightened his grip, pressing his tongue against me and lapping me with short, determined strokes. A pressure grew in the pit of my stomach and I couldn't help but arch my back high off the bed as that pressure grew, hot sparks shooting through me. Vidar pinned me in place by my hips as he eagerly led me to euphoria. The tingling pleasure grew into a storm, and with a sharp intake of breath I cried out; ecstasy crashed through me like a tidal wave, surging through my entire being.

Gasping and panting, I heard Vidar snicker between my legs, gazing up at me. *That damned smirk.* Even after all these years together, he delighted in satisfying me – just as much as I did in satisfying him. Never did he neglect my gratification, even after all these years – he would never rush to his own. No, Vidar wasn't a selfish lover, he was entirely the opposite, he denied himself his own gratification until I had first received mine.

“That was a great apology.” I breathed.

“I'm not finished apologising yet.”

Vidar's lips were damp, and I smelled the trace of my scent on him as we kissed before he pushed against my hip, urging me to turn over. I rolled onto my hands and knees; with one hand gripping my hip, Vidar took his cock and pressed it against me, easing it into me. We gasped in unison at the abrupt *give* as he entered me, the glorious rush as he slowly pushed further into me, my insides stretching to fit him. Impatient and yearning for the delectable feeling of having Vidar wholly inside me, I pressed back against him, forcing him to slide completely into me.

*Oh!* The glorious rush and delicious pressure of him filling me, his hips pressed against my buttocks, the front of his thighs against the back of mine! Though I hadn't felt empty before, there was a bizarre and incredible feeling of completeness with Vidar inside me. The waves of my previous orgasm still pulsated through me, but with Vidar inside me, a primal, animalistic need for more overwhelmed my body.

Vidar grabbed my hair, twisting it around his fist, his other hand squeezing my hip. His hips slammed onto my buttocks with loud fleshy thuds. My breasts slapped together, and my moans grew louder as Vidar increased his speed and force, thrusting faster and rougher, euphoria rising inside me once again, consuming me.

Vidar let go of my hair and gripped my hips with both hands. I gasped, cursing as ecstasy crashed through my body. Vidar didn't stop though, he pounded me quicker and quicker, his grip on my hips tightening, his nails stabbing into my skin. With a loud groan, Vidar's body shuddered, and his cock throbbed inside me as he released his own euphoria.

## CHAPTER TWO

WE LAID IN rapture, panting and basking in the afterglow of our union. We held each other, tangled in each other's arms, our bodies pressed close although our skin was hot, sticky and slick with sweat. After a while, drifting between wake and slumber, Vidar peeled away from me and slipped off the bench. A small smile playing on his lips, his icy eyes locked on mine, Vidar wrung out the rag and tenderly continued to clean my body with the now cold water. Beaming, I closed my eyes and enjoyed his pampering.

My body delightfully clean from Vidar's methodical, wonderful bathing, Vidar massaged some scented oil, made from various flowers and herbs, over my flesh. At that moment, his large, rough hands were gliding over my belly, rubbing the sweet oil into me, and our fourth child was kicking up a storm inside me.

"He's a strong boy." Vidar grinned, pressing his hand against my belly to feel our child's activity.

"How do you know it's a boy?" I asked.

"I just do."

Vidar dripped a little more oil into his hands and massaged it over my ribs, breasts and chest. Our conversation slipped away as I drifted into a haze of tranquillity. I had almost fallen asleep by the time Vidar had finished. Sweetly and carefully, Vidar lifted me from the bench and carried me to our bed, stealthy as a cat so as not to wake our children.

My body encased in his, I fell asleep instantly and didn't stir even once during the night. And Vidar, my heart, my beloved husband, didn't wake me the following morning, choosing to let me wake when I felt the need to, and not a moment sooner.

It was midday by the time my eyes fluttered open, the grey light of yet another moody, dreary day pouring in from the

smoke hole. I spent a long time stretching luxuriously in my bed, listening to the rain hammer down on the roof, before I decided to start my day. My swollen feet still throbbed from being on them for so long the day before, but I squeezed them into my leather boots and made my way to the main room of our hall, glowing still from the previous night with my husband.

“Sleep well?” Vidar asked, kissing me as I entered.

“*Já*, very.” I purred, embracing him.

“I could tell from your snores – you were so loud, you almost drowned out the noise of the storm.” Vidar teased.

I punched him playfully before I greeted each of our children, placing a kiss on their heads. Young Birger was carving away at a chunk of wood by the fire, barely breaking his concentration to acknowledge me with more than a mumbled “*Góðan morgin*.” Sander and Æsa squealed as they chased one another on the benches that lined the walls of our hall but paused to embrace me.

“*Mumie!*” Æsa exclaimed as I squeezed her.

“*Góðan morgin*, my loves.” I smiled, watching the two children race along the benches again.

At the sound of my voice, Caterine appeared from the kitchen with a steaming bowl of water and a dry rag for me to clean my face and hands with. I sat beside Vidar and she placed the bowl in front of me. As I rinsed my hands and splashed the water over my face, Caterine brought me a late breakfast of hot porridge, honey and dried fruits.

“The storm was bad?” I asked, dabbing my face dry with the rag.

“Terrible,” Vidar replied, watching me take a small bite of the sweet, creamy oats. “Young Birger and I went to the shipyard this morning to check on the fleet; luckily we’ve only lost one ship. The waves were too rough to retrieve any planks, but there may be some salvageable pieces washed up after it’s calmed.”

“Not a good day to sail.” I commented.

“Only a man challenging the gods would set sail on a sea like this.” Vidar said, dipping his finger into my bowl and stealing a scoop of my porridge.

“Hey!” I chided as he slurped the porridge from his finger.

“*Mmm*, delicious.” Vidar winked. “Young Birger and I are going to the shipyard again, now you’re awake. We need to moor as many ships on land as we can until this storm passes.”

“How long do you think the storm will continue?”

“I’m not sure, I haven’t seen a storm like this in many years.” Vidar said. “Young Birger and I will be gone for a while, I want to check on the townspeople, in case the storm has damaged their homes.”

I nodded in agreement and kissed my husband. He placed a hand on Young Birger’s shoulder, indicating it was time to leave. They wrapped themselves in their cloaks before they stepped out of the hall and braved the raging weather outside. Their cloaks were hooded and made of goatskin, treated with beeswax and fish oil to keep them soft and waterproof.

After I finished my breakfast, Caterine retrieved a purse of pins and a comb from a chest in my bedroom, set to untangle the snarls from my unruly chestnut curls. She parted my long, thick hair into small sections, combing the sections and plaiting them, tying them back with thin leather thongs before she neatly pinned the plaits to my head.

As Caterine checked the front of my hair, tucking unruly curls back into place, I noticed dark puffy smudges beneath her eyes. She involuntarily shuddered as she explained she hadn’t slept at all due to the storm.

I hadn’t realised the extent of Caterine’s fear of storms, though I suppose we hadn’t owned her for long, and there hadn’t been a storm of this magnitude in all the time we had owned her. As Vidar had said, he hadn’t seen a storm this vicious in a long time.

We had bought Caterine a little more than a year ago when a thrall merchant had passed through Aros. Aros was located in the east of Denmark’s Jutland peninsula in a luscious green valley on the northern shores of a fjord. Over the years of Vidar’s jarldom, he had taken advantage of the town’s excellent position and Aros had evolved into a rich, bustling trading centre.

Merchants from far across the world came to Aros to trade and sell their goods. From Dyflin in Ireland and the Danish-owned Jórdvik in Britain came pottery, cups, glass beads and drinking glasses, leather goods, jewellery, weapons, cloth and chain mailweapons, cloth and chain mail. Some Norse traders would take iron, furs, timber, amber and soapstone to Constantinople and Baghdad and bring back silk, wine, Arabic silver, spices, fruit, fabric and so much more. The most profitable trade, however, was thralls. After raids and battles, the Norse would seize survivors, women, men and children, enslave them and take them to their lands.

I knew this all too well – the Danes of Roskilde had struck the Kingdom of the East Angles in Britain, my homeland, almost twenty years ago, when the sons of Ragnar Loðbrók led the Great Army to attack Britain. The Danes of Roskilde had killed my people, burned my village to ashes, and seized me and a handful of others as thralls.

I had been lucky though; I had been a child when the fierce warrior Birger Bloody Sword captured and adopted me. He had rescued me because of my uncanny likeness to his daughter, who had died years before he and his people attacked my homeland. Out of yearning for his beloved deceased daughter, Birger saved me, loved me, protected me. He spared me from thralldom and death.

I had known no other who had been as lucky as me.

I felt the deepest of sympathies towards slaves because of my close call to thralldom. I was kind to them, I befriended the ones closest to me, I refused to beat my thralls, and I fed them the same meals I would feed my family. Though I owned them, though they were forced into slavery, I tried to offer them the best life possible if I couldn't offer them guaranteed freedom.

Over a year ago, I had been visiting the market with my husband and children. Our house thrall had recently died from sickness in the middle of winter, and Vidar had decided we needed to buy another. Snow pellets lashed down from the silver sky onto the townspeople bustling through the market, shrouded in furs.

Æsa, a baby at the time, was swaddled in furs, strapped to my front and encased in my cloak to stave off the bitter cold of winter. Young Birger strode alongside his father and Sander darted between us, ever running off and getting into mischief.

“Where’s Sander?” I cried out for what felt like the tenth time.

“That boy has a curious mind,” Vidar commented – was that a hint of pride I heard in his voice? “He will be an adventurous man and travel to the furthest parts of the world, I’d wager.”

“When Sander is a man, he can travel as far as he wants. Right now, he needs to stop getting lost.” I snapped, glaring through the snow in search of our son.

“I’m sure he’ll find us, don’t fret so much, little fawn.” Vidar said. “Ah, there’s Herra Kaupmaðr.”

Dressed garishly in a long, billowing tunic and trousers made of yellow silk from Asia, and a cloak made of hundreds of minx, ermine and sable pelts, was Herra Kaupmaðr. He wore otter skin gloves, and marten fur lined the top of his thick leather boots and the hems of his tunic and gloves. The long wiry hair that fell from his head was bleached saffron yellow, and his beard was orange like amber. Through the opening of his fur cloak, I could see a wide belt around his middle with various sized bags, tools and utility daggers hanging from it, and a large, ominous sealskin whip.

Herra Kaupmaðr, which meant ‘Lord Merchant’ in the Norse tongue, was an eclectic, nomadic old Swede, the most famous and richest merchant in the Norse lands. No one knew what Herra’s real name was, he introduced himself to all with his pompous self-title, but admittedly he lived up to his name. Herra Kaupmaðr could find any item in the world – *anything!* – given time and ample payment. He surely was a lord among merchants. In fact, if he ever found a town to settle in, I’m sure Herra Kaupmaðr was rich enough to be a king.

Vidar made his way to Herra’s elaborately decorated stall, where slaves stood on a large wooden platform in rags, iron collars around their necks, shivering violently in the bitter weather. Herra Kaupmaðr welcomed Vidar warmly, clapping his hand on my husband’s shoulder.

“Jarl Vidar Alvarsson, what a joy and a pleasure it is to see you again! The Jarlkona is beautiful as ever if you don’t mind my saying—” Herra bowed down low as he flattered me. “And how big your children are growing! Though, I thought you had another son?”

“Sander has run off again.” Vidar smirked, and I rolled my eyes at the lightness of my husband’s tone.

“Ah! A curious boy will grow into an adventurous man! He will be a grand traveller when he is grown, no?” Herra beamed, showing off his carved and brightly dyed teeth.

“That’s what I said to my wife.” Vidar grinned. At the sight of my dark scowl, Vidar cleared his throat and changed the subject. “We are in search of a new thrall.”

“*Ah!* For the Jarl of Aros, I have only the best! I have new stock, a beautiful young thing from Francia, she would make a wonderful nursemaid; she has large breasts bursting with milk.” Herra Kaupmaðr winked and chuckled wickedly.

“What of her child?” Vidar asked, his eyebrows raised.

“Don’t worry, it died a week or so ago.” Herra said carelessly. “If it isn’t a nursemaid you’re searching for, I have a number of sturdy males from the Slavic lands for any labour and field work. What are you looking for in particular?”

Herra reached up and wrapped his arm around Vidar’s shoulders, leading my husband to view his ‘stock’. Vidar was a tall man, and Herra Kaupmaðr was quite short. Vidar kindly slouched down to Herra Kaupmaðr’s level, so the merchant could keep his arm wrapped around Vidar’s shoulders. They made a humorous pair, the jarl and the merchant, but thanks to their high ranks no one would comment whether in jest or not.

I didn’t follow Vidar and Herra. Instead, I glanced around in search of my son; Sander was nowhere to be seen, and I was beginning to panic.

“Sander!” I called. “Sander come here at once!”

“Do you want me to search for him, *móðir?*” Young Birger offered.

“*Nei*, I don’t want you missing as well.” I replied, kissing my son’s forehead. “Did you see which direction he went?”

Young Birger shook his head.

“I can’t shop for thralls while Sander is missing. Your *faðir* can browse, come with me – we’re going to find Sander.”

“Shall I tell *faðir*?” Young Birger asked.

“*Nei*.” I shook my head, glaring at Vidar’s back as he walked along the platform examining thralls. “He can stare at the Frankish thrall’s breasts while we look for the *curious boy*.” I grumbled quietly.

Together, Young Birger and I, with *Æsa* sleeping amidst my furs and cloak, took off in search of Sander. We combed the crowds, checked every stall and shop, explored the bay – maybe Sander had decided to play in one of the ships moored on the shore?

Nothing. Not a single sight of him.

Townspople checked on me, concerned for their distressed jarlkona. I informed them of my missing son, and soon enough I had a group aiding my search.

Time passed, but still, no one had found Sander.

Young Birger and I returned to Herra Kaupmaðr’s stand, which was surrounded by a huge mob of townspople. I found Vidar, a frown on his lips and his brows knitted, his eyes wide and searching. When Vidar spotted me and our children, a wave of relief crashed over his face and softened his expression.

“Where did you run off to, little fawn?” Vidar asked, bringing me into his arms.

“I was looking for Sander,” I said stiffly, pushing him away from me. “I knew his whereabouts didn’t bother you, so I didn’t think you’d care if I went to look for him.”

Vidar stared at me through narrowed eyes for a moment and briefly chewed his bottom lip.

“Did you find him?” He asked, intelligently deciding not to argue with me.

“*Nei*, I haven’t!” I snapped, tears brimming in my eyes.

“Let us search together.” Vidar said, reaching out to embrace me again, but paused, obviously unsure if I would rebuff him again. “A thrall has fled the market stand, Herra is arranging a

party right now to hunt for her. I'll have them look for Sander as well. Let's find our son."

I nodded, unable to speak in case my words would cause my tears to spill. Vidar kept his hand offered, and I grabbed it, gripping it tightly. He pulled me through the crowd, Young Birger right behind me, and we made our way to the platform where Herra Kaupmaðr stood commanding his mob.

"While your people search for your thrall, have them look for my son." Vidar ordered the merchant.

Herra nodded to his jarl.

"Sander Vidarsson is missing!" Herra boomed to his group. "Find the jarl's son! Bring him and the thrall here immediately!"

With that, the mob dispersed throughout the market, off to raze the town for my son and the thrall.

Minutes felt like hours. Where was Sander?

Vidar, Young Birger and I were combing the beach again, unable to stand around and wait in the marketplace. It was freezing on the shores; the bitter wind ripped over the waves and stung my face. Vidar, Young Birger and I were all red-cheeked and shivering.

"I will whip that boy when we find him." Vidar grumbled as we searched the shores again.

"And I will whip you for not looking for him sooner!" I scolded. "*He's a curious boy—*"

"Alright, Aveline!" Vidar snapped.

He leapt down from a merchant's *knarr* he had been searching and strode towards me, his face etched with guilt and frustration.

"I'm sorry," Vidar said, softer this time. "I should've taken his disappearance seriously. I'm sorry."

I stared down and watched Æsa blink and turn her head, peering at the surrounding scenery. It was horridly cold, but she was warm and cosy against me, protected from the weather. Vidar's shadow cast over me as he stood in front of me, still and quiet. I looked up at him, and he rested his forehead against mine.

"I'm sorry, too. I'm just worried—" I stopped as my voice shuddered.

“We will find him.” Vidar whispered, kissing my forehead.

“*Móðir – faðir!*” Young Birger called some ways down the beach from us. “Look!”

Our oldest son pointed towards the waters where a bizarre creature crawled from the raging waves onto the beach. It was a woman! And in her arms, she carried a still, sodden brown creature. Young Birger ran to her, Vidar and I dashing up behind him. With a lurching step, the woman heaved herself out of the waters, clutching the animal against her chest, and collapsed onto the shore. Long tentacles of black, bedraggled hair stuck to her face, her skin was grey and tinged with blue, and she shivered viciously – visibly frozen to her core.

Vidar yanked off his fur cloak and wrapped the woman in it. She coughed and spluttered, fading in and out of consciousness. Vidar pulled the woman into his arms and briskly rubbed her back and arms, trying to generate warmth.

“*Móðir!*” Young Birger cried out, pointing at the woman’s dog.

I stared at his horror-filled face and turned my gaze to the creature. It wasn’t a dog–

“*L’enfant!*” The woman spluttered, choking up water as she attempted to point at the furs. “*L’enfant!*”

“Sander!” I gasped.

I cried out his name over and over, causing Æsa to wail in distress. So panicked, I ignored her, my heart racing painfully in my chest. I dropped to my knees and ripped the soaking fur away from the small figure on the sand.

It *was* Sander!

Oh! My beloved Sander! He was still, his chest didn’t move! His golden hair clung to his face, his lips were blue, and his flesh was pale and grey from the cold. I pulled off my cloak, swathed my poor boy in it, and tried to pull him onto my lap.

“He’s not moving, Vidar, *he’s not moving!*” I howled.

Vidar thrust the half-drowned woman into Young Birger’s arms and scooped up Sander’s limp, slender body. He ripped the soaking clothes from our child and bundled him up in my fur

cloak. My heart ached as I watched Sander flop lifelessly with every movement Vidar made.

“*Nei, nei, nei!*” I wept, gaping at my son.

Once Sander was bundled, Vidar held him against his chest, Sander’s head slumped over his shoulder. Suddenly Vidar slapped Sander’s back.

“What are you doing?!” I yelled, my eyes popping from my skull as I watched Vidar beating our son.

Vidar didn’t answer. Over and over he slammed his open hand on Sander’s back. I flinched with every slap that collided onto my four-year-old son. I clutched poor sobbing Æsa and wept into her hair, my body shuddering and shaking.

Suddenly, there was a rasping intake of breath.

I stared at Sander and Vidar. Sander took another hoarse breath and vomited out the water he had inhaled.

“He’s alive!” Vidar exclaimed. “We must go back!”

With that, Vidar sprinted towards the town, our young son in his arms, alive – but barely. Between us, Young Birger and I carried the woman who had saved Sander’s life, staggering up the shore to the marketplace.

“Get me furs!” Vidar bellowed as he barged through the crowd and shoved his way into the nearest building, an alehouse. “Make a fire!”

“My thrall!” Herra Kaupmaðr exclaimed as Young Birger and I stumbled into the marketplace, pointing a finger at the woman in Young Birger and my arms.

Immediately two of Herra’s men dashed to us and snatched the woman away. They threw at Herra’s feet and ripped her tunic from her. Herra pulled the whip from his belt, raised it high and lashed her. A sickening *crack/rang* through the air as the sealskin whip struck her soaking flesh; she shrieked in agony, high and shrill.

“What are you doing?” I screeched as Herra brought the whip up again.

“She escaped, Jarlkona, I must punish her.” Herra Kaupmaðr explained with a look of confusion.

“She saved my son!”

“She ran from my stall—”

“If you want to keep selling your wares in Aros, Herra Kaupmaðr, you will stop arguing with me now!” I thundered. “I am the Jarlkona of Aros and I order you to stop beating this woman at once!”

But for the wind and the crashing of the waves in the background, the marketplace was silent, and every face stared at me. Even Æsa, still strapped to my torso, was shocked into silence by my raging outburst.

My heart raced as I glared at Herra Kaupmaðr. I had never used my title, jarlkona meaning ‘jarl’s wife’, to force a townsperson to do my bidding in all the years I’d been jarlkona – whether married to Vidar, or to my first husband, Jarl Erhardt Ketilsson – but I felt a need to now. Herra Kaupmaðr needed reminding of my position, and of his place.

“What is her price?” I demanded.

“Three marks of silver,” Herra Kaupmaðr replied. “But to apologise to you, my Jarlkona, I will sell her for—”

“I will pay you three marks of silver. Get one of your men to carry her to my hall.” I growled. “I want her there *now*.”

“Of course, Jarlkona.”

Before Herra Kaupmaðr uttered another word, I stormed off to the alehouse I had seen Vidar carry Sander into.

Night had fallen by the time Sander had warmed and colour had returned to his flesh. He had stopped coughing and vomiting, and for hours he inhaled rapid, rasping breaths and hardly spoke – he just shuddered and shivered and breathed.

The owners of the alehouse had given us some of their son’s dry clothes and furs to dress Sander in, and stew to feed him. Sander had sipped a little of the broth from the stew before we returned to our home, and Vidar had carried him the whole way to the hall.

When we were home, we found our new thrall asleep on the bench, still dressed in the rags we had found her in. I woke her, fed her and cleaned the deep wound that ripped across her back from Herra’s whip, while Vidar settled our three children in the bedroom. Encased in blankets, with dry clothes on her back and

food in her belly, I left Caterine to sleep by the fire. I finally retired to the sleeping area and found Vidar and all three of our children curled up asleep in his and my bed dressed in clean, dry nightclothes, Vidar's arms wrapped tightly around Sander.

I spent a lot of time teaching Caterine Norse. She had learned it quickly and even taught me a few phrases and words in François, her native language. Within a few months, between the pieces of information I'd gathered from Sander – who, at four years old, feared he might be punished for admitting what had happened – and the information in broken Norse I had garnered from the thrall, I managed to find out what had happened the day Sander had almost died.

Sander had run off to look at the ships, bored with traipsing through the marketplace. Caterine had seen him from the platform she was standing on and watched him dash towards the shore. He had clambered and climbed all over the ships and boats for a while when, suddenly, he fell.

At the sight of the small boy fall into the freezing, raging waves, Caterine had bolted away from the slave stand, knowing full well the punishment she would receive for doing so, but she couldn't let the child drown. When she reached the shore, Caterine lost sight of Sander. It had taken a while, but at last, she spotted his little blond head bobbing in the water and made out his muffled cries over the roaring waves. She dived into the water and swam to him, clutching him close to her when she reached him.

Taken by the sea, Caterine had struggled to get Sander and herself to safety. He had been conscious when she had found him, but by the time she had managed to get herself and Sander on the shore, he had inhaled too much water.

Thank all the gods in Asgard that Caterine had fled from Herra Kaupmaðr's slave stand to rescue my son, and that Vidar had dislodged the water from inside Sander's chest when he beat Sander's back.

I removed Caterine's slave collar that night, and I refused to cut her hair short as was the way thralls were meant to wear their hair. Herra had been wise to leave Caterine's gorgeous locks long

before he sold her, and it explained the extortionate price he had charged me for her. Caterine was a very attractive woman, and her long thick ebony hair was a mantle of her beauty – a beauty of which she deserved to keep after risking her life to save my son.

Over a year had passed since that day. I had paid Herra Kaupmaðr his silver and had refused to visit his shop ever again – Vidar would make his purchases from Herra alone. I would never forgive the merchant for whipping the woman who had saved my son from death.

“If your chores are done, you may sleep for a while,” I said to Caterine. “I will wake you in a few hours.”

The Frankish thrall nodded her head and thanked me. She slipped off her shoes and crawled onto the bench nearest the fire and promptly fell asleep beneath the furs.

“Sander, Æsa, come here, it’s time to practise the runes,” I called. “We must be quiet so Caterine can rest.”

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THE STORM HAD raged throughout the day, and long into the night. By evening time, we sat at the table, the darkness of the hall punctured by the orange glow of cod liver oil lamps and the flames of the firepit, enjoying the delectable deer stew we had been looking forward to since I had killed the stag.

The storm bellowed and boomed outside. Poor Caterine flinched at every flash of lightning through the smokehole and cowered at every roar of thunder. This would be the second night the horrendous storm would rage, and I sympathised for the poor thrall.

Æsa had been fearful of the storm at first but had become accustomed to the noise thanks to it raging for so long. She still flinched at the flashes and thunder, but thankfully she had stopped wailing because of them now.

“*Mon Deu!*” Caterine gasped at a deafening crash of thunder.

“The storm is upon us.” Vidar commented; his eyes cast upward.

I frowned at Vidar for a moment, my brows knitted. With every crack of thunder and the fierce pounding of the wind, the hall walls shook, and the shields hung upon them shuddered. The rain hammered down, and I wondered whether the roof would withstand the downpour. I thought of my sheep – would *they* withstand the fury of the storm? I shook my head; I would find out in the morning.

We kept most of our sheep on the mainland just outside of Aros, cared for by a farmer and his family. We kept the ewes and lambs in a paddock behind our hall, and I had locked them away into their barn just before night had fallen. Norsemen normally penned livestock in their homes, but as Vidar and I were Jarl and Jarlkona of Aros, we could afford the luxury of a barn detached from our elegant hall.

“*Mumie*, I’m scared.” Æsa whispered, crawling into my lap and wrapping her arms around my hugely protruding belly.

“Me too.” Sander admitted, staring at me from across the table with his huge blue eyes.

“Come here,” I beckoned, reaching out to my son.

Sander slid out of his chair and lunged into my arms.

“Be careful of your *móðir*’s belly, Sander.” Vidar cautioned. “Your baby brother is in there.”

Sander stared at Vidar without saying a word, clutching me tightly as a flash of lightning lit up the hall. The five-year-old hid his face into my dress, and little Æsa did the same.

“I have told you of the duel between Thor and Hrungrnir, have I not, children?” Vidar asked suddenly, regarding Young Birger, Sander and Æsa in turn, a small smile turning up the corners of his lips. “One day, Hrungrnir the *jötunn* invited the Allfather Odin to *Jötunheimr*. Odin rode his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, to the realm of the *jötnar*, and when he arrived, he bet Hrungrnir that Sleipnir could outrun any horse in *Jötunheimr*.

“Insulted, Hrungrnir accepted Odin’s challenge – he mounted his horse, Gullfaxi, and together the Allfather and the *jötunn* raced through air and water, mud and streams, over steep hills and thick woodland – until Hrungrnir realised they had passed through the gates of Asgard.

“Hrungnir hadn’t managed to surpass Odin. As he rode as fast as he could, Hrungnir passed by a group of gods who were drinking. They invited him to join them and Hrungnir accepted.”

Vidar took a deep swig of his mead, then he stood and slowly stepped around the table to near his children.

“Hrungnir became drunk and belligerent – boasting he would kill all of the gods but for Freya and Sif, the wife of Thor.” Vidar grinned, pretending to waver and stumble as he acted out his impression of a drunken Hrungnir, much to the children’s amusement. “These beautiful goddesses, he exclaimed, he would carry back to *Jötunheimr*. Next, he boasted that he would drink every drop of ale in Asgard!”

Vidar laughed, then drank down the rest of his mead, slamming his cup on the table.

“The gods grew tired of the *jötunn* and sent for Thor – who had been fighting *jötnar* elsewhere. Thor found the *jötunn* and gods and prepared to slay Hrungnir right then and there – but the *jötunn* accused Thor of being a coward for attempting to kill an unarmed man. He challenged Thor to a duel, and Thor accepted.

“Hrungnir arrived at the duel dressed in stone armour with a shield made of stone, and for his weapon, he brandished a huge whetstone!

“Suddenly lightning illuminated the sky, and thunder clapped above him, and the mighty Thor roared onto the battlefield!” Vidar exclaimed, and just as he spoke our hall lit up with the white flash of lightning and a clap of thunder exploded in the skies outside.

Vidar, the children and I glanced between each other and laughed at the coincidence.

“Thor is helping tell the tale.” Young Birger chuckled.

“He is indeed.” Vidar snickered. “Now, where was I? Ah, *já* – Thor roared into the battlefield, his orange hair blazing like fire from his head! He hurled his hammer – the powerful Mjölfnir – at Hrungnir, and Hrungnir threw his whetstone at Thor! The whetstone exploded against Thor’s forehead and shattered into

pieces, causing flint to scatter upon the earth. And Thor's hammer struck Hrungnir's head and the *jötunn's* head shattered!"

Young Birger, Sander and Æsa giggled and I couldn't help but chortle along with them. Vidar's icy eyes blazed as he told the tale. He beamed at his chuckling children – whatever worries they had previously, they certainly had no more.

"In the lands of the gods, my children, the mighty Thor fights the *jötnar*, and the storm is the proof of that. Every flash of lightning is Thor raising Mjölfnir – so swift that lightning flashes through the sky—" Vidar grinned, swinging his hands into the air, as though he were lifting the hammer himself. "–And every roar of thunder is Thor bringing Mjölfnir down upon a *jötunn!*"

The children giggled as Vidar slammed his imaginary hammer down, just as Thor would. Even Caterine and I giggled at Vidar's vivid commentary.

"With Mjölfnir gripped in his fists, he cracks the powerful hammer upon *jötnar* skulls, *crack, crack, crack!*"

At the final *crack*, the door to our hall swung open, and there in the violent night stood a being as tall and broad as a giant from Vidar's tale!

"*Faðir!*" Screeched Æsa. "*Mumie!*"

Lightning flashed across the sky, briefly illuminating our surroundings with blue light. I gaped wide-eyed at the huge figure that filled our doorway, my heart racing inside my chest, the fair hairs on my arms standing on end, goosebumps erupting over my flesh.

The lightning flash lit up the *jötunn's* face, and—  
"Jan!"

