

ASHES REMAIN

Excerpt

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ISBN-10: 978-1-7339996-5-6

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In memory of
Tony Hartwick
21st June 1980 – 23rd September 2019

Horror covers all the heath,
Clouds of carnage blot the sun.
Sisters, weave the web of death;
Sisters, cease, the work is done.

The Fatal Sisters
Thomas Gray

PROLOGUE

NORTH SEA

Late Spring, 886

“NOTHING CAN KILL a man if his time hasn’t come, and nothing can save one doomed to die.”

The black waves surrounding my ship mirrored the midnight sky almost perfectly. I was the only person awake, my crew and passengers fast asleep. Everything was calm and quiet, the occurrences from just a few days ago temporarily forgotten. I turned my gaze from the star-laden sea to the withered faces of those near me, dirt and blood dried upon their skin and clothes. In just a few hours they would wake, ripped away from the evanescent serenity sleep blessed them with.

Njörðr the god of seafaring seemed to have taken pity on us. Even the ocean god Ægir, his wife, Ran, and their nine daughters seemed to have turned a blind eye to us, granting us safe passage across the seas from Britain to our home in the Danish lands.

So many had died ...

I squeezed my eyes shut and eased a sigh through my pursed lips. The past year had gone by in a haze of blood and death. From the summer of 885 until just weeks ago, we had suffered horrendous losses from our failed siege on Paris. What was meant to be an easy victory turned into a bloodbath. After our bloody defeat, we went to the town of Gipeswic in the Kingdom of the East Angles to recuperate, but that was not meant to be ...

I could still feel the heat of the blazing Danish homes singe my skin as I dashed past them, clutching my children as we pressed through the panicked crowds to the harbour. Anglo-Saxons rushed into the throng, beating and killing the innocent Danes who fled from their burning abodes.

Thankfully, most of my crew escaped the riots of Gipeswic relatively unharmed. Now slumped in rows clutching their oars,

they rested. Strangers were huddled about my ship too, injured men, broken families, women clutching children to their breasts, orphans shivering alone on the wet floorboards, their families slaughtered by the Anglo-Saxons. All of them sought sanctuary on my ship, wanting to get as far from the hate-filled Anglo-Saxons as they could. My eyes burned with sadness at the sight of them, but there were no tears left in me.

A sound beside me stole me from my thoughts. Æsa, my only living daughter, whimpered in her sleep. Her delicate face screwed up and indiscernible words slipped from her lips. Before I could move to comfort her, my eldest son, Young Birger, who was asleep beside her, woke enough to pull her against him.

Immediately her cries quietened, the furrows in her brow eased and her frown slackened. She burrowed against him, his presence expelling her nightmare immediately. A ragged sigh tumbled from Young Birger's lips and he fell back to sleep, his own body and mind fatigued by what had happened in Gipeswic.

I gazed at my children. Hidden beneath furs with only their heads sticking out, Young Birger, Sander, Æsa and Einar were clustered together on the ship's rough, wet floor. The cool breeze tugged at their golden hair, the fair hair they had inherited from their father ...

Even in the silvery light of the moon, I could see their cheeks whipped red from the salty sea winds, their faces wilted by sadness. They had lost so many loved ones over the past two years, their darling sister, Alffinna, our dear thrall and friend, Caterine, who had cared for my children like a second mother, their grandparents, my husband's parents Freydis and Alvar, and now their father, my beloved husband, Vidar ...

Vidar ...

My hands curled into fists and my ragged nails dug into my palms. Damn the Kingdom of the East Angles! Damn me for *wanting* to return to that place! I could feel my husband's last kiss tingle on my lips as though he had only just placed it there, but he had not. Vidar had died days ago on the shore of Gipeswic,

killed by an Anglo-Saxon – my countryman – thanks to the riot incited by my own brother, Beric.

I hadn't seen my homeland, the Kingdom of the East Angles, for twenty years. When I was just a young girl, the Great Heathen Army flooded my lands, burning homes and slaughtering all in their path. I had been lucky for my life had been spared. Rather than taking me as a thrall, my captor, Birger Bloody-Sword, adopted me and raised me as his daughter. For the past twenty years I had lived in Denmark, believing my whole blood family were dead. Little did I know that one of my seven brothers had survived.

After besieging the Franks at Paris, and losing miserably to them, Vidar took me back to the East Angles, took me back to my old village, to lift my spirits. By chance, I met a childhood friend, Guthlac, who had survived the Great Heathen Army's attack alongside my brother – news that shocked me to the core. Guthlac told us Beric might be stationed in Gipeswic with King Alfred's *fyrð*, for Beric was a soldier now.

We travelled to Gipeswic immediately, and I met another soldier there, Theodric Holt. I had not recognised him at the time, but Holt had been a thrall owned by my husband in Roskilde, Denmark. Holt had escaped many years ago and somehow managed to return to the East Angles. He hadn't recognised me either and, swayed by my sadness, he helped me find Beric.

Reunited, my brother and I were elated, but time had changed us both in such drastic ways. Beric sought to kill every last Dane in vengeance for our family. Stupidly, I told him of my Danish husband, my Danish children, my Danish adoptive father, in hope that he would make an exception, that he would love me, his sister, that he would love his niece and nephews. Maybe in time he would accept my Danish family, even if he couldn't forgive what the Danes had done in the past ...

I had been wrong – again, I was naïve, and my naivety had given me foolish hope. Time had hardened my brother's heart to stone, he was consumed with a loathing for the Danes so dark

and strong that not even I, his long-lost sister, could overcome it.

“Aveline is dead! Had I known you were a traitor like Guthlac, I never would have met you. Leave this place and never return, do you hear me? Otherwise, you’ll be killed like your Danish kin!”

Those had been the last words my brother had said to me after twenty years of separation. In his rage at my revelation, Beric disowned me, he stormed into the darkness and set aflame the homes of Danes settled in Gipeswic. Beric slaughtered Dane after Dane – Beric started the riot that led to my husband’s death.

I should never have returned! Sentimentality had made me want to visit my homelands again and Vidar made that wish come true. Vidar had supported me through every wish, whim or want. He was my guide, my absolute, my protector. He didn’t want me to return to the Kingdom of the East Angles in fear of losing me to my previous life, but he took me back there regardless of his fear, just to make me happy.

Vidar had been everything to me.

Our romance began when I was just fifteen and lasted over fourteen wonderful years, six of which we were married. The years had been difficult, but our love burned brightly through all storms – battles, wars, the deaths of our loved ones. We stood beside each other, constant and devoted, but thanks to my ridiculous sentimentality, thanks to my foolish naivety, I returned to the land of my birth and led Vidar to his death.

I hadn’t known Vidar was doomed to die, but the Allfather had been right – nothing could save him. I had dreamt of a long life together, a blissful marriage that spanned decades, but that did not come to pass. Of course, it hadn’t – Vidar was a Dane and Danes died young, they fought, they raided, they battled, they died.

But Vidar’s death ... It was my fault.

I didn’t even try to beg the gods – the Christian one nor the Norse pantheon – to return Vidar to me, for I knew they would not.

When our daughter, Alffinna, had been killed, her death almost destroyed me. I sank into a depression so immense, I never thought I would escape it – and part of me didn't want to. I couldn't bear even the light of day. Even when I slept, I saw Alffinna being killed before my eyes over and over again, helpless to stop it, unable to turn back time and bring my daughter back.

In desperation, I travelled across Denmark in the dead of winter to find a völva, a seeress and witch, rumoured to be powerful enough to speak to the gods. I almost died reaching her, but I arrived at her door and through potions and rituals, she sent me to the spirit realm.

I met the Allfather, the One-Eyed One, Odin, in the spirit realm. He told me that nine deaths had been sacrificed so that I might have a second life as a Dane. Those deaths had been my parents, six of my brothers and Mildritha – an Anglo-Saxon woman from my village who had protected me on the ship that took us from Britain to Denmark. After Mildritha's death, I was alone among the Danes – she had been the final link to my previous life as an Anglo-Saxon.

The Allfather said that sacrificing nine more lives would grant his blessings on my children. My children would live long, honourable lives and my sons would gain glory in battle and eventually die honourable deaths. I promised immediately, not weighing the consequences of that vow. I didn't want to watch another of my children die.

Five of the lives the Allfather requested had been taken before I'd even had the chance to make that promise to him, Birger, my adoptive father, Estrith, a thrall and dear friend, Caterine, Alffinna and Freydis. With Alvar and Vidar, the Allfather had seven of his nine sacrifices. Only two more lives were left to sacrifice, and I didn't know when or who would be taken.

Had I known that Vidar would be sacrificed, would I have made that vow to the Allfather? For the sake of my children, would I have made that same promise? Did it even matter whether I had agreed to the Allfather's terms? I had not agreed to the nine lives sacrificed for my second life as a Dane, nor had

I agreed to the five lives that were sacrificed *during* my life as a Dane. The gods were cruel and fickle, they did as they desired and bestowed blessings only on a chosen few.

Perhaps I could have requested Vidar be excluded from the sacrifices?

Hot tears brewed in my aching eyes, I screwed them shut, refusing to let them fall, and released my breath from my pursed lips in quiet sputters. I couldn't think like that, I couldn't let these thoughts lead me into darkness. I couldn't go back in time and change anything, I couldn't – no matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't.

“That which is worth having is worth sacrificing for.” The Allfather had said. “... A second chance at life – escaping death! – *that* is something great and deserves a great sacrifice! These lives paid for that, for you, for this life you live now, whether you chose it or not. Nine deaths paid for you to *live* as Aveline Birgersdóttir, not to *die* as Aveline Eadricesdohter.”

“How am I meant to live with the guilt? With the burden of their deaths resting on my shoulders?” I had demanded.

“You honour them. You live the greatest life you can in respect to them.” The Allfather had replied.

Whether you chose it or not ...

I had agreed to the Allfather's terms to protect my children. I had agreed for him to take the lives of my dear ones for the sake of my children. Whether I agreed or not, those lives would still have been taken from me, but I *had* agreed ... I had agreed to Vidar's death and nothing could bring him back to me. Now I had to honour him, and all those who had died for the sake of my damned promise. I had to live the greatest life I could, in respect to them, and I would.

The love Vidar and I shared had burned strong for almost fifteen years, now Vidar was dead. Never would I be so naïve, never would I trust so easily, never would I make a promise so thoughtlessly – not even to a god – and never would I return to the East Angles. Vidar always considered every option, always looked at an issue from all possible angles before making a decision. I did not, I was too emotional, too brash, too given to nostalgia and sentimentality. Never would I be that way again.

“The death of your daughter has shown you an agony more painful than anything you’ll ever know.” The Allfather said. “You can choose to let that pain destroy you, or you can draw wisdom from it. You can accept, as hard as it is, that death is a natural part of the cycle of life, and you can draw strength from the knowledge that nothing will ever hurt you as much as this has. Or you can kill yourself now and end the pain. Which do you choose?”

I had chosen to live. I had chosen to accept the tragic death of my daughter, I had chosen to embrace the pain of her death and let it strengthen me. My family would never be whole after Alffinna’s death, but I had come to accept that.

With Vidar’s death, I knew that agony once more, and I would have to draw wisdom from it as I had from Alffinna’s death. I would strengthen from it, I would live the greatest life I could, to honour Vidar and all those who died because of me, but I would *never* be naïve again.

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands and turned away from the star-sprinkled waves. I gazed at the occupants of my ship. These people, my crew, the poor displaced men, women and children, I gazed at my own sweet children curled on the wet ship floor. These were my responsibility.

I couldn’t change the web the Nornir had woven for me on their tapestry of life, but I *would* be great enough to earn the ability to change the direction they wove to suit me – *not* to suit the cruel, fickle gods.

With Vidar dead and my sons too young to take his jarldoms themselves, I would take them myself. I would lead my warriors to victory – careful, calculated victories. I would protect my people from armies and enemies, I would be the best leader I could, just as Vidar was. I would make Aros and Roskilde thriving market towns like the great town of Ribe. I would do everything for my children to succeed, for the Allfather’s prophecy to come true.

I would make Vidar proud, until the day I would meet him again in the afterlife.

CHAPTER ONE

OBOTRITE SETTLEMENT

Autumn, 886

SEARING PAIN TORE through my lungs with each rasping breath. Exhaustion weighed down my aching arms, my calves throbbed, and sweat stung the bloody cuts and open wounds scattered over my body. I couldn't rest though, it wasn't over yet.

Bodies littered the ground, both young and old, their blood seeping into the earth. The soft rattling breath of those not yet dead was audible among the corpses. I carried on walking step by heavy step, glancing over those that still clung to life. They posed no threat, from their wounds I knew they would die soon enough.

The tiny broken bodies of children, their pale cheeks stained with tears, were cradled by their mothers or siblings. My heart ached at the sight of them, but I trudged past them all the same and made my way to the nearest log house in search of survivors.

Inside the Wendish dwellings, I kicked aside stools, children's wooden toys, spinning tools and broken dishes scattered across the floor. The homes had been ransacked already and my men had turned their attention to the church in the centre of the Obotrite town. While they collected their plunder, I crept about the town to slay any survivors who might be hiding, thankful to be alone regardless of my gruesome mission.

I shoved open the door to the nearest house and entered it, lifting my sword, *Úlfsblóð*, in front of me, ready to cut down whoever might be hiding in the shadows. So far, all the small windowless single-roomed houses were dark and silent, empty of people or filled with corpses. This house was no different, there was no one to slay here. The corpses of the presumed family, an old woman, man, a younger woman and two small

children, were piled beside the brick oven in the corner of the little log home.

A shuddering breath sputtered from my cracked lips. I clapped a hand to my burning chest, feeling a thick glob of mucus leak down the back of my throat. I spat onto the ground – my saliva was red with blood. I wrinkled my nose and stumbled out of the house, letting the door swing closed behind me.

The next dwelling, a dilapidated shack of a home, stood far in the distance, clutched tightly by a wild tangle of overgrown brambles and weeds. I wondered whether the place was even inhabited considering its dire state, but I couldn't leave it unchecked. With a shallow, wheezing sigh, I trudged towards it, my legs trembling and arms aching.

I tried the lock. It was stiff, but with a little wiggling it lifted, yet the door still wouldn't open.

"Damn it ..." I grumbled quietly.

I lifted *Úlfssblóð*, my muscles tight and sore, and rammed the door with my shoulder. Bruised from slamming against so many doors, I winced, unable to stop myself from crying out. Thankfully, the door swung open when I rammed it a second time, sending it clattering against the wall.

I almost gasped aloud when a cat skittered across the room yowling, whipping past my legs at lightning speed. I managed to control myself, paused in the door frame, listening.

No sound ... No scuffle of feet in the dirt floor, no sharp intake of breath, no whimper. I glanced over my shoulder and watched the ginger feline plunge into a thicket across the way before I slipped into the dark abode, the door creaking shut behind me.

Flames danced in the oven across the room, lighting the sparse area with an eerie glow. The only furniture inside the house was a mouldy straw bed covered in a tattered blanket, a low table with a bowl half-full of cold stew sat upon it, and a cupboard storing whatever else belonged to the dweller of this pitiful hovel. But for the overgrown vegetation slowly consuming the house, it was not any different to the other houses in this poor village.

Thump!

Úlfsblóð slipped from my trembling, sweaty fingers and landed on the packed-dirt floor. I stared at it, at the long red stains on the double-edged blade, at the filthy handprint marring the pale antler hilt. I reached for it, but my aching legs and back would not bend. Instead, I fell to my knees, collapsing on the floor beside it.

Rather than reach for my sword, I drew my hands onto my lap and stared at them. My palms were small and my fingers slender, but they were red and black with blood and dirt, filth caked beneath each nail. My cramping muscles would not allow me to hold my hands out flat without pain tearing through them.

I forced myself up, flinching and groaning as I stood. I staggered to the oven where a wooden bucket of water stood, my sword forgotten on the floor behind me. I eased myself down beside the bucket, my joints popping and cracking, and dipped my hands into the lukewarm liquid.

Wishing for a chunk of lye soap, I scrubbed and scrubbed, watching the paleness of my flesh gradually reappear as the filth washed away, fouling the once-clear water. My hands were finally clean, but there was still dirt beneath my nails. I pulled my utility knife from my belt and—

“Argh!”

My head pounded and ears rang — it took me a moment to realise I was flopped over the upturned water bucket. The water pooled over the ground, soaking my skirts and turning the dirt floor to mud. I glanced over my shoulder to see a skinny, scruffy man wearing threadbare clothing — one of the damned Wends! He held Úlfsblóð in his quaking hands. The bastard had struck me with the pommel of my own sword! That was his mistake — he should’ve stabbed me when he had the chance.

The Wend barked something at me in his language. I eyed him groggily, this house must belong to him for his clothes were as shabby as the dilapidated dwelling.

“Give me my sword.” I rasped, delicately touching the knot that had sprung up from where the fool had struck me.

The Wend couldn't understand me. He barked at me again. His eyes were wide and sweat poured from his brow. The knuckles of his skinny, trembling fingers were white from the tightness of his grip around *Úlfsblóð*'s filthy hilt.

With a flick of his head, he signalled me to stand.

Slowly I rose. I stepped towards the Wend, glancing from his terrified face to *Úlfsblóð*. He shuffled aside, nodding his head at the door, barking anxious words at me.

"I'm not leaving without my sword." I said regardless that he apparently could not understand the Norse language.

He started yelling, shaking my sword in a manner I assumed meant to threaten, but the fear and panic in his eyes betrayed him. I stepped closer, he was less than an arms-length away from me.

"Give me my sword." I said.

The Wend's temper was running short. He yelled at me again, *Úlfsblóð* held across his chest. Though he was becoming more animated, I wasn't afraid – from the closeness I was standing to him, he couldn't stab me, he'd have to swing to truly harm me and in doing so, he'd leave his torso unprotected.

"Give me my sword." I growled.

Finally, the Wend swung.

He lifted *Úlfsblóð* to his shoulder and in that moment, I plunged my utility knife into his stomach. *Úlfsblóð* clattered to the ground. The Wend gawped at the small knife sticking into him, my hand clasped around the short wooden handle.

He was frozen in shock, I stabbed him again. Blood oozed from the little wounds, and his tunic muffled the wet snap of his skin as my metal blade pierced his flesh and perforated his organs.

I managed to gore the Wend twice more before he recovered from his shock. He punched me, hard. A white light flashed before my eyes, stealing my vision for just a moment. I guarded my face with one arm while stabbing wildly at him, the blade piercing him over and over. Still the Wend beat me, but he was tiring quickly.

I could not take many more punches.

I threw myself across the room, landing in a pile on the floor. The Wend glared at me, his face deathly pale, blood streaming from his belly. Our eyes locked briefly then dropped to *Úlfssblóð* at his feet. He reached down to grab it, but I dove at him, tackling him to the ground. The Wend cried out and I sank my knife into his neck. I felt the knife ricochet against his bone, sending shudders through my arm. The Wend yowled but he silenced quickly. His body dropped.

I disentangled myself from the Wend and heaved him over to retrieve *Úlfssblóð*. A soft gurgling sounded from his throat as I shoved his body aside. I crouched beside him and grabbed a fistful of his black hair. His dark brown eyes darted in their sockets. I pulled his head back, dug my knife's blade into the soft flesh of his neck and slit his throat, the tender flesh snapping and releasing a cascade of blood. His gurgling intensified, his body spasmed violently then he fell still. Dead.

"I can't believe you hit me with my own sword," I grumbled as I sheathed *Úlfssblóð*. "Fucking bastard."

I did a quick search of his body, but I found nothing, just as I expected. The man had nothing. There was not a single thing of value on his person or in his home – the clothes on his back seemed to be the only clothing he owned.

My eyes drifted over the wounds in his stomach, the wounds I had given him. He had only tried to defend his home, tried to save himself from the horrifying fate his village had suffered at the hands of raiders. That was what we were, my army of Danes and me. We were raiders, we were killers ...

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly and tried to swallow down the emotion knotted in my throat. I turned my back on the Wend, left his dilapidated dwelling and made my way to the church in the centre of the settlement.

I squinted up at the sun in the middle of the clear sky. We had made good time, at this rate we could arrive back in Aros by evening meal. I needed to go back home, I needed to be with my children. I had been away from them for far too long.

Out of the four of them, my eldest two had come to war with me, both boys old enough to fight. My youngest children, *Æsa*

and Einar, were still far too young, and I had left them in my hall back in Aros, safe with my thralls, Melisende and Rowena, and my friends, Guðrin and Borghildr, watching over them.

In the Norse world, boys were considered men at ten years of age, but were not able to fight in battles until at least the age of twelve. Young Birger, my eldest son, was old enough to actively participate in expeditions at almost thirteen years of age. I had fought beside Young Birger in Francia shortly before his twelfth winter. He was an excellent warrior and a highly capable archer.

Sander had seen that battle, but he had been too young to fight. He was forced to remain at camp or huddle by the mast of our longship with the women and children whether he liked it or not. He was still too young to actively participate, but since he would see his tenth winter and thus become a man in just a few months, I allowed him to attend the expedition, to view and learn from it.

We had not fought soldiers nor besieged an entire city like Young Birger had for his first combat experience. No, we had slaughtered unarmed monks, nuns and abbots, plundered their abbeys and monasteries, killed unarmed villagers or those equipped with rickety farming tools, but it had been enough to whet Sander's appetite for war.

My army and I had been raiding the Wendish lands for two months. I hadn't seen Æsa and Einar for *two months*. This settlement was the last of our expedition. It belonged to a tribe of Obotrites, also known as Polabian Wends, not too far from the East Francian border. Some Wends were Christian, like those of this settlement, while others worshipped Wendish gods.

I did not know their gods, nor did I care. We had come to plunder, to ravage their lands for gold and goods and we had been victorious – though the villagers of this settlement had been poor, their Christian church was not. We would return home this very day, our arms filled with riches, sacks of grains and other foodstuffs, though there was nothing more I wanted than to embrace my children again.

I was halfway to the church when I spotted a small group of warriors marching towards me. There were six of them in total, all wild and bloodied and grinning.

“Any survivors, Jarl?”

“Not anymore, *nei*.” I replied.

“Are you alright?” Jan asked, gazing at me with concern in his sapphire eyes.

“*Já*, I’m fine.” I shrugged. “Did you load the plunder?”

“That we did, Jarl.” Domnall beamed through his bushy ginger beard, his light blue eyes sparkling. “I’ve my eye on a few trinkets I think Guðrin will like.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I smiled warmly to the giant fiery-haired Dane. “She will have whatever you want to give her.”

“Borghildr might not be happy with what I’ve found.” Ebbe chuckled.

“Not another concubine, man?” Hallmundr rolled his eyes. “Borghildr will kill you if you bring another home!”

“I’ll have her, I’ve seen the woman – she’s a fine-looking thing.” Lars piped in.

“*Enough*.” I said firmly. “No one is having her, she’ll be put in with the others and sold at the market, just as I ordered before we came here. Keep your silver, but the thralls *will* be sold.”

“It’s probably for the best.” Ebbe said with a shrug.

“*Já* it is,” Einarr the musician said. “If you keep bringing home these concubines, Borghildr will make a eunuch of you.”

“You should see the tits on this thrall, though.” Ebbe winked, earning laughter from his companions.

“Come on, we’ll talk about the thrall’s tits on the ships.” I said, rolling my eyes at him. “Is everyone set to leave?”

“That’s why we came to find you.” Domnall said. “The ships are loaded and the crew ready. We just have to get on Storm-Serpent then we can head back home.”

“Good.” I said. “Let’s go.”

“*Já*, Jarl Aveline.” The men nodded.

Ebbe, Domnall, Hallmundr, Lars and Einarr swiftly turned and started towards the bay where our three huge dragon-headed warships, Sea-Wolf, Oak-Blade and Storm-Serpent, were

bobbing on the calm waters. Jan didn't move, though. He blocked my path, his eyes locked on me, his great muscled arms crossed over his chest.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You're wheezing and there's no colour in your face." Jan said. "Where are you hurt?"

"All over, Jan, I've just been in a battle." I scoffed, bumping him with my shoulder as I started after the others.

"Do you want some wine?" Jan asked, walking beside me.

"I'd kill for some."

"No need, I already have." Jan grinned. "The casks are on Storm-Serpent for us to enjoy."

"You *are* good to me!" I laughed.

"I do my best."

CHAPTER TWO

AROS, DENMARK

MY HALL BUZZED like a hive, swarming with townspeople. Sitting in my highbacked chair holding Einar, my youngest child, I watched the crowd. There were warriors grimy with dirt and blood, reeking of the salty tang of sweat and sea, their wives or lovers draped over them, glowing with pride. Children clung to their fathers' legs, and elderly men and women grinned at their sons and grandsons, proudly grasping their warrior's strong shoulders with gnarled hands. Faces glanced at me with admiration and pleasure, their cheeks flushed by mead and ale, their arms filled with gold and trinkets.

"The spoils are divided, are you all satisfied with your lot?" I asked, examining each warrior in turn.

"*Já!*" My warriors cheered, clutching their trinkets or raising their horns.

"Good, you have earned them." I smiled. "An entire season of battle and we have come out victorious! I congratulate you, my men. I am proud of you all."

"Odin was with us!" A warrior exclaimed, holding his silver chalice in the air.

The young, mousy-haired warrior was answered with a resounding roar of agreement, other warriors lifting their tankards and cups high, too, in honour of the gods.

"And why would he not?" I called over the enthusiastic din, ignoring the bitter pang that struck my heart at the warrior's excited words. "You all were powerful, strong, merciless – you were everything a fine warrior worthy of Valhalla ought to be, and more!"

Another great cheer shook the walls of my hall.

"But do not give the gods *all* the glory, my friend." I smirked, pointing at the young warrior. "*You* were the ones who proved

yourselves today – *you* were the ones who earned each and every victory we have gained this season. I am thankful to have the honour to fight beside you – as are the gods, I am sure! More so, I'm thankful to not be fighting against you.” I added with a laugh echoed around the room by all those grinning faces. “Now go to your homes, all of you. Take your riches, enjoy your wives, play with your children. There will be a feast here tonight, to celebrate *you*.” I lifted my horn of mead in the air. “*Skål!*”

With a rousing exclaim of ‘*Skål!*’ every man and woman brought their horns and tankards, and even glittering golden church chalices, to their lips and downed the contents. Mead, ale and beer dribbled down bearded chins accompanied by gruff chuckles and trill giggles. The townspeople’s happiness was infectious and noisy, but they finished their drinks and did as I bade, gradually filtering out of my hall.

We had returned to Aros that morning from our fruitful raiding expedition in the Wendish lands. We had fought hard, attacking farming village, market town and monastery alike, and hadn’t lost a single man. Each of my warriors held in his arms chalices, pyxes or crucifixes made of silver and gold. We had seized countless purses of coin, gems and jewellery – both silver and gold, casks of wine, livestock, furs and sacks of wheat, barley and oats – all kinds of marvellous plunder to keep and to sell.

The hall became deafeningly quiet in the townspeople’s absence. I released a sigh, my ears ringing from the quiet, and kissed the top of Einar’s head, glad to have my family together again. I shuffled Einar higher up my lap and turned my gaze to Æsa, Sander and Young Birger who were happily digging through our mountain of spoils.

Æsa’s hands were heavy with rings, and bracelets slid up and down her wrists clinking when she moved. Sander kept piling necklaces over Æsa’s head, much to her delight, and Young Birger was sitting nearby, laughing at the sight of them.

As Jarl of Aros, I received the biggest share of the plunder, though I had been more than generous with my men. My share would be added to the rest of my riches. My wealth would not just be spent on finery, it would be used as rewards for loyalty,

presents to sweeten alliances, gifts to persuade opposition into allies. I would pay for building supplies and labour to improve and expand the towns I ruled, to fund raids and war, to arm my warriors, to build a bigger, better fleet and to mend our existing ships. Should it ever happen, my fortune would pay to mend Aros or Roskilde if either of my towns were attacked.

In just a few years, my riches would pay for Æsa's *heiman fylgia*, dowry, when she wed, the *mundr*, bride-price, and the *morgen-gifu*, morning gift, for each of my sons' future wives, and when I died my riches would become my sons' inheritances.

"Would you like to pick something from the pile?" I asked, pointing at my other children and the mountain of chalices, jewellery, coin and crucifixes.

"*Nei*." My four-year-old son replied stoutly.

"What would you like then?" I chuckled at the serious expression on Einar's face.

"Where's Jan?"

"Jan? He's busy at the marketplace." I replied, caught off-guard by his question.

Einar stared at me disappointed, his fingers fiddling with the embroidered hem of his sleeve. A sigh fell from his lips and I kissed the top of his head.

"Jan will be back soon, my love." I soothed. "Why don't you look through the pile and find something for him?"

Einar stared at me with reluctance.

"Come now, my love. It would make Jan so happy to receive a gift from you." I urged.

"Fine." Einar grumbled.

"While you look, I'll wash and change." I smiled as Einar slipped off my lap and trudged over to his siblings.

My smile vanished the moment Einar's back was turned. I ran a hand through my greasy, knotted hair as I watched him reluctantly pick up a chalice.

Einar had grown close with Jan since Vidar's death. When we moored our longships in the harbour this morning, it was not me or Young Birger or Sander who Einar dashed toward first, but Jan. Einar immediately begged Jan to play with him,

explaining with almost unintelligible speed everything he had done while we were away raiding, wanting to share every detail with Jan. Though I wouldn't voice it aloud, I was jealous, jealous of the attention Einar gave Jan, but I didn't fault my son. Einar was searching for a father figure now his own father was gone.

"Your bath is ready, Jarl." Melisende said, appearing beside me.

"*Dakka fyrir.*" I said to my Frankish thrall.

I made my way to the kitchen slowly, grazing my fingertips along the posts that ran down the centre of the hall, supporting the roof. The posts were painted white with quicklime and at the top of each were gorgeous images carved into the wood. Across the room, my Anglo-Saxon thrall, Rowena, was already busying about tidying, sprinkling ashes on spilt drink puddles and sweeping the unsettled dirt of the floor.

I paused and watched my children. Young Birger and Sander were laughing at Æsa, who was spinning in circles, the gold and silver she was laden with jangling noisily. A sharp pang struck my heart at the sad sight of my youngest son, Einar was standing beside the pile of plunder half-heartedly examining the different shining pieces, frequently glancing between the spoils and the great door of our hall.

I dropped my head and turned away, continuing to the kitchen. I didn't know where Jan was – he had run off soon after we had unloaded the ships, his portion of the loot already in his chest on Storm-Serpent. Apparently, he needed to speak to someone at the marketplace – who that someone was, I didn't know, and I didn't bother to ask.

Though I wasn't concerned about where Jan was or what he was doing, Einar was, desperately. It broke my heart to see my youngest child so worried, but I knew when Jan came to the hall Einar would be elated and happy, back to the cheery child he normally was. This happened every time Jan was absent, there was nothing I could do but assure Einar that Jan *would* return.

"Would you like help undressing, Jarl?" Melisende asked as I entered the kitchen.

“*Nei, þakka.*” I smiled. “I’ll call should I need you. Do tell me when Jan arrives, though.”

“Of course, Jarl.” My Frankish thrall nodded before leaving me in solitude.

Steam rose enticingly from a large wooden tub beside the fire pit in the centre of the kitchen. Upon the hot vapour was the aromatic fragrance of lavender, lending me a sense of calm. I inhaled it deeply, eager for my first hot bath since I’d gone off to raid. The skirts and hem of my gown were stiff with blood, sweat and dirt, and though I’d washed my face and hands, I still reeked of the salty brine of seawater and the fetid stench of death from those I’d slaughtered.

Since we’d returned to Aros, no one had time to wash or change, too excited to see our families and divide up the plunder. It was finally time for me to wash away the foul smells and filth of battle and settle into my home.

Folded neatly on the scrubbed tabletop near the bathtub were clean clothes, a linen sheet to dry with and a basket filled with a variety of soaps. I began the ordeal of stripping my filthy clothing from my body, starting with the blood-splattered tortoiseshell brooches on my dress.

Slowly I unpinned the brooches fastened to the straps of my apron gown. Between them was a string of gorgeous glass beads, amber, scarlet and gold in colour. My adoptive father, Birger Bloody Sword had gifted me these brooches when I was a young girl. A small smile lifted one corner of my mouth as thought of my dear Birger. I laid the beads and brooches gently on the tabletop and continued to peel my stinking clothing from my body.

Glad to be free of the grimy garments, there was only one thing left on my naked body: around my neck hung a simple silver ring tied to a long thin black leather thong – Vidar’s wedding ring.

I never removed the necklace. I wore it as I slept, as I bathed, as I battled. As Vidar lay dying, he bade us take his sword, bow and arm bands to his sons, and the Mjölfnir pendant he always wore to his daughter. Our friends Hallmundr, Domnall and

Einarr retrieved these items from my husband's body while Jan forcibly carried me to the ship.

One of our three companions had retrieved Vidar's wedding ring for me – I did not know who had and I hadn't asked, but I was thankful. Upon my finger I still wore the engagement band and wedding ring Vidar had given me years ago, and around my neck, tucked beneath my clothes, hung Vidar's ring.

I took the basket of soaps and set them on the ground beside the tub. I climbed into the bath, avoiding the heated stones at the end of the tub, a low purr of delight rolling in my throat. The bite of the heat warmed me to my bones, turning my pale flesh red as I sank lower into the water, my every ache and throb soothed at once. I leaned back to soak my tangled hair and my scalp burned, but I didn't care – this was my first hot bath in months and, scalding or not, I was going to enjoy it for as long as I could.

Carefully I wiped the film of grime from Vidar's ring underneath the water with my fingers until it shone silver once more. As I cleaned the black leather thong, my mind drifted to the expedition in the Wendish lands.

It was the first raid I had led as Jarl of Aros. It had been bountiful, not just for the spoils we had returned home with. I had solidified my people's faith and trust in me. Whatever doubts they might have had in my leadership were wiped out by the success of this expedition. I had proven to them I could lead them in battle, that I could fight alongside them, that I would not fail them. Not a single member of my crew had died nor been terribly injured, and all of them had returned home far richer than when they had left. I had earned my people's confidence, I had their trust, and most importantly, I had their loyalty.

The face of the young, mousy-haired warrior whirled in my mind.

"Odin was with us?"

Nei, *Biólan Koðránsón*, nei, *he was not*. I thought bitterly, staring at the smoke-stained ceiling beams. *I did not see him there – do not give the One-Eyed One an honour he doesn't deserve.*

I had met him, the one called the Allfather. Sat on a great wooden throne, his great hands curled around the roaring wolves carved into the chair's arms, his one piercing blue eye scrutinised me. His other eye socket was empty, the lid sewn shut. He had been vast, not old yet not young, intimidating yet comforting. His laugh had been loud and warm yet sent shivers down my spine. His great muscled body was clad in indigo, fine leathers and shadow, his snow-white beard braided loosely. He had been a friend, had made promises to me, but he had also kept a secret from me that I could never forgive him for.

Nothing can kill a man if his time hasn't come, and nothing can save one doomed to die ...

The One-Eyed One could have warned me, but he didn't ...

An invisible fist squeezed my heart. I sank deeper into the tub, my eyes stinging with tears I wouldn't let fall. I breathed in, out, in, out, calming the rage seething inside me.

The lavender scented steam was thick and warm, swirling through my nostrils and dancing down my throat. Claspng Vidar's ring, I let the bath mist lead me into a stupor. I listened to my heart beating in my ears, steady as a drum, listened to the deep, slow breaths gently fall from my lips. Gradually memories and thoughts slipped away. My grip on the ring lessened, until finally my mind was clear.

"Aveline?"

I woke with a start. I didn't know how long I had been sleeping, but the bath water had chilled considerably. I sat up in the tub and the cool air rushed over me, creating goosebumps over my flesh.

"What the—" I gasped.

With a few long-legged strides, Jan, still dressed in his filthy expedition clothes, made his way to me and crouched down beside the tub, a mischievous grin playing on his lips. A hot blush burned on my cheeks, I folded my arms over my breasts, my long, thick chestnut curls clinging to my body, concealing most of me from Jan's view.

"I tried to stop him, Jarl—" Melisende stammered from the doorway, pale-faced with horror.

I waved a hand wildly at her and she vanished quickly.

“What are you doing in here? I’m having a bath!” I snapped.

“I can see that.” Jan grinned. “Melisende said you wanted to know when I arrived. She offered to announce me, but I thought I’d announce myself.” His wicked grin was replaced with an innocent smile, but I knew better than to fall for it. “Can I pass you the soap?”

“Hand me that linen. I’ll not talk to you while I’m unclothed.” I growled, very conscious of my nakedness under his sapphire gaze.

Jan let out a dramatic sigh, shrugged his shoulders and fetched me the linen. I snatched it out of his hands and held the folded fabric against my chest.

“Get out of here! We’ll speak when I’m dressed.”

“You seem irritable, is there anything I can do to relieve your stress? I could rub your shoulders – or wash your hair?”

“Had you been any other man, Jan Jötunnson, I’d have your head cut from your body!” I snarled.

“Surprisingly, that’s not the first time I’ve been told that.” Jan mused, strolling towards the door.

“Better yet, I’d do it myself!” I shouted after him, watching him disappear into the main room.

“I’d prefer it if you did!” Jan called back wickedly.

I sighed, relieved that he had left but shocked he’d dared to enter while I was bathing in the first place. I couldn’t help but chuckle as I tossed the linen back onto the table. Damn that Jan! He dared to do anything and almost always managed to get away with it. He had always been cheeky and forward, but with the newfound closeness of our relationship, I had to become accustomed to his mischievousness and his love of crossing boundaries.

Over the months, Jan’s and my friendship strengthened, we became much closer than ever before. Bonded by grief, since Vidar’s death, we were there for each other always. Jan became my rock, my support, the person who kept me standing while my life fell apart around me. But for the children, Jan was the one person in the world who grieved for Vidar as I did.

Vidar was ripped from our lives so suddenly, and despite his own sadness, Jan stepped up and became such a major role in my life. It was so hard for me to keep myself together and simultaneously be there for my children. Jan helped not just me, but the children through their grief as well. Jan was by my side through it all.

When Alffinna died, I failed my family. Swallowed by my own sorrow, I left Vidar to struggle through his grief and at the same time guide the children through theirs while I wallowed selfishly alone. I swore never to do that again – I would be strong, I wouldn't fail them again.

But I had never imagined I'd lose Vidar. I couldn't fathom a life without him – I thought he'd be with me through everything, and when he was killed, I had no idea how I could keep my vow when I was just as devastated as our children.

That was where Jan came in. I confided every secret, every emotion, every thought in him and only him. Every day since Vidar's death, Jan visited to make sure the children and I had eaten. He played with them, went hunting and trapping with us. He wouldn't leave the hall until the children were asleep, and when he went to the shipyard he always took the boys along.

Jan filled the place Vidar had left, becoming a father-figure to my four sweet children. He held them and listened to them when they were sad. He shared tales of Vidar's life with us, Vidar's childhood long before I'd ever stepped foot in the Danish lands, to keep Vidar's spirit alive and bright in the children's hearts. He made the children happy, and in turn, Jan made me happy, too.

I grabbed the lye soap and lathered my body and hair with it, washing myself as quickly as I could in the lukewarm water. Soon enough, I stepped out of the bath, water streaming from my clean body, and hurriedly dried myself and dressed.

I emerged into the main room dressed in a gorgeous forest green gown, the sleeves and neckline embroidered with silver, red and blue thread. I smelled far better than I had in months. Indeed, I even felt lighter, as though the filth and blood dried to my body had been weighing me down. I was free of that burden ... Until the next expedition at least.

“I apologise, Jarl, I—” Melisende started, still flushed with embarrassment.

“It wasn’t *your* fault, I know.” I interrupted, staring pointedly at Jan.

Jan grinned innocently, sipping his tankard of honey mead.

Melisende pulled a chair out from the table for me, opposite Jan, and I sat in it, still glaring at Jan. Leather thongs and an assortment of oils and various sized combs were laid out upon the table in front of me. My thick, matted chestnut curls hung like soggy rat tails to the small of my back, leaving a dark sodden patch on my gown. Behind me, Melisende lifted my hair over the back of my chair and set to work detangling my hair with her fingers, grunting and gasping at the state of it.

“You needed me, Jarl?” Jan asked brightly.

“Have you seen Einar yet?” I asked as Melisende took one of the combs and picked at a particularly snarled lock of my hair.

“*Já*, we played for a while before I came to see you. He gave me the most wonderful chalice.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” I smiled. “He missed you earlier.”

“He’s a great boy.” Jan grinned. “All of your sons are, and Æsa is a wonderful girl. Einar reminds me of you, he’s sweet, sensitive, kind.”

“*Dakka fyrir*. Not the words one usually uses to describe a boy, but I appreciate it.” I laughed.

“A man must be strong, resilient and brave, but he must also be generous and aware of others. If my son has just a fraction of Einar’s heart, I would be proud.” Jan said warmly.

Jan’s son ... Jan had not seen his son, Thórvar, for four years. Jan had been raiding for a few months along the coast of Francia and during that time, his wife, Thóra, took their son Thórvar and left. She left a message for Jan with a neighbour and the message was simple, Jan could keep all their money, possessions and property and she would not ask for a single thing, but she was taking Thórvar. She bade Jan not to follow them and said she and Thórvar would never return to Roskilde. Thóra gave no reason as to why she was deserting Jan, she just left. Jan had searched desperately for them for years, but to no avail.

“I’m sure your son is every bit as wonderful as Einar.” I assured with all the sincerity in my heart.

Jan shrugged, drained his mead and hailed Rowena over to fetch him another. She hurried away, Jan’s cup in one hand and a broom in her other. We sat in silence as Melisende dedicatedly combed my hair and coated my curls in sweet smelling oils.

I tried to imagine what Thórvar would look like now, but all I could conjure was a miniature version of Jan. Unfortunately, Vidar and I never had the chance to meet Thórvar – in fact, I had never met any of Jan’s children.

I lived in the Kingdom of the East Angles when Jan was married his first wife. After her death, he brought many women into his bed, thralls and Danes alike. Over the years, Jan had conceived four children between four thralls, and one legitimate child with his second wife.

The two daughters he’d conceived in the two years after his wife’s death had died shortly after their births. After Jarl Erhardt had taken me as peace bride and forced me to Aros, Jan conceived a child with another thrall, a son he’d named Jarðarr. Unfortunately, Jarðarr had drowned in Roskilde Fjord soon after his third winter, a tragic accident.

Jan met his second wife, Thóra, at Vidar and my wedding. He quickly conceived a child with her and married her, and the bitch abandoned him after their son saw his second winter. Two years after Thóra vanished, Jan had taken a thrall named Fríðr and gotten her with child. She, like his first wife, died giving birth to his stillborn child. He named his daughter Jóra and she and Fríðr were laid to rest in the burial grounds at the heart of Aros.

The gods seemed to toy with Jan. The Nornir had cursed him with a life of loss – on top of the children, the wives and the lovers he had lost, Jan’s eldest brother had died when Jan was just a boy and his mother had died birthing his youngest brother. Now he had lost Vidar, his closest friend.

Despite all the tragedy in his life, Jan always smiled, Jan always jested, Jan always laughed. I had only seen glimpses of his inner broken self in rare moments when Jan accidentally let his guard down, but on the battlefield, I saw his rage ...

Since Fríðr and Jóra's deaths, I hadn't seen Jan with a woman, not Dane nor thrall. I wondered if he had given up on the idea of marriage and fatherhood, a preposterous idea for most people but not at all an unreasonable decision for Jan.

Though I hadn't lost half as much as him, I had a small insight to Jan's tragedy, having lost my birth family, my adoptive father, my daughter, Alffinna, and my husband, Vidar.

As a widow, I was expected to remarry, but I could remain unwed for the rest of my life if I chose to, though that decision was critically ill-advised. Unwise or not, it was the decision I had privately made, and I supported Jan with every fibre of my being if that was a decision he had made, too.

"Anyway," Jan said, accepting his fresh mead from Rowena before she continued tidying. "I heard you gave a fine speech, honouring the men over the gods and all that."

I narrowed my eyes.

"What did you hear?" I asked, my voice low.

"You're fine for now, Jarl, no one is suspicious of you." Jan said. "*Do not give the gods all of the glory.* If the townspeople were not so elated, some might say you were speaking against the gods. Not something a jarl should do in any case."

"Are you *scolding* me, Jan Jötunnson?"

"Never, Jarl. I'm merely advising you." Jan said, raising his thick tawny brows at me. "As I said, the townspeople are delighted to be home with their families, so they have taken your comment in stride – in fact, they were thrilled you honoured them as highly as the gods. But I know you, Aveline. You must watch what you say."

"*Dakka fyrir*, Jan. I will heed your advice," I said levelly, though anger bubbled in my stomach. "But understand, my relationship with the gods is between them and me, no one else."

"I do understand," Jan said. "But you cannot have the townspeople know you're angry with the gods."

"I can be angry with whomever I want – the gods, the townspeople, *you*." I grumbled. "When I defeated those who challenged me after we came back from Gipeswic, I honoured the gods for my victory, didn't I? I slaughtered goats to the gods

before setting sail to the Wendish lands, did I not? I celebrated Baldr at *Midsumarblót*, correct? You were by my side when I began organising *Vetrnætr* before we even left for this expedition. Did I not host *Sigrblót* when we returned from the East Angles, even though I was mourning my husband and father-in-law? Damn it, Jan! Didn't I do all these things?"

I slammed my fists on the table, sending the combs clattering away. I caught Rowena's nervous glance in the corner of my eye and felt Melisende pause, a lock of my hair still held in her fingers, the weight of the antler comb tangled in the strands. Jan gave no reaction, he simply gazed at me over his tankard, unblinking and expressionless.

"I have honoured the gods far more than they deserve!" I hissed. "I have continued honouring them for the sake of the townspeople, so do not come into my hall and reprimand me for asking my people to share in the triumph of *their* actions rather than give all of their hard-earned glory to the damned gods!"

My nails dug hard in my trembling hands, splinters of pain slicing through my palms, but I did not uncurl my fists and I did not break my fiery glare from Jan's cool sapphire gaze.

"*Já*, you have, Jarl." Jan agreed. "You have proved yourself to be a respectable, praiseworthy jarl, your people support you, they are yours. *But* – and I say this as your friend – the townspeople will love their female Anglo-Saxon jarl for only as long as you continue leading them to victory. That does not mean you are safe from being challenged again. You do not have Vidar here to protect you anymore, so be sure to watch what you say."

Before I could say another word, Einar and Æsa burst into the hall and threw themselves at Jan.

"Jan! Come outside with us!" Einar demanded.

Jan wrapped his arm around Einar, though his eyes didn't drop from mine. Æsa grabbed his arm and dramatically attempted to drag Jan out of his chair, much to Einar's amusement. I didn't laugh. I didn't smile.

"Off with you, Jan Jötunnson." I muttered.

“*Já, Jarl,*” Jan muttered, allowing my children to lead him out of the hall.