



# Astrid at Sea (Viktor & Astrid At Sea #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Join Viktor, Astrid, Kis and the crew as they navigate life upon The Serpent, sailing the Seven Seas and all the troubles that come with it!

**Total Pages (Source):** 42

## CHAPTER ONE

I couldn't bring myself to move away from the rail until Jorvik was nothing more than a tiny dot in the distance. Until I couldn't see my parents and friends anymore. Until I couldn't see my home anymore.

Except it wasn't my home anymore.

Ever since I married Viktor, he became my everything, including my home.

Viktor was my home—well, Viktor and Kis. Wherever he was, I wanted to be there as well, even if that was in the middle of a sea, setting sail on a four-month mission to an island called Greenland.

"It's not too late to change your mind," Viktor whispered, his breath fanning over the shell of my ear and his chest warming my back. "We're still close enough to turn back if you want to. I don't mind."

"I don't want you to lose your Captaincy," I said, turning around in his arms to gaze up at him. "And I don't want to go back to Jorvik if you're not going to be there. I want to be wherever you are, Viktor."

"We'll be at sea for four months. Possibly longer if we get lost," he warned, but with the way his lips were turned up at the corners as he lowered his face, gently brushing them against mine, I knew he was only teasing.

"We'll just have to make sure we don't get lost then," I grinned and rose on my

tiptoes to press my lips to his in a real kiss. As we were on the top deck, all the crew was here and had a front-row seat to us making out.

“Come on, my siren,” Viktor grinned and placed one last kiss on my mouth before pulling away, but he kept an arm around my waist as he guided me around the top deck of The Serpent.

We started at the front of the ship where the infamous Serpent was hung, proudly displayed as we cut through the water. It was various shades of dark grey, almost black. The scales looked real and glistened in the sunlight. The serpent twisted and turned in several curves, leading all the way up to the serpent’s scaly face, beady eyes, and slippery, scaly tongue. I had seen the serpent several times before, but this was the first time I was so up close.

“Do you want to sit on it?” Viktor whispered in my ear.

“What?” I asked and turned to glance over my shoulder at him, my tone laced with surprise. He grinned and nodded, looking awfully excited about it. “You cannot be serious!”

“Oh, I am,” he grinned wickedly at me.

“We hear you’re giving a tour of The Serpent, and we’re wondering why we weren’t invited,” Roscoe grinned, joining us at the rail with Manny in tow.

“Maybe because you’re not my wife,” Viktor snorted, but he sported a large grin. “Well, since you’re here, you might as well join us for the rest of it. And don’t worry, you haven’t missed anything important. I was just asking Astrid if she wants to sit on the serpent.”

“Sit on the serpent?” Manny frowned, puzzled. “That’s not a thing, is it?”

“It is,” Viktor grinned and turned to Roscoe. “Care to show these two what I mean?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice,” Roscoe returned the grin.

We all watched as he braced his hands on the rail and used his arm strength to leap onto it. He sat on the edge of the rail before swinging his legs over the serpent’s head. It was just wide enough for him to use as a chair, but I couldn’t help but fear that he would fall into the water with the gentle sway of the ship, and we would never see him again.

“Okay, I think that’s enough now,” I chuckled nervously, resisting the urge to reach out and grab Roscoe’s hand to pull him over the rail. When Viktor and Roscoe merely laughed at my reaction, I huffed. “It’s not funny. I don’t want him to fall into the water.”

“I’m a good swimmer,” Roscoe grinned cockily, but it was quickly replaced by one of fear when he lost his footing, looking as if he was going to fall face-first into the water. I gasped and instinctively reached out to grab him. “Viktor!” I screeched, a cry for help.

Instead of my husband helping me, he threw his head back and laughed. My lips parted in shock, and when I glanced around, spotting three men laughing at me, especially Roscoe, who looked completely at ease sitting on the serpent’s head, I realised that I had been made the butt of the joke.

I groaned and resisted the urge to stomp my feet, but only because I knew that would give them more to laugh about.

“That wasn’t funny,” I groaned, glaring at the three of them. My eyes lingered on my husband, who looked proud for pulling a fast one on me. “I was genuinely afraid that Roscoe would fall into the water.”

“Don’t worry, my siren.” Viktor threw an arm over my shoulders, pulling me into his side. I buried my face in his chest and felt his chest rumble as he laughed. It was hard to be mad at him when he looked so handsome and carefree. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to any of my crew. If Roscoe fell in the water, I would have jumped in after him.” He pressed a kiss to my hair.

“Well, that’s reassuring,” I huffed. “Now, before one of you gives me a heart attack, let’s continue with the rest of this tour.”

Once Roscoe’s feet were safely back on the deck, we moved further down the ship to join Dagfinn at the wheel.

Dagfinn was a large, burly kind of fellow. His hair was dark, thick, and a little matted in places. It was as if he didn’t wash it often, but it didn’t look dirty. He kept it longer than Viktor’s, falling to the middle of his back. I noticed he nearly always freely wore his hair like that, and not for the first time, I was a little envious of the thickness and length. Regardless of the scary, powerful stance, his smile was that of a cuddly teddy bear, and I couldn’t help but return it.

It was nice to feel like I belonged here even though I technically didn’t. I had all but jumped onto the ship at the last minute—just about how long it took for the immediate direction of my life to suddenly change.

“When can we have a go at the wheel?” Roscoe asked excitedly, looking as if his fingers itched to give it a whirl. With his jumpy mood, I couldn’t help but think he’d sail us into a large rock, splitting the ship right through the middle.

“We’ll be on the water for a couple of months. There’ll be plenty of time for all of you to pick up everything. There’s no need to rush,” Dagfinn chuckled, and when he turned to face me, he winked.

I returned the grin, ignoring the playful way Viktor narrowed his eyes at the both of us.

“Seems like someone’s jealous,” Dagfinn grinned. “But you don’t have anything to worry about, Captain. I’m completely and utterly in love with my wife. Thankfully, she loves me back just as much, though I’ve always wondered if that has anything to do with the third leg I carry around with me in my trousers.”

My lips parted in a loud gasp before I laughed hard and loudly. Roscoe and Viktor laughed with me, but Manny shifted uncomfortably and looked away.

“That’s Dagfinn for you,” Viktor chuckled as he led us away from the wheel. “He’s got a bit of a loose tongue and tends to overshare. If you offend easily, you probably won’t be very comfortable around Dagfinn, but he means well and has a good heart.”

Next up on the tour were the sails and the mast of the ship, which was Garth’s speciality. I had watched him align them earlier, and I noticed him glancing at them every so often, checking up on them.

“This is Garth’s area of expertise,” Viktor confirmed my thinking. “He’s in charge of the sails.”

“I’m not as young or agile as I used to be, so whenever someone needs to go up the mast, I usually get Caspian or Laurence to go up for me. They’re young and won’t die or break all their bones if they accidentally fall,” Gustav chuckled, mirth swimming in his eyes. “But since we’ve now got you two strapping lads–” He sent a pointed look to Manny and Roscoe. “–next time I need one of them fixing, I’ll call for you.” And as if he suddenly remembered something, Gustav turned to me with a large, friendly grin. “Of course, Astrid, if you fancy climbing the mast, I’ll happily call for you as well.”

Even though we all knew it was a joke, Viktor sent Garth a dark, warning glare.

“I think I’ll pass,” I chuckled. “But thanks for the offer, Gustav.”

Viktor turned to me, his stern expression melting into a soft smile. “Don’t worry, Astrid. We’ll find something for you to do.”

Moving away from Garth and his mast, Viktor pointed out the stairs that led down to the second-level deck, from which you could access the third-level deck.

Behind that little part, Gustav and a few others sat around a small mountain of stones and the tripod bowl where the fire would usually go. The single pan on top of it meant that the cooking process was slow and probably kept Gustav busy most of the day. For at least half of today, he wouldn’t need to cook. Not since we had the bread and cheese I had packed for the crew. I was now grateful that I had packed extra; otherwise, there wouldn’t have been enough for me or Manny.

We skipped the second deck for now and went directly down to the third level. Traditionally, this was where the entire crew would have been, physically rowing the boat to keep it sailing through the water. Chip had put in some fancy mechanism where the only thing the person steering the ship needed to do was keep their foot down on the button to keep the rows automatically moving, which meant that the purpose of this deck had changed. It had now turned into somewhat of a storage area, not just for the dried foods we had taken from Jorvik to keep us going for the estimated length of the mission, but for the weapons and other goods we intended to trade along the way.

“As you can see, there’s nothing much to see down here,” Viktor said. “There are water and apple cider barrels in those two corners over there.” He pointed toward the left, where the entire wall was lined up with large barrels. “That and the barrels of dried food on the other side will keep us alive for the next few months.”

“What about fish?” I asked, curious.

“We’re trying to catch fish every day, but in some parts of the ocean, there’s no guarantee that we’ll be able to catch any. It may be because the fish swim deeper in that part of the sea, or maybe it’s densely populated because sharks are eating them, but those are just some of the reasons,” Viktor explained. “Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, let’s head back to the second level. That’s where we have our bedrooms and the bathrooms.”

I listened carefully as Viktor guided us through the rooms. The Serpent looked large from the outside, but it felt even bigger when in it—especially the second level, which had ten bedrooms and two bathrooms.

“Usually, we get a room each, but there’s more of us this time, which means that three rooms will have to be shared,” Viktor said, bringing us to a stop in front of the first room. “Manny and Roscoe, you can take this one and Astrid,” he grinned as he turned to face me. “You’ll be sharing with me.”

We broke apart to get acquainted with our living quarters for the next few months. Viktor led me to our bedroom at the end of the hallway. It was the furthest away from the stairs leading up to the top deck but closest to the ones leading to the deck below. It was also away from both of the bathrooms.

I guess being married to the Captain came with its perks.

“I’ve been dying to get you alone all morning, my siren,” Viktor groaned in wanton desire, pulling me into his arms as soon as we were alone in our room. “What does a man have to do to get a moment alone with his wife?”

“Maybe he could start by actually telling his wife that,” I grinned and looped my arms around his neck, pulling him in close.



“I’m sorry for not speaking to you about this earlier, my siren,” Viktor whispered against my lips, his eyes fluttered closed. “I know I should have asked if you wanted to join me on this mission, but I promise you that the next few months will pass quickly, and we’ll be back in Jorvik before you know it.”

“You don’t need to apologise.” I was quick to stop him. “I definitely didn’t expect this, but I’m happy to be here. I’m so grateful that we don’t have to spend such a long time away from each other. I’m confident that it’s not just because we’re newly married. I know I would have missed you so much, pirate. I would have struggled to be away from you for so long. It would have killed me.”

Relief washed over his face. “I feel the same way,” he exhaled a shaky breath. “I don’t like to hear about you and death in the same sentence, but I feel the same way, my siren. I wouldn’t have survived without you either. You make me so damn happy.” He pressed his lips against mine in a hard, all-consuming kiss.

His words warmed my heart, and as he kissed me, gently stroking my tongue with slow, sensual strokes, I was tempted by what I had been contemplating for a few days now. I would have spoken my heart this morning, but we were interrupted.

Just like how we were interrupted now...

“Viktor! Astrid!” We heard Gustav suddenly call for us somewhere from the top deck. “Lunch!”

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:03 pm*

### CHAPTER TWO

It took us a few hours to finally reach Isle, mostly because Dagfinn allowed Roscoe and Manny to steer the wheel, and they kept steering us in the wrong direction.

“What business do we have here exactly?” I asked Viktor, peering over the rail at the group of people that had gathered at the shore in anticipation for us, just as we did back at Jorvik. Kis meowed in my arms as if she wanted to know the answer as well.

“Mostly spears,” he answered. “We dropped off a shipment a few weeks ago, and they ordered more. This is one of the easiest stops we have, though things are never easy when it comes to Asmund.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, curious.

“The man never does just business,” Caspian answered, joining us at the rail. “When I was last here to sell some quail eggs, he wouldn’t let us leave until we had a feast. And their feasts always last so long. Don’t get me wrong, the food is always great, but it’s not convenient you’re short on time.”

“The same happened to us last time as well. I swear, Isle eats their weight in gold,” Viktor sighed, running a hand down his face. “I fear that since it’s already late in the day and it will be dark very soon, he’ll insist that we stay the night.”

“That’ll set us behind,” I murmured, and they both nodded in agreement.

“We don’t want to waste time at the start. We’ll have plenty of time for that later,”

Viktor groaned. “Though Asmund doesn’t know how to take no for an answer.”

“I think that’s more of a Chief thing than an Asmund thing,” Caspian snorted and pushed himself off the rail, leaving to help Hammond dock the ship on the shore and throw out the plank for us to get off.

From what I had heard, Caspian was a bit of a lady’s man around Jorvik. With his blonde hair, eyes nearly as deep blue as the ocean, deep dimples on both of his cheeks and the gift of height on his side, the appeal was obvious. And the way he walked, confident and with charm, it appeared he knew it, too.

I turned to Viktor. “Are we all going to get off the ship?”

“I see no reason why not.” He shrugged and reached for my hand. “Though I should warn you.”

“Warn me? About what?”

Viktor grimaced. “Asmund is...very much a free spirit. And he can be a bit too forward at times.”

“How so?”

“He doesn’t have a filter. He says whatever comes to mind, even if it’s rude or too personal.”

“There are worse things than speaking your mind,” I murmured, surprised that Viktor wasn’t a fan of it. He always encouraged me to speak my mind and listened to what I had to say.

“You’ll see soon enough,” he chuckled and squeezed my hand tightly, helping me

over the rail and onto the plank. It was long, thin, and wide enough for one person but could be sturdier if you asked me. I held my breath the entire way down, afraid that it would either snap under my weight—not that I weighed nearly as much as some of the other crew members—or my foot would slip, and I would fall flat on my face on the shore. That would make a memorable first impression for the people of Isle.

“I was wondering when you would all get here!” A man stepped forward to greet us all with a large grin. With the way he was the first to speak and stood tall with so much confidence and power, I could only assume that this was Asmund, the Chief of Isle. “We’ve been waiting for you since yesterday.”

A few islanders nodded and murmured in agreement.

“It’s nice of you to wait for us, Asmund, but we made it very clear that today would be the day we would be setting sail from Jorvik,” Viktor spoke firmly, a solemn expression on his face. It was appropriate for the situation, but I wasn’t used to seeing him so firm and serious.

This was not the Viktor I was used to at all.

The Viktor I knew was always lighthearted and teasing me. I teasingly called him a pirate even though he was the exact opposite, and we bickered more than couples that had been married for longer than I had been born, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Ah, I must have read Barden’s letter wrong, but not to worry. These things happen. All that matters is that you’re here now,” Asmund laughed and waved his hand dismissively. Soon, his attention turned to me. “And who might this be?” He asked with a big grin on his face.

I had noticed him steal a few glances at me while he spoke to Viktor. It was

understandable because I knew it was rare for women to embark on sea missions, so I knew it was only a matter of time before he asked about me. I could already tell that Asmund wasn't the kind to keep his thoughts and opinions to himself. Viktor had warned me, after all.

"This is my wife, Astrid," Viktor grinned widely, proud, as he introduced me. "We recently got married. That's why I didn't mention it the last time I was here."

"Viktor Thostenson, married?" Asmund laughed freely like it was the funniest thing in the world. "I never thought I'd live to see you take a woman, but I see the appeal," he grinned and winked at me. I returned the smile, a little tight and forced around the edges. It didn't seem like Asmund had ill intentions, but he was a little too eccentric for my liking. "You're a lucky man, Viktor. Your wife is a beautiful little thing."

Viktor turned to smile at me; his eyes, slightly pinched at the corners, told me he didn't like how Asmund spoke and looked at me either. Though I already knew from how he held me close to his side, his arm tight around my waist. Possessive .

"I agree. I'm a very lucky man," Viktor grinned, and his words warmed my heart.

"And the cat?" Asmund asked, settling his eyes on the feline in my arms, stretched out like my arms were her own personal throne.

"Her name is Kis," I said and laughed when Kis meowed as if introducing herself.

"She's a pretty little thing. Just like her owner."

Viktor cleared his throat, his fingers digging into my side. "Now that we've got all the introductions out of the way, let's get down to business. We have a long trip ahead of us, so—"

“Nonsense,” Asmund snorted. “You know I don’t like to talk business until after dinner.” He turned his attention to the rest of the crew. “I hope you’re all hungry because we’ve cooked a big feast anticipating your arrival.”

“Told you,” Caspian snickered as he walked past us, following after Asmund and the people of Isle as they led the way.

“They’re obsessed with having feasts here,” Latham murmured as he fell into step beside Viktor and me.

“The cooks must be extremely overworked,” Gustav said.

“It must cost them a fortune,” I noted.

“That must be why they always have to scramble around for gold when we come to collect our payment,” Viktor chuckled, his voice low so none of the local islanders would overhear and take offence. “I always tell Barden never to let them delay their payments because regardless of how much time we give them, they’re never prepared. If we don’t collect on time, they fall behind.”

“I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Latham snorted. “You’ve only done one of these. Imagine us—” he gestured to the rest of the crew. “—who have to come here regularly.”

“It must suck to be you,” Viktor chuckled and playfully punched his shoulder.

Viktor and the rest of the crew had mentioned to me that the people of Isle threw grand feasts for dinner whenever they came over for business. I thought they were being a little dramatic, but I was wrong.

Long tables lined the centre of the square, every inch of them covered with various

dishes. The spread before me had me wondering how more people of Isle weren't overweight.

"Believe me now?" Caspian grinned, brushing past me to sit at one of the tables. I moved to sit next to him, with Viktor on my other side and Asmund next to him. The rest of the crew filled the table, and the other one opposite us.

"People of Isle," Asmund spoke loudly, tapping a spoon against his glass, demanding silence. "We have some very special guests with us tonight. Captain Viktor Thostenson from Jorvik and his crew!" The people cheered loudly to welcome us. "The most special of them all is Astrid Thostenson, Captain Viktor's wife!" The cheers were far louder than before, and my face flushed at the attention. "In honour of our most special guests, let the feast begin!"

"Ignore them, my siren," Viktor murmured in my ear and plated a rabbit leg for both of us. "They're just happy to see a new face."

"They look a little more interested than that," I murmured back, my lips tugging down into a frown as I spotted more than a few people openly staring at me. "They're looking at me like they've never seen a woman before."

"I don't blame them. What with how some of the women look here," Caspian snorted.

"That's so rude!" I gasped, struggling to hold back my laughter. "Don't let anyone catch you saying that, or you'll get us all in trouble."

"I'll try not to, but we both know I'm right," he grinned and helped himself to a second rabbit leg.

I couldn't deny it. Most of the people here seemed lovely, but I couldn't help but feel

that the people of Jorvik were far more pleasant to look at. Especially the women, but that was a wicked thing to think. I was just as bad at Caspian, who couldn't control his tongue.

"You know, Astrid," Asmund chuckled as he reached for his ale, his head turned to glance at me from around Viktor. "The last time your husband was here, I tried to set him up with one of my dancers, but he wouldn't even look at her. I now understand why." He threw his head back to laugh, though Viktor and I didn't find it very funny.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Most of the crew reacted like me, uncomfortable and nervous-looking, while the rest pretended as if they hadn't heard anything in the first place.

I heard Viktor's breath hitch from beside me, and I could tell he was nervous, too, but there was no need. I was very aware that I wasn't the first woman that Viktor had taken to bed, but I didn't want to hear about all the women before me. I was happy knowing I was his wife and would be the last woman he would be with.

"I'm glad to hear my husband has been faithful to me before we were even married," I smiled at Asmund, hoping he would drop the subject.

While I didn't mind as we weren't married then and Viktor didn't owe me anything—I appreciated the loyalty when he only felt a mere inclination toward me—it was somewhat strange that Asmund was telling me this. There wasn't a need for it, and I was happier not knowing.

"Viktor is lucky to have landed a wife like you, Astrid. You're a pretty little thing." He winked at me before turning to Garth, sitting on his other side. I wondered if he would call Garth a pretty little thing as well.

Viktor dropped his hand on mine on the table, entwining our fingers and gently



squeezing it.

“I can explain,” he whispered, looking nervous.

I shook my head. “There’s nothing to explain, Viktor. That was from before you proposed to me. Besides, nothing happened. I’d rather not know about it.”

“I’m glad you see it that way,” he sighed in relief and leaned in to press his lips to my temple. “And I’m sorry for Asmund. He takes some getting used to but doesn’t mean any harm. We just need to put up with him long enough for the feast and then the spears, and we’ll be on our way.”

“What about the Chiefess?” I asked, nibbling on a carrot and keeping it away from Kis. I didn’t want a repeat of last time when Viktor accidentally gave Kis a carrot. Instead, I put some peas and fish on the ground for her. She purred and rubbed her head against my leg before getting stuck in her very own feast.

“I’ve never met her.”

“Neither have I,” Caspian pitched in, his head bowed as he stroked Kis’ tail while she ate a piece of rabbit he had given her. I had already told him he could feed her anything but carrots. If he did, he would be tasked with cleaning up her sick later. “Rumour has it that they don’t get along, and Asmund has his eyes set on one of the dancers,” he indulged me, his voice barely above a whisper so only the three of us could hear.

“That’s terrible,” I frowned. “It’s just a rumour, right?”

Viktor pursed his lips. “I saw him with a dancer when I was here last time. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. At one point, she sat next to him and stroked him through his trousers while I was right there.”

I couldn't help but pull a face at the visual, and Caspian and Viktor laughed at my disgusted expression.

I frowned harder. "I feel bad for the woman."

"It's impossible not to," Caspian agreed.

Viktor loaded his plate with more potatoes and rabbit and did the same to mine without me needing to ask. "Looks can be deceiving, can't they?"

For the rest of the feast, I hoped that the rumours Caspian and Viktor had told me were false and that the Chiefess would present herself. The evening went on, and our plates were eventually cleared, but there still was no sighting of her. Instead, the dancers arrived and were very scantily dressed in their tight dresses with slits up the side of their legs, showing far more skin than I cared to see.

"Thank you for honouring us with this feast, Asmund," Viktor spoke firmly, his tone serious. "But we must speak business now. Please get the payment ready while we unload the spears. We've got a long journey ahead of us, and I don't want us to fall behind so early into it."

"Ah, about that," Asmund chuckled, and for the first time this evening, he looked a little nervous. "I'm afraid that we've run into a little bit of a problem."

### CHAPTER THREE

Viktor squeezed his eyes shut and let out a frustrated groan. “Don’t tell me you’re going to set us behind schedule already.”

“Then I guess I shouldn’t say anything,” Asmund laughed, and his people joined in. Neither I nor the crew found it all that funny. “Besides, Viktor, you didn’t think we’d allow you to leave at this time of night, did you? What kind of hosts would that make us?” He gestured to the darkness that had befallen us during the feast. “We insist you all stay the night. You can leave after breakfast tomorrow.”

“There is no appropriate time when you’re at sea,” Viktor pursed his lips. “What exactly is the problem, Asmund? Be honest with me.”

“We haven’t got enough gold to pay you at the moment,” Asmund admitted, the easy smile on his face not the least bit nervous. It was like he didn’t have a care in the world!

“Then I’m afraid we’ll just have to take our shipment back and be on our way,” Viktor stated. Judging by the sour expression on Asmund’s face, I could tell he wasn’t a fan of the suggestion. “Maybe on the way back, if you have enough gold, we can stop by and go ahead with the trade.”

“Let me try again,” Asmund cleared his throat, his smile slowly fading and the light in his eyes dimming ever so slightly. “We don’t have the gold today but will have it tomorrow. That’s why I suggested you all stay for breakfast tomorrow.”

“What makes tomorrow different from today?”

“My men will return from Mann tomorrow,” Asmund said. “We do regular trade with them. They have a shortage of animal milk. When my men return, we’ll have more than enough gold to pay you.”

Viktor gave him a curt nod, and I could tell he wasn’t happy. “Are you sure they will return tomorrow? I don’t have to remind you that our time is precious, Asmund, and we have a very busy schedule ahead of us.”

“Yes. Yes!” Asmund nodded his head frantically. “You have my word, Captain Viktor,” he promised, but I couldn’t help but think that the word of the Chief of Isle didn’t mean all that much. Not after everything I had heard about him and witnessed during the feast.

“Well, I guess we can wait until tomorrow for your men to return,” Viktor reluctantly agreed. “But we can’t afford to waste any more time, Asmund. If you cannot pay us tomorrow, we will be forced to take our shipment and leave. I hope you understand.”

Asmund was back to his usual goofy, cheery self. “Don’t worry, Captain Viktor. You’ll be back at sea before you know it,” he grinned before calling for more ale.

The next morning came and went, but Asmund’s men were yet to return from Mann, and we were yet to be paid. When Viktor enquired about it, Asmund promised they would be back before nightfall, and we would be paid and free to leave after the feast tonight.

Yes, another feast.

Viktor, Garth, Dagfinn, and Odin accompanied Asmund and a few of his men as they headed down the shore. They were building a new ship for their sea crew and wanted

some advice on the design.

We were invited to help ourselves to some of the fresh fruit, so the others had dispersed to get picking before lunch was served. While everyone was otherwise preoccupied, I spotted Roscoe and Manny sneaking away. I wished them good fun but hoped they didn't get into too much mischief. Viktor was stressed enough as it was, and we had barely been at sea for a day.

Even though the Chiefess of Isle wasn't present at the feast last night—something I found very strange as guests were present—I had been extended an invitation to have lunch with her in her parlour.

Before lunch, the other women who would attend the luncheon with me gave me a grand tour of Isle.

“You are fortunate to be invited to the Chiefess' parlour,” the woman leading the tour, Revna, told me. “There are women who have lived on Isle their whole life and have yet to be invited to the Chiefess' parlour. They would kill for an invitation.”

Revna clearly intended it as a compliment, making it sound like the luncheon was a grand privilege of some sort, but I couldn't help but grimace. Another feast was scheduled for this evening, and many women had already started work on it. Isle's population was nearly double that of Jorvik, so there was far more work and preparations to be done, yet these women giving me the tour didn't seem fazed. They were also dressed far better than any of the women I had spied working earlier, making me think they had no plans to help. Class seemed to be a real issue here, and as frustratingly stubborn and bone-headed Barden could be at times, he would never have allowed such a thing to happen in Jorvik.

“I feel honoured,” I faked a smile.

“You should,” Revna grinned, and the others agreed.

Once the tour concluded, Revna and the two others, Kindra and Ursula, finally led me to the Chief’s hut. Revna knocked on the door, and as we waited patiently for the Chiefess to open it, she turned and smiled over her shoulder at me. I couldn’t help but note that it was just as fake as the one I had given her earlier.

For some reason, these women didn’t seem to like me. Suddenly, I felt like I was walking into the lion’s den. I was about to make an excuse and leave when the door swung open by a woman far too poorly dressed to be the Chiefess—I only thought this because of the class differences I had observed.

“The Chiefess is in her parlour,” the woman said, turning around to lead the way.

She was just the maid. That made sense.

“Thank you,” I smiled warmly at her and followed. The maid’s smile was hesitant, and she knocked on the parlour door twice before opening it for us. I was the only one who thanked her and the only one she smiled at.

Kindra and Ursula moved to take their seats around the little table in the middle of the room. Two other women were already sitting there. I deemed the woman at the head of the table to be the Chiefess of Isle, sitting tall and proud and with a calculated, too-perfect smile on her face.

“Astrid, this is Lada,” Revna gestured to the women sitting between the Chiefess and Kindra. “And this is our Chiefess, Ivana.”

I had been right about the woman I had assumed to be the Chiefess. She was dressed the grandest of them all, with a large, poofy skirt, the tightest corset I had ever seen be worn out in public and even white gloves that covered her hands and arm all the

way to above her elbow. She was far too dressed up for a casual luncheon, and I suddenly felt underdressed in my simple dress.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Astrid,” Ivana greeted me with a strained smile. There was no warmth to it. “I hear you are the Captain’s wife.”

“I am.” I nodded curtly, my guard up. “It’s a pity we couldn’t meet at the feast yesterday.”

Ivana pursed her lips as she stared at me for a few moments, and I was almost certain she was trying to suppress a smile. “I wasn’t feeling well,” she told me before gesturing to the only empty seating cushion at the table. To my joy, it was the one between her and Revna.

The sharp look she sent all the others when she thought I wasn’t looking told me she wasn’t being entirely truthful with me. Perhaps there was more truth to those rumours Caspian and Viktor had told me yesterday than I thought.

“Please sit and help yourself to a cup of tea,” Ivana said. “Usually, I would have a maid here to do that for us, but they’re all busy preparing for the feast tonight.”

One thing that was very clear to me was that all of these women were older than me, at least by ten years. It made me feel smaller, more inadequate and out of place than I cared to admit, but I refused to show weakness in front of these women.

“I must admit, Astrid,” Lada said from across the table. “I don’t know about anyone else, but I was shocked to hear that one of the crew had brought their wife and cat along with them on a mission. I’ve heard of a few rebel females embarking on a short mission to test their sea legs, but they never last.”

“Yes,” I chuckled, the sound strained. “It was a sort of last-minute decision.”

“What compelled him to make such a decision?” Kindra asked, peering at me as if she believed it to be the most absurd thing ever.

“My husband couldn’t bear the thought of being away from me for so long, and honestly, neither could I.” I shrugged, surprised by their frowning faces. They looked at me like the notion of a husband and wife missing each other when separated was absurd.

“My husband is a seaman, as well,” Revna said. “But he’s never thought about taking me to sea with him. When he returns to land, he hardly wants to talk about his time on the water.”

Kindra, Lada and Ursula all nodded, their experiences matching up with Revna. It appeared that the only person around this table who wasn’t part of a crew was Ivana’s husband, but that was because he was the Chief of Isle instead.

“We’re newly married,” I told them, trying not to cringe at the bitter taste of the tea. It was far too strong for me, but I was determined to drink at least half of it. I didn’t want to give Ivana any more reason to dislike me.

“It’s still very strange,” Ivana frowned, looking to be deep in thought. “I’ve heard a lot of sea stories in my time as Chiefess, from our crew and those that stop by for trade or a warm meal, but I have never heard of a crew member, let alone a Captain, taking his wife and her cat along with him.”

“I guess Viktor is a first then,” I chuckled, but none of them echoed the sound.

“Where is your little cat now?” Ursula asked, a small smile on her face. She seemed to be the friendliest of the group, and I made a point to return her smile with a genuine one.



“She is exploring the island,” I answered.

“I would love to meet her later,” Ursula told me, her expression quickly dimming when the others sent her strange looks.

“When I next see her, I’ll come find you and introduce you to Kis,” I smiled widely, ignoring the frowns around the table. “Kis doesn’t take well to strangers, but if you give her something to eat, she’ll let you pet her.”

“I have some fish at home she might like,” Ursula grinned, and this time, I was glad to see that she ignored the strange looks from the others.

“How long have you been married, Astrid?” Revna asked from beside me. “You mentioned you haven’t been married long.”

I felt my cheeks warm with a flush. “Ten days.”

“Ah, you are just newlyweds still!” Lada grinned, a wicked glint in her eyes as she stared at me. “Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but the sex must still be electric.”

Before I could tell them that we were yet to have sex, the others all jumped in with stories of their own.

“It was when Asmund and I got married,” Ivana laughed, fanning herself as her cheeks coloured pink. “The sex was amazing for the first two years of our marriage. And then I got pregnant, and he’s hardly touched me since. Every time he does, I fall pregnant, and then he goes back to not touching me.”

“Gerald always falls on top of me like an animal when he gets back from the sea,” Kindra giggled and fanned herself, her cheeks now bright red. “The sex is always amazing for the first week, but then it fizzles out, so I’m always very encouraging

about him going away as often as he wants.”

“That only lasts a few days for us when Sten gets back,” Lada grinned wickedly, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. “But he always brings back lavish gifts with him. He loves having his cock sucked, and depending on how good the gifts are that time, that’s how good I’ll give it to him.”

“Gorm is only interested in having sex with me when I’m pregnant,” Revna sighed dramatically. “It’s so good and electric, but I’m not even thirty and already a mother of five. I gave birth six months ago, and he hasn’t touched me since, so when he gets back next week, I guess I’ll be trying for a sixth.”

It appeared now that the lid had been unscrewed, the can of worms had been unleashed, and I was forced to sit there and listen to their wild sex stories with their husbands. Not only did I learn that pregnancy plays around with your hormones and makes you hornier than at any other time in your life, but you’ll be having non-stop sex for the first five months, and after that, there would be a dry spell until long after the child is born.

By the end of the raunchy anecdotes, all the blood in my body had rushed to my face, and I could hardly believe some of the things they had shared with me.

“Viktor has never fallen on me like an animal before,” I told them, red in the face. After hearing their wild stories, I was embarrassed to admit that I was still a virgin.

“Just you wait,” Revna laughed. “It might not happen now since you’re together, or perhaps because you’re still newlyweds, but as soon as you’re separated for a little while, he’ll ravage you like an animal when he returns.”

All the women laughed, but I was too nervous to join in.

Ivana turned to me. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” I denied, hating the squeak in my voice which gave me away.

Her eyes narrowed, and the corner of her lips turned up in a wicked smirk. “You have laid with your husband, haven’t you?”

“Of course I have!” I scoffed and turned away so she wouldn’t see the lie on my face. “Whatever makes you think that?”

Ivana cocked her head to the side, studying me, and the other women eagerly watched the exchange.

“You just seem a little... inexperienced .”

I gulped and shook my head, but they must have seen through the lie because they all burst out laughing. My cheeks burned furiously, and I ducked my head in shame and... disappointment .

### CHAPTER FOUR

Thankfully, Isle's sea crew returned just before the feast started. Viktor had already accepted and counted the gold from Asmund—it was all there—and we planned to set sail as soon as our stomachs were full.

“Will we be able to make up the one day we were set behind here?” I turned to ask Viktor, smiling warmly as he topped up my glass with some more ale.

“We should if there aren't any other stops like this one.” He reached for a second helping of the giant goat specially slaughtered for this evening's feast. “We always overestimate the length of the trip by a little bit as things like this happen more often than you think they would. Sometimes, it's not enough, and we still return late.”

“If that's the case, you should start overestimating a little more,” I told him. “If I was still back at Jorvik and waiting three months for you to come home, and you didn't turn up on the estimated day, I would be worried sick.”

“You never have to worry about me, my siren,” Viktor murmured. He threw an arm over my shoulder, pulled me into his side and bowed his head to press his lips to my forehead. “I never want you to have to worry about me. I only want you to have happy thoughts when you think of me, so I'll take your advice the next time we set sail for a long mission. I'm sure everyone's families would appreciate it.”

“I'll always worry about you, Viktor. That's part of the job description as your wife,” I told him, playfully nudging his shoulder with mine in hopes of lightening the mood.

“Well, then. If you must,” he chuckled, pressing another kiss to my temple. “How was your day? I feel like I haven’t seen you all day today.”

“It was good,” I lied smoothly, a little embarrassed to tell him everything the women of Isle had told me today. It wasn’t often that I kept things from Viktor, mostly because I felt comfortable enough to tell him everything and anything, though I couldn’t deny that the notion of him falling onto me like an animal in heat for sex made me more than a little nervous. But not because I was scared. The nerves weren’t bad or unwelcome, just a little... foreign .

All the women made it sound like it was a chore, boring, and something they just needed to deal with. They either tolerated it, initiated it because they wanted a child, or felt distant from their husband.

Was that how sex was supposed to be?

What was the point of going all the way then when oral was so pleasurable?

Viktor narrowed his eyes at me in suspicion. “Why do I feel like you’re hiding something from me, my siren?”

“It’s nothing important,” I denied, sipping at some water in hopes that it would cool down the warm flush that coloured my cheeks. “I just remembered some things from lunch earlier with the ladies.”

“What kind of things?”

“It’s not important,” I tried to deny, but I could tell that he wasn’t convinced. “Maybe I’ll tell you about it later, but it’s nothing to be worried about. If anything, it’s a little embarrassing.”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about with me,” he assured me. “But as long as it’s nothing to be worried about, then you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” I exhaled and turned my head to graze my lips against his cheek. Before I could ask about his day, we were interrupted by a familiar voice from behind us.

“Just the person that I was looking for!”

Glancing over my shoulder, I was surprised to find Ivana standing behind me with a large grin and a tall glass of something murky topped off with a yellow slice of lemon. She thrust the glass forward, all but forcing it into my hands.

I turned to greet her. “Will you be joining us at the feast today, Ivana?”

“No.” The Chiefess shook her head, her grin only growing bigger. “I’m not feeling well again this evening, so I’ll be heading back to my hut to rest, but I couldn’t stomach the thought of letting you leave without saying goodbye, Astrid. As a parting present, I brought you my favourite drink. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.”

I graciously returned her smile. “That’s sweet of you, but you shouldn’t have gone out of your way like that.”

“Nonsense,” Ivana laughed. “This is only one of my duties as the Chiefess of Isle. Plus, I enjoyed your company at lunch today. I wish you didn’t have to leave so soon, but perhaps you can visit with Viktor once you’re back from your mission?”

“Sure.” I nodded without any intention of following through with her request. I had spent more than enough time on Isle to know that this wasn’t my sort of place, and I didn’t wish to spend any more time here than what was necessary.

When Viktor subtly snickered beside me, I knew he saw through the whole act.

“It was great meeting you, Astrid,” Ivana grinned widely at me and pulled me in for a quick hug before she pulled away, already back on her feet. “I must go now as I’m still not feeling well, but I hope you enjoy the feast and safe sailing!”

“Thank you,” I murmured after her, but she was already too far gone to hear me.

“Well, that’s a first,” Viktor murmured, the both of us watching Ivana’s back as she walked away from us and the rest of the island people enjoying all that the feast had to offer. “I’ve never met the Chiefess of Isle before. I’ve never even seen her before now.”

“Trust me, you’re not missing out on much,” I snorted, raising the glass to my lips. Immediately, my nose scrunched from its pungent smell, but I forced myself to take a sip. Ivana had seemed really keen on it. Hopefully, it wouldn’t taste nearly half as bad as it smelt.

My nose scrunched again at its bitter initial taste, but the aftertaste wasn’t horrible. After another tentative sip, it felt like the unusual drink was growing on me. It was only when I had drunk more than half that I started to feel strange.

The world was spinning on its axis, and everything was moving around me.

“I don’t feel so good, pirate,” I whispered, somehow able to put down the glass without dropping it. “I think it might be something I ate.”

Viktor frowned. “Or drank,” he murmured, reaching for the glass, holding it up to his nose for a smell. His nose scrunched in distaste the same way mine had. “You, my siren,” Viktor laughed and took a tentative sip of the drink, wincing at the strong, bitter taste. “Are drunk.”

I turned to question him; my lips parted in shock.

“Drunk?” I echoed.

“You’re definitely drunk, my siren,” he threw his head back and laughed. “I don’t blame you. This is some pretty strong stuff.”

“I can’t be drunk. I’ve never been drunk before,” I shook my head but quickly regretted it when I felt the food and drink that I had just consumed start to come up again. I promptly pressed a hand over my mouth before I embarrassed myself in front of everyone.

“Here, drink some water.” Viktor lifted his glass to my lips. “Pace yourself,” he murmured and helped me take a few small sips at a time, trying not to make myself even more sick than I already felt.

“How can I be drunk?” I groaned as I pushed the glass away from my lips, feeling very sick. Desperate to get the world to stop spinning, I closed my eyes and leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“The drink Ivana gave you was very strong. It has high levels of alcohol,” he told me, running a gentle hand through my hair as he embraced me. The touch already made me feel better, but I was still battling the feeling of throwing up.

“Why would she do that to me?” I whimpered.

“I think she was being friendly,” he murmured in a low baritone, turning his head to brush his lips against my hairline.

“If she just wanted to be friends, why do I feel so bad?” I groaned and nuzzled my face further into the crook of his neck, desperately seeking the comfort and relief that



only my husband could provide.

“Because it’s your first time drinking,” he whispered against my forehead, his lips lingering there. “You’re just not used to it. The first time is always the worst. All the other times after aren’t so bad.”

“They aren’t?”

“Well, they are, but not nearly as bad as this one,” he chuckled, and the sound made me wince. Everything suddenly sounded so loud. As if the world spinning wasn’t enough already. “I’m sorry you feel terrible, my siren. But don’t worry, I’ll look after you.”

“Looks like Astrid here has had a few ales too many,” Asmund laughed, taking the seat before us. “She doesn’t look too good, but nothing that a glass of water and a good night’s sleep won’t cure. Maybe a stationary bed would be good for her. We have a few huts free if you want to spend the night.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Viktor denied, careful not to jostle me when he shook his head. “We’re already a day behind. Astrid will get some rest on the ship, and she’ll feel better in the morning. There’s no need to stick around any longer, but I appreciate the offer, Asmund.”

I was grateful that Viktor hadn’t taken Asmund up on his offer. I would have been so annoyed if we were set behind another day because of me.

In my drunken stupor, I was hardly aware of Viktor carrying me back to The Serpent, where we were set to resume the mission. When I felt the soft fur of our wolf skin blanket underneath me, I knew we were in our bedroom.

“Do you want to change out of your dress?” Viktor asked, but he didn’t wait for an

answer. He was already sifting through our clothes rack.

“Yes,” I whimpered.

Viktor was gentle as he pulled me into a sitting position. If I was sober and in my right mind, I would have been a little embarrassed about my husband having to change me like this, but right now, all I felt was gratitude.

I allowed him to pull the dress over my head and slip me into one of his tunics. Once we were both changed for bed, Viktor crawled in behind me and pulled the blanket over us both.

“You don’t have to head back up to the deck?” I asked, turning over onto my side to bury my face in his chest.

“No,” he whispered, tightening his arms around me and pulling me closer. “I don’t want to be anywhere else, my siren. Wherever you are, that’s always where I want to be.”

“You’re too good to me, pirate,” I murmured sleepily into his chest. “I’ll never speak of you like how the women of Isle speak of their husbands.”

“How do they speak of their husbands?” He asked, curious.

“Like animals.”

“Animals?”

“They say that their husbands ravish them like animals, and they made fun of me for being so inexperienced. When I said you weren’t that way with me, they didn’t believe me. After that, I didn’t dare admit that we had yet to consummate our

marriage.”

I felt his chest shake from under my face when he chuckled. “Do you want me to ravish you like an animal, my siren?”

“Maybe,” I murmured, conflicted.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he chuckled and kissed the crown of my head. “I think you should sleep before you say anything else you’ll probably regret in the morning.”

“Fine,” I groaned and nuzzled my face further into his chest, feeling like I could never be close enough to him. “But I still have so much to tell you.”

“I can’t wait to hear it all, but for now, sleep,” Viktor laughed. “Sleep tight and have sweet dreams. I hope for your sake that your headache isn’t too bad in the morning, but I’ll be here to look after you. Always.”

### CHAPTER FIVE

The first thing I did in the morning was slap the palm of my hand over my mouth in a desperate but poor attempt to stop myself from throwing up.

“Astrid?” Viktor called out to me in a groggy voice, but I couldn’t answer him with a mouthful of bile.

Throwing off the blanket, I rushed out of bed and headed for the door. Before I could make it, Viktor curled an arm around my waist, forced me to sit on the edge of the bed and held up a bucket.

My throat burned as I emptied the contents of my stomach into the bucket, including the liquid poison I had unknowingly consumed yesterday.

“Viktor,” I groaned, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “Please leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere, my siren,” Viktor murmured from behind me, holding the bucket with one hand and my hair at the base of my neck with the other, keeping it out of the crossfire.

“I don’t want you to see me like this.” I pushed my face further into the bucket when my stomach lurched again.

I would have never accepted the drink if I knew it was spiked.

“We’re married, Astrid,” he whispered, smoothing a hand down my back—calming

me. “That means we’re there for each other in good times and bad.”

“But this is embarrassing,” I whined.

“That’s what you’ll be saying when you see me drunk,” he chuckled but was quick to quieten down when I heaved and threw up some more.

When my stomach finally felt settled, I pushed the bucket away.

“I think I’m done,” I exhaled deeply. My throat still burned, but my stomach didn’t feel like it would turn inside out anymore, so that was something.

When Viktor handed me a napkin and removed the sick bucket, I thanked him.

“You don’t have to thank me for anything, Astrid,” he whispered, kissing my cheek. “I’m just fulfilling my duties as a husband. Now, get back into bed. You need to rest.”

I allowed Viktor to push me back and cover me with the blanket, tucking me into bed like a child.

“Where are you going?” I asked, watching as he moved toward the door.

“I’m going to get rid of this and bring back something to settle your stomach,” he said, slipping out of the room.

My eyes closed briefly. I didn’t know how long had passed since I opened them again, but when I turned my head, I saw they had landed on a very concerned Viktor.

“How do you feel?”

“Not great,” I frowned and turned to snuggle into his side, craving his warmth. My husband threw his arm over my body and pulled me closer, curling his body around mine. “How long was I asleep?”

“No longer than ten minutes. You were asleep when I returned.” He reached for something behind him. “You need to sit up and get this down you, my siren.”

“What is it?” I asked, staring at the glass of clear liquid he held up for me. “Water?”

“No.” Viktor shook his head and helped me sit up. “It’s Garth’s special hangover cure. Drink it and take a nap. I guarantee it’ll make you feel as good as new when you wake up.”

Desperate to rid myself of the pounding headache that felt like it was splitting my skull in two, I gulped down the drink quickly.

Viktor laughed. “Pace yourself, my siren.”

Taking heed of his words, I sipped the rest of the concoction and let him take the glass from me when I finished it.

“Are you sleepy?” He whispered as we settled back in the bed.

“Kind of,” I whispered back, my eyes closing as I pressed my face into his chest. I don’t know how I had ever managed to fall asleep before marrying Viktor. Now, it felt like I couldn’t fall asleep without his arms wrapped around me like this. “Don’t you need to get to the top deck and do some Captain things?”

“Captain things?” He was amused. “They’ll manage fine without me for a while. I’ll stay here with you until you fall asleep.”

“Thank you,” I exhaled in relief. Right now, I wanted nothing more than to be held by my husband until I fell asleep.

“I’d do anything for you, my siren.” He brushed his lips against my forehead in a soft, featherlight kiss. “I should tell you about last night.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Please tell me I didn’t embarrass myself.”

“Nothing embarrassing,” he chuckled. “It was more... interesting .”

“Interesting? How so?” I held my breath, afraid that I had spilt the beans on the conversation I had with the women from Isle yesterday. While none of it was bad, it was embarrassing to admit to my husband. Especially when the women of Isle were right. I was inexperienced.

His grin was laced with amusement. “Like how you want me to ravish you like an animal and don’t understand why those women don’t enjoy it when their husbands do the same,” Viktor chuckled, and as if he knew that I would try to squirm my way out of his arms, he tightened his hold around my waist and pressed his upper body against mine, trapping me underneath him. “I appreciate you being honest with me, my siren, but we’re still going to wait. Only until you’re ready,” he said in a rough, husky voice, staring at me with dark eyes. “And when you are, I’m going to love you and ravish you until you beg me to stop.”

“Why would I ever want you to stop?” I asked in an airy voice, my eyes locked on his. There was something so enchanting about my husband, something so wickedly handsome and irresistible.

“You won’t because I’ll do things right, my siren. So right ,” he groaned and brushed his lips against mine. “And don’t pay too much attention to what those women have to say. They’re all old and bitter and live differently than we do in Jorvik, but I’m

sure you don't need me to tell you that."

I nodded, yes, but my mind lingered on his promise to ravage me as soon as I was ready. Oh, how I wished that could happen now.

As if he could sense my trail of thought, Viktor's lips curled up at the corners. He brushed a stray, offending dark strand of hair away from my face before lowering his to mine. I was just glad the hangover cure left a minty taste in my mouth, making it feel clean, or I never would have allowed him to kiss me so soon after throwing up.

"You'll never end up like any of those women, my siren." He pressed the words into my mouth, forcing them deeper with his wet tongue, stroking mine sensually. "I'll never stop loving you. And I'll never leave you for many months like they do to their wives."

"What does that mean?" I asked, the words coming out in a breathy moan.

"Either I have to cut back on the missions, or you'll have to get good at swimming. It doesn't matter which one. As long as we're together, that's all that matters."

"We should devise a rule," I murmured, tapping my chin thoughtfully.

"What kind of rule?"

"If it's less than a month, you can go alone. Anything longer than a month, I'm coming with you."

"That's a good idea, but even a month without you sounds impossible, my siren. Maybe we can negotiate it down to two weeks." His lips turned down in a slight frown. "But it's a good rule."



“Of course it is. It was my idea.”

When a knock sounded on the door, Viktor quickly rolled out of bed to open it.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Breakfast,” Viktor grinned and turned around to present the food tray the Caspian had been kind enough to drop off to us. The tray had a few slices of bread, one big bowl of soup and a small plate of some of the fruit we had picked from Isle.

“I’m never going to drink again,” I groaned when I moved to sit up in bed, and it felt like the whole world was spinning. Viktor helped me up and lay the tray over my thighs.

“Never say never,” Viktor chuckled and held up a slice of bread dipped in soup to my mouth. “Next time you want a drink, I’ll get you something a little sweeter and not as strong.”

I kissed his hand in thanks and accepted the bread he fed me. “You don’t have to feed me, pirate. I’m not that sick.”

“I want to,” he told me with a soft smile, and I couldn’t bring myself to say no to him.

After Viktor fed us both until there wasn’t a single crumb left on the tray, he held me in his arms and whispered sweet nothings in my ear until I fell asleep.

When I awoke later, sometime in the afternoon, I felt much better. I guess Garth’s hangover cure really did work. However, that didn’t stop the big wave of embarrassment from nearly drowning me.

I was spewing out the contents of my stomach after one measly drink while he held

up the bucket and held back my hair.

What must my husband think of me?

### CHAPTER SIX

I spent a considerable amount of time picking out the perfect dress. My options were limited because I couldn't pack much in the little time I had. I ended up settling on a dark navy dress with dainty white flowers. It was simple and pretty, and I felt even more beautiful when I twisted my hair into the perfect plait.

After how embarrassingly inebriated I was last night and pathetically hungover this morning, I wanted to step out in front of everyone, looking like I had everything under control.

I immediately regretted it when I stepped out on the top deck, and Caspian and Laurence started laughing at me. They were on cleaning duty but paused to make fun of me.

"What are you two laughing at?" I narrowed my eyes at them, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Why are you dressed like you're about to go for a walk through a field of flowers?" Laurence chuckled, pointedly looking at the flowers patterned on my dress. It wasn't my favourite dress of all time, but it was pretty, and I liked how it fit me.

"Why is that so specific?" I countered, taking great joy in the way his face flushed.

"Laurence clearly likes going on romantic walks through flower fields," Caspian snickered, teasing Laurence and then turned to me. "I'm assuming this is your favourite dress?"

“It’s not my favourite, but I like it well enough.”

“Well, I doubt you’ll feel the same about it for long. Not with how much it rained earlier.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, and when they both pointed to my feet, I glanced down to see that the bottom of my dress was already wet with the murky water Caspian and Laurence were mopping up. “I’m going to change,” I groaned and retreated down the stairs.

Caspian and Laurence nodded at me when I returned to the top deck, no longer dressed in one of my finest dresses. Instead, I chose one that was a little faded in colour and half an inch shorter than all my other ones. The dress was still pretty—this one pale yellow with white ruffles around the sleeves and neckline—but it had seen better days.

I found Viktor at the front of the ship, his hands on the wheel and his foot on the button.

The corner of his lips twitched with the hint of a smile. “How are you feeling this morning, my siren?”

“Better.” I returned his smile, albeit mine was a little embarrassed. “Thank you for looking after me earlier.”

“That’s what good husbands do,” he chuckled and moved over, taking one hand off the wheel. “Come here.”

“What are you doing, pirate?” I asked with wide eyes. “Isn’t it dangerous to take your hands off the wheel?”

“For too long? Yes,” He nodded and laughed. “You better hurry up and put your hands on the wheel before it’s too late. I’m going to teach you how to steer.”

“I’ve never steered a ship before,” I protested but moved to stand in front of him.

“I’ll teach you.”

He guided my hands on the wheel, making me grab two spokes on opposite sides.

“Like this?”

“Perfect,” he made a low noise of satisfaction and rested his chin on my shoulder from behind, wrapping his arms around my waist. “I’ll keep my foot on the pedal, so you only have to focus on steering the wheel.”

“I think that’s best,” I chuckled nervously. “So, what do I do?”

“Just hold it,” he told me. “Try and sail straight, but it’s not a big deal if you stray a little off course. Most of the time, all you have to do is hold it and make sure it doesn’t spin too far out.”

“Hold it, and steer straight. Got it,” I murmured and nodded, my eyes trained on the vast sea ahead.

“I’ll make a good sea woman out of you yet.” He squeezed my hip. “Do you feel like Garth’s hangover cure worked?”

“I think so, but I think I was hallucinating at one point.”

“Hallucinating?”

“I woke up to use the bathroom. Someone was in there, so I went down the hallway

to use the other bathroom. But when I glanced over my shoulder, I spotted the door open, and someone ran out. I tried to call after them, but they didn't answer and kept running."

I felt him frown. "It could have been one of the crew," he mused aloud but didn't sound convinced.

"Probably."

"But it is strange."

"Why would they run away from me?"

"I don't know," he murmured, a confused expression on his face. "I guess we'll just have to ask the crew at dinner or something. Though I doubt anyone would own up to it as it's rather strange."

"Probably not," I murmured and remembered something. "I know I'm your wife, Viktor, but I don't want you to give me special treatment. We've been away from home for two days, and I haven't been assigned any chores."

"You don't have to do chores, my siren. You just being here is enough."

"It isn't for me," I frowned. "At the very least, I should pull my weight around here."

"What do you want to do?"

"I'm more than happy to do whatever needs to be done. Here, on the ship, I don't just want to be your wife, Viktor. I want to be part of the crew."

"We'll find something for you tomorrow," Viktor promised me with a kiss on my

shoulder. “We’ll start small and see where we go from there.”

“Thank you,” I smiled at him before returning my attention to the water ahead, making sure I hadn’t steered off course with all the distractions. I doubted getting us all lost would land me in good standing with the crew. “How many more islands until we’re smooth sailing to Greenland?”

“Four more,” Viktor told me, tightening his arms around me. “That shouldn’t take us longer than four days—actually, we have five more stops left. After the fourth island, we’ll be smooth sailing to another island where we get most of our fur. We’ll probably spend the night there to rest, then leave for Greenland. After that, we’ll be heading to Treasure Island.”

“It sounds like we’ve overestimated quite a bit for this mission.”

“You underestimate how long it’ll take to get to Greenland,” Viktor chuckled. “After Treasure Island, we’ll probably stop again at Greenland to rest for a few days. Being non-stop on the boat for three or four weeks will be immensely tiring for all of us.”

I remained at the wheel until Gustav called us over for dinner. Then, Garth took over, multitasking, steering, and eating.

Dinner consisted of fried fish, roasted nuts and a slice of the bread from this morning for everyone. It wasn’t the most extravagant meal, but it was pretty good, considering we were in the middle of the ocean.

“How about we address the elephant on the ship?” Laurence grinned, making a show of glancing around everyone in the circle before his eyes settled on me.

My cheeks flushed. “Please don’t,” I groaned and buried my face in my hands in shame.

“It would be impossible not to, considering how wasted you were yesterday,” Dagfinn laughed. “The last time I was that wasted, Sophia and I conceived our youngest child. And the time before, we conceived our middle child.”

“We didn’t need to know that,” Caspian groaned and pulled a disgusted face.

“If we can talk about Astrid being drunk, then why don’t you want to hear about me being just as drunk?” Dagfinn complained.

“Maybe it’s because Astrid wasn’t talking about the conception of her children.” Roscoe pulled a face, looking just as disgusted as Caspian, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“No one encourage Dagfinn,” Viktor chuckled. “I don’t want to know about the conception of all his children. I already know too much as it is.”

“Speaking of being drunk,” I began in a desperate attempt to take the attention away from the topic of conception. “There’s something I wanted to ask you all about. I woke up to use the bathroom earlier, but someone was already in it. Naturally, I walked down the hallway to use the other one, but when I looked over my shoulder, I saw someone running away from the other bathroom. I called after them, but they didn’t answer. I was wondering who that was.”

“It sounds like they had an explosive time in the toilet and were too embarrassed to own up to it,” Caspian laughed, and I pulled a face again. Perhaps over dinner wasn’t the best time to discuss this topic.

“Can we please stop talking about explosive toilet times?” Gustav groaned and put down his half-eaten slice of bread, seemingly put off his food.

“I’m with Gustav on this one,” Hammond piped up, but he had already licked his



plate clean and was staring at Latham's plate next to his.

"Did you see what direction they ran in?" Garth asked, his lips curling down.

I frowned. "I don't remember."

"You must have still been drunk," Odin joked, and everyone laughed. Me included.

"That's very possible," I chuckled.

I know Odin teasing me was insignificant within itself, but it felt significant to me. It felt like they were starting to accept me, and not just because I was the Captain's wife. There was a real sense of family and belonging among these men, and I was grateful that Viktor had these people in his life. And now, me, too.

Jerrik and Manny were the only ones who didn't talk much to me, but I knew they were more reserved than the others.

Either way, I enjoyed the company more than the food at dinner, but that had more to do with my apprehension about fish than Gustav's cooking. However, I had a feeling that would soon change with all this water around us. Fish was pretty much the only thing we had access to. It was either fish or starve.

I helped Gustav clean up after dinner, and Roscoe and Manny, the two juniors on the ship, did the washing up. Latham switched with Garth, and we all enjoyed some ale. After last night's and this morning's events, I opted out and instead moved over to the rail to stare at the water.

The water was beautiful during the day, but it was extra special in the darkness of the night.

The water almost glistened under the moonlight.

When I felt a pair of eyes bore into my back, I didn't need to look back to see who it was. My husband watched me all evening, but I couldn't complain. The feel of his eyes on me made me feel warm and protected. Safe and loved.

He always told me that he loved me, and while I believed him, there was something ultra special when he looked at me like that. I didn't think he even realised how he looked at me, so unashamedly uncaring of who was looking, whether it was a stranger on one of the islands we stopped at or one of the crew.

If I had turned down his offer of marriage for Crosby's, it would have been the biggest mistake of my life. It was evident that no one would love me the way Viktor did, and as of recently, I had grown to appreciate that so much more.

And now, I couldn't help but start to return his feelings. It was impossible not to when he looked at me the way he did and treated me like I was the most precious thing in the world.

It was both gross and endearing that he had held my hair back while I threw up the entire contents of my stomach this morning despite my pleas for him to leave. I couldn't imagine anyone else doing that for me—anyone else ever caring about me in that way—other than my family.

“Do you want to head to bed, my siren?” Viktor asked as he came to stand next to me at the rail, holding his hand out for me to take.

I accepted it without a second thought and squeezed his hand, allowing him to lead me downstairs to our bedroom.

I loved the feeling of our fingers laced together. There wasn't anywhere I wouldn't

follow this man if he held my hand like this.

“I’ve been thinking about something all day,” I murmured as he closed the door behind us.

“What’s that?” Viktor hummed in question and reached for the bottom of his tunic, getting undressed for bed.

Unable to look away from his chiselled chest, made all that more prominent when he flexed with his arms above his head, I swallowed. Hard .

How was I lucky enough to marry such a fine specimen of pure testosterone?

“What have you been thinking about all day, my siren?” Viktor laughed at my stunned expression, leaning in to steal a quick kiss before he continued stripping.

“Oh, right,” I murmured breathlessly. My fingers shook as I reached behind and began on the buttons along the back of my dress. “I want to make our marriage real.”

Viktor was down to only his briefs now, and his fingers halted at the waistband as he held my eyes. “Our marriage is real.”

I slipped the dress off my shoulders and allowed it to pool at my feet, leaving me in only my thin slip. “We haven’t consummated it yet,” I whispered.

His eyes darkened with need and desire. “What are you saying, my siren?”

“I want to have sex with you tonight.” My voice was laced with raw need as I stared at him, both of us in equal states of undress. “I want to have sex with my husband.”

“What?” Viktor whispered, looking like he couldn’t believe what he had just heard.

“You heard me.” I sent him a sultry, pointed look and slipped off the slip, leaving me as naked as the day I was born. “I want to have sex with you, Viktor. I want to feel you inside of me.”

My husband gulped, physically struggling. The prominent bulge growing in his underwear told me he was far more than ready, and that only made me want him so much more.

“You’re not ready,” he protested weakly.

“But I am,” I insisted, the sound coming out a breathy moan.

“Astrid,” Viktor groaned and shook his head, forcing his eyes away from me. “I don’t want to rush you into anything you’re not ready for.”

“You’re not rushing me into anything,” I denied. “I want this, Viktor. I want you.”

His voice was coarse. “I don’t want you to regret this in the morning.”

“I could never regret you.” I closed the distance between us and rose on my tiptoes to whisper against his lips, “I love you, Viktor.”

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:03 pm*

### CHAPTER SEVEN

“ Say that again,” Viktor demanded in a shaky voice, sounding like he was hanging on by a thread.

“I love you, Viktor,” I whispered again against his lips. “So much.”

“I love you too, Astrid. More than you can imagine,” he exhaled and pulled me flush against his body. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’m more sure of this than anything else in my life,” I promised. “Will you let me have you, Viktor?” I asked in the sultriest voice I could muster, desperate to seduce him to have his wicked ways with me.

This man loved me more than any man could ever love me. I had never been more certain of anything else, and it was time to take our relationship to the next level.

“If we do this, there’s no going back, my siren,” Viktor warned me as he pulled down the waistband of his underwear, freeing his cock.

He fisted it at the base and pumped it slowly, his eyes trailing down my body. Mine did the same to his, my entire body heating up when they fell on his cock.

His big, thick, meaty cock.

“The same goes for you, pirate,” I smiled flirtatiously and walked backwards to the bed, lowering myself onto it. “Won’t you join me?” I spread my legs, beckoning my

husband.

“You don’t need to ask me twice,” Viktor chuckled, still pumping his cock as he approached me. When he lowered himself on the bed, he placed a hand on my shoulder and pushed me to lay on my back. “This is your last chance to stop me,” he murmured throatily, looming over me. He dropped himself to his knees and gently pressed his lips against mine.

“That’s not happening,” I groaned and reached my arms up to wrap around his neck, desperate to close the little distance that remained between us. “I want you, Viktor. Stop denying me. Stop denying your wife.”

He groaned and pressed his lips harder against mine. “I could never deny you, my siren.”

One moment, I could feel him resisting, his touch and kiss gentle, almost as if afraid that he would hurt me. The next moment, he was bruising my lips with his and his hands were everywhere. One hand was under my thigh, the fingertips digging into my skin as he raised my leg and hooked it over his hip, opening me up to him. His other hand was on my breast, squeezing, rubbing and pinching my nipples, alternating between them both to give equal attention.

When his hardened cock pressed against my pussy, only an inch away from my seeping hole, I moaned and arched my back.

“Viktor,” I whined, one hand lost in his hair while the other trailed down his chest, desperate to feel my husband’s cock.

“Astrid,” he groaned back, but I swallowed the sound in a hungry kiss.

“I need you inside of me, Viktor,” I all but begged him, desperate to feel the pleasure

which I knew only my husband could give me.

“How do you want it, my siren?” His kisses trailed down my neck and shoulders until he reached my pebbled nipples, immediately sucking one into his mouth. “Gentle?” He switched to my other nipple. “Or hard?” To emphasise his point, his teeth raked over the hardened nub, sucking greedily.

“Hard,” I exhaled in frustration, squirming underneath him as I tried to get his cock to slip into my pussy. The thick, mushroom tip kept brushing and prodding between my lips, but he wouldn’t give me what I really wanted.

Before I could raise my hips and demand that he get inside me right now, Viktor pulled his hips back and slammed into me. True to his word, he entered me hard, and my eyes immediately rolled into the back of my head. The pain from having my virginity taken was overpowered by the sheer pleasure of his thick, throbbing cock deep inside of me.

I had thought the feeling of his cock down my throat had been amazing, but it was nothing compared to the feel of him inside of me, forcing my pussy to stretch to accommodate his thick cock.

“Astrid?” Viktor called out my name, his voice strained. “Are you okay, my siren?”

“Yes,” I moaned and nodded, forcing my eyes open. “It feels so good. You feel so good inside me,” I moaned wantonly. “I need you to move, Viktor. I need more.”

My husband, always a man of his word, thrust in and out of me harder than before. My toes curled into the blanket, and I raised my legs to hook them around his hips, desperate to feel him closer.

“I’m going to come,” I moaned, far too gone in the moment to feel embarrassed about

coming so soon.

But when my husband was thrusting into me, the squelching, wet sounds of our body meeting each time, and his mouth sucking hard on my nipples, playing with my body, how was a woman supposed to last?

And as if that wasn't enough, Viktor held my eyes as he sucked on his thumb and slipped it between our bodies to rub my clit just as furiously as he was slamming into me.

"Come for me, my siren," he groaned and moved up to press another kiss to my lips. However, this one was far dirtier as his tongue thrust in my mouth, stroking my own at the same rate that his hips were moving. "Come on," he tempted me in a low, gravelly tone. "Come for me, my siren. Come on my cock."

His dirty words pushed me over the edge, and my pussy walls clenched around his cock, desperate to keep him in there as I came down from the high.

"Clench around me like that again," Viktor groaned, raking his teeth over my bottom lip as his thrusts turned gentle, drawing out my orgasm.

Like a good girl, I did as I was told and clenched tightly around his cock, moaning wantonly at the feel of him.

Viktor groaned and dropped himself lower, burying his face in the crook of my neck. He slipped his hands under my hips and pressed them into the small of my back, holding me in place as he savagely drove into me to chase his own release.

"Harder, Viktor!" I moaned in his ear, wrapping my arms tight around his shoulder. "I need you to—" I was cut off mid-sentence at a particularly hard thrust, my voice breaking off into a loud groan.



If I weren't so lost in the moment, I would have been embarrassed about moaning so loud when members of the crew were right next door, but right now, I couldn't think about anything but Viktor and the wonderful things his cock was doing to me.

With the way that Viktor was driving into me, it didn't take long for me to come again. And with how sloppy and erratic his thrusts became, I knew he wasn't far from coming as well.

There was a hungry look on Viktor's face as he stared at the junction where we were joined. When he pulled out, leaving only the tip inside me, his cock was adorned with specks of blood from taking my virginity. It seemed to spur my husband on more, and when he pounded deep inside me, giving me all that he had to offer, my toes curled, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head.

"Where do you want my cum, my siren?"

"Tits," was all I could manage as I panted heavily, still coming down from the high of the second orgasm he had given me.

"You're going to be the death of me," he groaned, but I didn't miss the slight smirk that crept onto his lips as he thrust into me twice more before pulling out. He rose to his knees and pumped his cock over my chest. "Push them together for me."

Wanting to please him, I pushed my breasts together and held out my tongue as far as I could. Viktor cursed, his eyebrows knitting together. He almost looked like he was in pain as he pumped his cock faster, desperate for his release.

Milky white cum shot out from the tip of his cock, spurting all over my boobs. There was even a blob that landed on my tongue, and when I made a show of closing my mouth and swallowing it, he groaned and pumped his cock faster, forcing out the last few drops of his cum.

“I’ve never come so hard in my life before,” Viktor groaned lowly as he rubbed his cock all over my breasts, rubbing in his essence. “You’re far too sexy for your own good, my siren.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, pirate,” I giggled and smiled widely when he rolled onto the bed to lay beside me.

Viktor slipped his arm under my head, pulled me into his side and pulled the blanket over us.

“I love you so much, Astrid,” he groaned, whispering the words in my ear.

“I love you, too,” I whispered back, turning my head to brush the tip of my nose against his, my eyes fluttering shut.

That night was the best sleep of my life.

I woke up feeling like my heart would burst with love. It didn’t matter that there was a slight, uncomfortable ache between my legs or that my breasts were still a little sticky from his cum. All that mattered was that I loved Viktor, and he loved me back. Fiercely .

How had I been so lucky to have had this wonderful man fall in love with me? I certainly hadn’t done anything to deserve it.

Gazing at him from under my lashes, my eyes still heavy with sleep, I couldn’t resist touching him. My fingertips grazed his cheek and the lines on his face. He hadn’t shaved since we had set sail from Jorvik, and I wasn’t mad about it. Not when the shadow of a beard made me want him all that more.

The thought went straight to my pussy, and I crossed my legs to dim the feeling but

had no luck.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Viktor whispered, his eyes still closed.

“Like what?” I asked, a small smile creeping onto my face.

“Like you want to eat me,” he snickered, his eyes fluttering open to stare at me. I immediately lost myself in the dark pools, but there was no sense of fear or worry. Not when I was with him.

“I guess we worked up an appetite last night,” I murmured, feeling my lips curl higher.

“You can say that again,” Viktor grinned and pressed his lips to mine in a sweet, gentle kiss. “Good morrow, wife,” he whispered, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth.

“Good morrow, husband,” I moaned into his mouth, already hungry for more of him, but the ache between my legs warned me to pace myself. How were we going to explain this to the crew if I suddenly found myself unable to walk from fucking so hard?

“How did you sleep?” He pressed his face into the crook of my neck, resting there as if I were his pillow. But I couldn’t bring myself to complain in the slightest. Not when it felt so right.

“It was the best night’s sleep in my life,” I admitted, raking my nails over his scalp.

“I feel the same way,” he murmured, inhaling deeply. “Sometimes, I still can’t believe that we’re married.”

“Me, too,” I whispered back with a goofy grin, but it didn’t stay in place for long. “What are you doing?” I asked, my breath hitching at his wandering hands, which only seemed to dip lower and lower. “Viktor,” I whined, but the sound was cut short when he pressed his thumb between my pussy lips.

“Come on,” Viktor suddenly announced, pushing himself up from the bed.

“Where are you going?” I asked, almost panicked.

“Let’s wash up together. It’s a great way to save on water,” he told me, reaching for his breeches. He threw his tunic at me before sticking his head out the door to ensure the coast was clear. The last thing we needed right now was to get caught. With several months left at sea, I doubted anyone would forget it anytime soon, and we would be forced to live with the constant teasing.

When Viktor had suggested that we wash up together to save on water, I should have known that he was lying through his teeth. I should have known that it would lead to another round of sex while we were wet and naked together, but I certainly wasn’t complaining. Not when he felt so good inside of me.

At least this time, when he came all over my boobs, we remembered to wash it away.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

I don't know whether it was the knowing looks on their faces or the glares that Viktor was shooting all of them when he thought I wasn't paying attention, but I knew that they all knew.

Breakfast was certainly a little more awkward than yesterday, but I knew things would worsen if I let it get to me. And with that in mind, I looked everyone in the eye and acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Well, if you didn't count having sex with my husband for the first time and feeling him between my legs with every step I took.

Viktor pulled me to the side after breakfast. "I've talked to Gustav and Jerrik, and they're willing to show you what a usual day is like for them."

"So, the decision is between fishing and cooking?" I tapped my chin in thought, mentally pulling a face at the prospect of being out on the water all day. "I'll go with cooking."

I had seen Jerrik spend several hours in the water with a spear to catch fish for us all. I was very grateful he did that for us, but it didn't look enjoyable. I also doubted I would be any good at it.

"I thought you would," Viktor chuckled. "But I wanted you to have the first pick."

"What do you mean?" I asked, curious.

“Since you chose cooking with Gustav for today, that means Manny and Roscoe will get fishing with Jerrik. Frankly, I’m glad it’s them and not you,” Viktor chuckled and pulled me into his arms. “Don’t let Gustav make you do anything that will have you losing a hand or burning your hair.” He pressed his lips to my forehead. “I’d hate to have to make Gustav walk the plank.”

“You wouldn’t do that, pirate.” I narrowed my eyes at him, but the look on his face told me he was serious. “Okay, fine,” I sighed. “I’ll be sure to return with my hands and hair intact.”

He bowed his face and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “That’s all I ask for, my siren,” he sighed into my mouth.

I wanted to loop my arms around his neck and press his lips harder against mine, hungry for a taste of last night and this morning, but we couldn’t. We were on the top deck with the crew all around us, so I reluctantly innocently pecked his lips again before letting him go.

Gustav grinned when he spotted me approaching him. “I was wondering when you would finally turn up.”

I took a seat next to him, watching as he cleaned the pot that had been used to make breakfast. “You were expecting me?”

“I had a feeling you wouldn’t pick fishing,” he chuckled. “Something tells me you’re not a fan of the sea. Kind of like that cat of yours.”

“Speaking of Kis, where is she?” I asked, perking up as I glanced around the top deck, but from here, I couldn’t see all the way to the front. “I haven’t seen her since yesterday.”

“You weren’t feeling well, so Viktor asked me to look after her.” He gestured to his right, where I found a seemingly sated cat happily munching away on the last of her fish.

“You’re spoiling her, you know?” I chuckled.

“It’s hard to say no to her.”

“You’re not wrong there. Thank you for looking after her.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I enjoy playing with her, though I feel like Kis only puts up with me because I supply the food.”

“I’d love to tell you otherwise, but unfortunately, I can’t. She’s the same with me,” I laughed. “Now, as your little helper for the day, what do you need me to do?”

“We’re going to make a fish stew for lunch and dinner today, so you can start by cutting these vegetables for me,” Gustav said as he scrubbed the pot. “We can’t start on the fish until Jerrik catches something.”

“How do you want me to cut them?” I asked, eying up the carrots that looked a little sorry for themselves. They were the last of the fresh produce we brought from Jorvik, but thankfully, we managed to get some from Isle as well, which would last a little longer.

“Into medium-sized chunks,” Gustav told me. “Just as you would do when we roast vegetables.”

“Medium-sized chunks. Got it.”

It became apparent to me very quickly that Gustav didn’t need my help in the kitchen.

Even though it was a lot of work to cook enough to feed thirteen people and a cat three times a day, Gustav was very efficient with his work. He had cut up half the vegetables in the time it took me to peel and cut just two. If anything, I was only slowing him down with my help, but he didn't complain.

Even Jerrik mentioned that Gustav seemed behind with the cooking today when he came by to drop off the fish he had caught. Usually, by this time, Gustav was finished with all the prep and growing impatient, waiting for the fish. It was great for Jerrik, as he didn't need to deal with an impatient Gustav today, but I couldn't help but think I was doing more harm than good by helping him out.

I wasn't sure why he accepted Viktor's request for me to help.

Gustav sent a pointed look at the fish Jerrik had dropped off. "Grab one."

I did as I was told, trying to ignore the slippery scales as the fish flailed about, desperate to escape from me and back into the water.

"What next?" I asked.

"Grab a knife and lay the fish down like this," he instructed, showing me what to do. "I usually cut the head and tail off first, so we'll start with that. Kis can eat the heads if she wants. And then we'll gut them."

"How do we gut them?" I asked in a small voice, afraid I would need to stick my hand inside the fish. I always found it very unpleasant when I watched my parents do that. I didn't know how the sight of blood and fish guts all over their hands didn't bother them.

"Follow my lead."



I watched as Gustav lay down the fish in front of him. The fish stopped squirming when Gustav slammed the sharp side of the knife down on its throat, severing its head. He was quick to do the same to the tail. He then turned the fish around and slid the knife down its throat. The insides slowly began slipping out of the fish, and Gustav helped speed up the process by scooping out the rest with the tip of his knife.

“Now we’ll give it a wash, and it’s all good for cooking,” Gustav told me with a grin, but it immediately slipped off his face when he noted my face.

“Are you okay, Astrid? You’re looking a little green.”

“I don’t think I can do that.” I shook my head frantically, trying not to look down at the two fish beside each other. One was dead and bloody, and the other was squirming far more than before, no doubt aware of the horrid fate that it would face soon, just like his scaly friend.

“Don’t worry. All it takes is practice,” he tried to assure me. “By the time we get through all these fish, you’ll get the hang of it.”

My nose scrunched up in disgust, and I pressed a hand to my mouth. “That was one of the most disgusting things I’ve ever seen. I don’t think I can do this, Gustav. I’m sorry.”

“I know it’s not for everyone,” he chuckled. “How about you cut up the fish after I wash it, and you add it to the stew?”

“I can do that,” I murmured, grateful I didn’t need to gut the fish anymore.

Who knew cooking could be so bloody and gruesome? Certainly not me.

### CHAPTER NINE

“Gustav came to talk to me earlier,” Viktor leaned over to whisper as we all enjoyed some ale after dinner. “He told me you weren’t a fan of gutting fish.”

I leaned into his warmth and rested my head on his shoulder. “That would be putting it lightly,” I snorted. “I was doing everything I could not to throw up.”

“Trust me to marry the one woman in all of Jorvik who doesn’t like fish,” he chuckled, turning his head to brush his lips against the crown of my head.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” I huffed and pinched his side. When he yelped, the crew laughed, and that amused me immensely. “Can I please try something different tomorrow? Gustav didn’t need help with any of the other stuff. I’m pretty sure I was slowing him down, but he’s too kind to be honest with me.”

“We’ll find something for you, Astrid,” Viktor chuckled, his lips brushing against my forehead with each spoken word.

“I could do with some help with the sails,” Garth called out from the other side of the table. “If you’re up for it.”

I smiled. “I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Great,” he beamed at me. “I’ll come find you in the morning then, kiddo.”

“We’ll be docking at Mann tomorrow, so you’ll have plenty of time to learn,”

Dagfinn called out from where he was currently at the wheel.

“How long will we be staying there?” Roscoe asked, still pouting from when he was denied any ale. Viktor declared he and Manny were old enough to join us on the ship but not old enough for ale. It was rather comical when Roscoe found that out.

“We’ll dock in the morning, and if things go according to plan, we’ll be back on the sea by evening,” Caspian said. “Any longer than that will set us back another day.”

“A few days isn’t a big deal,” Jerrik murmured, toying with a loose button on his shirt. “It’ll be good if we pick up some fresh vegetation while we’re there. We’ve been running a little low on fish lately.”

“How low?” Viktor asked, his tone spiked with concern.

“Only a little low,” Jerrik answered. “I don’t think it’s anything to be worried about. There are always fewer fish in the waters around here. Things should return to normal in a few days.”

“Fresh vegetation is always nicer to cook than the dried stuff,” Gustav added with a shrug. “Not to mention the taste.”

Viktor nodded. “We’ll be sure to bring it up with them. Though we should be prepared to fork over a hefty amount.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, curious.

“The chief of Mann isn’t known to be the most agreeable of men,” Odin snorted. “The last time we stopped there, he refused us a warm meal when we asked for one. Even when we offered to pay for it.”

I pulled a face at that. “Why do you keep going back there?”

“It gives us a good break from being constantly on sea,” Viktor told me.

“I’m going to head in for the night,” Hammond suddenly announced as he stood up and stretched his arms above his head, yawning loudly.

“Tired already, old man?” Garth laughed, taking another swig from his ale.

“That’s rich coming from you, old man,” Hammond chuckled. “I’ll see you all in the morning.” He waved goodbye before heading down to the second deck.

We all said our goodbyes, and Hammond was shortly joined by Odin and Jerrik, who also decided to turn in for the night.

Conversation flowed freely between the rest of us, as it always did at this time of night. Everyone was reasonably busy during the day, and it was only at this time of night when we had nothing to do but talk and drink ale until we became overcome with sleep.

“We’ve got a bit of a problem!” Hammond said, rushing back onto the top deck. Jerrik and Odin were hot on his heels.

“What kind of problem?” Gustav asked.

“There’s a big pool of sick outside one of the rooms,” Jerrik answered. He wandered over to the rail and leaned against it, stretching his legs out in front of him.

“Which one of the rooms?” Dagfinn asked, his lips turning down into a disgusted frown.

“Manny and Roscoe’s,” Odin answered. “It’s stinking up the place. One of you needs to go down and clean it up.”

Roscoe looked confused. “I don’t mind cleaning it up, but it wasn’t me. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Manny either. He’s been with me all evening.”

Manny shook his head. “It wasn’t me either. I haven’t been down to the second deck since a little after lunch.”

“I don’t know how long the sick has been down there, but it smells awful.” Hammond pulled a face, almost as if he could still smell it.

“One of you boys should just own up to it,” Garth chuckled, reaching to pour himself another glass of ale even though he looked to be on the verge of being drunk already. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Roscoe and Manny sported matching frowns.

“It wasn’t either of us,” Roscoe insisted. “Neither of us has been seasick since we’ve been here.”

All eyes then turned to me, and I quickly shook my head.

“I might be unable to handle my drink and have a light stomach, but it wasn’t me. I don’t get seasick,” I denied. “Even if it were me, I would have cleaned it up.”

“Anyone want to own up to it?” Latham asked, a slight, confused frown on his face. No one answered. “Well, if it wasn’t Manny, Roscoe or Astrid, then it has to be one of us,” he said, gesturing to the original crew.

A round of denials sounded around the group as no one owned up to the pool of sick.

Viktor sighed, tired. “It doesn’t matter who owns up to it. We need to get it cleaned up. I don’t want the smell getting any worse.”

“I don’t mind cleaning it up,” Roscoe offered as he rose to his feet. Manny was quick to join him. “But it really wasn’t us.”

Hammond, Odin, and Jerrik went down to the second floor again to go to bed, and Roscoe and Manny followed with some cleaning supplies. Even though they offered to clean up the sick, it felt wrong.

I moved to stand up. “I’ll go and help them.”

Viktor curled an arm around my waist. “No, stay here,” he whined, pulling me into his side.

“You don’t really think one of them was sick, do you?”

“It would make sense if it were one of them,” he mused quietly. “But they seem adamant it wasn’t them.”

“If it wasn’t them, and it wasn’t me, then who could it be?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s a big deal,” he murmured, gently shaking his head. “People are sick at sea more than you think. I guess the person, whoever it is, is a little embarrassed to admit it. I’m just surprised they didn’t clean it up themselves.”

I hummed in agreement but didn’t say anything else.

If it wasn’t Manny, Roscoe, me, or any other crew members, then who else could it be?

### CHAPTER TEN

Latham had docked The Serpent at the island called Mann before we had even woken. When I walked past his room this morning, I laughed when I heard him snoring loudly.

Poor Latham had been tasked with steering The Serpent all night as per the rota.

There was no need for me on the island, so I stuck around on the ship with Garth, who was currently going over how to work the sails with Roscoe and I. Jerrik, Odin, Hammond, and Manny had joined Viktor on the island as they completed the trade and hopefully brought us back some fresh vegetation—Gustav had rushed to join them as soon as he heard the last part. It could take anywhere between less than an hour and several hours, depending on the mood of the Chief. From what I had heard, he wasn't the easiest of men to deal with. That left Caspian, Laurence and Dagfinn to clean the top deck, as it had rained for most of the night. If Garth hadn't called me to learn how to work the sails, I would have offered to help them. I wasn't the best at cooking, but cleaning was simple enough.

"The Serpent all but glides through the water when the wind is blowing," Garth smiled, looking like he was in his element. Roscoe and I exchanged knowing looks, neither of us unable to hold back our giggles with how passionate he was about the sails. "Do both of you want to learn the way of the sail, or are you just going to stand there giggling like a bunch of babies?" Garth tutted, clearly not happy with either of us.

"Sorry, Garth," I apologised sheepishly.

Roscoe nodded, but there was a slight twitch to his lips. “We do want to learn.”

“Great.” Garth turned around to continue. “Working the sails is not difficult to master, but there’s a knack in knowing which way the wind blows. You see,” he said, slipping his index finger into his mouth to wet the tip. “The wind is coming from the east right now. If I were sailing right now, I would put down these two sails.” He pointed to the two square sails mounted on the left and right. “The same goes for the West. The easiest is when the wind is coming downwind. That’s when the fore and aft sails do most of the work. You mess up the sails, and we’ll end up steering off course.”

My head was craned back to stare up at the sails. “It sounds easy enough,” I murmured.

“Far too easy,” Roscoe agreed with me.

“It’s the actual doing part, which is hard,” Garth chuckled. “It’s a good thing we’re docked right now. You can play with the sails and get a feel of it all.”

We both watched as Garth stepped forward and patted the large wooden beam, which stood several feet tall and was connected to the fore and aft sails.

“You see this?” He asked us, pointing to what looked like a mini wheel. “Chip has installed two of these wheels to control the fore and aft sails. If you want to know how it works, you’ll have to wait until we return to Jorvik to ask him because I don’t know anything about it. What I do know is that if I turn it this way—” He turned the mini-wheel left. “—the sails are set for upwind. And if I turn it the other way—” He turned the mini wheel right. “—the sails are set for downwind. The same goes for this other wheel, which controls the aft sails.” He pointed to the second mini-wheel. “He didn’t get the time to install the same for the side sails, so we still have to climb up the beam to change them, but we don’t normally need to do that very often anyway.



We mostly use the fore and aft sails, but during a storm, we need as much stability as possible.”

I gulped at the idea of a storm. Father mentioned more than a few stories of longships being flipped over and the entire crew drowning in a brutal storm. Whenever he left for the sea when I was younger, I would pray for his safe return each morning when I first woke up and each night before I fell asleep.

I was so grateful that he didn’t go out on missions anymore. Except, I had only gone and married a sailor myself. And a Captain at that, too.

“Astrid,” Garth called to me, his voice snapping me out of my thoughts. “I’m not going to make you climb the beams because Viktor will drown me if I do,” he chuckled, and even though both of us knew Viktor would do just that, I couldn’t help but join in. “But do you want to have a go at the fore and aft sails?”

I nodded eagerly and stepped forward, moving to the wheel that controlled the foresail. I curled my fingers around two spokes but didn’t get the chance to turn it.

“Since when did we allow whores to play with the sails?” An unfamiliar voice sounded from behind us. “Or is this some new kind of foreplay? Because if it is, count me in.”

“Who goes there?” Garth called out, his lips turning down into a deep scowl.

“No need to take that tone with us, old man,” the first man chuckled. His hair was short and golden, his face long, but the rest of him short.

“We come in peace,” the second man chuckled. He was the opposite of his friend—tall and bulky with dark, short hair.

“Your disgusting choice of words certainly doesn’t suggest that you come in peace,” I snapped, unable to hold back my tongue from the way they leered at me. Despite my words, they peered at me, standing behind Garth like I was a piece of meat, and they hadn’t been fed in weeks.

What was wrong with them? Had these men never seen a woman before?

“The whore speaks,” the dark-haired man snickered.

“What’s your name, whore?” The light-haired man asked, stupid enough to believe that he would ask so disgustingly and I would answer him.

“Stop calling her that!” Roscoe growled, matching Garth’s stance as he stepped forward. With both Roscoe and Garth standing in front of me, the disgusting men couldn’t see me anymore.

“That’s the last time you call her that,” Dagfinn growled as he joined us at the sails, a crazed look on his face. He must have rushed over here because he was still holding the wet mop, and it dripped dirty water over this part of the deck, which they had already cleaned.

When Caspian and Laurence flanked me from both sides, my heart overflowed with love and respect for these men, who quickly defended me. But now was not the time to get sappy—not when we needed to teach these two men a lesson about how to speak to a lady.

“I understand that you’re all protective of the ship whore, especially since she’s your only source of entertainment out on the water, but what if we pay you?” The dark-haired man asked, having the audacity to reach into his pockets and count his measly pennies.

“Or perhaps we could trade something for an hour with her?” The other man was quick to ask after stealing a look at all the money his friend had. Or lack thereof.

“How dare you speak to As-her like that!” Garth growled, quick to catch himself when he nearly used my name. “You will speak to her with respect!”

“I don’t know how things are where you’re from, old man, but whores don’t deserve respect here. So, take our money and hand her over. We promise to show her a good time and return her in one piece. We won’t even need an hour if she’s any good.” The light-haired man was on a real rant and looked like he had so much more in his argument about why he and his friend deserved even a moment of my time but didn’t get the chance to get the words out of his mouth. I would imagine it was difficult to say much more when Roscoe’s fist landed in his mouth and Dagfinn’s in his friends’.

“Don’t you dare call her a whore again!” Caspian spat as he stepped forward to punch them both, the smile on his face telling me that he enjoyed this far more than he probably should have.

Even though Garth was the voice of reason in most situations, he stepped aside and encouraged Laurence to get a punch in while the men were down.

“I think it’s my turn now,” I declared, stepping forward once Laurence had his go.

Dagfinn and Roscoe were kind enough to hold each man down for me. Caspian and Laurence were stood on either side of me, ready to step in if I needed help. It was sweet, but I didn’t need it.

I stopped in front of the light-haired man, grinning down at him. He had been forced onto his knees, his hands restrained helplessly behind his back by an outraged and disgusted Roscoe.

“How dare you speak to a woman like that!” I spat. “Did your parents not teach you any manners?”

“My parents taught me that whores don’t deserve respect,” he sneered at me, but before one of the others could react, I reared my first back and slammed it into his cheek. Even though my knuckles throbbed at the impact, I refused to show it. My hand would be sore for a day or two, but I didn’t care. This moment was worth it.

The man’s head snapped to the right at the impact of my fist against his face, hard enough that he bumped his face into that of his friend. But the best part was when everyone cheered me on.

“Don’t forget about this one.” Caspian all but danced on the balls of his feet, pointing at the dark-haired man now looking up at me with fear shining in his eyes, begging me to spare him the pain and humiliation. Too bad he hadn’t extended the same favour to me when he got out his pennies and attempted to buy an hour of my time.

“I’ll have you know that I’m not a whore,” I spat at him, punching him just as hard as I had done to his friend.

“She’s part of the crew,” Laurence piped up, a proud look on his face. “Now apologise before we set her husband on you both.”

“Husband?” They both asked, their eyes slowly widening as understanding dawned on them. It was scarce for a woman to be aboard a mission, especially one as long as this one. It was even rarer for this woman to be married to a crew member, but if she was, then there was only one person she would be married to.

The Captain.

“Let’s go and find out what her husband has to say about this,” Garth announced,

moving around the men to lead the way off The Serpent. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to hear how you two have been talking to one of our crew.”

“We might as well share this story with your Chief, as well,” Dagfinn chuckled as he forced his dark-haired captive to his feet, and Roscoe did the same to the other one.

“That’ll teach you to call me a whore,” I huffed, eagerly following everyone.

Watching these two imbeciles get ashamed in front of their people was not a show I was willing to miss.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Can we please talk about this?” The dark-haired man begged as Dagfinn pushed him down the shore and away from The Serpent in search of Viktor. Or even better yet, the Chief of Mann. “I’m sure if we talk about this, we can agree that this was all a big misunderstanding.”

“A big misunderstanding?” Garth snorted. “The only misunderstanding here is thinking you can get on our ship and run your mouth.”

“It was a mistake,” the light-haired man pleaded.

Roscoe merely tightened his grasp on him and snorted, “That’s for us to decide.”

Roscoe and Dagfinn dragged the two down the shore and off the beach. The rest of us were hot on their heels.

When asked, the two men were stupid enough to lead us to the island centre, where everyone usually gathered.

“Let go of them!” An islander rushed over to us, but Caspian and Laurence stepped in the way.

“What is wrong with you all?” Another asked. “You’re on our island for five minutes, and this is how you treat our people? What gives you the right?”

“These men acting sleazy and parading around our ship, acting like they own it,

makes them worthy of this behaviour,” I retorted, but it didn’t go down as well as I had hoped. “They have no respect for women. They need to be taught a lesson. They can’t get away with speaking to a woman like this.”

“No one asked you, whore!”

“Step aside and let us men deal with this. A female has no business here.” They sneered at the word ‘female’ as if it was an insult.

“Don’t you dare talk to her that way,” Garth snapped with a fierce scowl. “She is one of the crew, and you will treat her with as much respect as you do the rest of us.”

“Who says we have respect for any of you?” Another man yelled.

The large group of Mann islanders who had gathered laughed as if he had just said the funniest thing ever.

“Leave our men and go back to your ship!” Another man demanded.

“We’re here to do business with your Chief, and this is how you treat us? What’s wrong with you?” Caspian scoffed and stepped forward menacingly. “We are the ones doing you a favour by stopping here. We could have saved both our time and efforts and continued sailing, but you need our inventions, so I’d think twice before speaking to one of our crew in such a way.”

“She’s a woman. She can’t be part of the crew,” one of the women snorted as if everything I had just said had gone in one ear and come out the other.

It was bad enough coming from a man but much worse from a woman.

“It shows how little you know,” Roscoe snorted.

“Shut up, child and let the adults deal with this.”

“A child and a whore. What an interesting crew you have.”

“Quiet!” Garth demanded, his voice travelling through the entire square, and for a moment, he was granted the silence he had so unceremoniously requested.

One man stepped forward, having the nerve to sneer at us. “We do not need you and your silly inventions! Leave our men and get off our land!”

Before any of us could reply, a voice of authority beat us to it.

“What’s going on here?” A loud, booming voice asked. At the sound, we all turned our heads in his direction.

Although the man was small in stature, his manner of walking down the steps, with his head held high and a pompous expression, told me he was the Chief of Mann.

When Viktor and the rest of the crew followed after the Chief, I exhaled in relief. Hopefully, they would be able to talk some sense into these people. With how strong-willed and stuck in their misogynistic ways they were, it would undoubtedly be a difficult task.

Viktor’s dark eyes fell on me, brimming with concern. “Astrid?” He called out, his eyebrows furrowing together as he weaved through the crowd to get to me. Hammond, Odin, Manny, and Gustav were quick to follow after him, looking just as concerned as Viktor.

I couldn’t blame them. We must be quite a sight, all worked up like this, with these two men still held captive by Roscoe and Dagfinn.



“What happened?” Viktor asked, his eyes lingering on me for a few seconds before he turned to assess the rest of the crew. His eyes narrowed, demanding an explanation.

Garth was the first to speak up. “These two men had the nerve to get onto the ship and insult us all.” He pointed at the two offenders. “Before you react, wait for me to finish, okay?” There was a hint of warning to his tone, and he sent Viktor a pointed look. “They repeatedly called Astrid a whore and had the nerve to try and buy an hour of her time. You’re already mad, Viktor, so I won’t tell you how lewd and insistent they both were.”

“Astrid? A whore?” Viktor questioned in a low, gravelly tone, making me worry about all the dangerous thoughts running through his mind. Before I could reach out to him in hopes of calming down what could very well possibly turn into a horrible situation, he turned his attention to the two men we were still holding as prisoners. “Please let go of these men,” he addressed Roscoe and Dagfinn in a scarily calm tone. “I’d like to have a word with them.”

“Sure thing, Captain,” Dagfinn grinned and turned to Roscoe, indicating to watch him. Roscoe nodded, and we all watched as Dagfinn kicked the dark-haired man forward, laughing when he fell face-first into the ground.

The crew laughed, but the angry shouts from the island people made it apparent they didn’t enjoy it as much as we did.

A man stepped forward from the Mann islanders. “Now, that was unnecessary, don’t you think, Captain Viktor?”

“No, I don’t think it was unnecessary at all, Njal,” Viktor scoffed and shook his head before turning his attention to Roscoe. When he received the signal, Roscoe kicked his leg forward, and the light-haired man fell to the same fate as his dear friend. It

was the least of what they deserved for their disrespect.

The two offenders were quick to scramble to their feet, but surrounded by us, they couldn't escape.

"This is Astrid." Viktor stepped forward and aside, giving everyone an unrestricted view of me. "Not only is she part of the crew, but she is also my wife. She is not the ship whore. Even if she was a regular crew member, that does not give anyone the right to come onto the ship, my ship, and speak to one of us that way."

The Chief, Njal, clapped his hands together. "Great. Now that we've got that out of the way, let's head back to the hut and finalise the deal."

"I'm not finished here," Viktor scoffed, not budging. "These men disrespected not only my wife but my entire crew. They must be punished."

The crew voiced their agreement, and the two offending men glanced around, their eyes wide, desperate for someone to step in and save them.

I was never one to encourage violence, but these two men deserved it.

"I don't think that's necessary," Njal denied, a cocky smirk on his face as he turned to glance over at me. "I mean, it was a simple mistake. An easy mistake."

"An easy mistake?" Odin snorted.

"Women never travel on ships." Njal shrugged nonchalantly. "And on the rare occasions that they do, it's because they're the ship whore. My men made a mistake, and they've apologised. Let's drop this here and return to work."

"This is not something you can just dismiss," Viktor growled, a dark look on his face.

“They have disrespected my wife. They deserve to be punished for their disgusting behaviour.”

“Just let this go, Viktor,” Njal groaned. “Let’s go back to my hut. The sooner we finish, the sooner you can leave and get back on the sea.”

“I don’t think so,” Viktor frowned and turned to face his crew. “Let’s all get back on The Serpent. We have a lot of sailing ahead of us.”

None of us questioned Viktor as we turned around to leave the island called Mann. Stopping here was a waste of time as we had to go out of our way to get here in the first place, but alas, we would never make this mistake again.

“Where are you going?” Njal called after us. He and a few of his men were hot on our tails as we headed back to the shore where The Serpent was docked. “What about the trade?”

“It won’t be happening,” Viktor scoffed, not sparing a single glance over his shoulder. Instead, he squeezed my hand gently and subtly pulled me closer to him. “My crew and I refuse to do business with men who treat women, namely my wife, so horribly.”

“Your Chief isn’t going to be happy about this,” Njal spat behind us, fuming, but Viktor merely snorted in response.

“My Chief will commend me for standing my ground and demanding respect.” He squeezed my hand again and pressed his lips to my forehead. “I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with this, my siren,” he whispered the apology, a sorrowful expression on his face. “I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

“You have nothing to make up for, pirate. It’s not your fault,” I whispered back,

tilting my head to press my lips to the underside of his chin. “Thank you for standing up for me.”

“Be assured I will always stand up for you, Astrid.”

“Captain Viktor, you are out of order!” Njal growled. By this time, we had arrived at the shore, and half of us were already back on The Serpent.

“You and the rest of Mann are out of order!” Laurence yelled over his shoulder, seemingly offended. I didn’t blame him.

Njal began to panic as we pulled back the ramp, getting ready to push off from the shore. “We still need those swords we had you weld for us!”

“You should have thought about that before,” Viktor grinned as he leaned over the rail, aggravating the situation by waving the people of Mann goodbye as we began sailing away.

“What about the honey?” Njal screamed loud enough to be heard.

“There’s no more honey for you!”

I was surprised to hear we sold our honey. We mostly used it for medicinal concoctions, but we must be in an influx this year if we were selling it.

“But we need that honey!”

Roscoe rushed to the rail to scream, “You should have thought of that before you decided to brush off the disrespect like it wasn’t a big deal.”

“I will call for the men to be punished however you want!”

“Too late!” Viktor grinned, and whatever Njal said next, we couldn’t hear as we had sailed too far away.

Hammond congratulated Viktor by patting him on the back. “We did a good job, Captain!”

“Serves them right for treating one of us with such disrespect,” Garth laughed, and the rest of the crew agreed.

The people of Mann truly did deserve what they got, but all I could think about was the crew standing up for me. They were in my corner even before Viktor found out what had happened.

A warm, tingly sensation filled my heart. It truly felt like the crew had accepted me as one of their own.

Like I was one of them.

Like I belonged here.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

There was no place like home.

Whether on land or at sea, home was in my husband's arms. And right now, with his warm breath fanning over the back of my neck and his arms wound tightly around my waist, his hands pressed into my stomach to keep me pressed into him, and with the thick fur of the blanket thrown over us carelessly, I had never felt more at home.

"Have I told you how much I love you today?" I murmured with closed eyes, snuggling closer.

When Viktor growled something along the lines of: "You'll regret that later when you don't get any sleep tonight", I couldn't help but laugh.

I knew what I was doing when I did it, but I couldn't resist. Who would be able to when they were married to a man like Viktor?

Just looking at him had my pussy wet and clenching for something big and thick to fill it.

"As it's past midnight, and we've already started a new day, the answer would be no," Viktor whispered against my skin, groaning lightly as he nuzzled his face further into my neck.

It appeared that I wasn't the only one who enjoyed our late-night snuggle sessions.

“Well, I’ll just take this moment to tell you how much I love you.”

“And how much is that?”

“So much,” I couldn’t help but laugh, moaning lightly when he nipped at my neck, gently sucking it into his mouth. I would be more concerned about him leaving a love bite if it didn’t feel so good. The last thing I needed was for the whole crew to tease us about it tomorrow—namely me. When you were out at sea all day with nothing but the blues of the water to gaze at, opportunities to make fun of each other in some light jesting weren’t to be missed.

Viktor pressed a kiss to my neck. “I love you too, Astrid.”

My smile faltered. “I don’t know many men back at Jorvik that would stand up for their wives the way you stood up for me today.”

“They’re doing it wrong,” he murmured, pressing another kiss to my neck. “You can’t claim to love someone if you’re unwilling to stick up for them when they’ve been wronged and disrespected. And just so we’re on the same page,” he exhaled deeply, his warm breath fanning over my skin and sending a shiver down my spine. “I will always have your back, my siren. No matter what. You and I, we’re a team.”

Unable to keep my feelings for this man at bay, I leaned up and brushed my lips against his in a soft, gentle kiss. It stayed sweet for approximately two seconds before I slanted my head, and it turned hungry and passionate.

I moaned at the taste of him as I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth. When his hand dropped to my ass, squeezing hard before moving down to grasp my thigh and hook it over his hip, I knew what I planned to be a simple kiss before we fell asleep—a blatant lie—quickly turned into so much more.

“God, I love you so much,” Viktor groaned as he pushed me onto my back, my leg still hooked over his hip. He was quick to grasp my other thigh and give it a quick squeeze before hooking it over the other side. “I never truly believed in love before you, Astrid,” he whispered the words against the slope of my neck, pressing wet kisses up and down the length of it as he shimmied out of his undergarments and the bulbous head of his cock disappeared under the bottom of the slip I had donned for the night. “But now, with you, I can’t get enough of it. I won’t ever get enough of loving you,” he groaned as he pushed forward and spread my pussy lips, spearing me with the entire length of his thick, girthy cock.

“Oh, Viktor!” I groaned and arched my back, feeling so full with his cock buried deep inside of me, balls deep. “That feels so good,” I groaned and tightened my legs around his hips, pressing the soles of my feet against his buttocks in a desperate need to feel him closer. I feared it would never be enough.

He pressed his mouth to mine in a hard hiss. “You feel incredible,” he grunted.

The kisses trailed down my chin, neck and along my shoulders. He slipped the straps of my slip down my arms with the tip of his nose.

He continued his light thrusts as he sat up, forcing me up with him. Sensing what he wanted, I lifted my arms above my head, and Viktor pulled off my slip in one sweeping motion. He threw it carelessly to the side before pushing me down on the bed once again.

“Come here, pirate,” I groaned and held my arms open for him, needing to feel him as close as humanly possible.

“Your pussy is so tight,” Viktor groaned against one of my pebbled nipples, flicking it with his tongue as he dug deeper inside me. “It’s so greedy for me.” His kisses turned wet, and he turned his head to give the other nipple equal attention. “It



clenches so tight around my cock.”

His words had me moaning and panting, making my pussy even wetter. I gushed around his cock, but with the way he drilled into me, I quickly found myself climbing toward my climax.

We both stilled when we suddenly heard some shuffling outside the door.

“What’s that?” I whispered, staring up at him with wide eyes.

“There’s someone outside the door,” Viktor murmured and pulled out of me. If I weren’t concerned about there being someone outside the door, potentially listening to us having sex, I would have demanded that he get back inside me. However, unbeknown to the happenings inside my mind, Viktor slammed his cock back inside me, the loud slapping of his balls against the curve of my ass filling the room.

“What are you doing?” I whispered with wide eyes, trying to hold back my moans.

“I’m showing my wife a good time,” he chuckled and pressed a hard kiss to my mouth. “Whoever that is, they’re probably just walking past to use the bathroom. Why should that stop our fun?”

Before I could reprimand Viktor for being so nonchalant about all of this, he pressed his hand against my mouth and thrust into me even harder than ever before.

There was something so sinfully hot about this. His hand pressed to my mouth, muffling my wanton moans as he thrust his big cock in and out of me, hitting that perfect spot inside of me every time.

“I didn’t know my wife was such a dirty little thing,” Viktor chuckled throatily at the look of wanton pleasure on my face.

When my moans got louder, he pressed his hand harder against my mouth and continued the deep thrusts, making my legs quiver. I bit his hand when the feeling became almost too much, but Viktor just smirked at me.

With his free hand, he sunk his fingers into my thigh and lifted my leg, unhooking it from around his hip and draping it over his shoulder instead.

I didn't even know my legs could open up that wide!

At this angle, it felt like Viktor was hitting a magical spot inside me I didn't even know existed. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and I moaned his name, the sound muffled against the palm of his hand.

"You like that, my siren?" He asked in a low, gravelly tone.

We had gotten so lost in the sweet pleasure that we forgot about the shuffling we had heard outside our door earlier. However, we were quickly reminded of it when the door squeaked as it began to open.

I shrieked, startled, and Viktor swore loudly as he reached for the blanket, pulling it over us both. But just as quick as the mystery person had opened the door, they slammed it shut, and then there was the faint sound of their feet pattering on the ground as they hurried away.

We stared at the closed door for a long moment, unsure what to say or do before Viktor turned to face me. Our eyes locked, and I knew we were thinking the same thing.

Who had just come into our room?

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Viktor,” I called out his name in a harsh whisper, pressing a hand to his chest to push him off me. “You’re still inside me.”

“I know.” He ground his hips into me.

My eyes threatened to roll into the back of my head with pleasure, and I bit down hard on my bottom lip to muffle the loud moan that threatened to escape.

“You need to get your cock out of me,” I whimpered, feeling like I was in two minds. As good as my husband felt inside me, someone had just walked into our room in the middle of the night.

“I hate those words,” Viktor groaned and dropped his face to rest in the valley between my breasts. He pressed a soft, lingering kiss there before he lifted himself off me, pulling his thick, throbbing cock out of me. It stood tall and proud, glistening with our juices in the candlelight, beckoning me to reach out and suck the bulbous head into my mouth. It took everything I possessed to resist the female urge. Instead, I sat up in bed and covered myself with the blanket.

“Who was at the door?” I asked, though my eyes remained glued on his cock, mesmerised as it bobbed slightly from how hard and heavy it was.

“I don’t know,” Viktor groaned, his eyelids heavy and his gaze downcast and stormy as he stared at me. “But if you keep looking at my cock like that, I’m going to have to push you down on your knees and pry open that pretty little mouth of yours, my

siren.”

“They just had to open the door when I was so close,” I pouted, unable to stop myself from stealing glances at his cock. How could I not when it was still so gloriously hard and wet? It was his fault for distracting me with it.

I wanted Viktor everywhere. All over me. Under me. Inside me . I wanted him back in my arms and between my legs, but my head won over both my heart and pussy in this situation.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the mystery person who had walked in on us.

“It must have been one of the guys,” I murmured, gnawing on my bottom lip.

“They know better than to sneak into someone’s room in the middle of the night,” Viktor frowned and glanced over his shoulder at the door. He looked conflicted as he glanced between me and the door, and when he groaned, I knew his head had won out over his heart and cock as well. “Stay here,” he told me, already moving toward the door. “I’m going to find out who is wandering around the ship this late at night. And then when I find them, I’m going to rip them a new one for cockblocking me.”

I laughed as I watched Viktor leave, but when the sound ceased, my mind clouded with thoughts of the strange things happening around the ship as of late.

First, there was that person I was certain had run from the bathroom so I wouldn’t run into them. Next, there was that pool of vomit outside Roscoe and Manny’s room, which no one was willing to own up to. And now, someone had walked into our room in the middle of the night, but instead of owning up to the mistake, they had run away. Again.

I was sensing a pattern here.

My lips tugged down at the corners as my mind ran wild. Before I could freak myself out, Viktor returned.

“Caspian is keeping watch tonight,” Viktor murmured as he closed the door behind him. “But he says he didn’t see or hear anything.”

“Was it him who opened our door? Maybe he thought it was the bathroom?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I asked him about it, but he says he hasn’t left the deck since before we all turned in for the night.”

My nose scrunched up at the bridge. We all turned in hours ago. I didn’t want to think what that meant in terms of Caspian emptying his bladder.

“If it wasn’t Caspian, then it must have been one of the others, right?” I asked, moving over to make room for him on the bed.

Viktor settled in beside me. “Possibly, but I don’t think so. I knocked on everyone’s doors, but no one opened theirs.”

“That might not mean anything. Whoever it was could be embarrassed, so they didn’t open the door when you knocked.”

“I know,” he sighed, turning around to fluff his pillow before dropping his head on it. I did the same and snuggled into his side. He pulled the blanket up to cover us both. “This is all very strange, and frankly, I don’t think it was any of them that came into our room.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked, curious.

“If it were one of the guys, they would have said something. At the very least, they

would have apologised for walking in on us in such a compromising situation. It's not the first time one of us has accidentally walked into the wrong room in the middle of the night when returning from the bathroom. I've done it. We've all done it. I can't imagine why they would be so embarrassed about an honest mistake."

"That's what I was also thinking," I murmured lowly. "I think something very fishy is going on here."

"How so?"

"I think someone is sneaking around behind our backs," I said. "I'm not sure what they're hiding or what their motives are, but something very fishy is going on here. Something tells me that if we ask the crew about it tomorrow, no one will own up to it."

"I have the same feeling," he sighed.

"Do you suspect anyone?" I asked.

Viktor shook his head. "No. I trust these men with my life—all of them. I don't understand what they could suddenly be hiding from me." His eyebrows furrowed together in worry. "Why? Do you suspect anyone?"

"No. They all seem very trustworthy, and I don't understand why they would need to lie about something as small as this."

"Me neither," he pursed his lips. "I think we should keep this to ourselves for a while...at least until we have more to go off. I doubt anyone would own up to it anyway."

I hummed in agreement.

Viktor and I lay on our backs, staring at the wooden ceiling as The Serpent gently bobbed up and down on the water. Neither of us knew what to say or make of the peculiar situation.

“Why would one of my men do this, Astrid?” Viktor asked in a small voice, sounding torn up.

“I don’t know, but we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

Seeing my husband in such low spirits saddened me, especially since his usual mood was the stark opposite of his current one. Even though it wasn’t a permanent solution, I knew it would undoubtedly be effective.

Leaning over, I pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth before abruptly pulling away.

“Where are you going, my siren?” His eyebrows furrowed together as he propped himself on his elbows to watch me. The confusion swiftly disappeared when I beckoned him closer with a wanton finger and my best bedroom eyes.

I wasted no time in throwing the blanket off both of us. As I hadn’t bothered to get dressed when Viktor had slipped out of the room earlier, I was still naked, which worked in my favour now. I sucked on my index and middle finger before trailing them down my body and between my legs. I spread my legs and slipped them into my wet heat, which still glistened with the juices from my last orgasm.

“Viktor,” I moaned out his name as I slipped my fingers inside my pussy, right up to the knuckle. “Please, Viktor. I need you.”

Not one to disappoint, Viktor mounted me before I saw it coming, and he sucked the juices off my fingers as he rocked into me, desperately chasing the highs of the

orgasm which had slipped away from him earlier.

With Viktor's cock back inside me, his thumb furiously flicking my slick clit, and his mouth sucking greedily on my nipples, all thoughts of the mystery person that had walked into our room earlier vanished from my mind.

Right now, all I could focus on was my husband.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Viktor and I agreed not to say anything to anyone until we figured out what was happening around here, but I couldn't stop watching everyone. I was looking for something, anything suspicious, but I had found nothing so far.

Roscoe and Manny, who were my company today while we mopped the second deck, must have figured out what I was doing because they started looking at me funny.

"Why do you keep staring at us?" Roscoe asked, watching me with suspicious, narrowed eyes.

I shrugged dismissively. "No reason."

"I know you're keeping something for us, so spill."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I denied, keeping up the innocent act. Hoping he would drop the questioning, I dipped my mop in the clean water and moved onto the steps leading to the third and bottom deck.

"You've been watching us," Manny piped up, surprising me.

Out of all the crew, Manny was the most reserved. He was helpful and great to have around but didn't speak much. A few days in, I realised that he enjoyed his own company. He didn't do well in large crowds but appeared to be warming up to us.

"And you must have been watching me to know that I've been watching you," I

countered, quirking a questioning brow at him.

His lips turned up slightly at the corners. “It’s difficult not to watch you when your face looks like you’re permanently trying to solve an impossible puzzle.”

“Why have you been watching us, Astrid?” Roscoe asked. “What are you hiding?”

I pursed my lips, considering my options for a moment before I gave in with a sigh. “I don’t know how to say this, but there’s been some strange things happening around the ship.”

Roscoe and Manny pursed their lips, sharing a knowing look.

“What?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at them.

“I know no one believed us, but it really wasn’t Roscoe or me that threw up outside our room,” Manny told me in the utmost seriousness.

“But we don’t think it was any of the others either,” Roscoe pitched in.

“I believe you,” I told them. “But I can’t possibly explain what happened that night. If none of us threw up, then who was it?”

“Was it Kis?” Roscoe asked, eying up the feline, currently rubbing herself against my legs. You’d think I’d see her more when we were stuck on a ship together for the foreseeable future, but it turned out to be the stark opposite. The only time I saw her was during the night, but she hadn’t been coming to our bed the past couple of nights. I had no idea where she had made her bed, but she seemed pretty happy, so I let her be.

“Kis only throws up when she eats carrots.” I leaned down to pick up Kis, running

my fingers through her thick black fur. “And we haven’t had any carrots since we were still in Jorvik.”

Manny frowned. “None of this makes any sense.”

I ran my fingers through Kis’ fur, smiling down at her when she meowed while licking her paw.

“Something strange happened last night,” I admitted in a small voice.

“What happened last night?” Roscoe asked, his face the mask of concentration.

“It must have been a little past midnight. Viktor and I were in our room,” I told them, purposely leaving out the part where he had been buried balls deep inside me, his hips slamming into mine with each thrust. “We were nearly asleep when someone opened our door. We both sprang up at the sound, but the person ran away before we could see who it was.”

“That’s so bizarre!” Roscoe gaped, his eyes wide.

“Things are starting to get really strange around here,” Manny frowned and glanced up and down the hall as if he suspected whoever was acting strange onboard would come running down the hallway toward us right now to reveal themselves. “How come Viktor didn’t say anything about it during breakfast?”

“We agreed to keep it to ourselves for now, but I guess I kind of broke that pact,” I chuckled and bent down to allow Kis out of my arms when she became restless. We all watched as she bounded down the hallway and up the stairs which led to the top deck. “We planned to watch everyone and try to figure out who could be behind this all since no one owns up to it.”

“Have you got anyone in mind?” Roscoe asked, a curious expression on his face.

“No,” I sighed and shook my head. “I don’t know if that’s a good or a bad thing.”

“I can see something bad right now,” Manny murmured under his breath, and Roscoe and I turned to look at what he was staring at.

Like the other day, there was a pool of sick outside one of the rooms on the other side of the hallway we hadn’t cleaned yet. Moving closer to it, despite the stench that threatened to repel me, I saw it was outside Garth and Odin’s room, but it couldn’t have been either of them. They spent nearly as much time out on the sea as Viktor did.

There were even little footprints in the pool from where Kis had skipped through it when she went upstairs. Her footprints would have looked cute if it wasn’t a pool of sick that she had paraded through.

“I’ll get this one. You guys got the last one,” I said, my nose turning up at the stench, which became even more unbearable the closer I got to it.

I hadn’t physically seen the pool of sick last time, but judging by the bits of undigested food in it, I was certain that it was one of us. It had to be. I could see Gustav’s cooking in it.

“We’ll need to bring this up with everyone again,” Roscoe sighed, moving to help me.

“The sooner we get to the bottom of this, the sooner we can stop cleaning up someone’s disgusting vomit,” Manny groaned as he swapped out my dirty bucket of water with his clean one, and frankly, I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Kis meowed and rubbed the side of her face against my arm, asking for some fish. As I hadn't finished the last of mine, I placed her on my lap and fed her the fish from the palm of my hand.

"What did you get up to today, my siren?" Viktor leaned over to ask but hissed when Kis swatted his hand away with her sharp claws, protective of her fish.

I couldn't help but laugh at the deep scowl on his face as he glared at her. We both knew it meant nothing. Viktor may not admit it, but he was just as smitten with Kis as I was, if not more.

In fact, on more than one occasion on this trip, I had awoken to the sight of Kis asleep on Viktor's chest, never without a few fresh scratches.

They have a love-hate relationship.

"You'll find out soon enough, my pirate." I leaned over to press my lips against his cheek to make up for the scratch that Kis had just rewarded him with.

Roscoe, Manny, and I kept our mouths shut during lunch because we still needed time to wrap our heads around everything. We also spent the rest of the day watching everyone together, trying to remain as discrete as possible. Disappointingly, we didn't spot anything out of the ordinary.

However, at dinner, we couldn't hold ourselves back any longer.

"We had to clean up another pile of sick today," Roscoe suddenly announced, and Caspian choked on his mouthful in surprise.

"Warn a man before announcing something like that over dinner," Caspian grumbled, but it didn't stop him from getting stuck right back into his food as if nothing had

happened in the first place.

“It was outside Garth and Odin’s room,” I said, running my fingers through Kis’ fur.

Manny quickly added, “Not that we’re suggesting Garth or Odin were the ones that had been sick.”

“This is all so confusing,” Jerrik frowned, a befuddled expression on his face. “Strange things have been happening around here. Nothing like this has ever happened on our other trips.”

Viktor stared at his friend. “Is there something you haven’t told us, Jerrik?”

Jerrik pursed his lips, watching Viktor for a long moment before he sighed, giving in. “I didn’t want to say anything at the risk of sounding like a child, but one of my blankets has gone missing. It was a gift for my wife so I wouldn’t be cold at night, and I’d like it back. I promise I won’t get angry. I just want my blanket back.”

“Since you’ve mentioned it—” Hammond frowned. “—I’m also missing a tunic.”

“I feel like I’ve been hearing someone walk around at night, but every time I’ve checked, there wasn’t anyone there,” Latham added.

“And I feel like we’re going through the nuts sooner than we should,” Gustav added, exhaling deeply. “Whenever I go down there in the morning to retrieve some, I feel like there’s always less than there was the previous day.”

“Someone came into our room last night but then left before we could see them,” Viktor said, a perplexed expression on his face. “I don’t know what’s happening on The Serpent this mission, but I don’t like it one bit. Whatever it is, I intend to get to the bottom of it,” he warned, glancing around the circle to hold all their eyes,

studying them. When he reached the last person, he sighed and shook his head. “I know it’s not any of us,” he murmured quietly. “But I can’t think of any other possible explanation. Unless...” His jaw clenched, and it looked like he didn’t want to admit it.

“Do you think it’s a stowaway?” Odin asked in a small voice.

An eery silence engulfed us as we all realised how obvious the answer had been from the very beginning.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After dinner, Latham, Laurence and Dagfinn searched the top deck, Caspian, Gustav, and Jerrik searched the second deck, and Hammond, Roscoe and Manny searched the bottom deck. They all returned with nothing to report.

“I guess there’s nothing we can do tonight,” Viktor sighed, addressing the crew. His arms were wrapped tightly around my waist from behind while he leaned back against the railing. “I’m on night duty, so I’ll stay here on watch. If there is a stowaway on the ship, we’ll find him. Or her.”

The crew murmured their good nights before heading down to the second deck to head to bed.

“You should head to bed as well, my siren,” Viktor murmured, dropping his head to brush his lips against the crown of my head. “There’s no need for the both of us to be awake all night.”

I lifted my chin in defiance, refusing to abide by his words. “If you’re staying awake all night, so am I.”

“But then we’ll both be tired tomorrow.” His lips tugged down in a slight frown as he tightened his arms around me, pulling me closer. “And there’s no need for that.”

“If we’re both tired tomorrow, we’ll nap together,” I bargained, my lips twitching higher at the corners.



“You make a very valid point, my siren,” my husband chuckled and bowed his head lower to press his lips to mine in a gentle kiss.

“We should probably get to the wheel,” I whispered against his mouth. I couldn’t resist trailing my hands up over his chest and shoulders, looping my arms around his neck as I played with his hair, tugging his face closer to mine.

“We should,” he groaned and pressed another kiss to my lips before reluctantly pulling away.

I couldn’t help but pout when he did, but Viktor quickly turned it into a smile when my husband gave me another quick kiss.

“Do you want to have a go at the wheel tonight?” Viktor asked when we moved over to the front of the ship.

“As long as you supervise. I don’t want to steer us into any big rocks or anything that will kill us.”

“Don’t worry. You’re always safe with me, my siren,” Viktor chuckled and wound his arms around my waist from behind, though he stuck his foot out to keep it on the button, giving us the little extra power we needed to glide through the water. There wasn’t much wind tonight, so he would probably need to keep his foot on the button for most of the night. “You’re a natural at the wheel.” He dropped his head to press his lips to the side of my neck, the kiss a little sweeter than his compliment.

Well, at least there was something I was good at. Steering and cleaning the ship. They were both things I was good at, but not something that would keep me busy all day, so I was still looking for a permanent role while on The Serpent.

If I didn’t find anything soon, I was very tempted to return to Gustav and give gutting

fish another go to make myself useful. I would just have to find a way to stop myself gagging every time.

“I see the appeal, you know?” I whispered into the darkness of the night, leaning my head back against his chest.

“Oh?” He hummed, his face buried in the crook of my neck.

“I see why you’re so in love with the water,” I clarified with a small smile, not that he could see it. “I may still dislike swimming, but it’s so beautiful out here. So peaceful. I see why you love being out on the water. I’m starting to feel the same way.”

I felt his grin against my neck. “I told you I’d make a sea woman out of you just yet.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves now,” I laughed when he playfully dug his fingers into my hips. “I said that I see the appeal. Not that I’m going to go for a swim every spare moment I get.”

“Bringing you with me is the best decision I’ve ever made, my siren,” he exhaled. “I don’t know what I would have done with you, and it’s only been two weeks.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without you either, pirate,” I admitted. “It would have been so hard with you away for so long.”

“And Kis,” Viktor chuckled. “That cat of yours still might not be my best friend, but I would have missed her as well.”

“I’m not going to lie and say she would have missed you,” I giggled. “But it seems like she’s doing pretty well here. She loves all the attention she’s getting from the crew.”

“Perhaps it’s too much attention,” he snorted. “I barely see her nowadays. It’s like the only time we see her is when she scratches at the door at night to come and sleep on my chest. And she still scratches me.”

“It’s her way of showing she loves you,” I lied smoothly, unable to keep my lips from creeping into a grin.

“You’re not fooling me, my siren,” he laughed, the sound infectious.

Our laughter came to a swift, abrupt end when a loud crash sounded from behind us.

“Did you hear that?” I asked in a small whisper, my heart hammering in my chest.

“I did,” Viktor murmured, his arms protectively tightening around my waist as he turned to stare over his shoulder.

“What was that sound?” I asked, unable to ignore my curiosity, even if it did kill the cat. Turning my head to glance over my shoulder, my lips tugged into a frown as I didn’t spot anyone else on the top deck.

It was just us two. There wasn’t anyone or anything behind us, but how was that possible? Something must have made that sound.

Viktor cursed under his breath and turned to leave. “I don’t know, but I’m going to find out. I shouldn’t be gone too long. I know you can take care of yourself, my siren, but if you see anything, scream, and I’ll get here as fast as I can. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you. I would sooner die than let anything happen to you.”

He pressed a rough kiss to my mouth and ran over to the other end of the ship and down the steps that led to the second deck.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Astrid,” I whispered to myself as I turned my attention back to the front, focusing on sailing the ship. “Viktor will be back before you know it.”

It wasn’t necessarily being left alone on the top deck in the middle of the night that had me spooked. It was the sounds that continued to come from the lower deck.

When I heard a scuffle from behind me, my breath hitched, and I swivelled around on the balls of my feet. My heart felt like it was beating a thousand beats a minute as my eyes wildly searched the dark.

“Viktor?” I called out to him in a shaky voice, but it wasn’t the dark pools of my husband’s eyes that I was staring into.

“Laurence?”

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Laurence?” I called out in surprise, pressing a hand over my chest where my heart was beating erratically. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought I heard something, so I came to investigate.” Laurence moved to step on the button I had neglected since Viktor left to investigate. “I wanted to check that the both of you were fine.”

“Thanks,” I smiled warmly at him. “Viktor and I were talking one moment, and then there was a loud crash the next moment. He went to investigate.”

“How long has he been gone?” Laurence frowned, concern masking his face.

“He left a few moments before you turned up.”

“I should probably go check on him,” Laurence offered, but I quickly stopped him.

“No, let me,” I insisted.

Laurence didn’t look so convinced, but he was smart enough to hold his tongue as I left the wheel to him and wandered across the top deck to the stairs that led down to the second level. Even though I knew Viktor was down there somewhere in the darkness, and no matter what, I would always be safe when he was nearby, my breath was guarded, and my steps were slow and cautious.

The whole time, I couldn’t help but feel like someone was watching me. Their eyes

followed me as I walked the rest of the way down the stairs. Before I could call out for them to reveal themselves, arms snagged me around the waist and lifted me into the air.

If I didn't recognise the familiar arms around my waist, hugging me to their hard chest, I would have screamed and woken up the entire ship.

"That wasn't funny," I huffed as he laughed in my ear.

"From where I'm standing, it was hilarious," Viktor laughed and tightened his arms around me. He dropped his head to press his lips to the side of my neck in a soft kiss. "Sorry for scaring you, my siren."

"I wasn't scared," I lied. "You were gone for a while, so I came to look for you. Laurence is at the wheel," I told him, turning around in his arms.

"Laurence?"

"He said he couldn't sleep, and when he heard a noise, he came to check on us."

"I'm glad Laurence is handling the wheel," Viktor sighed and reached for my hand. "I was getting anxious about you being up there alone."

I narrowed my eyes at him playfully. "I can look after myself."

"I know, but I can't help but worry about you, my siren," he murmured lowly, leaning in to graze his lips against mine in a ghost of a kiss. "Care to explore with me?"

"I thought you'd never ask," I grinned, and my teeth sunk into my bottom lip, my eyes lingering on his before I turned around and led him down the hallway. "Find

anything?" I asked, shooting him a questioning look over my shoulder.

"There's nothing on this floor," he answered, reaching for my hand. "I checked all the rooms, including the bathrooms. Everyone is asleep and accounted for. Except for Laurence, we know where he is."

"How did you check the rooms?" I asked.

"The same way that person checked our room last night," he chuckled. "I peeked into every room, and all the beds except ours and Laurence's are accounted for. I was mostly checking for anyone hiding in the room rather than checking on the sleeping crew. I'm not that creepy, you know?"

"That's debatable," I snorted, giggling when he playfully tugged on a strand of my hair, pulling me closer to him. "If you've already checked the second deck, we only have the bottom deck left."

"Let me go first." Viktor brushed his lips against my temple before he rushed to get ahead of me.

The only time I had been down to the bottom deck was on the first day when Viktor gave Roscoe, Manny, and me a tour of the ship. Besides that, Gustav was the only one who regularly headed down here to fetch the supplies he needed to cook for us all.

"How chivalrous of you," I chuckled but couldn't bring myself to complain when he kept his hold on my hand tight.

Standing on the last step behind Viktor, I peered over his shoulder at the bottom deck. Nothing looked out of place or like it didn't belong there. It looked like how it did on the tour...except for one tiny detail.

A familiar blanket lay in the corner, peeking out from behind three barrels that looked strategically placed to hide something... or someone .

“Viktor,” I whispered, grabbing his shoulder. “Do you see that?”

“See what?” He asked in an equally quiet whisper. When I turned his head to face the corner where the blanket lay, his breath hitched just as mine did. “Stay here,” he ordered and left me on the step to investigate.

Of course, I didn’t listen. He really shouldn’t have expected anything else.

“It stinks down here.” My nose was scrunched in distaste as I ducked under Viktor’s arm and spied some old fish in the corner. It looked like the fish Gustav had cooked yesterday. Or perhaps the day before.

“And this is Jerrik’s missing blanket,” Viktor murmured, kicking the corner of it with his foot. “You know what this means?”

I gulped and nodded. I did.

Someone was sleeping down here.

We had a stowaway.

Viktor and I quickly scrambled back up to the top deck before the stowaway returned for his old, uneaten fish. Garth would be horrified to see one of his meals in that state.

“Did you find anything?” Laurence asked, glancing over his shoulder as we rushed to join him at the wheel.

“There’s a stowaway on the ship,” I said, the words rushing out of my mouth before I



could stop them.

“A stowaway? Really?” He sounded in surprise. “How can you be sure?”

“He’s got a blanket and some food hidden behind some barrels in the corner of the bottom deck,” Viktor answered, his voice gruff. He brushed his fingers through his hair—a nervous habit. “The stowaway has been stealing food from us. And not just the meals that Gustav cooks.”

Laurence pursed his lips, displeased. “That means he’s been sneaking around the ship under our noses this whole time.”

“And he’s been stealing from us,” I said, referring to Jerrik’s blanket.

“What are we going to do?” Laurence asked.

“We need to lure him out. Find out who they are,” I said. “Do you think they may be from Mann?”

“It’s possible,” Viktor murmured, but he didn’t look convinced.

“To steal?” Laurene asked.

“Revenge,” Viktor murmured in a low tone, and my face twisted into an expression of horror at his words.

“Revenge?” I gulped.

My husband nodded. “We need to catch him before he goes further and gets one of us. But the question is, how are we going to do that?”

“I’ve got an idea,” I murmured and turned to glance at Laurence, aware that if anyone were going to back me on this, it would be him. It certainly wouldn’t be Viktor. If anything, he would be against what I had in mind, even though it was a good idea.

“Why do I feel like I won’t like this?” Viktor groaned.

“You definitely won’t like this,” Laurence laughed, already on the same thought train as me.

Viktor’s eyes pleaded with me. “Tell me, my siren.”

“Use me as bait,” I said and rushed to explain the rest before Viktor could turn down a perfectly good plan just because it put me in a bit of danger. “I’m certain that the stowaway is from Mann. Revenge is our best bet right now, and what better way for them to get revenge than for them to get at me? I was the reason for us to leave early, after all.”

“I don’t like this,” Viktor murmured, but Laurence cut him off.

“I understand your concern, Viktor,” Laurence sighed. “And if our positions were switched right now and my wife was on the line like this, I would also be totally against it. But you have to see that this is our best option right now. We need to lure out whoever is on our ship.”

“Something bad could happen,” Viktor sighed, his face softening as he turned to face me. “You could get hurt, my siren. I don’t know what I’d do if that happened.”

“You won’t let that happen, pirate,” I whispered, moving to close the distance between us. I was grateful that Laurence had the good judgment to look away and give us this private moment because we badly needed it.

I looped my arms around Viktor's neck and brought his face down to mine, pressing our foreheads together.

"I know you won't let anything happen to me," I whispered against his mouth. "I know it's dangerous and that you're worried about me, but we really need to find out who is hiding on our ship, and this is our best option right now."

"I still don't like this," Viktor groaned, pressing another sweet kiss to my lips. "But I know you can take care of yourself, my siren."

"And if I need you, I promise to scream as loud as I can," I assured him, my lips curling up at the corners.

"I'll come running before you finish screaming," he promised me, pressing one more kiss to my lips—this one harder...rougher... needier—before he allowed Laurence to drag him away from me, off the top deck and down to their rooms on the second floor.

The stowaway wouldn't dare reveal himself as long as I was with Viktor and Laurence. Our best chance was if I was alone. Hopefully, I hadn't bit off more than I could chew.

My hands remained steady on the wheel as I focused on breathing evenly. This needed to be as normal and believable as I could possibly make it. It needed to look like I belonged here, like I was meant to be at the wheel, and Viktor and Laurence had merely dropped by to check on me. At the very least, it needed to look like I wasn't expecting them to return for a while.

Seconds turned into minutes, and the more time that passed, the more I felt like my plan was going to fail.

Whoever had been hiding on the ship wasn't going to show up. They wouldn't fall for this trick and come seek me out.

When I was on the verge of calling for Viktor and Laurence to come back so we could come up with a Plan B, I felt a pair of eyes on me. The gaze was lingering and probing, making me squirm in a way that only a man could do.

I couldn't deny that I was more than a little scared, but now was not the time to show it. Not when we needed to discover who this man was and what he was doing here.

My breath hitched as I heard their footsteps tap against the wooden floors as he walked along the deck toward me. The footsteps got louder as he got closer, and I did my best to make it seem like I couldn't hear him. Like I didn't know they were behind me, watching me, staring at me . This was the perfect opportunity for them to get revenge while I was here alone.

Finally, when I felt a hand land on my shoulder, I knew our plan had worked.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fear struck my heart as the stowaway kept a firm and somewhat familiar hand on my shoulder, almost as if waiting for me to turn around and face him.

Wait... familiar?

My eyes widened as I realised this was someone I knew. Someone from Jorvik.

Unable to handle my mind wandering any longer, I let go of the wheel spokes and turned around to face the stowaway. When my eyes finally landed on his face and familiar features, I blinked several times to ensure I wasn't seeing things. When his face didn't warp into someone else's, and he even had the nerve to smile at me, somewhat hopeful—mostly naive—that I would receive him happily, I could hardly believe what was happening.

“Crosby?” I gaped, unable to believe my eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Ouch,” he grimaced. “Is it wrong of me to hope you would have been excited to see me, Astrid?” He slipped his hands into his breeches' pockets—they were far too big to be his own.

“Sorry,” I apologised even though I didn't mean it. “I'm just surprised to see you.”

“I bet you are,” he chuckled, but the sound was cut short by a throaty cough.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my eyebrows knitting together in concern.

He nodded and coughed once more.

“I’ve just been a little cold lately, so I’ve picked up a nasty cough,” he explained, pausing to clear his throat once again. “Nothing warm soup, a thick blanket and some much-needed rest can’t get rid of.”

“I don’t understand...” My voice trailed off as I tried to make sense of the situation. “You’re the stowaway?”

“I wouldn’t exactly refer to myself as a stowaway, but I guess that’s what some people would call it.” He shrugged, his eyes drifting over my shoulder to stare into the darkness of the ocean. “The sea is beautiful at this time of night.”

“How would you know?”

“It’s not the first time I’ve been out here at night,” he told me, still staring at the ocean as we gently bobbed up and down. “It’s far more difficult to make it out onto the top deck during the day, but I have done it a few times. For food and stuff, but I try not to. It’s far too risky.”

“I saw the fish.”

“Yes, sorry about that.” His gaze snapped back to me, and he had the decency to look sheepish about it. “I only ever took food when I felt like I was going to pass out from hunger.”

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” I murmured, shifting uncomfortably on my feet. “I’m just trying to make sense of this strange situation.”

“How about I help you?”

“You’ll tell me?” My tone was sceptical.

Crosby nodded and inhaled sharply. His eyes flitted over my shoulder to admire the sea, but they were back on mine just as quickly as they had left.

“I bet you’re wondering how I got on The Serpent in the first place?” His lips were curled in a ghost of a smile.

I nodded.

Crosby was silent for a moment, staring at the sea. “You were there, weren’t you?”

My eyebrows knitted together. “Where?”

“At my wedding.” He dropped my eyes. “To Chara.”

I nodded.

“She’s pregnant.”

I nodded again.

“I didn’t want to marry her,” he whispered so lowly I wasn’t even sure that’s what he had said. “I didn’t want to marry Chara, but I was forced to go through with it. Everyone told me it was the proper thing to do.” He dropped to the ground at my feet, crossing his legs to get comfortable. I wasn’t sure what was going through his mind or what he wanted, but I sat before him to keep the playing field level.

“I didn’t know I was going to do it,” he whispered, his voice even quieter than before. “Days leading up to it, I didn’t know I was going to sneak onto The Serpent. I didn’t plan it. One moment, I was helping Chip load some jars of honey onto the ship, and

the next, I was moving those barrels to the corner and hiding behind them, waiting for everyone to leave and for the ship to start moving. To start moving away from land, from Jorvik, but most importantly, from Chara and that baby she claims to be mine.”

I held back a gasp. “What are you saying?”

He answered me with a pointed look.

“Are you insinuating that you’re not the father of Chara’s baby?”

“Yes,” he sighed but then shook his head. “No,” he denied, burying his face in his hands seconds before I saw a lone tear rolling down his face. “I don’t know,” he groaned, and when he lifted his head, a waterfall of tears streamed down his face.

I gulped and watched Crosby with wide eyes. I had never seen him like this before.

So lost.

So sad.

So broken.

Crosby had always been pleasant and had a way of looking at the positive side of things. He always tried to find the good in everything, but it appeared that all that had changed now.

If this were someone else, if this weren’t the same Crosby that proposed to me and blown his top when I accepted Viktor’s offer of marriage over his, I would have done more to comfort him. If this was someone else, I would have hugged and held them until the tears stopped. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. Not with Crosby.



“Did you ask her?” It was an obvious question, but it needed to be asked. People never thought to ask the otherwise obvious question when they were as distraught as Crosby was right now.

“I tried,” he sniffled. “But every time I try to ask her about it, she turns it into an argument and refuses to answer the question. If that isn’t her admitting that I’m not the father of the child growing inside of her, I don’t know what is.”

“Maybe,” I murmured, my lips tugging into a frown. “Or maybe she’s hurt by your question and thinks you shouldn’t even have to ask such a thing.”

“Whose side are you on?” Crosby snapped at me, but the anger quickly fizzled away at the startled expression on my face. “Sorry, Astrid. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

I shook my head and pursed my lips, choosing not to hold a grudge.

“I’m not on anyone’s side, Crosby,” I told him. “I’m just trying to make you see how things might look from her point of view.”

“She’s lied about it before.”

“I know. You don’t need to remind me,” I chuckled, but he didn’t find it very funny. “But just because she’s lied about it once before doesn’t mean she’s lying again. Or that she lies all the time.”

“You don’t know that,” he grumbled, and I couldn’t think of anything to say.

What could I say to a man who had already made up his mind?

An uncomfortable silence washed over us. Crosby allowed the tears to fall freely,

making no move to wipe them away. I sat across from him, just watching him and feeling sorry for him.

Crosby wasn't a bad person.

He wasn't my person, but he wasn't bad.

Unfortunately, I couldn't say the same about Chara. It was sad that he had spent more time at sea than with his wife after their wedding.

"And you've been sneaking around the ship ever since?" I asked, having already figured as much.

"The blankets, food, clothes, it was all me," Crosby admitted, still refusing to meet my eyes.

"And last night?"

"Yes, sorry about that," he chuckled nervously. "I was sick on my tunic and wanted to replace it with a clean one. I haven't figured out the rooms yet, so I picked a random one. I didn't know it was yours." His cheeks burned crimson. "And I didn't know you two were awake."

"That's okay," I murmured, gulping uncomfortably. It wasn't okay. Not really. I had been really embarrassed, but not as embarrassed if it had been one of the crew that had been flashed with the image of my legs wound around Viktor's waist while he was buried balls-deep inside of him. Luckily, Viktor had pulled the blanket up over us just in time. "But it's probably best if you don't mention it again. Especially to Viktor. There's no need to make things awkward."

"Yes, of course! I wouldn't dare to do that."

I smiled gratefully at him, but my lips were quick to drop.

“I disagree with you running away from your newly married, pregnant wife, but what’s done is done. There’s no point in crying over spilt milk.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that since you’re stuck here for the next few months, you might as well make yourself useful. And there’s no point in hanging around on the bottom deck anymore. You’ll make yourself even sicker than you already are.” And, as if on cue, Crosby started coughing. “Come on,” I told him as I rose to my feet, brushing the dust off the skirt of my dress. “Let’s go find Viktor and Laurence. I’m sure we can set you up in a room, but I must warn you, you’ll probably have to share a room with somebody. We haven’t got enough rooms for one each.”

Crosby got a peculiar, unsettling look on his face. At first, I assumed it was at the mention that he would need to share a room with someone, but when his eyes widened and he slapped a hand over his mouth, I knew it was due to something else.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough time to move and save myself.

I promised Viktor that I would scream as loud as I possibly could if I needed help, but I doubted Crosby’s vomit all over my dress and shoes was the kind of dangerous situation he had in mind.

Well, I guess this also explained the mysterious puddles of sickness all around the ship.

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

To my surprise, Crosby found it much harder to integrate into life on The Serpent than I had imagined he would. He was usually so easy-going, and he had a lot of friends back at Jorvik, but things were different for him out at sea.

He started the morning in a chipper mood—the exact opposite of Laurence, who ended up with Crosby as a roommate simply because he was the only other person awake.

Crosby was determined to prove himself helpful and much more than an unwanted stowaway. He tried to take over the steering of the ship from Hammond, and perhaps if he were thinking clearly, he would have realised that it was far too soon for that. I wasn't the least bit surprised when Hammond chased him away with a murderous scowl and harsh curse words I would never care to repeat.

Crosby then tried to help Jerrik with the fishing, but I laughed and watched as Jerrik jumped over the edge to escape him. But not before demanding that he get his blanket back.

After Jerrik, Crosby had gone out to look for Viktor, but he had been discussing something with Garth and Odin, both concerned about the lack of wind since yesterday. It was safe to say that interaction hadn't gone down well.

When Viktor caught my eyes later, I sent him a pointed look. He sighed and nodded, making a point to invite Crosby to have lunch with us all. Crosby tried to join us all for breakfast, but he couldn't get a seat in the usual circle where we all sat for meals. So, he ate outside the circle by himself, looking sad and mooney.

It was safe to say that none of the crew was particularly pleased about having Crosby on the ship, and I couldn't blame them. Not when I felt the same way.

Viktor also wasn't happy, and I couldn't blame him either. Crosby's presence here complicated many things, including the mess he made with our food supply on the bottom deck. We were all now waiting for Gustav to confirm just how much of a problem Crosby had caused.

"What's on the agenda for today?" Crosby asked eagerly, rubbing his hands together as if he couldn't be more excited.

Viktor sighed and spared him a glance but didn't say anything. Instead, he glanced around the circle we were all sitting in.

"Who'd like to start?" He asked, opening up the floor for everyone to voice their concerns or any problems they might be facing. As Captain of the ship, it was his job to ensure smooth sailing for us all. Pun intended.

"Roscoe and I have been doing the cleaning lately," Manny started, surprising us all. This was a first for him and a pleasant surprise. "But with how it's been raining every night and the sick puddles everywhere—" He was a better person than me because he resisted the urge to glance at Crosby for that part. "—it's just been a lot, and we could do with an extra pair of hands."

"I agree with you, Manny. Since Crosby has been attributing to the mess, I think it's only fair that he helps you with the cleaning," Viktor said, turning his attention to the man in question. "Any objections?"

"None," Crosby answered far too quickly, and we all burst out laughing at the terrified expression on his face.

I couldn't blame him. Viktor at sea wasn't quite the same as Viktor on land. I wasn't sure which one I preferred. They were both pretty damn irresistible.

"Great, let's move on to the next matter of business. Who wants to go next?"

Jerrik cleared his throat, drawing all attention to him in a very subtle way. "We're at that part of the trip where there's not many fish in the water. I don't know if it's a simple shortage or if something in the water is eating them all up. Either way, I'm struggling to get my hands on some," Jerrik sighed, brushing his fingers through his wet hair. "This is the third day that I've barely been able to catch anything. I went in early this morning to try my luck at a different time of day, but still nothing. I'll go back in again after lunch, but things aren't looking good."

"How long do you think this will last?" Viktor asked, a gravely serious expression on his face.

Jerrik shrugged. "I don't know. It usually passes by now. Hopefully, things will improve as soon as we get close to civilisation."

The expression on Viktor's face was tight as he stared at Jerrik, their eyes locked. Even though I couldn't tap into their silent conversation, I had a pretty good idea of how concerned they were.

I reached over and slipped my hand into Viktor's, giving it a gentle squeeze. It was worrying that there was a shortage of fish—the central part of our diet while out at sea—but I was hopeful that things would get better soon. They had to.

"I'm sure the fish will turn up soon," Crosby grinned, but no one replied.

"We need more hands at sea," Viktor announced after a few moments, finally breaking eye contact with Jerrik. "Whoever has some spare time today, I want them

out at sea. Take Chip's rowboat, do whatever you need, but we must get our hands on some fish."

He didn't need to explain why.

A few hands were raised, offering their help—mine included. I wasn't a good swimmer, and I had only been fishing with my father and brother a handful of times, but I was willing to try if it meant helping the crew.

Gustav finally joined us, having just emerged from the bottom deck where he had been inventorying our dried food supply.

"What's the verdict, Gustav?" Viktor asked, subconsciously squeezing my hand. The simple action warmed my heart more than he could imagine, knowing that he relied on me when he struggled to stay afloat amid all these problems he was expected to solve.

"Things aren't looking good," Gustav sighed, shaking his head. He sat between Latham and Hammond and helped himself to the few slices of bread we left him.

"How can that be possible?" Caspian groaned, clicking his tongue in displeasure. "Surely, that's the whole point of dry food. To last for a long time because it's been dried?"

"Feel free to go down there and take a look for yourself if you don't believe me," Gustav snapped, clearly stressed.

Cooking and keeping us all fed were the main parts of his job description. If I were him, I would be stressed as well.

"Sorry," Gustav grumbled the apology and sighed deeply. "I've checked it all. All the

fresh vegetables we've been picking up from islands along the way have gone off. I think I can salvage some of the potatoes, but that's about it."

"What about the dried foods?" Latham asked.

"No good."

"Why not?"

"Many of them have been unwrapped and left out, so much of it has gone stale. The rest isn't in the best condition for consumption, but we haven't got much else of a choice right now. Anyway, that's not the bulk of our issues right now," Gustav sighed, dropped the slice of bread he had been eating plain and brushed his hair away from his forehead. His face twisted into a grim expression. "I don't know if you caught wind of the smell last night, but there's a mix of urine and faeces in a few of the barrels. It wouldn't have been an issue if those barrels contained packaged food, but as we were short on time, we just put a lot of it into the barrels without wrapping them up."

"How many barrels?" Viktor asked, his tone deathly quiet.

"Two," Gustav answered. "But three of the other barrels surrounding them have also gone off. We can't eat any of it without making ourselves sick."

That was five in total. The last time I counted, we had loaded eight barrels of dried food onto the ship. That left three for us. And that didn't include the portions that we had already consumed.

"Faeces?" Garth called out in question while Roscoe exclaimed, "Urine?"

"How could that have happened? Who would do that?" Manny asked, looking a little



green in the face.

At his question, everyone shared knowing looks before slowly, one by one, they all turned to stare in my direction.

“What? Why are you all looking at me?” I snapped at them, a deep scowl on my face. “I’ve only ever used a bathroom.”

Despite the severity of the situation, they all burst out laughing. My cheeks flamed at the notion that they were all laughing at me, and when I turned to face Viktor, he bowed his head to rest his forehead against mine and playfully bumped the tip of my nose with his.

“We don’t think it’s you, my siren,” he laughed and nuzzled my nose again. “Kis.”

“Oh,” I murmured, my cheeks flaming harder. “It’s not Kis either,” I denied, turning to face the rest of the crew. “Kis only throws up when she has carrots, but there are no carrots onboard. And I’ve set her up a little toilet in the bathroom. I’ve seen her use it a bunch of times. I’m certain Kis isn’t behind this.”

“I don’t think it’s Kis either,” Gustav said. “It’s far too much to be cat faeces.”

“Who else would defecate in the barrels of food?” Dagfinn asked, serious. Humour from the earlier misunderstanding had long worn off now.

“It was me,” Crosby admitted in a small voice. When all eyes snapped to him, he bowed his head in shame. “It was dark and cold, and I was stuck on the bottom deck for days. I couldn’t tell which barrels had food in them. I promise I only used the ones that I thought were empty.”

“Well, they weren’t empty, were they? Why would we bring empty barrels aboard the

ship?” Odin snapped with a fierce scowl on his face. “Well done, Crosby! You’ve just royally fucked us!”

“You’re supposed to shit out food! Not shit on it,” Dagfinn groaned and squeezed his eyes shut, deeply frustrated.

“I knew we should have made him walk the plank!”

“How are we supposed to make it to Greenland without food?”

“Is it too late to turn back and go back to Mann? Of course, we’ll teach them a lesson in respecting women, but we need food.”

“We’ll figure out a solution to the food shortage,” Viktor spoke loudly, commandeering everyone’s attention like the true Captain he was. “But for now, Gustav and Hammond, I need you to look through the barrels and the little food we have left. If there is anything you think we can salvage, do what you can. Anything that we can’t, throw overboard.”

Everyone looked like they wanted to say something, even I wanted to, but Viktor’s definite tone kept us all quiet.

We were quick to move on to the important matter of where we would stop next since we had left Mann earlier than anticipated, but no one seemed to pay much attention, including me.

While everyone helped themselves to another glass of ale to get through the rest of the meeting, my eyes couldn’t help but flit toward Crosby. He looked so sad and lost, as if he didn’t belong here. Like he knew no one wanted him here.

Even though I knew the bulk of our problems were Crosby’s fault, I couldn’t help but

feel bad for him.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

The lack of fish was a bigger issue than Jerrik and Viktor had let on.

It had been suggested that there was only a slight fish shortage, and Jerrik hadn't been able to find much these past few days. He had failed to admit that he hadn't been able to find any fish these past few days, and Gustav had been rationing fish from previous days as best as he could. Unfortunately, the last of that had run out, and if we didn't catch any fish today, we would have nothing but dried fruits to eat for dinner tonight.

Naturally, as he was the one behind all of this, my eyes drifted to Crosby. When I found him already looking at me, I was quick to avert my gaze.

The last thing I needed right now was to give him the false hope that there could possibly be something between us. That there had ever been something between us.

"Meow," Kis called out to me, rubbing the side of her body against my leg. Unable to resist, I reached down and picked her up, holding her while she licked her paw clean. It looked dirtied with breadcrumbs that one of the crew must have fed her during breakfast. Either that or she had sniped it when no one was looking. The latter sounded more plausible to me.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," I tutted, smoothing a hand down her head, between her ears like she loved. "You won't like it out on the water. I know you won't."

Kis meowed again and looked up at me uninterestedly, telling me that my words hadn't changed her mind.

“But you hate the water,” I protested.

Her next meow said, “ You hate the water too, but you’re still going.”

“I just want to help, Kis,” I sighed and lifted her to bury my face in her fur. As sassy and troublesome as this creature could be at times, I wouldn’t swap her for any other cat in all of Jorvik.

“This is your last chance to change your mind,” Viktor whispered in my ear, placing his arms on the rail on either side of me, trapping me and Kis between it and his chest.

“I’m not going to change my mind,” I told him, leaning back to rest my head against his chest. “I just want to be of some help.”

“Without the risk of sounding condescending...” He nuzzled his face into my neck and stroked a hand through Kis’ fur. She began purring and moved to lay on her stomach, granting him more room.

Right there, she reminded her of me, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Like mother, like daughter.

Viktor sent me a funny look, but I shook my head.

“Without the risk of sounding condescending,” he repeated. “You’re not a very good swimmer. Or good at fishing.”

“I know, but Jerrik needs help,” I told him, my lips tugging down at the corners as a wave of hesitation washed over me. I wasn’t nearly as confident as I had been moments ago, but perhaps that was just false confidence. “And you never know; I might be able to pick it up after some practice.”

“I hope so, my siren,” Viktor chuckled and pressed his lips to the slope of my neck. “I love you, Astrid,” he exhaled deeply. “Your willingness to help with everything is so beautiful. I really admire that in you.”

“Nearly as beautiful as me?” My lips twisted into a teasing grin as I turned around in his arms to face him, with Kis pushed in between us. Not that she seemed to have any qualms with the position. In fact, she meowed and made a show of getting more comfortable, basking from the warmth that radiated from our bodies.

“Nothing is as beautiful as you, my siren.” He pressed a soft kiss to my lips.

The kiss didn’t last long as Kis meowed in protest, scratching at his chest.

“Let me take her from you,” Viktor chuckled, reaching for her.

Kis hissed at first and scratched at Viktor’s arms. He winced slightly but, other than that, didn’t appear to be fazed. When he settled her in his arms, gently rocking her like one would do to a baby, she meowed and laid her furry head on his arm, getting comfortable. She looked like she belonged there, and he looked like he belonged with something small like Kis in his arms.

And then suddenly, I couldn’t get the vision of my husband holding a baby out of my mind.

My eyes widened before I could control my reaction. It was too early to be thinking like that.

Far too early .

“Why do you look like that, my siren?”

“Like what?” I cleared my throat and glanced over my shoulder, watching Jerrik wait patiently for us to finish up here so I could join him.

“Like you’re spooked.”

“I’m not spooked.” I rose on my tiptoes to press a kiss to his lips, hoping to distract him. I quickly kissed Kis’ head as well. “I don’t want to keep Jerrik waiting. I’ll see you both later.”

“See you later, my siren. Stay safe!” I heard Viktor call after me, sounding somewhat confused. I couldn’t blame him for sounding that way. My thoughts were a jumbled mess, and I knew I needed to get away from him if I wanted to stop thinking about him with a baby in his arms.

Our baby .

What better way to clear my mind than to spend the day at sea, fishing on a little rowboat?

I smiled apologetically to Jerrik when I reached him. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting long.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he dismissed. “I’ve already loaded the rowboat with everything we need for today. Including some bread if we end up staying out later than planned. Once we get in, one of the others will help lower us onto the water.”

I nodded and climbed into the boat, choosing to sit on the middle plank so regardless of where Jerrik sat, I would be close to him. With the both of us out on the sea together for so long, it was an excellent opportunity to get to know him better.

“Who’s going to lower us?” I asked, turning my head to glance around the top deck.

“Hammond and Latham,” Jerrik told me. “But we’re just awaiting one more person...there he is now.”

I twisted my neck to see who it was. When my eyes landed on Crosby, walking toward us with a nervous smile and playing awkwardly with his fingers, my eyebrows shot up in surprise.

I turned back to face Jerrik. “Crosby?” I gaped.

“Don’t ask me how,” he groaned. “I turned him down several times, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Sighing, I pursed my lips and waited for Crosby to join us in the small rowboat.

True to Jerrik’s word, Hammond and Latham wandered over to turn the mechanic wheel that Chip had installed. It controlled the chains that the little rowboat was attached to. Once we landed in the water, we pulled on the chains to indicate they could stop turning the wheel.

“Go get us some fish!” Latham grinned, leaning over the railing to unclip the rowboat from the chains to set us free. To keep them from getting damaged, Latham and Hammond turned the wheel the other way to retrieve them. They would drop the chains once again when we returned, hopefully with some fish.

I smiled and waved at them before tightening my grip around my oar. Crosby and I followed Jerrik’s lead as he rowed us away from the ship, further east, in search of some fish.

Jerrik usually went swimming, but as there were three of us today—and the fact that I was a poor swimmer and would no doubt drown myself in these deep waters—we had opted for the rowboat.



“What happened to cleaning with Roscoe and Manny?” I asked curiously, throwing the question over my shoulder at Crosby as we rowed.

“They said they didn’t need my help,” he told me, but I didn’t quite believe him.

Roscoe and Manny definitely needed help. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t have bothered bringing it up during the meeting after lunch. Something told me the three of them had had a little falling out.

“Besides, I know that I played a pretty big part in the food shortage we’re experiencing, so I thought I’d help with the fishing.” Jerrik snorted at that, and I felt Crosby shift uncomfortably behind me. “I also wanted to go fishing because I heard that you offered to help as well, Astrid.” It was now my turn to shift uncomfortably in my seat. “You’re the only one that’s nice to me, Astrid. Everyone else mostly ignores me. Sometimes, it’s like I don’t exist.”

“They’re just upset,” I tell him, hoping to brush the issue under the rug. “I’m sure all of this will blow over in time.” That was a full-blown lie from me. Not for a second did I believe that this would blow over soon, and it was only confirmed when Jerrik snorted again.

“I hope so,” Crosby murmured, sounding forlorn, but I struggled to bring myself to feel bad for him.

When we arrived at a spot Jerrik was finally satisfied with, my arms ached from all the rowing, and we switched the oars for spears.

“First rule: don’t point the spear at me. Second rule: don’t point the spear at yourself or each other. Third point: always, always, always point the spear at the water.”

I nodded and did as instructed, immediately pointing the sharp edge of the spear

toward the water.

“When you see a fish, pierce it with the sharp end of the spear. Killing it isn’t your objective, but it’s not a problem if you do.”

Jerrik wasn’t finished speaking, but Crosby got too excited and threw his spear into the water. I couldn’t see the fish he had spotted, but the water splashed where the spear landed. Instead of reaching for it, he watched in horror as it floated away from us.

Jerrik winced as he reached to retrieve the spear before it was lost to the waves. “Not quite like that, but good attempt, I guess.”

I turned my head to stare at The Serpent. We were close enough that I could still see it, but they wouldn’t be able to hear us even if we screamed at the top of our lungs and vice versa.

This was going to be a long day.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

I was proud to say that I caught our first fish. It wasn't particularly big or meaty, but it was our only one at the moment, and the slight smile on Jerrik's face when I presented it to him, pierced on the sharp end of my spear, told me that he was proud of me. And that meant a lot to me.

A long stretch of time passed before Jerrik caught our next fish, and then it felt like we were on a roll. Jerrik caught four more fish, all larger than mine, before I caught my second. Crosby hadn't caught any yet.

The seven fish meant that we were doing better than we had these past few days, but it still wasn't much. It was just about enough to last for today and tomorrow.

"I'm going to get into the water," Jerrik said. "This spot is good, but the boat might be scaring off the bigger fish. Will you two be okay here without me?"

"We will," I assured him.

When Jerrik leapt into the water, he splashed us. I playfully threw a handful of water at him in retaliation, and he swam away, laughing to himself.

At this point, the skirt of my dress had already been soaked several times. Hopefully, Gustav would be kind enough to warm some water for us when we returned to The Serpent so we could wash with it. The last thing I wanted was to catch a cold.

I watched as Jerrik swam away from us like a pro. My eyes remained trained on him

the whole time, watching as he got smaller and smaller until I had to squint to be able to make out the shape of him.

And then I was alone with Crosby.

Not wanting it to be awkward, I shifted to Jerrik's plank, now facing Crosby.

"I'm not very good at this," he chuckled, his tone melancholy.

"I'm not very good at it either." I shrugged, keeping my eyes trained on the water for any unsuspecting fish unfortunate enough to swim near us.

"You've caught two already. That's more than me," he pointed out.

"You'll get the hang of it," I tried to assure him. "You just need to concentrate harder and spear the fish faster. Your reactions are a little slow, but you'll get the hang of it with more practice."

"Does Viktor have faster reactions than me?" Crosby suddenly asked, catching me off guard with the strange question.

My lips parted in surprise, and I stared at him with wide, unblinking eyes until I finally managed, "What?"

"Is Viktor faster than me?"

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"Forget it," he pursed his lips and shook his head.

My lips tugged down into a deep frown as I blinked at him for a few moments before

I forced myself to drag my eyes away. I didn't know what Crosby meant by the strange questions and wasn't about to ask. With Jerrik far away, I didn't want to encourage any more bizarre behaviour from him.

It was a while later before we saw any more action. My eyes widened when I spotted a seemingly innocent fish swimming toward us, casually going about its day. Unfortunately for it, but luckily for us, I quickly sprung into action. Just like Jerrik had taught us, I pointed the spear at the water and held my breath—that part Jerrik hadn't taught me—as I waited for the fish to get closer.

I counted to three in my head before stabbing the spear through the fish. I had aimed for the body but missed it. Luckily, I snagged it by the tail instead. The fish dangled in the air as it flailed about in a desperate attempt to save itself, but I quickly reached out and held my hand underneath it as I brought it into the boat. This one was still alive, so I dropped it into the bucket with the other living fish. Crosby quickly slapped the lid over the bucket before it could flop out, and we both exhaled in relief.

“That's eight now,” I grinned.

“You did great, Astrid. Well done.”

“Thank you.”

We both fell back into an unsettling silence as we kept our eyes on the water for the next unsuspecting fish. Well, I kept my eyes on the water, and Crosby kept his eyes on me, which made me very uncomfortable.

“Astrid?”

“Yes?” I remained staring at the water, looking for more fish.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why did you say yes to him and no to me?” Crosby asked, catching me off guard with yet another inappropriate question. “What about Viktor made you say yes to him over me?”

“I don’t like where this is going, Crosby.” I shifted uncomfortably on the plank, but there was nowhere for me to go. Not unless I wanted to get into the water and swim over to Jerrik. If I were a stronger swimmer, I would have just to escape this awkwardness with Crosby. “Now isn’t the time to speak about this.”

“Why not?” He snapped, his eyes burning with suppressed rage. “That day when you said no to me, you ruined my life.”

My lips parted in shock. “That’s not fair.”

“You ruined my life, and we both know it! Why can’t you admit it?”

A small flame lit inside me, burning fast. “How can you say that?” I scoffed. “You sound like a petulant child, Crosby. I didn’t ruin your life. I turned down your offer of marriage because I didn’t want to marry you. It’s as simple as that.”

Crosby continued like I hadn’t said anything. “If you had just accepted my offer of marriage, then Chara would have never come forward about her pregnancy, and I wouldn’t have been forced to marry her.”

“You shouldn’t have gotten her pregnant in the first place!”

“I wouldn’t have gotten her pregnant if you gave me the time of day.”

I rolled my eyes. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense, but you’re so oblivious, Astrid!” He sneered. “I’ve had feelings for you forever, but you’ve never looked at me twice. You’ve only ever had eyes for Viktor, even when he mistreated you.”

My eyes narrowed, offended. “Don’t speak like you know us.”

“But I know you, Astrid. I know you more than Viktor does. More than he’ll ever know you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t speak down to me like that. Just because you’re blind to my feelings for you doesn’t mean that they matter less.”

“I don’t know why you’re bringing this up now, Crosby. I’m already married to Viktor. You’re too late.” And thank God for that!

“You could have saved me from this mess if you simply said yes,” Crosby said, ignoring what I had just said. “I was the one that planned to marry you first. Viktor just got there before me, so you said yes to him.”

“That’s absurd,” I scoffed. “I didn’t say yes to Viktor because he was the first to propose.”

“Then why did you say yes to him over me?”

“Because I could see that he loved me, and honestly, I liked him as well. I could see myself falling in love with him. We both may not have realised it at first, but it was there all along, growing stronger and stronger until we couldn’t deny it any longer. I

clearly made the right decision because now, I'm completely and utterly in love with Viktor. I can't imagine my life without him. I don't want to live life without him. Is that reason enough for you, Crosby?"

The man looked pained by my answer, but he was so much of a masochist that he kept probing. "And you couldn't see yourself falling in love with me?"

"No, Crosby," I sighed, shaking my head. "I'm sorry if it hurts, but that's the truth."

"No." He stood up abruptly, rocking the boat. "That's not the truth! You're lying!"

"Crosby," I called out to him in a cautious tone. "You need to sit down."

"Don't tell me what to do!" He growled at me, slamming his foot down like a petulant child in the middle of a terrible meltdown. "You ruined my life, and now you're looking at me like I'm crazy."

"I didn't say you were crazy."

"Are you listening? I said you're looking at me like I'm crazy, not that you said that I am crazy!"

My heart began thumping hard and fast, fuelled by fear. Things were getting scary, and I was genuinely worried about Crosby's bizarre, unpredictable behaviour.

I turned my head frantically, looking around for Jerrik, desperately hoping that he was nearby and could save me. When I didn't spot him anywhere, I opened my mouth and screamed Jerrik's name as loud as my lungs would allow me.

"What are you doing?" Crosby spat at me with wild, furious eyes. "Stop screaming! Shut your mouth!"



I ignored Crosby and continued screaming Jerrik's name, desperate for him to appear out of thin air and help me.

"I said, shut your mouth!"

I ignored him and continued screaming.

Before I saw it coming, Crosby leapt across the boat and threw himself at me. His lips pressed against mine, and after the initial shock wore off me, I shrieked and shoved him off me. He proved to be too strong, so I turned my head to avoid his disgusting, unwanted lips.

"I'll have to marry you as well if I get you pregnant," Crosby snarled at me, circling one hand around my wrists while he tried to push the other one under my skirt.

I screamed and kicked his hand away from me. Like Hell I would let him touch me like this! But the fear that he could overpower me made me feel sick.

I propelled my whole body forward so my mouth was right next to his ear to scream much louder than before, "Let me go, Crosby!"

Crosby flinched back at my deafening scream, but he kept a tight grip on my wrists. I took advantage of the momentary distraction to push him off me, but instead of tumbling back like I had hoped he would, Crosby barely moved.

"I've never hated someone as much as I hate you, Astrid," Crosby spat, glaring darkly at me.

He reached for me again, but instead of trying to restrain me or force his hand under my skirt again, he pushed hard against my shoulders and sent me flying back into the water.

A high-pitched, fearful scream ripped through from deep within my chest, deathly afraid, but the sound was muted when my head broke through the top barrier of the water. I kicked my legs out, desperately trying to swim up to the surface because I knew I wouldn't survive if I remained underwater for too long.

Damn me for not taking Viktor up on those swimming lessons!

With all the strength I could muster, my head made it above water, but the rest of my body was weak. I was a wet, sputtering mess as I called out, "Help! Help! Crosby, please help me!"

Crosby watched me flail about in the water, the boat now several feet away, with dull, lifeless eyes.

It was almost as if he wasn't all there as he watched me drown.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I was drowning.

The water seeped into my lungs, and my body ached as I desperately tried to keep my head above water, but it was so difficult. It took so much strength and willpower—both of which I felt like I didn't have right now.

The more time that passed, the more sure I became that I wouldn't make it out of the water alive.

This was where I was going to die.

I could feel it. Death. Seeping into my body through my nose and lungs, slowly taking me away from Viktor and Kis.

I tried to fight, kick, and swim back up to the surface, but I could feel myself sinking lower and lower as if something was pulling me deeper into the water. I tried to keep my eyes open, but my body failed me.

People said that their lives flashed in front of their eyes when they were on the verge of death, but all I could think about was all the things I had yet to do. Viktor and I hadn't experienced life on land properly yet. We hadn't spent enough mornings laying in and just talking. We were yet to celebrate big moments like an anniversary or the birth of our first child. There was still so much more sex and love for us to have. Things were still so new between us that we hadn't even had a proper argument yet!

There was still so much more for Viktor and me to do...so much more of him to learn and love, but time had been robbed from us. From me .

My heart ached at what Viktor would go through when Jerrik returned to The Serpent with the terrible news.

I couldn't formulate any coherent thoughts after that. My mind became jumbled, and I couldn't think straight. I couldn't fight the sea anymore as it sucked me deeper and deeper.

My lips turned up at the corners as I thought of my love, my husband, my pirate, my Viktor...

It was a beautiful way to go.

"Astrid!" I heard someone call out, and a hand grasped my shoulder, shaking me frantically. "Astrid!"

I groaned and shifted my head. Something pressed down on my chest, and I felt myself surge forward. My body forced itself into a sitting position, and I threw up water over the side of the boat.

My chest ached, and I spluttered water everywhere. It was disgusting and far from attractive, but I was too far gone to care.

I placed my hands on either side of the boat, trying to steady myself and gather my bearings.

"Can you hear me, Astrid?" The same voice from before called out to me again, but I was still coughing haphazardly.

“Jerrik?” I croaked, my breathing rapid. “What happened?”

Jerrik ignored my question. “How are you feeling, Astrid?” He asked, his eyes wide, frantic and concerned as he stared at me.

“A little rough,” I admitted in a small, croaky voice. My chest burned when I spoke, but I was just grateful to be alive right now. “What happened?”

“You nearly drowned,” he told me with a gulp, his eyes still shining with fear. “I heard you screaming, so I rushed back. You were drowning, barely visible anymore. I pulled you out of the water.”

“Thank you for saving me,” I whispered to Jerrik. I tried to keep myself in check, not wanting to reveal just how rattled I felt, but when the urge became overwhelming and I couldn’t fight it anymore, I wrapped my arms around him in a tight, grateful hug. “Thank you for pulling me out of the water, Jerrik. I thought I was going to die.”

“I couldn’t let that happen,” Jerrik sniffled and buried his face in my hair, the embrace reminding me of Dustin’s hugs. “I know we don’t know each other very well yet, Astrid, but you’re like a little sister to me. It’s been nice having you around the ship. I was so scared when I heard your screams and came back to see you submerged in the water, already a few feet under.” His eyes didn’t meet mine. Instead, he turned away from me and rubbed his thumbs under his eyes, trying to stifle his sniffles. “If something happened to you, I never would have been able to face Viktor.”

Jerrik turned back to me once his tears had ceased—I think I was still too in shock to cry—but his gaze settled on something over my shoulder, and his face hardened. I was still struggling to register everything that had happened when Jerrik suddenly leapt around me.

One moment, we were sat in silence, and the next, Jerrik's hands were around Crosby's throat.

Crosby gagged and scratched at Jerrik's face, trying to save himself, but Jerrik was far too strong. His grip around Crosby's neck tightened, and as if it wasn't enough for him, he forced Crosby's head over the side of the boat and underwater—giving him a taste of what he had done to me.

But as much as I hated Crosby for what he had nearly done to me, I couldn't let that happen.

“Jerrik, no!” I exclaimed, rushing over to make him let go of Crosby. “What are you doing? Let him go!”

I wasn't nearly strong enough to physically stop Jerrik, and my flailing hands had little effect on him, but my begging and pleading must have done something because he cursed and dropped his hands abruptly. Crosby violently gasped for breath, still leaning over the side of the boat.

“That's nothing close to what Viktor and the rest of the crew are going to do to him when we get back,” Jerrik growled and reached for an oar.

I gulped at his words but couldn't help but agree. I was almost afraid of what Viktor was going to do to Crosby once he heard of how he pushed me off the boat and didn't help me when I was drowning. If it weren't for Jerrik's attempts to resuscitate me, I would be dead right now, and it would have been all Crosby's fault.

Jerrik made a point of sitting between me and Crosby on the way back to The Serpent. Perhaps it was a little over the top, but I was grateful. There was a dark side to Crosby I had never noticed before.

How could he push me off the boat and leave me to drown when I was begging for help?

How could he be so heartless?

It felt like we had been rowing forever, but the outline of The Serpent had only just come into view.

“Enid would like you,” Jerrik suddenly said.

Enid was Jerrik’s wife.

“How long have you been married?” I asked.

“Twelve years.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

I remember Jerrik and Enid’s wedding. I didn’t know Enid very well, but Jerrik’s parents didn’t live too far away from where my parents lived. I was just a child when they married, but I remembered how beautiful the night sky and the full moon were that day. Everyone said it was good luck, and I guess it was since they had now been married twelve years.

“I don’t know if you remember, but you danced until your father dragged you home,” Jerrik laughed. “Whenever I look at you, I remember that little girl dancing to her heart’s content, uncaring of what people had to say or think. Enid is very much like that. Never one to care what others have to say about her or us.”

“I would love to have tea with her when we return to Jorvik. She sounds like great fun.”

“She is,” he sighed wistfully, no doubt missing his wife. I couldn’t fathom how

difficult it must be for the crew to leave behind their families for so long.

Those few days when I thought Viktor would leave me behind had been torturous, and the morning he was set to sail was even worse. I couldn't imagine how I would have felt if he actually left me behind.

It would have been nothing short of torturous.

"We've been trying to have a child for our entire marriage," he whispered into the darkness of the evening. With how distant his voice was, I couldn't tell if he was talking to me or himself. "It was fine at first, but I feel like I've failed my Enid these past few years. She loves children and wants one of her own, but I can't give her one. I think something is wrong with me."

"I'm sorry, Jerrik," I whispered back, unsure how to navigate this very sensitive situation. "I can't imagine how difficult that must be for you both, but there might not be something wrong with you or Enid. Sometimes, these things take time."

"I keep telling myself that, but it's nice to hear it from someone else," Jerrik exhaled deeply as if the weight of the entire world had been on his shoulders. "I just want to give my Edin a child. It's the only thing she's asked from me, and I can't give it to her. It makes me feel like such a failure."

"You'll get there," I assured him, even though my heart broke for him and Enid. "Babies are made out of love, and it's clear that you love your wife very much. I'm sorry you two have to wait so long for your baby. I know it'll be worth it, and I have all my fingers and toes crossed for you." I would also keep them in my prayers, but I didn't say it out loud. I didn't know where Jerrik and Enid were with their faith in God for not being granted a child after so long.

"Thank you, Astrid. I appreciate that," Jerrik chuckled, but there was a tinge of



sadness to the sound. “Viktor is so much more than just my Captain, and I know it’s the same for the rest of the crew. He’s like a brother to me. Over the years, he’s become a significant part of my life, and I’m so grateful that he has you now. I’ve always noticed how lonely he looked when he thought no one was watching him, but he’s got you now, and he doesn’t look lonely anymore.”

“Thank you, Jerrik.” His words warmed my heart, and my lips stretched into a wide smile. “And once again, thank you for saving me. I was so scared that I was going to die.”

I didn’t tell him that I felt ready to die. That I had accepted the fate I didn’t think I could escape.

“You don’t need to thank me for that, Astrid. If it were someone else from the crew in my place, they would have done the same thing. You’re one of us now, and we look after each other.” His words meant so much more to me than he could ever imagine. “My only regret was that I was naïve enough to leave you alone with Crosby in the first place. If I hadn’t left, you wouldn’t have nearly drowned.”

“It’s not your fault,” I was quick to deny.

There was no way either of us could know that Crosby would have tried to kill me.

Jerrik and I continued chatting as we rowed, though it became difficult to talk and row when my arms ached. Thankfully, Jerrik didn’t seem to mind and was happy to talk for us both, and I was grateful for the distraction.

A loud sigh of relief escaped me as we sided up next to The Serpent, and I moved quickly to attach the chain to my end of the boat. Crosby, however, didn’t work as quickly. Instead, he seemed to be dragging his feet and even waited until Jerrik and I stepped back onto the ship before he even stood up.

One look at Viktor and I knew he had been waiting—and worrying—for us to get back. I didn't blame him. The sky had already gotten dark, and we were no doubt late for dinner.

Once the rowboat was back on the ship, I threw myself into Viktor's awaiting arms. I pressed my face into his chest, and he wrapped his arms tightly around me, squeezing me tight. I felt all the worry and anxiety of us being separated from him all day melt away in a deep exhale.

I should have known better than to run into Viktor's arms like that, but I couldn't help myself. After the initial relief of being reunited passed, I knew he could sense something was wrong.

"Your dress is so wet it could probably drown you," Viktor chuckled, but his words didn't have the effect he probably intended.

Instead of laughing, I stiffened—the confirmation he needed.

"Jerrik? Astrid?" Viktor called out in a dark, grave tone, watching us both carefully. "What happened out there?"

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Do you want to tell the story, or shall I?” Jerrik asked me.

I appreciated being given the choice because something told me that if Jerrik were to tell the story, Crosby would suffer a fate worse than drowning.

“We caught some fish, but it wasn’t much,” I started. Twelve, to be exact, including the few Jerrik had brought back with him when he heard the screaming. None were particularly big, but it should be enough for the next two days. “Jerrik swam a little away from us to see if we would have better luck with the fish there.”

“I understand why Jerrik’s clothes are soaked through, but why are yours, my siren?” Viktor asked, and even though his tone was annoyed, his arms around me were warm and homely, holding me like I was the most precious thing in the world.

“I’m getting there,” I chuckled at his impatience, but the sound was heavy. “Crosby was very upset with me for various reasons. I won’t get into it now, but I wouldn’t say what he wanted to hear...”

“Okay, and?”

“He kind of pushed me off the boat,” I blurted out, unable to think of a better way to say it. “I’m not a very good swimmer and struggled to stay afloat. I was asking Crosby for help, but he didn’t move. I don’t know if he mentally clocked out or what, but he hasn’t said anything since. Thankfully, Jerrik heard me screaming and came over to save me from drowning. If it weren’t for Jerrik, I don’t know what would

have happened to me.”

Gasps of shock and growls of anger sounded from the crew, who were all listening despite how quietly I had spoken. Viktor, however, didn't move nor say a thing. I didn't know which was worse.

“Viktor,” I whispered, digging my fingers into his tunic to get his attention. “Can you hear me, my pirate?”

Instead of answering, Viktor clenched his jaw and bowed his head, pressing his mouth to my ear.

“What else?” He whispered. His warm breath fanned over my neck, making goosebumps rise on my skin. My breath hitched when he dipped his head to press his lips behind my ear, and a shiver ran down my spine. “I know there's something else, Astrid,” he whispered in a husky tone, rubbing a gentle, comforting hand up and down my back. “Whatever it is, you can tell me. You can tell me anything. You know that.”

I did know that. With others, I would fear that they would blame me for Crosby's advances, but not Viktor. I never worried or feared that he would find a way to blame me for what Crosby had tried to do.

“He kissed me,” I whispered quietly so only he would hear. “And then he tried putting his hand up my skirt. When I pushed him away, he pushed me into the water. I saw the look in his eyes,” I gulped, forcing myself to continue speaking despite how bitter the words tasted in my mouth. “He wanted me to drown.”

I was thankful Viktor sensed there was more because I couldn't say it in front of everyone. Narrating Crosby's attempted assault made me feel disgusting, and the last thing I wanted was for everyone to look at me with pity.

“I owe Jerrik my life for saving you, my siren.” Viktor pressed his face into the crook of my neck, his arms tightening around me despite my soaked dress getting him all wet. “I don’t know what I would have done if something happened to you. I wouldn’t be able to go on without you.” His words wounded me, thinking of what would have become of him if something had happened to me today, but I felt the same way. If something were to happen to Viktor, I wouldn’t be able to go on either.

The mere thought of something happening to Viktor had the air escaping my lungs. I wouldn’t be able to breathe if my love wasn’t breathing the same air as me.

When I felt him press a kiss to my forehead and begin to pull away, I tightened my arms around him, refusing to let go. I needed another moment.

“Don’t be too mad at him, okay?” I mumbled into his chest. “I know what Crosby did was terrible, and I could have died today—” I felt his heart skip a beat under my cheek. “—but there’s something wrong with him. He’s not in the right state of mind, and we’ll only make things worse if you hurt him.”

“I don’t care,” Viktor grumbled, a dark look in his eyes as he glared at Crosby from over my head. “Not only did he touch you against your will, but he also tried to drown you.”

“I don’t think that was his intent,” I tried to reason, but my argument wasn’t very strong. Even I wasn’t convinced.

“Did he help you out of the water when you asked for help?” He asked sharply, turning his dark, questioning gaze on me. His eyes softened, and I could sense he was trying to calm himself down for my sake, but the rage still lingered.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, he didn’t.”

“How can you expect me to let him off after what he did?”

Truthfully, I couldn't.

Giving in with a sigh, I rose on my tiptoes and brushed my lips against the underside of his chin. Hopefully, after what Viktor had planned for him, Crosby would come out of it still able to walk and talk.

Viktor squeezed my hip and brushed his lips against my forehead before pulling away. He walked past me to join the crew who had formed a circle around Crosby. He was standing in the middle with his head bowed, and I couldn't see his face.

“What should we do with him, Captain?” Laurence asked, a nasty snarl on his face as he glared at Crosby.

“I think we should make him walk the plank,” Roscoe grinned, looking rather excited at finally using the plank.

“We should drown him like how he tried to drown Astrid,” Jerrik suggested.

“What if we make him walk the plank and then drown him?” Dagfinn said, suggesting the perfect combination of the two.

“I've got something better in mind,” Viktor grinned sadistically. “But first...” He clenched his hand tightly into a fist and slammed it into Crosby's face, striking his left cheek. Crosby fell to the floor, landing between Caspian and Odin, who disdainfully kicked him away.

It was sad that Crosby didn't try to fight back or defend himself. He just curled himself into the foetal position and patiently awaited his fate.

“Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?” Garth grumbled, his lips pulled down in a deep scowl. When Crosby didn’t say anything, he exhaled in frustration. “Crosby? Crosby! Hello? Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you,” Crosby whimpered. He lay pathetically on the ground until Odin reached down to pull him up into a sitting position, and my lips parted in shock at the sight of blood dripping down his chin. I didn’t realise Viktor could pack such a mean punch.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Garth asked again.

“Nothing,” Crosby whispered, his head hung low, refusing eye contact with any of us.

“Nothing?” Garth questioned, looking both appalled and disgusted.

Crosby shook his head. “What are you going to do with me?” He asked in a shaky voice.

“I’m so tempted to make you walk the plank and then leave you to drown at sea for what you did to my wife,” Viktor spat, and the way he clenched his jaw told me that he was itching to throw another punch. I feared that if he did, Crosby would suffer so much more than just a bloody mouth and a loose tooth or two.

“I think he deserves more than that,” Gustav said, stepping forward. “The idea of walking the plank doesn’t seem to scare him. It’s like he doesn’t even care.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Viktor asked.

“Keep him prisoner on the ship and then when we return to Jorvik, his punishment will be decided and handed out in front of all his friends and family. I’m sure he’ll

care then.”

“But it’ll be so much easier to make me walk the plank,” Crosby said quickly, only proving Gustav correct.

“I think that’s a good idea, Gustav,” Viktor voiced aloud. “Until we return to Jorvik, Crosby will be kept as a prisoner on the bottom deck.”

“What? No! You can’t do that!” Crosby whined, but fighting was no use.

Caspian and Hammond stepped forward to grab an arm each, restraining him.

“You should have thought of that before you tried to drown one of our own,” Hammond growled.

“I’m so sorry. Please don’t lock me up. I won’t cause any more trouble,” Crosby begged, kicking and screaming as he was dragged from the top deck to the second and then eventually to the third. We all followed to watch the spectacle.

“You should have thought about that before,” Caspian grinned as he and Hammond dropped Crosby rather unceremoniously, forcing him into a corner. He tried to get up, but they roughly shoved him back, sending his shoulder flying into the wall.

To ensure that he wouldn’t be causing us any more trouble, Viktor retrieved the chains that were kept for rare occasions like this, and they used them to restrict Crosby’s hands. They spared him enough wiggle room to stand up and stretch his legs, but he couldn’t even make it a foot from the wall.

“Astrid, please!” Crosby called out to me, blubbering with tears streaming down his face. “Please don’t leave me here, Astrid. Please don’t let them do this to me. I didn’t mean to hurt you! I wasn’t thinking properly! I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry!”



I turned my head away from Crosby and squeezed my eyes shut, unable to bring myself to look at him any longer.

I couldn't deny that I felt a little bad for Crosby, but then all I had to do was remember how I couldn't breathe under the water and his refusal to help me.

As pathetic as he looked, he didn't deserve my help.

"Ignore him," Viktor murmured as he reached for my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze before leading me out of the bottom deck with the rest of the crew.

Even though we closed the door to the bottom deck, we could hear Crosby's screams from all the way on the top deck.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

O din and I were the only ones awake at this time of night, but for two completely different reasons. He was on night duty, and I couldn't sleep thanks to Crosby's sporadic screaming and pleas for help. While Odin handled the wheel, I leaned against the rails on the other end of the deck, staring at the path ahead illuminated by the moonlight.

Crosby's screams had ceased a little while ago, but I still wasn't sleepy. How could I sleep with all the conflicting thoughts rushing through my mind?

The only reason I had gone to bed at all tonight was because I knew Viktor wouldn't if I didn't.

Speaking of the devil...

"Why aren't you in bed, my siren?" His voice was rough and thick with sleep. Before I could glance back, his arms wound around my waist from behind, and he pressed his bare chest to my back.

"I couldn't sleep," I whispered, my eyes still on the water.

He pressed a soft kiss behind my ear. "What are you thinking about?"

"Everything."

"Like?"

“I’m concerned we didn’t catch enough fish today,” I sighed. “If Crosby hadn’t done what he did, we wouldn’t have wasted so much time, and we could have spent more time in the water catching more fish.”

“You and Jerrik caught more fish today than he’s been able to in the past few days. That’s a good thing,” Viktor tried to assure me, but those weren’t the words I wanted to hear right now.

“But it won’t last long,” I pointed out, both loving and hating how he tried to assure me.

“We can worry about what we’re going to eat in a few days when the time comes,” he whispered, his voice quiet and gentle enough to almost lull me to sleep. If only my mind wasn’t cluttered with so many thoughts of what-ifs. “You don’t need to worry, my siren. After breakfast tomorrow, Jerrik will go back on the water and catch some more fish. Hopefully, he’ll be as lucky as you were today.”

“I want to go with him again tomorrow.”

Viktor paused, and I could feel him staring down at me. “Are you sure that’s such a good thing?”

“I know I’m not a good swimmer, but I was fine until Crosby pushed me in. I even caught a couple of fish myself without Jerrik’s help.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that, my siren. I can’t imagine how scary it must have been for you.” His arms tightened around me, hugging me harder. “If you want, you and I can go out swimming. We can practice strengthening your skills.”

“That would be a good idea, but I still want to join Jerrik tomorrow.”

Viktor still looked conflicted, but he gave in with a sigh. “Fine, if that’s what you want. I just worry about you.”

“I worry about you as well, Viktor.”

“You don’t need to worry about me, Astrid. I’m the Captain. It’s my job to worry about everyone else.”

“Someone has to worry about you.” I turned around in his arms, wound my arms around his waist and pressed my face into his chest. “You’ve got so much on your shoulders. I know that’s what you’ve signed up for as Captain, but there’s just so much to deal with, and you’re only one person. And now we also have Crosby here to make things more difficult.”

“He’s also one more mouth to feed, even though we barely have enough for ourselves.”

“He hasn’t been a single help since he’s gotten here,” I agreed with a frustrated groan. “And I have a feeling that won’t change anytime soon.”

“He’s locked up down there. We won’t have to worry about him anymore,” Viktor assured me, running a gentle hand down my back. “And the food rationing is only temporary. We’re only a little behind track, and I’m hopeful that as long as the winds keep going, we’ll get to the next island in three days. Maybe four at the most.”

I pulled back to look up at him. “Isn’t it too early to be docking at Greenland?”

He shook his head. “Not Greenland. There’s still more than ten days until we reach Greenland, maybe fifteen, but our food supply isn’t going to last until then.”

Viktor was right. We wouldn’t be able to make it to Greenland on the little we had

left, and we would last even less with the lack of fish. We would all be starving then, diminishing the chances of all of us making it to Greenland in one piece and with a sane mind. I gulped fearfully at that thought.

“We’ve sailed by this island once on our last mission,” he said. “We didn’t stop by as we didn’t need to, but we marked it on the map. It will come in useful now.”

“We can buy food from them and get a few hot meals,” I smiled hopefully into his chest. “But for now, we’ll work on the fishing and ration the little food we have left.”

“I’ve told you this before, and I’m telling you this now. I’ll make a good little sea Captain out of you yet,” Viktor chuckled and pressed his lips to my forehead. I could feel his lips curl against my skin, and it warmed my heart to feel him smile. To feel him genuinely smile.

I hadn’t seen him smile much like that these past few days.

Viktor and I stood there for some time, arms around each other, staring at the sea. Alone, we had many problems. Together, they added up, and we ended up with even more problems, but at least we had each other to lean on.

Yesterday was a fantastic fishing day compared to today.

Today, Jerrik, Manny, and I returned to The Serpent with empty buckets and a boat lighter than when we set off earlier, given the lunch and water we had consumed.

The three of us returned with heavy hearts and a cloud of disappointment hanging over our heads, even more so when dinner and the crew awaited us upon our return.

“Perfect timing,” Viktor grinned and pulled me into his arms.

I didn't miss how he looked me up and down, sighing in relief at how dry I looked. Nothing like the nearly drowned state I had returned in yesterday. Unlike Crosby, Manny was far gentler and even turned out to be pretty decent with a spear. It was just too bad that there weren't any fish around for us to hook on the end of that spear.

"Where's the fish?" Gustav frowned as he retrieved the bucket from Jerrik, finding it just as empty as when we left this morning.

"We didn't catch any," Jerrik groaned as he joined the circle for dinner. "We sailed out further than yesterday, but there weren't any big fish. The ones we did find were far too small to hook with a spear. We tried to scoop them up with our hands but didn't want to risk any of us nearly drowning again. Besides, they weren't big enough to feed even one of us, so it was useless."

"Let's all sit down to eat, and then we can discuss this further," Hammond called out, his lips pointed down.

I sat beside Viktor in the circle and stared at the little food before me, my lips curling down at the corners.

Half a slice of bread and the thinnest slice of cheese I had ever seen. It was so thin it was almost translucent.

Gustav cleared his throat as he picked at the bread. "I know it doesn't look like much, but this is all we have."

"What do you mean this is all we have?" Caspian asked, looking offended at the tiny portion of food before him. "I know we're short on supplies, but surely we shouldn't be rationing this much."

"What's wrong, Gustav?" Viktor called out to him, a speculative look in his eyes.

“You mean, what’s not wrong?” Gustav groaned and dropped his slice of bread to run his hand through his hair, tugging on the ends in frustration. “I went down to the bottom deck earlier to grab some supplies for dinner, but it’s all been ruined.”

My breath hitched. How was that possible?

“What do you mean it’s all been ruined?” Latham was the first to speak up, his voice ridden with disbelief.

“I don’t know if Crosby has found a way to pick the lock on his chains or if they’re longer than we anticipated, but he’s ruined it all,” Gustav groaned, burying his face in his hands.

“What do you mean he’s ruined it all?” I whispered, my eyes wide as I stared at Gustav, struggling to wrap my mind around what his words truly meant for us.

“Piss. Shit. Everywhere. It’s all opened and soiled. I’ve left it down there, but I doubt I can save any of it,” he groaned, starting to look a little green in the face. “I didn’t bother shortening the chains since he’s already ruined it all, but we should probably do that.”

No one said anything after that. We all sat silently and nibbled on the small dinner, which wasn’t enough to sustain a child. There was some bread left for the morning, which we would have to eat plain, but after that, we were all out of everything but water. And even then, it was salt water because Crosby had peed in the barrel of filtered water we kept in the bottom deck.

No one would say it as they were far too kind, but I knew this was all my fault. If Crosby wasn’t so mad at me, he wouldn’t have ruined the remainder of our food. If Crosby hadn’t been so obsessed with me, he would have never snuck onboard The Serpent in the first place.

How were we supposed to make it back to Jorvik without any food? We couldn't even rely on fishing, as we had barely been able to find any these past few days.

Hopefully, tomorrow would be better than today, but I already knew the sea made no promises. It only took prisoners.

We really needed to get to that island. Right now, it was our best hope to make it back to Jorvik alive.



### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It had been four whole days since we caught any fish, three days since we finished the last of our bread for breakfast, two days since we had been living on anything but filtered seawater, which was still a little too salty for my taste and one day since I last felt hopeful that we would make it past this alive. Viktor said they had marked the unnamed island on the map the last time they sailed past it, but we were either unable to read the map properly because we were so hungry and not thinking straight, or it had been mismarked because the island was nowhere to be seen.

I was starving yesterday and the day before, but today, I felt sick to my stomach and tired— oh so very tired . And dizzy.

I hadn't been able to sleep all night because I was so hungry, and neither could Viktor, though he kept assuring me that we would find food soon. I truly wanted to believe him, but the more time passed, the quicker my hope diminished.

“Do you want some water?” Viktor whispered from behind me, curling an arm around my shoulder.

“No,” I whispered back and shook my head. “If I drink any more water on an empty stomach, I’m going to be sick.”

“Drink a little, my siren. I don’t want you to fall sick.”

“I don’t want you to fall sick either,” I murmured, too hungry to make a sassy remark like I normally would have.

“Don’t worry, Astrid. We’re nearly there. By my calculations, we should be docking at the island first thing in the morning,” he tried to assure me. “You’ll be able to make it till the morning, won’t you?”

I nodded and smiled for his sake so as not to worry him more than he already was, but I honestly wasn’t sure. My stomach felt like it would cave in within itself from how empty it was.

“As soon as we get onto the island, I’ll climb the highest tree for you and pick the juiciest piece of fruit it has,” he promised me, and this time, even though it took more effort than I had, I smiled.

“Things might be easier if you just climb the shortest tree,” I told him and smiled wider when he chuckled.

“Even when you’re half-crazed with starvation, you never fail to make me laugh, my siren,” Viktor chuckled and leaned down to nuzzle the tip of his nose against mine. “I knew there was a reason I married you.”

I cocked a teasing brow at him. “You only married me for my humour?”

Viktor opened his mouth, most likely to tease me back, but whatever he was going to say was soon forgotten when shouts of anger sounded out from behind us.

“What is wrong with you? Can’t you see where you’re going?” Dagfinn growled, and we turned just in time to see him push Laurence out of the way, making him stumble back.

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with you?” Laurence frowned, catching himself before he tumbled to the ground. “Why are you getting so angry over something so simple?”

“Because you’re getting up in my personal space,” Dagfinn huffed, a sour expression on his face. “Just because that girl you’re in love with won’t let you come near her doesn’t mean you have to impinge on everyone else’s personal space.”

Laurence’s jaw dropped, and he looked like he was about to blow his top. He probably would have if Gustav hadn’t stepped in, stretching his arms out to keep Dagfinn and Laurence from ripping each other’s throats out.

“There’s no need for this.” Gustav sent Dagfinn a warning look. “Everyone is just temperamental because we’re hungry. You don’t really mean any of this so let’s calm down, okay?”

“Calm down?” Dagfinn scoffed and rolled his eyes. “We would all be calm if only you could do your one job.”

“That’s not fair,” Gustav groaned, his face growing hard. “How can you expect me to cook a dish out of nothing? I’m a Chef, not God! I can’t just whip up food from thin air.”

“Gustav would have something to cook if Jerrik caught some fish,” Hammond piped up, fuelling the already blazing fire. He was sitting in the same spot against the rail as this morning, refusing to move as if to preserve his energy. It was a good idea, but adding to an argument was not.

“Don’t try to turn this on me,” Jerrik scoffed, defensive. I didn’t blame him. I had gone fishing with Jerrik these past few days and experienced first-hand the frustration of returning to The Serpent day after day empty-handed. “If you all sailed the ship faster, maybe we could get into waters that actually have some fish for me to catch.”

“Caspian is always at the wheel,” Latham frowned. “I always tell him I’m better at the wheel, and he should let me take over, but he never does. His ego won’t allow

him to admit I'm better than him."

"Why is this suddenly being turned around on me?" Caspian shot up in his seat, his eyes fiery and accusatory as he glared at Latham. "I steer the ship because no one else likes doing it for a long time. If you're a better sailor than me, why did we hardly move last night when you were on night duty?"

"There was low wind! How is that my fault? I can't control the wind!" Latham growled, looking as if he would reach for Caspian and shake some sense into him if they weren't standing on opposite sides of the ship.

"Odin could have told us about the wind," Dagfinn muttered under his breath, but we all heard him. "Maybe we could have done something about it if we knew about it earlier."

"What would you have done if I did?" Odin asked, annoyed.

"We could have planned accordingly."

"How do you plan for no wind?" Laurence laughed.

Dagfinn shrugged. "I don't know. Garth could have played around with the sails or something."

"Don't look at me like that," Garth snapped, an unpleasant scowl on his face. "I may have the most experience out of us all, but I can't control the weather."

"And since when was it necessary for me to provide daily weather updates?" Odin huffed, matching Garth's expression. "We can prepare if there's a storm coming. But how are we going to prepare for no wind?"

I tugged on Viktor's sleeve to get his attention. "They need to stop arguing," I huffed and tuned out the argument. All the back and forth was starting to give me a headache. "Everyone is just hungry and are getting riled up for no reason. They're wasting their energy. This will only tire them out quicker and make them even more irritable."

"This was bound to happen sooner or later," Viktor groaned. "This job is hard enough on a full stomach, but it's even harder when none of us has eaten anything in two days."

"Thanks to Crosby," I snarled. We would have never been in this mess without Crosby and his selfishness and pettiness.

"Yes, exactly!" Manny spoke louder than we had heard before, demanding our undivided attention. "Why are we blaming each other when Crosby is at fault here? If it weren't for him, we would have the dried food and flour for bread to eat while we sail into waters that actually have fish for Jerrik to catch. Don't you see that turning on each other only hurts us when the man truly at fault here is locked away in the bottom deck?"

"Manny's right." I agreed with a nod. "There's no point turning on each other when we're not at fault. Crosby is."

"It's still not too late to make him walk the plank," Caspian grumbled under his breath, and we all laughed.

"We just need to make it till morning when we reach that island, and then we'll finally be able to get some food," I said, trying to stay positive.

All everyone needed right now was a little bit of hope.

“The morning, did you say?” Roscoe called out, speaking up for the first time. Something in his tone caught my attention, and I turned to look at what he was staring at.

“Yes,” I murmured, using the same mystified, disbelieving tone as him.

In the not-so-distant distance, I could see the shadow of an island about half a day earlier than we expected.

“Is that what I think it is?” Jerrik whistled under his breath as he walked closer to the rail where Roscoe was standing, trying to get a better look at the mound in the distance.

“It sure is!” Caspian grinned and pumped his fist into the air. Everyone else was quick to follow in his celebrations.

I felt sick as I continued staring at the island, but that could very well be because I had consumed only water for the past two days. Regardless, I pushed the gnawing feeling away and focused on the positives, choosing to be hopeful.

This mystery island, which the crew had marked on the map in passing on their last mission, was our only chance of survival right now.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

As we headed toward the island, The Serpent glided hurriedly through the water. We had yet to find out whether they were friends or foes, but right now, all that mattered was getting our hands on food.

Hopefully, even if they were foes, we could buy hot meals and enough provisions to last until we reached Greenland. The one place where gold coins held no value was at sea, when there was nowhere to go and no one to buy anything from.

“Where is everyone?” Manny muttered from behind me, a speculative expression on his face. It starkly contrasted against all the excited and delighted faces that the rest of the crew sported. Don’t get me wrong, I was excited to get my hands on some food as well, but we were docking at their shore, and there was no one to welcome us. That was strange.

No one came to see who was approaching their island, but with how hungry we all were, we couldn’t focus on that right now. Instead, our attention fell on the trees, their branches heavy with the weight of all the exotic fruits they grew. I reminded myself to bring something back to the ship for Kis since she was fast asleep in our bedroom.

“Safe for us to proceed, Captain?” Caspian asked absent-mindedly, and I could have sworn he was drooling.

“Go for it,” Viktor chuckled, the sound lighter and airier than I had heard it since the last time we had food to eat. “Whatever we eat now, we’ll pay for later. But pace

yourselves, men. You don't want to make yourself sick by going overboard."

Viktor's advice was lost on them all, as half of them didn't even wait for the ramp to drop to jump over the ship's rail and onto the sandy shore. I couldn't blame them. Viktor and I weren't far behind as we rushed down the ramp and ran along the coast toward the trees and the bushes that contained more fresh fruit than I had ever seen.

Apples were my least favourite fruit, but right now, on this mysterious island, after days without eating, the red, shiny apple in my hands was the most delicious thing I had ever put in my mouth. With how quickly I devoured the apple, I was no better than Caspian, whom I had made fun of only moments ago.

Before I could reach for another apple, Viktor showed up with some red berries. The others were quick to follow, and before we knew it, we were all sat in a circle with our collection of fresh fruit and vegetables in the middle, sharing and eating to our hearts' content.

Once we couldn't eat a bite more, we decided it was time to do some sleuthing and find out where the inhabitants of this mysterious island were.

Why hadn't they ventured out of their homes to investigate why strangers were ransacking their trees and bushes for all their fresh produce?

Jorvik was beautiful, but it was nothing compared to this place. We didn't know the island's name and would never have thought to stop here if we weren't in desperate need of food, but it was the most beautiful island I had ever been on.

Not only were all the fruits we ate the freshest and juiciest I had ever tasted, but there were also beautiful flowers everywhere. A single, wide path led from the shore to what we could only assume was the island centre, framed by a thick bed of beautiful, multi-coloured flowers.



“What should we do, Viktor?” Garth asked.

“We could stand in the centre of the square and shout as loud as we can until people turn up?” Caspian suggested with a cheeky grin, but Dagfinn quickly held onto the back of his tunic before he could rush off and do just that.

Viktor shot Dagfinn a grateful smile. “That’s not a great idea,” he chuckled. “Let’s find some huts and knock on a few doors.”

“Should we split up?” Latham asked.

“No. This island and its people are alien to us. It’s probably best if we stick together. We don’t want to ruffle any feathers before formally introducing ourselves to the Chief,” Viktor said. He grabbed my hand before weaving us down one of the random paths that led away from the square.

It didn’t take us long to arrive at a small community of huts.

“Pick one,” Viktor prompted me, gesturing to the five huts we were surrounded by.

“The second one,” I murmured and then Viktor turned to nod to the crew.

Latham was the first to step forward. We all watched as he jogged up the few steps to the hut and knocked twice. We waited and waited, but there was no response.

“I’m going to try again,” Latham told us, raising his hand to knock again. This time, he had only managed to knock once more before the door swung open to reveal a sleepy, cranky, half-naked man—he was only wearing his breeches, but they were hanging dangerously low on his hips. I couldn’t help but laugh silently at how Viktor casually shifted in front of me, shielding my view of this man and his naked chest.

“You don’t have anything to worry about, pirate,” I assured my husband with a giggle, pressing a hand to his back as I glanced around him.

The man rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“We were sailing by,” Latham began, purposely tiptoeing around the truth. “And dropped by in hopes of some hot food and company.”

“Sailing by?” The man frowned and dropped his hands to examine Latham properly. A long silence passed before his attention turned to the rest of us. “You’re not from Canne,” he said hesitantly.

“No, we’re not.” Latham’s tone was soft and gentle as he held up his hands to show he meant no harm. “We’re from Mann, which is approximately seven to ten days’ sail from here,” he lied smoothly, and Viktor squeezed my hand as if to assure me that this was standard procedure. It surprised me initially, but it made sense why they wouldn’t be so forthcoming with such information. We didn’t know these people. What if they turned out to be an island of cannibals or mass murderers? It was better to be safe than sorry.

“We’ve never met anyone from Mann before,” the man murmured.

“Well, now you have. Do you think you could help us out with some food?”

“We sure can, but it’s probably best if you first get acquainted with the Chief. I know he’ll want to meet our guests from Mann.”

Latham smiled and jogged down the steps. The man briefly disappeared into his hut to grab a tunic, which he pulled over his head as he joined us in the clearing.

“I’m Brank,” the man introduced himself.

“I’m Latham.” He turned to Viktor. “And this is Viktor. Our Captain.”

“Nice to meet you, Captain Viktor,” Brank smiled brightly at Viktor before moving over to stand before us, Latham now long forgotten. I would have laughed at the bewildered expression on Latham’s face if Brank hadn’t been staring at me with a peculiar expression on his face.

“Nice to meet you, Brank,” Viktor replied in a gruff voice, his gaze hard and threatening as he glared at the man, but Brank’s eyes were still set on me. I shifted closer to Viktor, seeking comfort in his touch.

“And who are you?” Brank asked, his eyes set intently on me.

“Astrid,” I told him. “I’m Viktor’s wife.”

“The Captain’s wife!” Brank beamed brighter. “This is lovely. It’s nice to meet you all!” He turned to address the rest of the crew. “Follow me. I’ll take you to meet the Chief.”

The walk from Brank’s hut to the Chief’s only took a few minutes. He knocked on the door and glanced over his shoulder at us. “I’ll wait with you while you talk with the Chief.”

“Thank you, Brank. That’s very kind of you,” Viktor smiled politely, but I knew him well enough to know it was forced. I could tell he felt uneasy about meeting the Chief of this mysterious island, and I didn’t blame him.

If we hadn’t been on the verge of going crazy with hunger or, worse, starving to death, we would have never needed to stop here. Hopefully, the Chief would be forthcoming enough to feed us and allow us to purchase some vegetation to keep us going until Greenland.

Brank dropped his voice when the door opened and exchanged low murmurs with a man we could only assume was the Chief.

“Which of you is the Captain?” The Chief asked, brushing past Brank to address us.

Viktor squeezed my hand and dropped it before stepping forward. Once again, I didn’t miss the subtle way he stepped in front of me, shielding me from prying, curious eyes. It would bother me if it were someone else, but I knew Viktor was only protecting me and had my best interests at heart.

“I am,” he said, loud and clear, his voice dripping with authority. “My name is Viktor. Viktor Thostenson.”

“Viktor Thostenson. That name sounds familiar,” the Chief murmured and accepted Viktor’s outstretched hand in greeting. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Viktor Thostenson. I am Bjorn Nybo, the Chief of Canne. Brank tells me you’re here for food?”

Viktor confirmed with a nod. “I must admit, we ate some of your berries and fruit along the shore. I apologise for not asking permission beforehand and am more than happy to compensate you. We’re also looking to purchase some dried foods and whatever else you can spare us.”

“Nonsense.” Bjorn waved a dismissive hand in the air. “You are travellers of the sea. We would be more than happy to help you. No money needed.”

“Are you sure?” Viktor asked, an unsure expression on his face. “We wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Oh, you’re not intruding at all,” Bjorn smiled widely and shook his head. “We’ll be able to spare some of our dried fruits, though it won’t be much. However, feel free to

help yourselves to some more of the produce from the trees lining the shore. Frankly, we have far more than we're able to eat. Once plucked, they should be good to last you several days."

"Thank you, Bjorn. We appreciate that so much."

"And to celebrate your visit, we will organise a feast!" Bjorn announced, catching us all off guard. While we were all hopeful for some hot food, perhaps a filling meal or two, a feast sounded far too much—especially for people they didn't know.

Viktor quickly denied with a firm shake of his head. "That's very kind of you, but you do not need to go to so much trouble."

"I don't know how you do things back in Mann, but here in Canne, we do not let our guests leave without filling their stomachs with lots of food and drink. I must insist, Captain Viktor."

Viktor pursed his lips and glanced over his shoulder. He glanced at the crew, who looked very excited at the prospect of the abundance of food that a feast promised, and then his eyes landed on me.

Even though I was nervous about being here, mainly because we were in a foreign land and these people were almost suspiciously friendly, I smiled and nodded encouragingly.

Viktor grinned and turned back to the Chief. "Thank you, Bjorn. We will be in debt to you."

"Nonsense," Bjorn dismissed with a nonchalant snort. "Let me give you a tour of Canne while the women get started on the feast."

I plastered a smile on my face and moved to fall into place beside Viktor. We followed behind Bjorn and Brank as they began the island tour. I was very excited about all the help the Chief had offered us and the feast they were kind enough to throw so impromptu, but something didn't feel quite right to me.

I couldn't help but feel like these people were far too friendly to a bunch of strangers, but perhaps that's just how they were in Canne.

Maybe I was being overly cautious and sceptical for no reason.

Maybe it was all in my head.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

We made it through half of the tour before remembering that Crosby was chained in the bottom deck of The Serpent. Even though he deserved everything he had faced so far, as well as what was coming for him when we returned to Jorvik, we couldn't let him die of starvation. It was a cruel fate, and leaving him to suffer at the hands of it, we decided, was a little too cruel. Therefore, Viktor asked for a few crew members to unchain him so he could eat something.

I joined Roscoe, Hammond, and Caspian as we cut the tour short and returned to the ship. Viktor didn't look too happy about it, but the tour was boring, and I got bored of people staring at me because I was the only female among the crew. Besides, I needed to take some food back for Kis.

"I don't understand why we can't just let him starve," Hammond grumbled. "He deserves it for what he tried to do to you, Astrid." That only referred to half of what Crosby had done to me as Viktor, and I had yet to disclose the full extent of the truth to the crew, as per my request.

"I agree with you there, Hammond, but the most we can do out here is make him walk the plank and leave him to drown at sea," I sighed.

Caspian grinned wickedly. "I like that idea."

"Of course you do," I giggled.

"He didn't seem that scared about walking the plank," Roscoe reminded us.

“If we hold out until we return to Jorvik, his punishment will be worse,” I said.

“I still wouldn’t mind watching him jump off the plank a few times before we return to Jorvik,” Caspian grumbled, making us all laugh. The grumpy mood didn’t last long as he turned to me with a grin and wiggled his eyebrows playfully. “I’m sure you can convince Viktor to make that happen once we’re back at sea.”

“I make no promise, but I’ll see what I can do,” I chuckled as we stopped in front of The Serpent. The ramp was still down from earlier, but before I could follow the others, I caught sight of something peculiar in the corner of my eye.

At the very end of the island, in the far distance, there were several ships of varying sizes. They lined the island’s shore along that side, partially hidden from view behind the tall tree.

In all our hunger, we must have missed them earlier. Or perhaps it was because the ships were strategically hidden behind tall trees, meaning that no ships would dock that way and see them.

“Why does this island need so many ships?” I frowned, and the others quickly matched my expression when they saw what I was looking at.

“I don’t know,” Caspian murmured, his frown mirroring mine. “Even we don’t have that many.”

Hammond stopped halfway up the ramp. “It would make sense of them to have a few, but there’s so many of them.” He craned his neck for a better look. “I count eight ships in total.”

“Why do they need eight ships?” Roscoe asked, confused. “How do they maintain them all?”



“It doesn’t look like they do,” Caspian snorted.

“To need eight ships, that must mean that they’re huge on sailing, but neither Brank nor Bjorn mentioned anything.” My frown deepened. “I’m surprised they didn’t mention it after Viktor introduced himself as Captain.”

“And they also said that they don’t get many visitors,” Roscoe reminded us.

Hammond frowned. “If they’re so big on sailing, surely they would have more friends and visitors.”

“And we would have heard of them if they ever sailed our way,” Caspian said. “It doesn’t make sense for them to have eight ships.”

“It doesn’t make sense, but I guess we can ask them about it later,” I concluded, still confused.

“Maybe at the feast,” Hammond mused aloud before turning to walk up the plank. We all followed closely behind him.

We cut across the top deck to the stairs leading down.

“What do you think they’ll be cooking at the feast?” Caspian asked.

Hammond shrugged. “Fish, meat, vegetables. The normal food that’s usually found at feasts.”

“I hope there are some rabbits,” Roscoe groaned, looking like he was about to start salivating at the mouth any moment now. “I’ve been craving rabbit since we left Isle.”

“Isle,” Hammond chuckled with a snort. “That feels like such a long time ago now.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Caspian tutted. “There can’t be any fish at the feast. How would they catch some when we haven’t found any for days?”

“They probably survive off meat and fresh produce,” Hammond said. “It’s not the best of diets, but they can’t help it if they can’t get their hands on fish.”

“But wouldn’t they have run out of animals to eat by now if that’s what they’re solely relying on?” I asked, catching onto what Caspian was trying to get at.

“They must have an excellent breeding plan, and I’m sure they trade with neighbouring islands,” Hammond said, even though it would take over a week, probably closer to two, to reach the closest neighbouring island. “We should ask them about it later. We might be able to pick up a few tips and tricks to take back to Jorvik with us.”

Caspian and I exchanged looks, neither of us convinced.

“Hello?” Crosby immediately called out to us as he heard the door to the bottom deck open. “Why have we stopped sailing? Why is it suddenly so quiet? What’s going on? Where is everyone?”

“You sure have a lot of questions for a prisoner,” Hammond chuckled, dropping to his knees in front of Crosby to start unchaining him. Roscoe moved to do the same to the other arm.

“Can someone please tell me what’s going on?” Crosby groaned and kicked his leg out in frustration. I rolled my eyes at his petulant attitude.

“Shut up, Crosby,” I snapped at him.

I had done a lot of thinking over the past few days and concluded that I was so done with Crosby.

Sure, I turned down his proposal, but I would have needed to turn down at least one of them. There was no way I could have said yes and married both Viktor and Crosby. Not that I was the least bit inclined toward the latter. Especially after he had tried to force his touch on me and then was willing to let me drown when he realised I wouldn't let him have his way.

Crosby deserved this and what he had coming for him, and I refused to feel sorry for him anymore.

I couldn't wait to return to Jorvik and see what punishment was picked for him.

"You can't treat me like this," Crosby complained as if he was innocent and deserved to be treated better. "Even though I'm a prisoner, I have rights! And I have the right to—"

"Shut up, Crosby!" I repeated, my voice far more forceful this time.

Roscoe and Hammond laughed as they dragged Crosby off the ship. Caspian grinned at me and shot me a thumbs-up. I chuckled at all their reactions. In such a short time and space, these men had turned into family, and I looked forward to getting to know them and their families better when we returned to Jorvik.

Despite our demands that he keep his mouth shut, Crosby continued grumbling. In an attempt to shut him up, Caspian kicked out his legs, sending Crosby tumbling to the floor and landing awkwardly on his knee, no doubt scraping it. The plan backfired because Crosby just grumbled some more.

"Where are we?" Crosby gaped once we reached the shore, his eyes wide as he took

in all the juicy fruit and fresh berries hanging from the trees and bushes.

“That’s none of your concern,” Hammond muttered. “We just need to get some food in you so you won’t die, and then we’ll have you back in your chains.”

“Can’t I take a walk?” Crosby pleaded. “I get no sunshine down on the bottom deck. I’m practically withering away down there.”

“You should have thought about that before you tried to drown me,” I snorted and crossed my arms over my chest. When Crosby turned to face me, begging me with his eyes, I merely rolled mine and avoided his gaze as I walked ahead.

“Here, take that,” Caspian said, holding out a large orange he picked up from the ground. It must have fallen off a tree, but it wasn’t an issue as we didn’t eat the skin. Or at least, most of us didn’t.

We all watched, surprised and slightly judgemental, as Crosby ignored the specks of dirt and sand on the orange and bit straight onto it.

“Chief mentioned that you couldn’t finish off the tour because you had a prisoner to deal with,” Brank called out, heading toward us with two other men.

“That’s right.” Hammond stood up straight, though made sure not to stray too far from Crosby. With how infatuated he was with the orange, I didn’t think Crosby would try anything funny. Especially not when Roscoe handed him a second orange. He went into that one, too, without peeling it.

Moments like these made me feel bad for Crosby, and I had to remind myself that he tried to kill me. A man like that didn’t deserve my sympathy.

“This is Rune.” Brank gestured to the man on his right, who smiled brightly and

waved in greeting. “And this is Sten.” He pointed to his left. Sten was far less welcoming as he pursed his lips and watched us all with narrowed eyes. “How about we finish the tour now that you’ve got your prisoner?” Brank offered, though his tone made it sound like we had no choice but to say yes.

“Sure, that sounds great,” I forced a bright smile and stepped forward, not wanting to raise too many eyebrows this early. These people were strangers, after all. “But I had a question...” I glanced over my shoulder. “About those ships over there. Are they all yours? They’re very impressive.”

“We like to think so too. That’s why we have them lined up like that,” Rune grinned.

“Do you have one Captain for all the ships or one for each ship?” Caspian asked casually, feigning interest, but I could tell he had picked up on what I was doing.

“We don’t have any Captains,” Sten told us, his voice a little too firm for my liking.

“Sten means to say that we don’t use those ships for sailing,” Brank quickly explained, his smile bright and wide enough to compensate for Sten’s obnoxious behaviour. “But forget about the ships. They’re not important. Let’s get back to the tour.”

We all smiled, but when the trio’s backs turned to lead the way, we all exchanged funny looks. Crosby included. Their answers were a little strange, and it seemed like they were desperate to stop speaking about the ships as soon as possible.

Why would you have eight large ships and not use them?

Why go to all the effort only to have them take up permanent space along the shore and gather dust?

It made no sense.

Brank, Rune and Sten were quick to rush through the first part of the tour that Bjorn had already taken us on, and we started off the second part at the town square, where it appeared that nearly all the females in the island had gathered to start work on preparations for the feast tonight.

The women laughed and talked loudly, seemingly not noticing us standing there. When Sten called out to them sternly, not sounding pleased in the slightest, their musings and laughter immediately ceased as their attention turned to us.

I kept the interested smile on my face the entire time as I made a show of listening to what Brank had to say about the island square and the women who were cooking for tonight's feast, but on the inside, my heart was pounding dangerously fast.

"Did you just hear what I heard?" Caspian leaned over to whisper when the trio momentarily turned their backs on us.

I gulped and nodded, trying not to look too alarmed. The horrified expression marred my face for all of two seconds before I slapped a bright smile on my face just in time for Brank to glance in my direction.

"I'm really looking forward to the feast tonight," I smiled.

If Brank or the others saw through my lie, they didn't show it.

"I'm glad to hear that. I assure you, you'll love the food. The meat will be nothing like you've ever tasted," Brank grinned, and we moved on to the next part of the tour.

I took advantage of the split moment to glance over my shoulder and lock eyes with the other four, Crosby included. They all looked as baffled and afraid as I was, but we

couldn't risk saying anything right now. Not when we needed to speak to the rest of the crew first.

But one thing I was sure of. One of us could have easily misheard, but the chances of all five of us mishearing what the cooks were discussing were slim to none.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When the tour ended, Hammond came up with the excuse of needing to return Crosby to the ship to lock him up once again. Caspian and I eagerly joined him while Roscoe snuck away to join Viktor and the rest of the crew.

“We must have misheard,” Caspian muttered under his breath, not for the first time, as he marched back and forth on the bottom deck, looking more troubled than I had ever seen him.

“What? All of us?” Hammond asked, tinkering with the chains as he secured them around Crosby’s wrists, who, somehow, on the way back, had swiped a third orange without us realising it.

“No.” I sat on an empty barrel, not in the mood to pace like Caspian. “We all heard what they were talking about. There’s no way that all of us could have misheard.”

Caspian still looked very alarmed. “But what if we did?”

“It’s not possible,” I insisted with a firm shake of my head.

“What’s not possible?” Viktor asked, catching us by surprise.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Viktor, Roscoe, and the crew walk into the bottom deck. Roscoe closed the door behind them to give us privacy to talk; I assumed in case any islanders had followed them back onto the ship. It was improbable, but I suddenly felt very paranoid.



“You’re not going to believe what we overheard,” I said.

Viktor moved to stand behind me, looping his arms around my waist. “Try us.”

“Did you guys notice anything strange during the tour?” I glanced at Viktor over my shoulder, even though my question was meant for everyone.

“Strange?”

“I’m sure there were a few strange things, but nothing pops to mind right now,” Garth frowned, moving to sit on the barrel next to me.

“Well—” I started, but Caspian beat me to it.

“They’re all cannibals!” Caspian declared with wide, fearful eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Laurence snickered, and the rest of the crew laughed—all except Hammond, Caspian, and I. Crosby didn’t laugh either, but that was because he was eating red berries from the palm of his hand. I don’t think any of us noticed him swipe those, either.

Hammond pursed his lips. “I hate to agree with Caspian, but he’s right.”

“This is nothing to laugh about,” Roscoe scoffed. “We’re not joking. We’re docked at an island full of cannibals.”

“Cannibals?” Viktor repeated, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

He didn’t believe us. I didn’t blame him because if the roles were reversed, I would also struggle to believe it.

But we weren't joking, and we hadn't misheard.

These people were cannibals, and we needed to leave as soon as possible.

I turned around on the barrel to face my husband. I pleaded with my eyes for him to believe it.

"We're being serious, Viktor. Brank and two others were taking us on the part of the tour that we had missed. When we got to the women working on the feast for tonight, they were talking about the meat they were cooking as if they were people."

"There has to be some misunderstanding here," Garth said from beside us, but I shook my head again.

"We can't all of misheard them," I insisted. "Not only were they referring to the meat they were cooking as a human, but several of them were wearing these necklaces made out of teeth around their necks. You can argue that it's animal teeth, but when you see them later, you'll see that they look just like human teeth. Like mine and yours."

"I did notice that the meat looked a little strange when we walked by," Gustav murmured, beginning to look doubtful. "It was redder and fleshier. Less fat than most animal meats would have. The cuts are different than I'm used to as well."

"You could tell all that by just looking at the meat?" Viktor asked, not looking as sure as before but still not wholly convinced.

Gustav nodded. "We're very far from Jorvik. I didn't say anything earlier because I thought maybe the animals were different here. I didn't think much of it then, but the more I think of it now, the more it seems that human meat could be a real possibility."

Murmurs sounded around the group as we considered everything we had learned about the island of Canne. When I heard a small meow and something furry brush up against my ankle, I reached down and picked up Kis. I immediately buried my face in her fur, nuzzling her close.

If these people turned out to be cannibals and they wanted to eat us, did that mean they would eat Kis, too?

As if Viktor could sense the direction of my thoughts, he chuckled and reached around me to drop his hand on Kis' head, scratching between her ears the way she liked.

Okay, perhaps they wouldn't eat Kis, but I wasn't willing to take that risk.

These people were cannibals, after all.

"I couldn't help but notice that there weren't any children around the island," Jerrik murmured, adding his two cents. "There's so many adults but no children. We could argue that maybe they're all asleep or playing somewhere, but there's no toys, no structures for them to play on... nothing."

"Are you saying that they're eating their own children?" Manny gasped with wide, fearful eyes.

Jerrik shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I don't know."

"How can they eat their own children?" Odin frowned, looking deeply disturbed. "Don't they have hearts in their chests?"

"They've probably eaten many hearts," Caspian snickered, but no one laughed.

“This is all so bizarre,” Dagfinn groaned, running anxious fingers through his hair. “But there are too many things to ignore and pass off as nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” Viktor frowned, his arms subconsciously tightening around me. “But cannibals? I’m still not completely convinced.”

“What would it take to convince you? Have one of them bite down on my bones like a chew toy?” I snapped, the words coming out harsher than I had intended. Immediately, I was regretful, but Viktor shook his head subtly, not needing an apology.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation for all of this, but even if they do turn out to be cannibals, the last person I would want them to eat is you, my siren,” he laughed and leaned in to kiss my cheek.

When everybody burst out laughing at his words, my cheeks flamed, and I buried my face in his chest.

“That’s very reassuring, Captain,” Roscoe joked.

“You’ll be the first person I give to them to eat,” Viktor joked back, and another round of laughter filled the bottom deck.

However, the laughter quickly fizzled out when the reality of the situation we had somehow landed ourselves in loomed over our heads once more.

“I’m convinced that they’re cannibals,” Hammond persisted. “There’s this line of empty ships along the shore. We asked about them, and they said that no one uses them. Like they’re just there for decoration.”

“I spotted the ships, too. Bjorn quickly changed the subject when I asked about

them,” Viktor frowned, and I could practically see the cogs turning in his head.

“What if they’re not eating each other?” Garth mused aloud. “What if they’re eating sailors who were naïve enough to stop at Canne like us?”

“Think about it.” Jerrik snapped his fingers, his eyes wide with a look of realisation dawning in them. “We haven’t been able to catch any fish for the past week, so I imagine they have the same issue. What else must they survive on if they don’t have any fish? Surely, they can’t survive on the limited fruit and vegetables they grow. And it’s not like they have abundant animals here either.”

“And have you seen the amounts of huts they have?” Laurence asked. “They have more than double the huts we have back at Jorvik, and each is brimming with people. More than just one couple.”

“With that many people, they’re bound to have worked their way through all the animals already,” Manny added. “Probably even years ago.”

“We have to think rationally here,” Viktor murmured, his eyes distant.

“What is there to think about?” Odin snorted. “We need to get off the island. I refuse to allow myself to be the next meal for these people.”

“Me neither!” Crosby agreed, but after a brief look, we all went back to ignoring him.

“But if we leave, we’re going to die at sea,” Jerrik groaned and buried his face in his hands.

“I’m with Jerrik on this one,” Gustav said. “There’s no food, and who knows when we’ll find fish again? It could be a day or two if we’re lucky, or it could even be another week. We won’t be able to go on long without food.”

“What do you want us to do?” Laurence snapped at him. “Stick around here and wait to be eaten for dinner?”

“They’re not going to eat us. Not if we don’t let them.” Caspian shook his head fiercely, though he still looked worried.

“I’m sure that’s what the crews of those other ships also thought,” Odin snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Enough!” Viktor squeezed my hip before rising to his feet, a stern look on his face. “I see both sides of the argument here. Frankly, it doesn’t look good for us either way.”

I nodded and rose to my feet as well. “If we wait around here for too long, they’re going to eat us, but if we leave for the sea now, then we’re going to die out there. Either way, we’ll end up dying, and no one will ever find us.”

“What are you saying?” Garth asked, his voice deathly quiet.

“I hope you’re not suggesting that we take this lying down,” Laurence frowned deeply at me.

“No, of course not,” I said. “I think we need to time ourselves.”

“How so?” Viktor asked, cocking his head to the side in a curious fashion.

“We stick around here for the feast and to gather as many supplies as we can. We play nice so they don’t suspect anything, and then tonight, after everyone has fallen asleep, we sail away. The more food we grab, the longer we’ll be able to survive out on sea. We’ll ration it. Try to make it last as long as possible, and hopefully, we’ll be back in waters where we’ll be able to find some fish. At least enough to keep us alive

till Greenland where, hopefully, they won't be cannibals.”

“I'm certain the people of Greenland aren't cannibals,” Viktor chuckled from behind me and leaned forward to press a kiss to my hair.

I loved many things about Viktor, but I especially loved that he was never shy or embarrassed to show me how much he loved me, regardless of where we were or who we were with. And it was never in an overbearing way I had seen some men behave with their wives.

The best part was that it was all subconscious, as if he did all these sweet little acts without thinking—like it was second nature to him.

“Now, any objections to Astrid's idea?” Viktor asked.

I couldn't help but hold my breath as I glanced around the crew. No one stepped forward to oppose my idea.

“Okay, great. A few of us will need to split up and grab some supplies. I don't care what it is. As long as it's something that we can eat, perhaps some of the berries or fruits, that's all that matters. We need to take enough where, hopefully, it will last for a while but not too much, where Bjorn and everyone else will notice and start to get suspicious. The last thing we need is for them to suspect that we know the truth about them and their ways.”

“They've also promised us some nuts and dried fruit, so we could remind them about that during the feast,” Jerrik suggested, and everyone nodded in approval. The nuts and dried fruit would last much longer than the fresh produce and would be easier to ration.

“It might be a long shot, but we could try asking for some flour?” Gustav asked. “I

can use the flour to make bread, which will keep us fuller for longer.”

Viktor nodded. “Good idea. We’ll ask them at the feast.”

We all huddled together to finalise the finer details of the plan. It was optimistic, but it could work if we executed it perfectly. If we didn’t, there was a good chance we would all be on the menu for the next feast.

And there was no way I would let these people eat Kis or Viktor.



### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

V iktor and the crew had one job: to make up a series of excuses explaining why we were late to the special feast this evening that was being held in our honour.

Jerrik, Caspian, and I left Roscoe and Manny to handle the food. They were to pick as many berries, fruits, and other fresh produce as possible from around the beach and load them onto The Serpent. Sure, we had permission from Bjorn, the Chief of Canne himself, but I doubted loading the ship with as much as possible wasn't what he had in mind.

“We need to hurry up and find something... anything ,” I whispered to the other two.

I probably could have done without whispering as everyone but us was at the feast, but we couldn't be too cautious. Not when our lives were on the line.

“I think our best bet would be the rooms,” Jerrik said as he led the way across the top deck of one of the pirate ships.

Unlike the top deck of The Serpent, which was cleaned every day, sometimes even more than once a day, depending on the weather, this ship had definitely seen better days. Not only were a few planks missing—Caspian nearly put his foot through another one, which made me distrust the structural integrity of this ship—but there was a horrid stench that seemed to linger on everything. And now it lingered on us as well.

“I think I'm going to be sick,” Caspian groaned and pressed his hand to his mouth. If

he had time to spare, I would have felt bad for him. Instead, I yanked on his elbow and tugged him behind me so he wouldn't fall behind.

If he was sick, it wasn't like he could make this ship stink any more than it already did.

The two of us followed Jerrik as we explored the first ship, looking for evidence that these people were cannibals. The first few rooms we examined were messy and stunk even more than the rest of the ship, but there was nothing unusual. The same was true of the rooms following it.

"Maybe we need to head down to the bottom deck," I suggested when we only had two rooms left to check.

"That might be a good idea," Jerrik agreed.

We checked out the two remaining rooms on our way to the bottom deck. The first was akin to all the others before it, but Jerrik stopped so abruptly in the doorway of the second bedroom that I nearly ran into his back.

"Oh, God!" I exclaimed and pressed a hand to my mouth as I peeked around Jerrik at the bloody scene in front of us.

"I don't think there's any need for us to head down to the bottom deck anymore," Jerrik groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose, looking as if he was trying to stop himself from being sick.

The same couldn't be said about Caspian.

"I'm definitely going to be sick now," Caspian groaned. This time, when he looked like he was going to be sick, I didn't force him to stay with us.

This bedroom was similar to the others before it. Messy with a disgusting, pungent stink. There were only a few differences, one of which was a trail of blood spots that, when followed, led to a small pile of dead bodies. The blood looked dry and old, and it had seeped through the floorboards to the deck below, hence the more pungent stink.

I could only imagine just how worse the bottom deck was.

Although there were only three bodies in this room, the amount of blood surrounding them suggested that, at one point, there could have been more. Perhaps the bodies were removed as they were needed. And by needed, I meant when the people of Canne ran out of human meat.

“The teeth necklaces make so much more sense now,” Jerrik whispered, leaning forward for a better look at the bodies.

I followed his gaze and stared at the body peeking out from the bottom of the pile. The face was disfigured entirely, looking as if they had been bludgeoned to death. Upon closer inspection, it appeared that all his teeth had been individually plucked from the poor man’s mouth.

“I can’t look at this any longer,” I groaned and rushed to leave the room before I threw up like Caspian was most definitely doing.

“Me neither,” Jerrik muttered.

He quickly followed me out of the room, closing the door behind him as if he were worried about disturbing the people inside the room. Except, that wasn’t possible as they were already dead.

Jerrik and I gasped for breath when we emerged on the top deck. There was still a

pungent smell—we now realised this was the stench of dead bodies left to rot—but it was nothing compared to the lower decks.

“How messed up must these people be?” The question dripped with disgust.

“It looks like they’re killing the sailors and then storing their bodies on the ship,” I tried not to gag as I spoke.

“And then retrieving them when it’s time for their next meal,” Jerrik finished my sentence, looking a little green in the face.

It was a miracle that neither of us had thrown up yet.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here before we end up like one of them.”

Jerrik’s words scared me more than I cared to admit, so I quickly followed him. When we passed Caspian on the way, throwing up over the side of the ship, I stopped to rub his back to help ease the pain. Once he was done, the three of us fled the ship faster than we had ever run before.

Only when we reached the sandy beach, several feet away from the ship, we felt like we could breathe again.

“I’ll never be able to eat meat again,” Caspian gulped, still very much green in the face.

“Me neither,” I groaned and shook my head. “Come on. We’ve been gone long enough. We must get to the others and join the feast before they realise we’re missing and get suspicious.”

Jerrik, Caspian, and I rushed down the beach and crouched behind the bushes where

Roscoe and Manny were collecting fresh produce to take with us. I ignored the fact that this felt like stealing and reminded myself that these people were literal cannibals. Stealing fruit was the least of our worries right now.

Thankfully, no one paid attention as we snuck into the feast to join the others. Things were in full swing, and there was plenty of food. There was even entertainment in the form of a magic show and fire breathing, which would have been impressive under any other circumstances.

I glanced down at the plate in front of me. The meat looked suspiciously like boar, but I wasn't fooled. I knew it was human meat.

"I can't eat this," I exhaled under my breath, keeping my face neutral because I knew people were stealing glances at us. We were the guests of honour, after all.

"Me neither," Viktor agreed, and like me, he sported a poised smile. "Just cut into it and keep moving your mouth. Make it look like you're eating it, but don't swallow. Empty your mouth into the napkin each time."

I gulped and nodded, quickly matching his happy smile, even though I felt anything but.

I didn't need to glance around the crew to know that they were doing the same thing as Viktor and I, making it look like we were eating the meat but not really eating it. Instead, we feasted on cooked vegetables and baked bread, but I didn't eat as much as a person who hadn't eaten in several days typically would have. Discovering the truth about these people tampered with my appetite.

"Did you find anything?" Viktor leaned over to ask, pressing a kiss to my hair.

He still maintained the happy smile, but I knew him well enough to see through it. I

could see that he was tense and worried, that his mind kept wandering to our grand escape tonight when the island of Canne fell asleep. The last I had heard, Bjorn had been talking about setting us up in a few huts, and while Viktor had tried to convince him that we were fine in our own beds on the ship, Bjorn wouldn't take no for an answer.

Usually, being offered a warm, stagnant bed after spending weeks at sea would be an impossible offer to turn down, but knowing that we would be sleeping amongst cannibals made it lose its appeal.

"We found more than we thought we would," I murmured so the people of Canne wouldn't overhear. "They're killing the sailors and storing them on the ships. They're ripping out their teeth and using them to make necklaces for their wives. We think they get more from the ships when they run out of bodies. We don't know how many there are because we got sick after checking the first one."

"This is worse than I thought." Viktor's expression dropped for just a moment before that perfect smile was back on his face. "As soon as everyone is asleep, we're leaving."

"Roscoe and Manny have gathered enough fruit and berries to last a few days. If we ration tightly, maybe we can make them last longer."

"And Bjorn has agreed to throw in a bag of flour with the nuts and dried fruits," he said. "We just need to pick them up from the cooks after the feast."

Viktor and I would have continued planning, but we realised Bjorn was watching us. He had an easy smile and watched us intently while he ate like we were putting on a show. I smiled at him and glanced away to speak to Odin on my left. Viktor did the same with Gustav on his right. We kept up the act for the remainder of the feast, and when a woman dropped by to collect our dirty plates, I kept the napkin out of sight so

she wouldn't see it.

“What's wrong, Astrid?” Bjorn suddenly called out to me. Despite how far he sat from me, his voice was so loud and booming that he silenced everyone at the feast, turning all eyes on me. “Was the meat not to your liking?”

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It was unnerving to have so many pairs of eyes on me.

“It was lovely,” I forced a smile, hating Bjorn’s probing eyes on me.

“Are you sure? Because it seems you didn’t enjoy it,” he chuckled, amused.

“I promise I enjoyed it. I’m just not a big meat eater,” I lied smoothly and held his gaze, needing him and everyone else to believe me.

“That makes sense.” His smile tipped slightly higher at the corners before turning to Viktor. “You looked like you enjoyed the meat.”

“Yes,” Viktor smiled brightly. “It was the best cut of meat I’ve ever eaten.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Bjorn grinned, genuinely delighted. “We’ll be happy to pack you some to take with you tomorrow.”

“That’s so kind of you, but we couldn’t,” Viktor denied, his tone polite. “You’ve been so kind and hospitable to us. We don’t want to put you out even more than we already have.”

Bjorn made a dismissive sound. “Nonsense.”

“I know we previously discussed leaving in the morning, but I think my crew and I should return to sea tonight. We’re already a few days behind on our mission, and I



don't want to risk falling behind even more."

"What are you talking about?" For the first time this evening, Bjorn's smile dimmed, and for a fleeting moment, I couldn't help but think that there was something sinister about him that we hadn't noticed before. But it was gone as quickly as I spotted it, and the bright smile promptly returned. "It's so late and dark already. We couldn't possibly let you leave at this time of night."

"It's not that dark," Viktor denied with a light-hearted chuckle, and maybe I was biased, but he was right.

It certainly wasn't as bright as it had been an hour before, but it wasn't dark enough to call it a night just yet.

"No, but it will be very soon, and I won't be able to sleep tonight knowing that I let you all leave like this without a good night's rest."

Viktor smiled, but I could tell he was getting frustrated. Bjorn wasn't going to give up, and we all knew it.

"That's very kind of you, Bjorn." His smile was tenser than before. "It would be rude for me to turn down the offer once again, so we'll accept. Thank you for your hospitality. If it's okay with you, my crew and I will head to bed now. It's been a long day, and we'd like to set sail nice and early tomorrow."

"Great." Bjorn grinned. "Brank, do you mind showing Captain Viktor and his crew to their huts for the night?"

"We'll be fine. Brank already showed us earlier," Viktor dismissed casually as he rose to his feet. He held a hand out for me, and I gladly accepted it, allowing him to help me up. The expression on his face remained light and carefree, but the way he

squeezed my hand told me how he was truly feeling. Nervous, anxious and all other synonyms of those words.

“That’s brilliant,” Bjorn grinned, not seeming the least bit fazed. “We’ll see you all in the morning for breakfast, then.”

“Good night.”

I waited until we were away from the feast to ask, “They didn’t believe us for a second there, did they?”

“Nope.” Viktor shook his head and squeezed my hand, his grip tight but not painful. I couldn’t bring myself to complain in the slightest. Not when we were all scared for our lives here.

“This way,” Odin directed us, having scouted the area earlier. He took us down a shortcut through the trees to the beaches, avoiding anyone seeing us. We all quietly hurried after him, and true to his word, he led us to the beach in record time. However, we needed to move faster. If the people of Canne realised that we weren’t in our designated huts, they would come down to the beach where The Serpent was docked. We needed to be gone before that happened.

The only unfortunate part of Odin’s shortcut was that it landed us on the other side of the beach from where The Serpent was docked.

“Hurry!” Viktor whispered harshly.

He pushed me forward, making me the first person to walk up the plank. As soon as I was on The Serpent, I rushed to the rail to watch him.

Viktor was the epitome of a true Captain. He made sure that the entire crew got onto

the ship before he did, but at that moment, I wanted nothing more than for him to get on before everyone else. Just as he needed to know that everyone was safe, I needed to know that he was safe.

A light shone over the trees leading away from the feast. I watched as it moved away from our huts, quickly following the shortcut that Odin had led us down.

“They know that we’ve left!” The words rushed out of my mouth. “Hurry up! They’re nearly onto the beach!”

They must know that we figured out what they were.

Cannibals.

“Hurry up, men!” Viktor roared, shoving at the few still yet to climb the plank. “I don’t know about you, but I have no intentions of becoming tomorrow’s breakfast.”

Even though the ramp was designed to take only the weight of one person at a time, the last few crew members on the shore rushed up it simultaneously. Two was risky when it was claimed that the plank could only handle the weight of one person—though I had a feeling that the weight of two young teenagers, such as Roscoe and Manny, added together to equate to the weight of one fully grown man. Three would be stupid, and all three of them would end up on their asses, and we would be stuck with the issue of a broken ramp and the prospect of losing three of our men to an island of hungry, bloodthirsty cannibals.

Roscoe and Manny were the last ones onto The Serpent, leaving Viktor the only man on the shore, waiting for his turn to climb up the ramp. The entire time, I willed for them to move quicker so Viktor could follow.

I wouldn’t be at rest until Viktor wrapped his arms around me, assuring me he was

safe.

“Hurry, Viktor! They’re nearly here!” I screamed at him as he climbed onto the ramp.

I held my breath the entire time Viktor climbed up the plank. He all but threw himself over the side and onto the ship, and Caspian had The Serpent pulling away from the land before the others could pull up the ramp. I winced at the sound of the bottom of the ramp cracking, no doubt making it difficult for us to use it next time, but that was the least of our worries right now.

We were all safe from the cannibals, and that was all that mattered.

I exhaled in relief and dropped myself to the ground next to Viktor, throwing my arms around his neck and holding him tightly.

“They were so close to getting you,” I whispered, unable to stop picturing some of Bjorn’s men less than a foot away from him. If Caspian hadn’t started sailing away when he did, they would have been able to get onto the ramp themselves...and I didn’t even want to think about what would have happened then.

“I would never let that happen, my siren,” Viktor into the crook of my neck. “I will never leave you.”

“Good.” I pressed my mouth to his in a quick, chaste kiss, not wanting to give the crew a show. “I love you, pirate.”

He squeezed my hips and followed my retreating mouth for another kiss. “I love you, my siren,” he grunted into my mouth.

I pressed my hands to his chest and playfully pushed, wanting to put some distance between us before we got carried away. While Viktor held me, whispering sweet

nothings into my ear, I glanced around at all the crew to do a head count, needing the assurance that everyone had made it safely onto the ship.

I counted thirteen, including Viktor and myself, which was correct, but the orange peel on the deck a few feet away made me rigid, and fear washed over me.

Crosby.

### CHAPTER THIRTY

“Please tell me Crosby is chained in the bottom deck,” I all but begged, staring at all the crew with wide eyes. I was trying to think positive thoughts, but it wasn’t working.

“He’s not,” Hammond whispered in a small voice, his eyes just as wide and fearful as mine. “He said he was hungry, so I unchained him earlier to get some fruit.”

“Where is he now?”

My question was answered with deafening silence.

“He must still be on the island,” he murmured, his voice low and barely audible, sounding ashamed.

“How could this have happened?” I groaned, pressing my face into my hands to muffle the panicked shout. “How could we have left one of us behind like this? They’re going to eat him alive!”

“We’ll figure something out,” Viktor tried to assure me, but his words didn’t do much. Not when I knew Crosby was up against an island full of cannibals. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were already planning how to eat him.

“Don’t get so worked up over this, Astrid,” Laurence said, looking as troubled as I felt. “It’s only Crosby. Maybe this is the punishment that we were holding out for?”

“That’s a terrible way of looking at it,” I groaned.

“I agree with Astrid,” Hammond frowned deeply. “This isn’t right. We have to go back for him.”

“Are you crazy?” Latham exclaimed. “We can’t go back for him! We’ll be walking ourselves into the lion’s den!”

“There’s no point getting all us all killed for just one person,” Gustav sided with Latham. “I know it sounds horrible, but we must be realistic.”

“And it’s Crosby!” Odin reasoned as if that was a good enough excuse in itself. It wasn’t, but I didn’t blame him for feeling that way. If Canne weren’t an island full of cannibals, I would have celebrated leaving Crosby behind. “It’s not like he’s a saint worthy of being saved.”

“But does he deserve to be turned into breakfast?” Viktor groaned.

“What are you suggesting? That we turn around and get him?” Garth asked. “You’re Captain. Whatever you choose, we’ll stand by you and honour your decision.”

Viktor groaned lowly and pressed his hand to his forehead, looking truly tormented. “As bad as I feel for Crosby, we can’t risk all of our lives for just one person. I hate to say it, but Crosby isn’t worth it.”

“Viktor?” I turned to face him, begging him for something I knew he couldn’t give me. Not without risking all our lives.

When he sighed and shook his head just slightly, a pitiful look on his face, I moved over to the rail. Islanders were lined along the shore, all angered and cursing us for escaping their greedy clutches.

I sincerely hoped that after they finished working their way through the pile of bodies they already had piled up, they wouldn't get their hands on any more sailors and then eventually die of starvation. That was the least of what they deserved after killing and eating so many people.

Eating humans. Imagine!

Despite Crosby's attempt to kill me not long ago, at this moment, I really felt sorry for him. How could I not when we had practically signed his death certificate by leaving him behind? Albeit accidentally.

No one deserved such a horrendous fate. Not even Crosby.

I closed my eyes and clasped my hands together, praying for him. I prayed that regardless of how he was killed, whether they yanked his teeth out, skinned him, or tried to cook him alive, he would die quickly and not feel any pain.

The notion of Crosby suffering and living through it all made me sick to my stomach.

When I opened my eyes after praying, I blinked several times to ensure I wasn't seeing things.

Had my prayer already been answered?

"Is that..." Hammond's voice trailed off in question from beside me, unable to believe his eyes just as I was.

"It is," I gulped and nodded my head frantically. "It's Crosby!" I turned around to whisper harshly to the crew, not wanting to give him up to the cannibals in case the wind carried the sound of my voice.



A series of questions, denials and exclamations sounded aloud as everyone rushed over to the rail to look at the dead man walking. Well, it was more like running.

Crosby had a large sack hanging over either shoulder. I had no idea how he could run so fast with them.

The cannibals hadn't spotted him yet, as he was still a reasonable distance away from them, but he couldn't keep running along the shore. If he did, he would end up running into them, and there was no way he would make it out of that crowd alive. Or with all his teeth.

As if he could sense our thoughts, Crosby veered off to the water and dived into it, making a considerable effort to swim toward us while still carrying the sacks. He was still far away from the group of cannibals that had gathered where the ship had been docked, but they all turned their heads at the sound of someone diving into the water.

"We need to help him!" I called over my shoulder, but Viktor and Jerrik had already sprung into action. They were already on the rowboat and halfway down the ship as Hammond and Odin turned the mechanical wheel as fast as they could.

My heart hammered painfully in my chest as I watched them reach the water and row toward Crosby, who was struggling with the two sacks he was trying to carry with him. I was in the right mind to scream at him to leave them, as making it out of the water alive was the most important thing right now, but he wouldn't be able to hear me. We were too far away.

"They have to make it," I murmured to myself as my eyes continuously flitted between Crosby swimming and Jerrik and Viktor rowing toward him at an exponential rate. All the while, we sailed away from them all, as well as the few cannibals who were brave enough to dive into the water and attempt to get to Crosby before Viktor and Jerrik did.

I could already tell they wouldn't make it as they had fumbled around too much initially and wasted precious time. There was now too much distance between them and Crosby, and by the time Crosby was finally pulled onto the boat—as well as at the two large mystery sacks he had stubbornly refused to leave behind—there was still so much distance between them and the rowboat.

Viktor and Jerrik were fast and had already turned the rowboat around to row back to us. I could imagine how exhausted they were, but they gritted their teeth and pushed on. The fear of being eaten alive was enough for Crosby to grab the third oar and help row despite resembling a drowned rat.

They were moving slightly faster now, but it wasn't enough for them to catch up to us fast enough.

Everyone on board held their breath as we watched the island called Canne fade into the background, taking their swimming cannibals with them. Caspian stopped the ship to allow Jerrik, Viktor and Crosby to catch up to us.

The entire time, I kept my gaze trained in the distance, fearful that in the meantime, the cannibals would catch up to us, but thankfully, I didn't spot anything or anyone.

I threw myself at Viktor before he could get off the boat. This time, no one laughed. Instead, we all released the breaths we had been holding, and Caspian quickly started sailing the ship again.

For cannibals who ate sailors, they were terrible at anything to do with the water. They could have gotten onto one of their ships and sailed after us if they wanted. They probably would have been able to catch up to us as well, but it appeared that they were more concerned with eating the people of the sea than learning the way of the sea.

It was too bad for them, but it worked out in our favour.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Crosby was no longer a prisoner. He had been promoted back to part of the crew, but that didn't mean anyone trusted him. Jerrik certainly didn't, and for that reason, Crosby wasn't allowed to join us fishing anymore.

A few of the others had warmed up to him, no doubt thanks to the two large sacks that he had stolen from Canne when we were in the midst of escaping. One was filled with flour for bread and the other with nuts and dried fruits. They were the items Bjorn had promised us, but we forgot to collect them in our haste to leave.

Together with the fresh produce we had swiped before the feast and the little fish we had caught these past few days, the food lasted a little over a week, but now, we were back to meals that wouldn't fill even one-fifth of our stomachs.

"This is our best yet," Jerrik exhaled in relief as we dropped the oars and patiently waited for them to reel us back onto The Serpent.

I joined Jerrik in his relief. "Six fish isn't going to last long, but it's the most we've seen in two weeks. I hope this means that we're back in more habitable waters."

"It sure looks like we are, and about time, too."

Everyone was just as delighted as we were when we showed them the six fish we had been lucky to catch today. It was five more fish than we caught yesterday.

Gustav quickly fried two fish and left the other four for the coming days. Even

though Jerrik and I were hopeful that things were starting to look up for us, we could not guarantee that we would be able to catch more fish tomorrow.

I wasn't surprised to find Crosby sat among us. This was the way it had been since we had fled from Canne, the island of cannibals.

When everyone had gone to sleep that night, I poked Viktor awake and demanded that Crosby be upgraded from the bottom deck. To my surprise, he had already discussed it with the crew, and they all agreed that Crosby would be promoted to one of the crew as long as it was fine with me. However, he had warned me that one foot out of line would result in Crosby being back chained in the bottom deck quicker than he could beg for mercy.

Viktor and I had had some beautiful, mind-blowing, toe-curling sex before, but that night was extra special. Knowing that this gorgeous man, whom I was lucky enough to call my husband, could read my mind and know what I felt before I even mentioned it to him made me feel so fortunate. And tingly between my legs.

Crosby had been helping with cleaning and smaller tasks around the ship. No one yet trusted him with the more critical tasks, and I was sure that Jerrik would rather drown himself than allow Crosby back on the rowboat with us, but he had been earning his keep.

After dinner and ale, Crosby helped Gustav clean up and went to the second deck, where he was rooming with Hammond.

I would have also loved to join them on the second deck, but Viktor was on night duty. And if Viktor was on night duty, so was I, much to his dismay.

"You should go to bed, my siren," Viktor murmured from behind me, bowing his head to kiss my neck.

“I’m not tired,” I lied, but I was betrayed by a big yawn not even a moment later.

“Not tired, huh?” Viktor laughed, and I couldn’t help but join in.

“Not as tired as I was that night we ran away from those wicked cannibals,” I chuckled, and even though the joke was lighthearted, Viktor let go of the wheel and curled one arm around my waist, saying so much to me with that simple action.

“I would never have let them eat you,” he whispered.

“Thanks for the reassurance, but after they chewed through your bones, I’m not sure if you would be able to stop them from doing the same to me.”

“We need to work on your positivity, my siren.” He playfully nipped my neck, making me giggle and squirm in his arms, but I froze when I felt something wet on my shoulder, seeping through the material of my dress.

“Viktor?” I whispered, my voice deathly quiet.

When I turned my head to glance over my shoulder, he nuzzled his face further into my neck. “Don’t look at me, Astrid. I don’t want you to see me like this.”

My lips parted in shock. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he tried to deny, but his voice cracked so painfully that I felt like my heart was also breaking. “I’ll be fine. Just give me a moment to collect myself.”

“Why are you crying?” I asked in a small voice, turning around in his arms. Reaching up, I pried his hands away to cup his face.

This wasn’t the first time I had seen Viktor shed tears, but it was the first time I felt

my heart cracking with each wet tear that rolled down his face.

“You need to tell me what’s wrong, Viktor, so that I can fix it,” I urged him quietly, struggling to keep my voice from cracking with emotion. “Did something happen? Are you hurt?”

“A lot of things have happened on this trip,” Viktor gulped and lowered his gaze, refusing to meet my eyes. “And I’ve nearly gotten you killed on more than one occasion.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You nearly drowned. Then you nearly starved to death, and then after that, you were nearly eaten alive by cannibals. All of those things are my fault. If it weren’t for me, you never would have been in danger like that,” he sniffled and wiped away the tears before they could fall. When he finally met my eyes, his face was hard, and his expression was serious. “I don’t want you to see me like this, my siren. Please go to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

If my husband thought it was that easy to get rid of me, he had another thing coming.

I pinned him with a hard stare. “Are you my husband or not?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“Answer my question,” I demanded.

“Of course, I’m your husband!”

“Then why are you trying to hide your pain from me?” I whispered, blinking back tears of my own. “Don’t you trust me to protect you? To care for you?”

“What? Of course I do, Astrid!” Viktor gaped at me, looking offended. “I don’t want you to ever think like that.” He shook his head and reached for me, pulling me into his arms and wounding them tight around me, leaving no room for escape. Not that I would ever dream about leaving Viktor’s arms.

“I don’t ever want you to feel like you have to hide your feelings from me,” I mumbled into his chest, holding him just as tight as he was holding me. “You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

“I know, I know,” Viktor sighed and nodded, still looking a little defeated. “I know that, but I feel like all I’ve done is fail you lately.” It hurt me to hear him talk like this, but I knew he needed to get all this off his chest.

“I haven’t been able to sleep since we returned from Canne,” Viktor admitted, whispering into my hair as he held me like I was the most precious cargo on this ship. “Every single night, I lay awake holding you. I wanted you with me because I thought I could keep you safe, and I couldn’t imagine spending months at sea without you. I knew the distance and yearning would kill me, and I still stand by that, but everything has been going wrong lately. You’ve been in danger over and over again, and I’ve been helpless to save you. I can’t fall asleep at night knowing how I’ve failed you, and I’ll keep failing you if I don’t change my ways.”

“I don’t want you to change your ways, pirate. You’re absolutely perfect the way you are. I love you the way you are.” I pulled back slightly to stare up at him. When he refused to meet my eyes, I cupped his face and peppered kisses all over his face until he looked at me. “Did you hear me, Viktor? I love you. More than a person can ever love somebody, and I love you so much for bringing me with you. I don’t know how I would have gotten this far without you, having to miss you every day. Things have been crazy lately, but we’ve all been in danger.” I nuzzled the tip of my nose against his. “When you got onto the rowboat with Jerrik to save Crosby, I wanted nothing more than to scream for you to come back. I didn’t want the cannibals to eat Crosby,



but I didn't want it enough to risk you, Viktor. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you. I truly wouldn't be able to live without you, so please don't put yourself in that position again."

Now, I was crying.

"I wouldn't be able to live without you either, my siren," Viktor whispered, inching his mouth closer to mine, brushing a soft kiss against my lips.

"Then it seems like we're at an impasse," I smiled against his lips. "You keep worrying about me, and I'll keep worrying about you, okay, pirate? Because not worrying about each other is impossible, but I need you to sleep at night, okay? Please do it for me. I need to know you're okay."

"I promise I'll try," he whispered, and his lips turned up slightly at the corners when I gave him a pointed look. "For you, I'll try anything, my siren."

"And I don't want you to hide your feelings from me anymore, okay? I'm your wife. You're supposed to tell me these things. You're supposed to confide in me so we can share the burden. We're a team, remember?"

"I'm so grateful you're my wife, Astrid," he groaned and pressed his mouth to mine again, this kiss harder and more passionate than before. "And I promise not to bottle my feelings anymore."

"That's all I can ask for," I sighed wistfully against his mouth. "I love you, Viktor."

"And I love you, Astrid. More than you can imagine. Never forget that."

"I wouldn't ever dream of it," I smiled, turning my head to rest against his chest, seeking the comfort that only my husband could provide.

Viktor kept his foot on the button the whole time, so we continued gliding through the water. His arms were tight around me, and the blanket he had wrapped around us was warm. Before I knew it, I found myself drifting off to sleep.

I didn't know how long I was out, but some time later, Viktor shook me awake with an alarmed look.

“What is it? What's wrong?” I asked, gasping as I surged awake.

“The King's Lost Island...Treasure Island,” Viktor whispered into the darkness, turning me around to stare into the distance.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Are you sure?” I asked, subconsciously tightening my grip on the soft material of Viktor’s tunic.

I couldn’t admit it aloud, but I was afraid that after what happened last time, if I let go of him, he would be lost to me forever.

“It has to be.” He nodded, looking sure of himself. “It’s unaccounted for on the map from Greenland. We thought it was on the other side of Greenland, but they must have made a mistake. Or maybe we did. You’d be surprised how often these things happen.” Viktor’s rambling told me he truly believed it, and I believed him.

I had to rub the sleep from my eyes and squint to be able to make out the shape of the island he was pointing at. It was small because we were so far away, but it was definitely an island.

“We’re here right now.” He pointed at the map, a few inches below the spot of land circled several times in red and labelled as ‘Treasure Island’.

“It’s too near,” I protested, my lips curving down at the corners. “We’re not even supposed to see Treasure Island from here.”

“The map must be off.” His eyes were glued to the map. “Greenland must have made a miscalculation.”

“Or maybe this isn’t Treasure Island?”

Viktor frowned. “How can you be sure?”

I pursed my lips. “What if this is just another island?” I asked, studying the map. “What if this island is like Canne? What if it’s dangerous?”

He squeezed my hip. “We’ll be more cautious this time,” he assured me. “I promise I won’t let anything happen to you, my siren. Do you trust me?”

“With my life,” I exhaled and leaned into his chest, needing him like I needed air. “I’m just worried.”

“I know, my siren. I’m also worried but have a gut feeling about this.” He brushed his lips against my forehead. “I might be wrong, but we can’t ignore this island. Let’s sail around it and continue forward. If the map is correct and this is just another island that isn’t on it, we’ll continue to Greenland. They’ll be able to confirm if the map is mistaken.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t wholly convinced.

“How many days have we left until Greenland?” I asked.

“Five.”

So, that would be five days to get to Greenland and then another five days to get back to this island if it did turn out to be Treasure Island. If the map were indeed wrong, then it would be a massive waste of time.

Two hours passed on our journey to Greenland, and we were close to the mystery island.

“If this does turn out to be Treasure Island, then the pirates were just rumours,” I

murmured, glancing around the shore but not spotting a single ship anywhere. And certainly not one that resembled belonging to a wicked and dangerous group of pirates.

“I had a feeling that they were just rumours,” Viktor murmured, and I didn’t miss the sound of relief in his voice. “You’re still not convinced this is Treasure Island, my siren?”

“I’m not sure anymore.” I gnawed on my bottom lip. “What are the chances Greenland would fail to mention that they had another deserted island nearby?”

“Absolutely no chance.”

“It’s deserted like we expect Treasure Island to be,” I murmured. “One deserted island right next to another deserted island? What are the chances?”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, my siren,” he chuckled, and I didn’t miss the way he pressed his foot down harder on the button to make the oars row faster.

“I really don’t have a good feeling about this, Viktor.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Maybe we should just go to Greenland.”

“Okay,” he agreed but didn’t sound convinced.

Viktor and I were still torn about whether this was Treasure Island, but we continued to sail around it anyway. Another two hours passed, and the mystery island was a blimp in the background as we left it in our wake, but I couldn’t get rid of the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Do you think I’m being too cautious?” I asked. “What if it turns out to be Treasure Island, and we’re just wasting our time by not checking it out now.”

Viktor was silent for a moment, thinking hard. “The worst that can happen is that we waste some time and must come back.”

“And the best?”

“It turns out to be Treasure Island, and we make all of Barden’s dreams come true.”

“And map miscalculations? You said they’re common.”

“More common than you think,” he chuckled, the sound a little strained.

“It sure does look deserted,” I murmured, eyeing the overgrown greenery and forest which ate away at the back of the island, making it impossible to dock there and forcing us to go around to the front once again.

Viktor squeezed my hip. “What do you want to do, my siren? Air on the side of caution or take a risk and pray it pays off?”

Even though I was severely traumatised by our experience at Canne, I reached out for the wheel and turned it as far as I went. Viktor grinned into my hair as The Serpent did a three-sixty-degree turn, and before we knew it, we were docking up at the mystery island.

Viktor didn’t bother putting down the ramp for us to walk down, as it was only the two of us. There was no point this late at night when everyone was still asleep.

“There are no ships,” I whispered, my eyes trailing up and down the shore. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Better than Canne, that’s for sure.”

Viktor pressed his hand to the small of my back and guided me to the front of the ship, glancing over the serpent mounted at the front.

“There are weeds everywhere,” he said, and I could hear the frown in his voice. “If there were anyone living here, even pirates, it wouldn’t look this bad.”

“If there were pirates here, we would have spotted their ship,” I pointed out, and he hummed in agreement.

“I really think this is it,” Viktor exhaled, and a wave of relief washed over me for the first time tonight.

There were no pirates, and there looked to be no one living here, either. This island was truly deserted.

Treasure Island.

“What’s the plan?” I asked Viktor in a small voice.

“I’m going to stay out here, just in case, but there’s nothing for us to do until the morning. We can start searching for the treasure once everyone is awake and we’ve had breakfast.”

“I’ll stay out here with you,” I told Viktor, raising my chin in defiance, telling him that there was nothing he could say or do to change my mind.

“Well, it’s a good thing we’ve got a blanket here with us, isn’t it?” Viktor chuckled and dropped himself to the deck, stretching his legs out in front of him.

I wasted no time joining him, sitting between his legs and resting my head against his chest. I sighed and closed my eyes when he threw the blanket over us, tucking me in.

Between Viktor's arms and the blanket, I was all snugly and warm, and I struggled to resist the wave of sleep that threatened to take me. I blinked my eyes rapidly and shifted around, trying to keep them open in case something happened, but there was no use.

It had been a long couple of days, and out here, on the deck, in the middle of the night, in my husband's arms, I welcomed the sleep.



### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

What should have been a peaceful sleep turned out to be rather difficult. I woke up several times during the night, twisting and turning in Viktor's arms, trying to get more comfortable.

Perhaps spending the night out on the deck wasn't the best idea.

The only thing that made it bearable was spending the night in my husband's arms, but for some bizarre reason, I didn't wake up in them.

"Viktor?" I called out to him, my voice groggy with sleep. "I think we fell asleep," I groaned again and rubbed my eyes. Don't tell me you're still asleep," I chuckled, but when I opened my eyes and glanced around, the sound quickly died.

My eyes widened, and I sat up straighter, frantically glancing left and right and turning my head in all directions.

I didn't know what was happening, but I wasn't on The Serpent anymore. That much was clear to me already.

I had fallen asleep on The Serpent in Viktor's arms but had awoken in an unfamiliar bottom deck of a ship I didn't recognise.

Where was I?

How did I get here?

And most importantly, where was Viktor?

My brain hurt to think of last night and all that had happened. I couldn't think of anything that could have led to me being here right now.

Viktor and I had been on night duty. We had docked at Treasure Island, which had appeared deserted. We spent the night out on the deck, docked at the island, planning to explore with the crew as soon as the sun rose in the morning. We must have fallen asleep when we were supposed to be on night duty...and now I was here...wherever this was.

All the racing questions going through my mind gave me a headache.

Where was Viktor? Was he okay? Did he wake up in a similar situation to me? Was he just as confused?

Where was the crew? Were they still asleep? Or had they been abducted as well?

My heart hurt as I thought of Viktor and how he must be worrying about me. I didn't want him to worry about me, but I had no idea where I was or how to escape from here.

Desperate to figure out where I was, I looked around for a clue, but nothing stuck out.

It looked like I was on a regular bottom deck of a ship. Unlike The Serpent, where the oars rowed automatically at the step of a button—thanks to Chip—there were seats for people to sit and do all the rowing themselves. This was how it used to be for us before Chip had thought of the idea and turned it into a reality, and it was strange to see it again when we were so accustomed to the fancy invention.

On the other side of the deck, there were a few barrels neatly stored in the corner, but

other than that, nothing else caught my attention. Not until I sighed in defeat and laid my head back against the wall. I groaned and rolled my neck, trying to get the kinks out after a rough night's sleep, and that's when the silver caught my eyes.

My hands were chained to the wall.

There were four pairs of chains, three on one side and one more on the other. I was the only person in here, chained.

Why was I in chains, and who put me in them?

My breath hitched in my throat, and my heart began beating dangerously fast as I tugged on the chains but couldn't get out of them. They rattled and rattled but didn't budge from the wall. They remained around my wrists, and despite my efforts, I was none the freer.

I was still tugging on the chains when I heard footsteps coming this way. I squeezed my eyes shut and lay limp against the wall, pretending to be asleep.

When the door opened, and the footsteps became louder as the person approached, I focused on keeping my breath slow and even. Judging by the heavy footsteps, it was a man.

My ears perked up at the sound of the chains rattling together, and when my first hand dropped to the floor, I knew he was releasing me. But why?

What was the point of releasing me so soon after chaining me?

The man was rough in his mannerisms as he let my other hand drop, my knuckles grazing against the rough wall on the way down. I remained in that flaccid state the whole time, even when I felt one hand slip behind me and press into the small of my

back and the other under my legs.

Before I knew it, the man threw me over his shoulder. When I opened my eyes, they were wide with fear as he began walking out of the bottom deck—not all that careful with the way he was holding me. They were also wide with disgust at how close my face was to his ass—practically on eye level. Not to mention how dangerously close his hand was to my ass, but I didn't dare say anything and give myself away.

I listened to his footsteps. He walked up one flight of stairs, down the hallway and then up another flight of stairs. I heard a door open, and when the fresh air hit me, I knew we were on the top deck. The gentle, occasional water sloshing against the ship's side told me we were docked at the shore.

But this wasn't The Serpent.

Where had this ship come from? Viktor and I hadn't seen it last night.

I held my breath as the man continued walking, and I dared to peek to confirm that we were on the top deck. My eyes widened when the man suddenly jumped over the rail, landing with a loud thud on a wooden plank. I realised then that he was walking off the ship with me still draped over his shoulder like an expensive scarf.

He walked down the sandy shore of the beach, and the further he walked, the more I could take in the ship we had just been on.

It was then that I realised it wasn't just a ship but a pirate ship.

But how was that possible? The pirates were supposed to be nothing more than a rumour...except that it was most definitely a pirate ship docked beside The Serpent.

When Dustin and I were younger, Father used to tell us bedtime stories about his

many trips to sea. Our favourite stories were pirate stories, and he always mentioned that pirate ships always had black flags and masts. Sometimes, the black material had a white skull and crossbones painted on it, and this pirate ship was no different.

I was so busy staring at the pirate ship that I hadn't noticed where the man was taking me. Far too late, I squeezed my eyes shut and went back to pretending I was unconscious.

"Looks like our little prisoner here is awake," one of the pirates chuckled, his mouth filled with a handful of nuts I recognised to be from The Serpent. These were the same ones that Crosby had put his neck on the line for as he ran across the shore of Canne, carrying the sacks on his shoulders while he tried to escape the cannibals that chased him, and these pirates had just helped themselves to them like it was nothing. Like they were entitled to it.

"Oh, I didn't know she was awake," the man holding me chuckled, and my body shook with the vibrations from his chest.

"I'm going to be sick," I lied.

Just as I hoped, the man holding me was quick to drop me to my feet before I was sick all down his back.

I took off running the moment I got on my feet, but I made it only three steps before he grabbed me again.

"You thought you could trick me, huh?" He chuckled, holding me to his chest while my feet dangled above the ground. "Where do you think you're going?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, I wriggled in his arms, desperate to escape, but it was useless. No matter how much I wriggled, kicked or screamed, the man holding me

was far stronger than I was.

“Keep squirming like that. It feels real good,” he whispered in my ear and ran a finger down my face. “You’re a pretty little thing. Once I’ve had a turn, I’m sure my brothers would also be interested in spending some time with you.”

“You’re disgusting,” I yelled at him. His nasty words were enough to stop my wriggling, and this time, it felt like I was going to be sick for real.

“Don’t you dare talk to her like that!” I suddenly heard Viktor scream. “Did you hear me? Don’t fucking talk to my wife with that disgusting mouth of yours!”

“What are you going to do about it, Captain ?” One of the pirates sneered, and all the others laughed.

Craning my neck to glance over the man’s shoulder, I finally saw Viktor and the crew. They were all lined up on the sand, their hands and feet tied, and with cloths around their mouths. Viktor’s cloth was lowered so he could talk, but when he opened his mouth to say something else, one of the pirates yanked it back into place, silencing him.

“Why did you have to uncover his mouth?” One of the pirates groaned and reached for another handful of nuts. “It was the only way I could get him to shut up.”

“It was entertaining, wasn’t it?” The pirate standing behind Viktor shrugged, and all the others laughed.

The pirates holding me tugged on my hair to get my attention. “I’ll deal with you after breakfast,” he grunted, already working on tying my hands behind my back. I squirmed in his arms and tried to shuck him off me, but it was no use. Regardless of my failed attempts, I refused to go down without a fight. Literally.

He had to wrestle me onto the ground and pin me down with the weight of his body to be able to get the ties around my feet, and the only way he could get me to stop screaming was to tie a bandana around my mouth. I didn't stop screaming, but my attempts were useless as the bandana severely muffled the sound. The offending pirate laughed at me and threw me over his shoulder once again. His hand was far too close to my ass than I liked, but thankfully, this trip was far shorter than the previous one.

The pirate dropped me unceremoniously on the sand. I hated how close I was to the pirates sitting in a circle around the fire and how far I was from the crew.

"Don't worry. I'll come back for you later," the pirate promised and blew me a kiss, much to my disgust before he joined his fellow pirates in drinking our ale and eating our food.

There were eight of them and fourteen of us. I believed we could take them easily, but not like this, not when we were clearly at a disadvantage with the restraints.

My eyes sought out Viktor, sitting on the other side. His eyes were wide with alarm, and they were already on me. I could see lines of worry creasing on his forehead, but I could also see the determination on his face, which told me he was already devising a plan.

Whatever it was, I sure hoped it would be soon. These pirates were scary, and I didn't like their teasing. I feared they would soon grow bored with their teasing, and then they would want more, which terrified me more than I was willing to admit.

I was forced to turn my attention away from Viktor and back to the pirates when the same one from before appeared before me with a bright smile and seemingly finished with his breakfast.

“You’re pretty, but you’re also a smart little thing, aren’t you?” He shot me a toothy grin. “I can practically see the cogs turning in your head. Don’t worry, I’ll explain everything to you.”



### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“What’s going on?” I dared to ask, internally relieved that my voice came out confident, even though that was the opposite of what I felt inside.

The pirate guilty of manhandling me—with how he led all the conversations and got the first pick of food before all the other pirates told me he was the leader—seated himself in front of me, shooting me a big, toothy grin.

“How about you leave the questioning to me?” He chuckled.

I pursed my lips, not liking his response. My eyes drifted over his shoulder, and I locked gazes with Viktor. The way his eyes crinkled at the corners, I could tell he was attempting to smile at me from under the bandana covering his mouth, but I couldn’t bring myself to return it.

I wanted to rush across the sand and throw myself into his arms. I wanted him to hold me, comfort me, and tell me everything would be okay and that we would all make it out of here safe and alive. But I couldn’t do that. Not when all of us were tied up and held hostage by a gang of pirates.

“Eyes on me.” The same pirate snapped his fingers in front of my face to get my attention. Not wanting to rock the metaphoric boat and worsen the situation, I tore my eyes away from my husband to look at him. “That’s better.” He gave me another toothy grin, but I didn’t return it. “What are you doing here on this island?”

“We stopped for some food,” I lied.

All the toothy grins turned out to be a facade because, in the blink of an eye, he backhanded me across the face. I gasped as my face was forced to the right, my cheek burning even when I cupped it to soothe the pain. Viktor's muffled shouts from where he was restrained made things worse, and I blinked back the tears—I wasn't just crying from the sting of the slap, but because I hated how helpless we all were. I could see that Viktor was fighting terribly against his restraints, trying to free himself so he could save me, but just like the rest of us, he was utterly powerless.

I furiously blinked back the tears, refusing to let them fall and give the pirate the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

The pirate pinched my chin, forcefully yanking my face to look at him.

"Try again," he growled in my face.

"We came in search of Treasure Island," I whispered harshly, hating myself for admitting the truth.

"That's more like it," he rumbled lowly. "Why have you come in search of Treasure Island?"

"Why do you think? Isn't it obvious?" I snorted, but the sound was cut short when another slap struck my other cheek, forcing my head the other way.

Viktor struggled harder to free himself, and one of the other pirates walked over to kick him in the chest, sending him flying onto his back.

"Stop it! Please, don't hurt him!" I called out, unable to hold back the traitorous tears this time.

The leader grinned at me and raised his hand once again. This time, instead of

slapping me, he signalled something to the other pirate, who, upon command, grinned wickedly and kicked Viktor once again. This time, the kick was to Viktor's side, sending him onto his side, where he doubled over when another pirate kicked him hard in the stomach.

"Please! Please, stop it! Stop hurting him!" I begged, nothing short of a blubbing mess right now. But I couldn't bring myself to care—not when Viktor was being punished for my attitude. "I'm sorry. I'll tell you whatever you want, but please, leave him alone."

"I want you to drop the attitude and answer my questions honestly," the pirate bargained with a sleazy grin.

"I'll do it," I quickly agreed, fearful and desperate as I spied the other pirate, rearing his leg back again to hurt Viktor more.

He smiled at me and dropped his hand. The other pirates backed away from Viktor. They didn't look happy about it, but at least they weren't hurting him anymore.

I exhaled in relief and forced myself to look up at the pirate through watery eyes.

"We came to Treasure Island in search of the treasure," I told him honestly.

"And how did a pretty young lass like you get on the ship?"

"My husband is the Captain. We're newly married and couldn't stand the thought of being away from each other for so long."

The pirate quirked a curious brow at me. "Newly married?"

"We hadn't been married for ten days when we set sail."

“And where have you come from?” He asked, narrowing his eyes at me in warning.  
“And don’t even think about lying to me. I’ll know if you are.”

I pursed my lips and forced myself to say, “Jorvik.”

“I’ve never heard of the place,” the pirate hummed, looking as if he didn’t believe me.

“It’s further down south,” I told him. “We’ve been travelling for over a month now, but we’ve also made several stops along the way.”

“Stops? What for?”

“To rest and for food.” When he gave me a pointed look and raised his hand in warning, I sighed, “Sometimes, we also stopped for business.”

“What kind of business?”

“Trade. Honey and spears, mostly.”

“Honey?” His eyebrows shot up in surprise. “For food?”

“And medicine.”

“Interesting,” he hummed and rubbed a hand under his chin. “And what’s your name, lass?”

“Astrid.” At this point, I was beyond ashamed of myself for being so forthcoming with all this information, even though the pirates hadn’t given me a choice.

“I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going on here, Astrid of Jorvik,” the pirate

grinned at me. “I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now, but we’re pirates. My name is Frode, and I am the Captain. That means that I’m in charge and that Treasure Island is ours. It will be good for you to remember that.”

I gulped and nodded, biting my tongue to stop myself from saying something I would regret.

“One of my men is an early riser. Imagine his surprise when he woke up this morning to find your ship docked at our shores,” Frode chuckled as if there was anything remotely funny about this situation. “You were all fast asleep, so it was pretty easy to restrain you. You were found on the top deck with that brute of a man. He had his arms wrapped around you.” He gestured over his shoulder at Viktor, who had a trickle of blood rolling down his forehead. That wasn’t enough to stop him from continuing to struggle against his restraints. “I assume he’s your husband?” I nodded. “The man my men were kicking just now?” I nodded again. “So, that would make him the Captain...” Frode mused aloud, a thoughtful look on his face.

“What are you doing here on the King’s Treasure Island?” I dared to ask, wanting to get the attention off Viktor. I couldn’t handle seeing him hurt anymore.

“It’s not the King’s island anymore,” Frode snorted, offended by my words. “That old fart has been dead for a long time now, and he was stupid enough to leave this island without anyone guarding his treasures. Well, his loss is our gain.”

“We don’t mean any trouble. When we docked here last night, we thought the island was deserted,” I said, urging him to believe me.

“That’s because we keep our ship hidden at the back among the trees for moments exactly like this one,” Frode grinned. “I have to say, you and your crew are a whole lot more ballsy than some others we’ve come by. No one has dared to dock on our island before. We usually sail out to introduce ourselves whenever we see passersby,

but you lot decided to turn up in the middle of the night.” It almost sounded like a compliment. “When we first discovered your ship this morning, we were going to wait until you woke up to make you walk the plank together. But then we had a change of heart...”

“What kind of change of heart?” I forced myself to ask despite the dread that settled in the pit of my stomach.

“If you help us with something, we’ll let you all go.”

His words caused hope to flicker inside me, but I didn’t want to get ahead of myself. Not when a literal pirate was leering in my face, pretending to be kind.

“Alive?” I asked, feeling like all of this was too good to be true.

“Alive.” Frode nodded in confirmation. We’ve been here for months but haven’t had much luck finding the treasure. We’ve found some small bits here and there, but we all know there’s so much more that we’re missing. That’s where you and your men come in.”

“What do you need us to do?” I asked, even though I already had a pretty good idea of the answer.

“You have the rest of the day to find all the treasure. Or at least enough for us to be happy to let you all go. Alive,” he grinned wickedly.

“What if we don’t find enough?” I had a pretty idea of this answer as well.

“We’re going to kill you all,” he smiled brightly at me as if he hadn’t just threatened all of our lives.

“And how do we determine enough treasure?”

Frode’s lips twitched higher at the corners. “Me and my men will be the judge of that.”

When he held his hand up in the air this time, all seven of his men rose to their feet and headed over to the crew. I watched as the pirates untied their hands and legs. Everyone was on edge, especially when the pirates pulled out knives and waved them in the air, threatening to make good use of them if anyone tried anything funny.

I watched with wide, fearful eyes as the pirates ushered the crew down the shore toward the line of trees in the distance. Two pirates remained behind and walked over to stand by Frode.

“Where are you taking them?” I asked in a shaky voice, craning my neck to hold onto Viktor’s eyes as he was forced into the forest with the sharp tip of a sword digging into his back.

“You’re collateral,” Frode laughed and grabbed my hand, yanking me onto my feet along with him. “If any of your crew members or the Captain, your precious husband , try anything funny, I’ll kill you in front of them all. That should be enough motivation to keep them in line.”

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Frode and the two other pirates who hung about whipped out some cards and gold to gamble with. The other five were tasked with keeping the crew in line while they were forced to dig up the treasure.

That meant there were five pirates for thirteen men and three for little old me. I wasn't complaining, but the numbers didn't make sense. However, I hoped it gave Viktor and the crew enough space and time to devise a plan to save us from this mess. It couldn't take much for the thirteen of them to overpower the five pirates tasked with guarding them and then the three watching me.

"What's wrong, Astrid of Jorvik? Cat got your tongue?" Frode laughed, taking a swig of our ale.

I pursed my lips and resisted every urge to roll my eyes. I had a feeling that wouldn't go down so well. Instead, I kept my eyes on the small mountain of gold coins up for grabs as they played cards.

"Don't ignore me when I'm talking to you," Frode huffed, his lips tugging down in an offended frown. He seemed bothered by my not answering him immediately, but I knew it was really because he was losing so much money. But, of course, why take his frustrations out on his men when he could take it out on me?

"I'm not ignoring you," I murmured, my eyes still trained on the game. I had never been interested in cards when my family and friends played the game, but I didn't have anything better to do right now.



One of the other pirates snorted and said, “It sure seems like you are.”

Frode ignored him and put down his remaining cards. The game and his fellow pirates were forgotten as he turned his body to face me, giving me his sole attention.

“You’re not ignoring me, are you, Astrid of Jorvik?”

“No, of course not,” I insisted and held his gaze, refusing to be the first one to look away. He would take too much pleasure in that.

“There’s something I haven’t told you yet. Something else we found on the ship.”

“What’s that?”

“A cat.”

My eyes widened at the mention of Kis, giving myself away. I had hoped that Kis would have remained hidden, taking care of herself like she always did, but she wouldn’t be safe if the pirates had gotten their hands on her.

“Don’t worry,” Frode chuckled. “We have no interest in your little furry friend.”

“What did you do with her?” I asked, trying to sound disinterested even though my heart was pounding rapidly at the thought of these horrid pirates hurting Kis.

Oh Lord, please let her be okay!

I would never forgive myself if these pirates did anything to hurt Kis!

“I already told you we have no interest in your furry friend. We locked her up in the bottom deck of your ship. She can die down there for all I care.”

Internally, I sighed in relief but outwardly refused to show any emotion because I didn't want to give them any ideas of using Kis against me. Unlike Frode, I cared about Kis. I had left Jorvik with Kis and refused to return without her.

When I didn't say anything, Frode tried another angle.

"You mentioned earlier that you were married to the Captain?" He asked, his intense gaze set on me.

I nodded, wary. "Yes."

"What was his name again?"

"I don't believe I mentioned his name to you before."

"What was his name?" Frode repeated. His smile dimmed just slightly, and I gulped, thinking it better to be truthful than risk getting myself in more trouble.

There was something sinister about Frode underneath the surface that I suspected he usually hid, but he was giving me a glimpse of now.

"Viktor."

"Viktor and Astrid of Jorvik," Frode chuckled. "Those names sound good together."

"That's why I married him," I replied dryly.

"You're a funny one, Astrid of Jorvik," he chuckled again, but I didn't find any humour in his words. The other two pirates did.

I pursed my lips and bit my tongue. It wouldn't do any of us any good if I were to

insult Frode's intelligence. Or lack thereof.

"How long have you two been married?"

This was starting to feel like an interrogation.

"About ten days before we set sail," I repeated.

"And how long ago was that?"

"About a month," I feigned nonchalance.

"So, you've been married a month and ten days?"

I shrugged. "Give or take a few days."

"And do you love your husband? Do you love Viktor of Jorvik?" Frode asked, holding my gaze as he awaited my answer. I didn't know why this pirate was asking me such weird questions, but I didn't like it.

"What kind of question is that?" I snorted. "Of course, I love my husband! I wouldn't have married him if I didn't love him."

Technically, I wasn't lying. I may not have been in love with Viktor that day we married, but his love for me was enough to convince me that I would be happy and well-loved by him. Falling in love with Viktor felt inevitable, and he soon proved me right.

It may have taken me longer to fall in love with Viktor than it did for him to fall in love with me, but that didn't diminish my love for my husband.

“Well, that’s too bad,” Frode chuckled lowly.

My lips curled down as I watched him. I didn’t like his sleazy grin one bit. It sent disgusted shivers down my spine.

“Is that how you look at your husband when he approaches you at night?”

My jaw dropped in shock at his sudden and utterly inappropriate question. How dare he have the nerve to ask me something so personal? And how dare his men laugh at me as if there was something remotely funny about this situation! There certainly wasn’t, but it appeared that I was the only one that felt that way.

“How dare you ask such a thing,” I scoffed, resisting the urge to spit at him since that was the only thing I could do in my restrained state.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m not going to.”

“We’ll see about that,” Frode grinned. Before I could call him out for being such a sleazy human being, he stood up and reached for me. He grabbed me from under my armpits and forced me onto my feet.

My eyes widened in panic as I stared up at him, but with my hands and feet still tied together, there wasn’t much that I could do.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked as Frode threw me over his shoulder once again. If I hadn’t been so worried about why we were heading away from the beach and his two fellow pirates, I would have complained about the whiplash, he would undoubtedly give me with the way he kept throwing me around.

“Since you refused to answer my question, I’ll have to find out the answer myself.”

“There’s no point,” I tried to deny, hoping he would stop whatever sinister thing he planned to do. “My husband would sooner rather die than answer that question.”

“Oh, you misunderstand me, Astrid of Jorvik,” Frode chuckled, and this time, his hand landed right on my ass as he smacked it. My face reddened, but not with embarrassment. “I don’t need to ask your husband. I’m going to find out for myself.”

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Frode didn't need to clarify further for me to figure out what he meant or what his intentions were. His hand on my ass and the sleazy, proud grin, which I just knew was on his face, was answer enough.

I had no idea why he felt the need to climb onto his pirate ship and head down to the second floor to one of the bedrooms. Perhaps it was because it was away from the rest of the island, or maybe he was too lazy to head to his hut. I wasn't even sure if this abandoned island had huts.

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded to know in a desperate scream, repeatedly raising my restrained hands and bringing them down on his back. I tried to get him to stop moving, but Frode merely chuckled and continued down the steps to the second floor.

"I'm going to show you a good time, unlike that good-for-nothing husband of yours," Frode laughed. When he gave one cheek a firm squeeze, I screamed as loud as I could and continued to thrash my hands against his back, but it was no use. I screamed as loud as I could until my throat ached from overuse, but no one came running to my rescue. I wasn't even sure if anyone could hear me, which made the dread filling my stomach even worse.

Oh, I wished I could be sick down his back right now. Frode would no doubt be too soiled and in a terrible mood to do anything wicked to me.

Frode pushed open the door at the end of the hallway, and I assumed this was his

bedroom.

“There’s no point screaming, lass,” he chuckled, kicking the door shut behind him. He briefly paused to lock the door, and I feared the sound of the lock sliding into place would haunt me for years to come. “No one is going to come and help you, and your husband, Viktor of Jorvik, won’t be able to hear you from wherever he is. It’s a pity because I’m sure he’d love to hear the screams of his wife as another man pleasures her.”

Frode roughly threw me down on the bed. There was a dark, depraved look in his eyes as he licked his lips and dropped a hand to the tie on his breeches.

With my hands and feet tied, I could do nothing but scramble back on the bed, desperately trying to put some distance between us.

“Please. You don’t have to do this,” I pleaded, hating how pathetic I sounded.

“You’re right. I don’t have to, but I want to, and I’m going to,” he chuckled lowly. “Don’t worry, Astrid of Jorvik. I’ll make sure you enjoy it.”

I shuffled back until my back pressed against the wall of empty bottles, and there was nowhere else to go. Frode smirked at this, at my vulnerability, and at this moment, I wished I could disappear—anything to escape Frode and his despicable intentions.

I kept my eyes trained on him, fearful of sudden actions, and watched as his fingers played with the strings around his waist, slowly undoing them.

“I don’t want you to do anything to me,” I protested in a small voice, hating how vulnerable I sounded.

“That’s not what your eyes are telling me.” He dropped his breeches and ripped his

tunic over his head, leaving him standing bare butt naked in front of me.

If I had any doubts about what Frode would do to me before, they were all cleared up now. It was apparent what he planned to do to me, whether I liked it or not.

Call me weak, scared, a coward, but I knew I couldn't live with this sort of violation.

I saw it happen once in Jorvik when I was much younger. Some sailors had stopped by on their travels for a night of rest and some food. Barden had been kind enough to accommodate them, but two of them snuck off their ship during the night and picked a random hut.

The mother and father were tied up and blindfolded while the two men did despicable things to their daughter and only child. She had just turned eighteen.

In the morning, the men were gone, never to be seen again, and by the following evening, the girl they had violated was no more as well.

This was the first time I had thought back to that poor woman since her funeral, and I suddenly felt devastation like I had never felt before. I was far too young then to understand the gravity of the situation or why she had made that choice, but right now, moments away from having the same thing that had been done to her done to me, I didn't see any fault in her decision. The pain was hers to live with alone and hers to manage however she saw fit. And she chose not to.

"You don't have to do this, Frode," I begged, furiously fighting with the ropes tying my hands together. It was no use. They were too tight.

Frode moved to stand in front of me and licked his lips; his eyes locked on me and the way I struggled on his bed.



“Don’t act like you weren’t begging for it earlier.”

I didn’t dare look up. Not when I knew he was completely naked, and his cock would be right in my face if I did.

“Why me?”

Frode shrugged. “I don’t see any other females on the ship, and I can’t remember the last time I’ve laid with a woman.”

“Please,” I begged, even though I knew it was useless. Frode was a pirate, and pirates weren’t known for their mercy. He would do to me what he wanted, and I could either submit to it in hopes that he wouldn’t hurt me or fight back.

“That’s right, Astrid of Jorvik. I love it when females beg for me.”

It took everything I had not to be sick in my mouth.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make it good for you.”

I cleared my throat and looked away from him. “Can I have some time before we...”

“What do you need time for?” He asked.

“Prepare myself,” I whispered, still refusing to look at him. I need time to get used to the idea before we proceed.”

Frode watched me through narrowed eyes, not looking convinced. “How much time do you need?”

“I don’t know.” I bowed my head and sniffled. The tears were real, but I was milking

them, hoping he would feel bad for me and back off. “Talk to me, Frode.”

His dark eyebrows knitted together, and he asked gruffly, “About what?”

“Anything. I need a distraction to clear my head.” I buried my face in my hands as best as I could with my wrists still tied. “Tell me about yourself. How did you end up as a pirate?”

The room went silent. I thought maybe I had angered Frode with the question when he was naked and moments away from flipping me over, pushing up my skirt and mounting me against my will, but when I looked up, he had a peculiar, somewhat distant look about him.

“Frode?”

“No one has ever asked me that before,” he murmured.

“Someone has now.”

“I don’t have a grand origin story like some other people,” he started with a chuckle, but I could tell it was to mask his nerves. It appeared that he hadn’t lied when he said no one had ever asked him this. “My father was a pirate. I was born on the water. This life is all I’ve ever known.”

“That’s it?”

He nodded. “That’s it.”

“Unless your mother was also a pirate, there has to be more to the story.”

“Of course, my mother wasn’t a pirate,” he scoffed. “She was a lowly wench. A

whore that my father accidentally got pregnant.”

“What happened to her?” I asked, sensing there was more to the story.

He looked away from me. “She was made to walk moments after she gave birth to me.”

Frode was right. He didn’t have a grand origin story. Instead, it was pretty sad, but I refused to feel sorry for a pirate. Not when he and his men held my husband and crewmates captive, slaving away for them until we were eventually killed—yes, it was pessimistic, but I didn’t believe the word of a pirate. Whether Viktor and the crew found the gold or not, I was certain that Frode and the other pirates planned to kill us all. And then there was the simple fact that he was moments away from violating me in the worst possible way.

“You need to untie me, Frode,” I prompted him after a few moments of silence.

He snapped out of the sad daze he was lost in and quirked an eyebrow. “Why would I do that?”

“How are we supposed to have sex with me tied up like this?” The words made me want to gag, but I reigned in the disgust.

“I don’t need to untie you for us to have fun. I can roll you onto your stomach.” The wicked glint in his eyes made me shudder. When Viktor looked at me like that, I ate it up and was putty in his hands, but Frode made me want to scrub my skin raw until I could no longer feel his nasty gaze on me.

I forced a pout, feigning flirty interest. “But that’s no fun.”

“No?”

“No.” I shook my head and smirked. “I’m normally really into sex, but I can’t do that while tied up.”

“Into it?” He hummed lowly, licking his lips. “How so?”

“Hair pulling, back scratching, legs around the hips, over the shoulders...just normal stuff like that. Being tied up doesn’t do it for me.” I shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

I smirked when he gulped, and from the corner of my eyes, I noticed him drop his hand to his cock, fisting it. I forced myself to keep my eyes locked on his, not wanting to see more than I should as I held my hands out.

In my sweetest voice, I asked, “Untie me?”

To my relief, Frode gulped and nodded. He gave his cock another pump before he reached under a pile of dirty clothes near the top corner of the bed. He fumbled around for a bit before he pulled out a sharp dagger, the tip gleaming in the daylight.

“I’m going to do more than just cut the ties if you try anything funny, Astrid of Jorvik,” he warned in a low, threatening voice.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I quickly said, furiously shaking my head, willing for him to believe me. If he didn’t, I didn’t know what I would do.

I held my breath as Frode’s gaze lingered on me briefly before he dropped to his knees. He cut the ties around my wrists before instructing me to shift over so he could do the same to the ties around my ankles.

Once he was done, he carelessly threw the dagger to the side and circled his fingers around my upper arm. His lips were puckered, and he pulled me close, his face slowly descending on mine.

Frode wanted a kiss, so that's exactly what I would give him.

Except, instead of kissing my mouth, he kissed the butt of one of his empty bottles.

Not only was Frode wicked for intending to force a woman into bed with him, but he was also very messy. He probably never cleaned his room. The wall I had been previously pressed up against was covered with empty bottles, and all I had to do was reach behind me to grab one.

Upon impact with his face, the bottle shattered in my hands. Instead of jumping back to escape the millions of glass shards that covered my lap, his naked body and the space between us, I plunged the sharp, broken bottom of the bottle into his jugular.

Blood oozed from the wound, and his eyes rolled to the back of his head—definitely not in the way he planned—as he fell forward on top of me. Not the least bit concerned about the life that was quickly draining out of him due to all the blood loss, I stepped back and allowed him to drop to the floor at my feet.

Frode opened his mouth to scream—or say his last words, I wasn't sure—but only a strangled gasp came out. And just like when I screamed for help, no one was around to hear it.

Frode's pathetic gasps and pleas for help fizzled out into chesty coughs and then nothing.

Silence.

Since my hands were already stained with blood and no amount of washing them would ever get it out, I pressed hard on the neck of the bottle to lodge it deeper in his jugular, forcing out more blood.

Frode was dead, and I had killed him. He had asked for it when he decided to drag me here to violate me.

Despite the feeling of numbness that washed over me, I knew that I couldn't stay at the scene of the crime for long.

The two pirates we left behind would get suspicious if Frode didn't return soon. With his excitement, he wouldn't have lasted more than a few minutes.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Before I headed up, I headed down.

I ransacked the bottom deck as best as possible, hoping to find something I could use against the two other pirates. A sword, perhaps. Or, at the very least, a spear. There was that dagger Frode kept hidden under a dirty pile of clothes, but it didn't look like it could inflict as much damage as I wanted.

Something longer and sharper would do the job well, but there appeared to be nothing of the sort down here. The barrels I had spied earlier were filled with food and treasure but no weapons.

It appeared that Frode's dagger and the element of surprise would be my only weapons.

I thought I would be sick when I returned to Frode's room. I had to pinch my nose to escape the metallic smell of blood. The only good thing about it was that the strong smell of blood reminded me that Frode was dead.

Pushing through my fear about being in a room with a dead body, I knelt on the ground beside him to place my ear to his chest, listening for his heartbeat. I stayed there like that for several moments, and when I couldn't hear a thing, I exhaled in relief and reached for the blanket from the bed to pull it over him. He didn't deserve such mercy, even in death, for how he and his men captured us and what he had tried to do to me. Regardless, I couldn't stand to look at his cold, lifeless body for a moment longer.

I never thought I'd be the person to rejoice over someone's death, especially not when it was at my own hands, but a lot of things had changed since The Serpent sailed away from Jorvik many, many weeks ago. And one of those changes was me .

Reaching over Frode's still, lifeless body, I pulled a face and stuck my hand under the pile of dirty clothes. After some rifling, my fingers curled around the cold handle of the dagger he used earlier to cut my ties.

I moved to the other side of the room and pressed myself against the wall, leaving it slightly ajar. I knew the chances of the two pirates hearing me all the way from the beach were slim, but I had to try something.

Sending off a silent prayer in my mind, I opened my mouth and screamed as loud as my lungs would allow me.

"No, please!" I screamed as loud as I possibly could, pushing past the way my throat burned from the strain. "Please! Someone help me! No! Please don't do this to me! Please!"

I screamed as loud as I could for as long as I could. When it didn't work immediately, I pushed past my dry throat and screamed some more. I knew the plan worked when I felt the soft quiver of the top deck above my head—somebody had heard my screams and ran onto the ship.

As soon as I realised my plan was working, I changed things. As the footsteps approached, my screams grew quieter and became moans.

I could hear a single pair of footsteps get closer, and when I heard them on the last step before coming down the hallway of the second deck, I clutched the dagger tighter between my fingers.



When I moaned again, calling out, “Oh, yes! Yes! Just like that!” I heard a single chuckle, confirming that only one pirate had ventured onto the ship to check on Frode and me. It was better this way because I couldn’t take on both pirates simultaneously, but it also meant I would need to devise another plan to lure the remaining pirate onto the ship. But one problem at a time.

Still moaning and whimpering quietly, I clutched the handle of the dagger tighter in my hands. I could barely hear over the sound of my heart thumping loudly in my chest, so I had to strain my ears to hear the pirate knock on the door. Of course, the only response was another moan. He probably thought the only thing happening behind the door was sex, but boy, was he in for a surprise.

I knew these despicable men wouldn’t be able to resist taking a peek, and I was only proved right when he pushed the door open to enter the room. He didn’t even have the chance to glance around and figure out Frode was dead on the floor before I jumped at and aimed for the jugular, just as I had done for his precious Captain.

This pirate was easier to kill than Frode. I had the element of surprise on my side, and he didn’t even have the chance to turn his head and see me before I slashed his neck with the sharp end of the dagger, going as deep as I could to inflict as much damage as I could.

The man’s lifeless body dropped like a heavy sack of potatoes, the light gone from his eyes before he even hit the ground.

There were two people’s blood on my hands now, and at the very least, I looked to add one more person to the list.

I didn’t like it, not one bit, but I had no choice.

These pirates gave me no choice.

This wouldn't be over until the third and final pirate was granted the same fate as the other two. Then, I needed to find a way to help Viktor and the crew overpower the remaining pirates escorting them.

With that in mind, I slipped the dagger into the neck of my dress, between my breasts, where it would be hidden from him and anyone else. I flinched when the blade nicked the side of my breast, drawing out a small trickle of blood, but thankfully, my dress was dark, so it didn't give me away.

And that's when the idea sprang to mind.

It was a terrible, disgusting idea which nearly made me sick, but I pushed myself forward. I fisted the right sleeve of my dress and yanked hard, ripping it halfway and leaving the material to dangle. I did the same to the material around my waist, tugging hard until it tore at the seams and the white of my underskirt showed from underneath it. I ruffled my skirt all over, making it creased and in all sorts of disarray. To make things even more believable, I poked myself in the eyes until they watered, making it look like I had been crying for ages.

Genuinely crying now, and not just because I had poked my eyes repeatedly, I staggered up to the top deck and toward the plank.

The first thing the pirate did was laugh at the state of me. That made me feel so much better about what I planned to do to him.

"What are you doing out of the bedrooms?" He laughed, walking over to the plank.

"Frode," I started, but my voice broke off with a genuine sob.

"Frode sure did a number on you, didn't he?" He laughed and made his way onto the ship to join me. "I'm surprised he let you out of the bedroom this soon after. A

beautiful thing like you, I certainly wouldn't let you up after only one round."

It took everything I possessed to keep the anger at bay.

The pirate stopped once he was standing in front of me. "Where's Sven?" he asked, his lips turned up at the corners in a large, sleazy grin that sent fearful, disgusting shivers down my spine. It was the same look Frode gave me before he closed the door.

Sven must be the name of the second pirate I killed.

"In the bedroom," I sniffled and dropped my gaze, unable to look him in the eye for several reasons. "With Frode."

He chuckled at my answer. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time Frode has shared his women with us." I wanted to scoff at the notion that I was now Frode's woman, but it wasn't worth it. "Why are you here?"

"Frode said to get you," I whispered, tears still streaming down my face.

"Well, I'm not going to say no to that," the pirate laughed and threw his arm over my shoulder. He guided us across the deck and down the stairs to the second floor, the both of us taking each step simultaneously. "What do you say that we stop by my room before we join Frode and Sven?" He chuckled, sliding his fingers down the slope of my neck. I wanted to gag at his touch but forced it down. I couldn't be sick and ruin it all now. Not when there was so much at stake.

"Won't they mind?" I asked, trying not to cringe back at his touch.

"He has Sven there to keep him company," he laughed. "And as long as we don't take too long, they won't even notice. It can be our little secret."

I nodded, but we both knew my opinion didn't matter. This man planned to do to me whatever he wanted, and he thought I could do nothing about it.

This wasn't exactly what I had planned. Admittedly, this was better than what I had planned: killing him as soon as he saw the other two bodies.

I tried to act normal as we walked down the hallway. My breath hitched in my throat as we stopped outside the room opposite Frode's bedroom. Thankfully, I moved Sven's body out of the way before closing the door. However, my paranoia thought of all the clues that could have remained. Like the possible blood spots, maybe a bloody footprint or a fingerprint—anything that would give me away if the pirate glanced over his shoulder toward Frode's room.

His tunic was off as soon as he entered the bedroom, not even waiting to close the door behind us.

“Take your dress off,” he instructed me, but I refused to listen.

I leapt forward and plunged the blade I had been hiding in my dress the whole time into the middle of his upper back, between his shoulder blades.

Unfortunately, it appeared that stabbing someone in the back didn't have the same effect as stabbing them in the neck. When I realised my mistake, the pirate turned around with the dagger sticking out between his shoulder blades and lunged at me.

“I should have known!” The pirate growled as he knocked me to the ground, immediately clasping his hands around my wrists and forcing my arms above my head. His legs were on either side of me, straddling me. When he leaned forward to press his forehead against mine, forcing all of his weight on me, I screamed.

I screamed and screamed, writhing and struggling underneath him, desperate to get

him off me, but it was no use. He was too strong and too heavy for me.

The most damage I seemed to be doing was to his eardrums with all my screaming, and even though my voice had gone hoarse and ached painfully, I continued screaming.

My voice was the only weapon I had left, and it seemed to really bother him, so much so that he slammed the palm of his hand against my mouth. I was quick enough to close it, so while it hurt immensely, making my mouth throb, my teeth were safe.

Choking on a broken tooth while this pirate had his wicked way with me was not the last moment I wanted to remember before he killed me. If I had my way, I was going to die in bed with Viktor by my side, the both of us old and grey, taking my last breath in his arms. Hopefully, I would go before him because I couldn't fathom life without him. Not even a few minutes.

"Soon, you'll be screaming in pleasure," the pirate spat at me, gripping the bottom of my dress and pulling it up. He struggled to push it up past my hips with the way he straddled me. "Soon you'll be—" His hand stilled, and his words were cut off before he was thrown off me.

I gasped and sat up, watching with wide eyes as the pirate was slammed against the wall, his head knocked against it several times until he was knocked out.

Viktor let go of him, and the body dropped to the floor, but he wasn't done. He pulled the dagger out of his back and turned him over onto his front before slamming the blade into his chest.

The body spasmed as blood splattered Viktor, but that was the least of either of our worries right now.

“Astrid,” Viktor whispered, and before he could say anything else, I threw myself into his arms.

Viktor lifted me into the air and forced my legs to wrap around his waist so the pool of blood he was standing in wouldn’t taint my feet.

“Viktor,” I whimpered into the crook of his neck, finding myself at a loss for words.

It felt like I couldn’t breathe because of how much I loved this man.

“Everything will be okay now, Astrid,” he whispered, rubbing a soothing hand down my back as he carried me out of the room. “I’ve got you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I’ve done terrible things,” I cried into his shoulder, unable to look him in the eye.

“I’m sorry, my siren. I’m so sorry,” Viktor apologised profusely as he held me tighter. “None of this is your fault. Please don’t blame yourself. I’m so sorry you had to go through all this alone. I should have been there for you.”

“You need to see what I’ve done,” I forced the words out of my mouth despite the horrid, bitter taste they left behind.

If Viktor started looking at me differently for what I had done, I don’t know what I would do. But I needed him to understand what I had done. To see the extent of it.

“Whatever is behind that door, it doesn’t change anything.” He brushed his lips against my forehead. “I love you, and I will never stop loving you. Nothing will ever change that.”

I gulped and nodded but struggled to believe him.

How could I when I had done some horrible things? Even if all of these men deserved this.

When Viktor pushed open the door and spied the first body by the door and the foot of the second body peeking out from the blanket that I had carelessly thrown over him so I wouldn't have to look at him anymore, he didn't judge me. He didn't yell at me. He didn't look disgusted or ask what I had done. He didn't say he didn't love me any more or couldn't look at me the same. He just held me tighter and peppered kisses all over my face.

When the first tear rolled down his face and onto mine, I didn't know where his tears began and where mine ended as they blended into one and dropped into the pool of blood that we were standing in.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Viktor didn't let me down on my feet until we were back on the sandy shore of the beach where I had seen him last, but even then, he didn't let me out of his arms. They were wrapped tightly around me as he held me, and I welcomed his touch. It felt like Heaven compared to the three different pairs of hands on me before—all of whom were now dead.

Viktor's touch was the only one I ever wanted, and it served those men right for what they tried to do to me.

Regardless, I wondered if I would ever forget the faces of the three men whom I had killed. I guess two, since technically, Viktor had been the one to intervene and murder the last one, but that didn't help the guilty thoughts racing through my mind right now.

"I know what you're thinking, my siren," Viktor whispered, squeezing me tighter. "It's not your fault. None of this is your fault, so please, stop blaming yourself."

"It's not your fault either, Viktor," I denied with a sniffle, lifting my head from his chest to look at him. I clasped my hands on either side of his face and brought it down until his forehead rested against mine, forcing him to look at me. "I can't believe what I've done, but I had to do it to survive. It'll take me a while to process it all, but it's not either of our fault, okay?"

"Okay," he whispered and nodded, laughing softly when his nose bumped against mine. "We'll talk about this later, but right now, I need to get back to the others



before the pirates realise I'm missing."

"Get back? Where?" I guess I was still shaken up by everything because I sounded panicked. Fearing that he would disappear, I clung desperately to my husband.

"I snuck away to look for you. I needed to make sure you were okay," he murmured. "If I'm gone too long, the other pirates will notice. I prefer to avoid that and keep the element of surprise."

"We need to free everyone."

Viktor nodded in agreement. "They've got us digging all over the place. We've found two spots where some gold has been buried, but it's not much. The pirates are adamant about much more, but I'm not sure."

"Even if you find all the King's treasure, they're not going to let us go," I told him. "They're going to be even more determined to kill us when they realise that we've killed three of their own."

"I know," he sighed and squeezed me tighter. By this point, he was squeezing me a little hard, but I couldn't bring myself to complain. Not when I needed the comfort just as much as he did. "We need to come up with a plan. There are fourteen of us, and only five of them left. I know they've taken all our weapons and supplies, but if we can get our hands on something, we can try to overthrow them and set ourselves free."

"There might be weapons on their ship," I murmured, remembering Frode's dagger I had used to kill him and Sven. "There were no weapons on the bottom deck, only some food, but if Frode had a dagger hidden in his room..."

"There's a possibility that the others might also have weapons hidden in their rooms."

Viktor snapped his fingers as he finished off my sentence.

Our hands tightly clasped together, Viktor and I wasted no time rushing back onto the pirate ship. We started in the first room, and without much effort, we were able to locate two daggers. One was hidden under the bed, and the other among his personal belongings. We found five more in the following five rooms and two more in the room opposite Frode's—the third pirate Viktor had saved me from.

It appeared that even though they were a band of pirates that sailed the Seven Seas together, wreaking havoc wherever they went, they didn't trust each other.

Viktor had been missing for quite some time now. If they hadn't already, one of the pirates would come looking for him soon enough, and that was not a risk we were willing to take. The daggers were sharp but small, so the element of surprise was still the best weapon we had.

Once we were back on the sandy beach, Viktor turned to face me. "You need to stay here and hide, my siren."

"What? No!"

"Hear me out," he said, his lips twitching slightly at the corners in a barely-there smile. "As soon as they see you, they will know something is wrong."

"But—" I tried to protest, but my husband cut me off.

"You've already been through so much, done so much. I can't bear the thought of you having to go through anything else, my siren," he whispered, bowing his head to nuzzle the tip of his nose against mine. If the moment wasn't so dire, I would have melted in his arms and ordered him to take me right then and there. "I'm so sorry that you had to go through that alone. I should have been there to stop it from happening,

to protect you, but I'm so proud of you for being able to protect yourself, my siren. My strong, brave wife." He held me to him, his hands delicately cupping my face and tilting it up so he could pepper kisses all over it. "But you need to let me do this. Let me protect you, my siren. Get onto The Serpent, where I know you'll be safe. Wait for us."

I pursed my lips, though, after a few moments, I couldn't stop them from curling down. "I'm not happy about this, Viktor. I want to come with you. I want to fight by your side."

"I know, but I can't risk putting you in any more danger, my siren," he sighed and brushed his lips against my forehead. "Stay safe for me. I'll be back with everyone before you know it, and then we'll leave this Hell hole."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try and sneak back without them noticing. I'll hand out the daggers to the crew, and we'll strike when they least expect it."

"And if they do notice you sneaking back?"

He shrugged. "We'll make it work, my siren. We outnumber them."

I knew there was nothing I could do to stop him, that this needed to be done, that this was something that he needed to do, so even though I wasn't happy about it, I sighed and gave in.

"Come back to me, pirate," I whispered and rose on my tiptoes for a kiss.

"Always, my siren," he promised.

Viktor slid one of the daggers into my hand and gave me a lingering kiss before he turned around and ran toward the treeline, disappearing behind it.

Soon, we would all be free, but I could only wait for now.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Viktor had promised to be back as soon as possible. While I knew he was probably trying his best to keep his word, it felt like he had been gone forever .

I don't know how much time passed, but I waited until I couldn't wait any longer. With the dagger Viktor had left me snuggled tightly in the palm of my hand, I began trekking up the shore in search of him and our crewmates.

I would be relieved to run into even Crosby right now.

I had nearly made it to the treeline when my ears perked up at the sound of faint laughter, and my eyes widened in fear. It didn't sound like any of our crewmates, and even if it was, I doubted any of them would be laughing so freely like this while held under captivity by murderous pirates.

When the laughter became louder, I took Viktor's advice and hid. I rushed back to the closest ship—the pirate ship—and took shelter on the side hidden from them. The plank to walk up onto the ship was on the other side, so there was no logical reason for them to wander onto this side of the vessel and discover me, but I couldn't help but worry that my hiding spot was flawed. Holding my breath, I willed for my heart to calm down, irrationally afraid they would somehow hear it and discover me.

From the sound of their light-hearted conversation poking fun at us and their laughter, only two pirates had returned to the ship.

They would find the bodies; I did not doubt that. What I did doubt, however, was

whether I could take on both pirates simultaneously. When they were on the ship and the coast was clear, I rushed down the sandy beach until I was safe behind the trees.

I didn't need to glance back to know they had already wandered off the top deck and to the second. Hopefully, I had some time before they came rushing off the ship to warn the others that things had ended badly for the three pirates who had stayed with me.

My grip on the dagger remained firm as I ran through the trees, trying to stay as quiet as possible. Thankfully, it didn't take long for me to come across some familiar faces—Roscoe and Manny. I felt relief like I had never felt before at the sight of them, even if they were sweaty and dirty from the rigorous digging. At least they were given spades and didn't have to dig with their bare hands.

Both their backs were to me as they worked, and one of the pirates was sitting on a rock nearby. He appeared to be busy writing in a journal, not paying much attention to them.

“Manny! Roscoe!” I whispered, hiding behind a bush, but neither turned.

When the whispering didn't work, I shook the bush quietly at first, but when that proved hopeless as well, I shook it harder. Manny glanced over his shoulder at the sound, and I locked eyes with him.

His lips parted in surprise as he glanced at me, and when I gestured toward Roscoe, he reached out and tapped his arm.

“Astrid?” Roscoe whispered, both of them turning to face me. They were blocking the view so the pirate couldn't see my head poking out from the bush, and they continued digging so it wouldn't make him suspicious.

“What are you doing here, Astrid?” Manny whispered.

“The other three pirates are dead,” I told them in a whisper. “Viktor has gone looking for the others.”

“Is he going to kill them?”

I nodded and held out my dagger, gesturing to the pirate behind them. “Here.”

Manny and Roscoe glanced at each other, partaking in a silent conversation with their eyes. Roscoe was the first to break the gaze and reach out to take the dagger from me. I wasn’t surprised. He was the more outgoing and assertive of the two.

If I could, I would have stepped forward to do the job myself and save these two young, innocent teenagers from having to go through the rest of their lives with the blood of a person—albeit a pirate—on their hands, but if I so much as rustled the bush too much, I would be found out, and that would only make things worse for all of us.

Slipping it under the sleeve of his tunic, Roscoe turned around and walked up to the pirate. They were too far away to hear what they were saying, but the pirate closed his journal to speak to Roscoe.

The pirate looked rather angry with something Roscoe had said, and he held out his arm, pointing it at where Manny was standing, indicating for him to get back to work. When Roscoe turned around, I was already wracking my mind to devise another plan, but he caught us all by surprise when he swiftly turned around again and plunged the dagger into the pirate’s chest, right where his heart was.

I watched in horror as he yanked the dagger out of his heart only to plunge it back in, deeper and twisting it. Roscoe stabbed the pirate’s lifeless body over and over again, only stopping once I called out to him. As if he hadn’t realised what he was doing,

Roscoe staggered back to us, a bewildered look on his face as he stared down at his bloody hands.

“He was drawing pictures of us,” Roscoe whispered, avoiding my gaze as he held out his hand to return the dagger to me. I wiped the blood against the bottom of my dress to clean it before handing it back to him. As disturbed as he looked, it was better for us all if Roscoe had the dagger.

“Pictures?” I asked.

Roscoe gulped slowly. “Pictures of how he was going to kill us.”

We were all silent for a long moment, taking in everything that had just happened.

“We need to find the others,” Manny said, handing me the other spade. It wasn’t an ideal weapon, but it would inflict a fair bit of damage if needed.

Roscoe and Manny were separated from the rest of the group early on, so tracking them down took us a while. We picked a random direction and ran but didn’t make it very far before we heard someone call out to us. The unfamiliar voice told us it was a pirate.

We stopped and turned around, and the pirate already had his sword raised. Without sounding unnecessarily negative, I couldn’t help but fear that a shovel wouldn’t stand a chance against his gleaming, sharp sword.

Much to our relief and the pirate’s dismay, we didn’t have to test the theory as before he even made it remotely close to us, his neck was cracked sharply to the side. There was a loud, painful crack that had me wincing, and when his body dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes, Hammond plunged his dagger deep into the pirate’s chest for good measure. Odin, Viktor, Jerrik and Caspian were quick to join



Hammond, and Viktor wasted no time pulling me into his arms, groaning when I accidentally hit him with the shovel.

“Sorry,” I apologised, but he only laughed as he kissed my forehead.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” He asked, his eyebrows knitting together in concern as he looked me up and down for any injuries.

“I’m not hurt,” I quickly denied before he worked himself into a frenzy. “But I can’t say the same thing about that pirate Hammond just annihilated.”

Hammond grinned at my words, but it was a bit tense and tight around the corners, not quite reaching his eyes.

“I thought I told you to wait at the ship?” Viktor groaned, drawing my attention back to him.

“Since when did I listen?” I chuckled, and he playfully narrowed his eyes at me. “I did go to the ship at first, but two pirates went back there, so I snuck away.

“How many more are still alive?” Caspian asked, a fierce look on his face.

“There are three dead on the ship,” Viktor said. “There’s this one that we got here as well.”

“And we got one as well,” Roscoe murmured in a small voice.

“That makes five,” Hammond countered. “There’s three left.”

“Two at the ship,” I repeated. “And possibly one more guarding the others.”

It was apparent that all these pirates needed to die if we wanted to get the entire crew off the island alive. As long as they were still alive, they were a threat to us, and we had already been through so much to get here.

Viktor, Jerrik, and Odin broke off from us to find the last pirate on the island with our remaining crewmates, and I led the rest of us back to the pirate ship.

It was time to end this once and for all.

### CHAPTER FORTY

Heading back to the ship was a waste of time. The two pirates were no longer here. I didn't need to snoop through the second floor to know the two pirates had figured out what had happened on the ship.

The doors to the last two rooms at the end of the corridor were open even though Viktor and I had purposely closed all of them.

They knew the truth, and now they were somewhere on the island, looking for us. I hated to admit it, but whoever found the other first would have the upper hand.

"I should have known," I muttered under my breath as we retreated to the forestry island with no sense of where to go or look.

"There's no way you could have known," Manny tried to assure me. The gesture was sweet, but I wasn't in a very compliant mood right now. Not when all our lives were in danger, and we had just wasted so much time trekking back to the ship not to find the pirates.

It felt like we had been walking forever, looking for the pirates. In reality, it couldn't have even been an hour.

"Do we go back and check if they've returned to the ship?" Caspian groaned, dragging his feet.

I mulled over his question momentarily, but before I could answer, Hammond

dropped to his knees behind a bush and pressed a finger to his lips, silencing us all. My eyebrows furrowed together at first, confused by his strange behaviour, but then my eyes widened, and I dropped to the ground behind him. I frantically but silently gestured for Caspian, Roscoe, and Manny to do the same.

“What are they doing?” I asked, struggling to see over the tall bush we were hiding behind.

“The holes seem far too big to be digging for treasure,” Hammond murmured.

Caspian crouched taller from behind me to get a better look. At the horrified gasp that escaped him, I couldn’t hold back my curiosity any longer. I rose on my knees, and the moment my eyes landed on Garth, Dagfinn, Gustav, Latham and Crosby, all dirty, sweaty, tired and overworked, forced to dig holes so deep I could only assume they were their own graves, I reacted the same way as Caspian.

Three pirates watched our crewmates, meaning Viktor and the others hadn’t yet gotten to the lone pirate. Perhaps making our crewmates dig graves for everyone was revenge for the bloody scenes the two pirates had witnessed on the ship.

How could they be so cruel?

When we heard some rustling over our shoulders, we all glanced back. Viktor, Odin, and Jerrik had found their way to us, looking as horrified as we felt.

“I’ve never seen something like this before.” Viktor crawled over to me and shook his head, looking more disgusted than I’d ever seen him. “Who has a weapon on their person?”

Roscoe and Caspian held up their daggers, and Hammond held up his recently acquired sword. Viktor’s eyes lingered on Manny and Roscoe before flicking over to

me. I knew what he was thinking. It was the same thing I was thinking. Manny and Roscoe were young and had already been exposed to so much. They didn't need to be traumatised anymore. He subtly dismissed Roscoe and instructed him to hand the dagger to Caspian.

Together, Viktor, Hammond and Caspian snuck away to take care of the remaining pirates and free us all.

The first pirate was the easiest to kill. Hammond snuck on him from behind and slashed the sharp edge of the sword against his neck, nearly slicing it all the way through. He died almost silently, coughing and gurgling quietly on the ground as the blood oozed out of him. The second pirate was far louder than the first, and he screamed and yelled loudly long after Caspian stabbed him in the back and chest multiple times.

Both were relatively easy kills, but they set off the third, making him more difficult to deal with than he should have been.

The third pirate saw Viktor coming and leapt at him in desperation. He swiped at Viktor, catching him by surprise, and forced the dagger out of his hand. I screamed in fright and jumped up to my feet, terribly afraid for my husband. The dagger dropped to the ground, too far away for Viktor to grab it and defend himself. When Viktor stumbled back as the pirate brandished his sword and charged toward him, he fell into a grave. I screamed louder and attempted to push through the greenery separating us from the clearing to get to him, but Roscoe and Jerrik held me back.

I knew they meant well, but at that moment, I didn't hate two men more. Perhaps the lone pirate that was still alive, but they came in very close second and third.

Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion.

The pirate leapt forward, and so did Hammond and Caspian, but they were too slow and too far away to get to him in time. I screamed, kicked and fought Roscoe and Jerrik, desperate to stop this man from slicing up my husband, but they were far too strong for me.

The pirate raised his sword high in the air above his head. Viktor threw his arm over his face in a last attempt...and Crosby charged at the pirate from behind, knocking him to the ground. His grip loosened on the sword in the flurry of it all, and it fell into the grave.

The grave that Viktor was in .

I screamed until my throat burned and my chest ached, and then I screamed some more. In shock, Roscoe and Jerrik let go of me, and I pushed through the bush to get to the grave.

Unable to think of anything but Viktor and the sword that had fallen into the grave, possibly slicing him in half, I stopped at the edge and propelled myself forward, peering down.

“Good catch, don’t you think?” Viktor grinned widely as if he wasn’t inches from death merely a moment ago.

The most enormous sigh of relief escaped me when I spied the sword in his hand. He had managed to catch it with his right hand, the sword upside down, and blood trickled down from where it cut into the skin of his fingers and palm, but he was alive .

“That’s not funny,” I sobbed as I dropped myself into the grave, ignoring the scratch on my palm and the way my knees ached from the poor landing.

Viktor threw the sword carelessly to the side a second before I threw myself at him, circling my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, clinging onto him for dear life. He laughed and playfully complained about surviving having a sword thrown at him but dying from my chokehold, but he held me even tighter than I held him.

If Crosby hadn't redeemed himself before, he certainly had now.

### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The graves came in handy. There were five in total, so a few of them had to share, but it wasn't like they could complain.

The shovels they had left us also came in handy as we used them to dig up the rest of the island and collect as much of the King's treasure as possible. Some we sold to Greenland in exchange for a hefty price, but admittedly, we kept most of it—the pieces we deemed to be the most valuable. After going through so much to get our hands on it, it was the least we deserved.

Perhaps I was only saying this because I was traumatised by the horrific ordeal, but the treasure was stunningly beautiful. It even glistened in the darkness of the bottom deck, where we had kept it for the trip back to Jorvik.

I finally started to see the true virtues and rewards of being a sailor, although I couldn't help but favour being a Captain's wife more.

After everything we had been through to get there, Greenland was nothing short of a dream. The trade was completed on the first day, and after hearing the horror stories of our journey there, they gifted us some expensive furs.

Greenland was somewhat of an anticlimactic end to our trip before we returned to Jorvik, but none of us were complaining.

We stayed in Greenland for six days, eating and resting before boarding The Serpent to return home. Treasure Island was deserted, and there were no provisions for



animals to live there, so it was of no interest to us. On our way back, we made sure to avoid both Canne and Mann.

The trip back took four weeks, which felt even longer because we made no stops along the way, not even when we got low on food and supplies. After everything we had been through, we were unwilling to take any more risks.

After months at sea, The Serpent was finally docked at Jorvik again, and I couldn't be more relieved if I tried.

The moment The Serpent docked at the shore and the plank was laid down—albeit two inches short from where it broke off when escaping Canne—I rushed down it before anyone else and all but threw myself and Kis into the awaiting arms of my family.

My mother, father, brother, and sister-in-law squeezed the life out of me, but there wasn't a single complaint on my lips. And soon after, Viktor joined us, too.

When I spotted a baby in Freja's arms, I squealed but quickly quietened down when she began stirring. I couldn't hold back my excitement when I was offered to hold her.

I didn't miss how Viktor melted at the sight of baby Rosa, eager to carry her. When my mother pointed out that Viktor was absolutely smitten with our baby niece, a warm flush spread over my cheeks, and I looked away.

She didn't need to tell me twice. In fact, she didn't even need to tell me the first time.

Viktor and I were separated from our family, or more importantly, we were forced to return baby Rosa to her parents when Barden pulled us to the side.

"I'd like to start by welcoming you both back," Barden smiled brightly at us both, but

it didn't quite reach his eyes. "We can discuss the trip first thing in the morning after you get some food in you and a good night's rest, but I'd like to start by clearing the air between us."

"How so?" Viktor hummed, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

"I wish to apologise for how I treated you before you left for the mission—specifically you, Viktor. After you left, I realised my behaviour was wrong and was driven by my greed for the King's treasure. Being married myself, I should know what it's like, especially since you were so newly married. I should have been more accommodating, and I guess I'm trying to say that I never should have expected things to stay the same after you married. I should have respected you, both of you, and I need to apologise for my behaviour. I'm really sorry, Viktor and Astrid."

Viktor pursed his lips, and I gave his hand an encouraging squeeze.

"And what about when you said you'd replace me?" He asked, and internally, I was dancing in happiness that we were finally confronting Barden for his brash behaviour before we left. Outwardly, I was calm and collected, the perfect Captain's wife.

"I'm sorry about that as well. I could never replace you, Viktor. You know that I was only chatting out of my ass," Barden sighed, looking sorry for himself. "No offence to your father, Astrid—" He glanced at me. "—but you're the best Captain we've ever had, Viktor. I don't know what we'd do without you."

"As long as you promise me that something like this will never happen again, I'll hold no grudges," Viktor countered with an ultimatum of his own.

"Yes! Yes, of course!" Barden nodded his head frantically. "Nothing like this will ever happen again. I give you my word."

“Then all between us is good, Barden,” Viktor grinned and pulled him in for a hug, clapping him sharply on the back. “It’s good to be back.”

“It’s good to have you back. Both of you,” Barden grinned. “I hope you’re not too tired because we’ve started preparations for a grand feast as soon as we saw The Serpent in the distance.”

“We’re all a little tired, but nothing a quick nap won’t fix,” Viktor smiled, a dark promise shining in his eyes when he turned to glance at me.

I was half-relieved, half-expecting Barden’s apology, and it appeared that many other things had also changed in Jorvik while we had been away.

For one, Jerrik’s wife was pregnant, having found out the week after we had left for sea. Chara was now between six and seven months along, and much to my surprise, Crosby ran into her arms as soon as he got off the ship. Odin’s children had found a kitten in the forest while on a walk one morning, and Kis was smitten with him. Laurence dropped to his knees in front of the girl who held his heart, and even Caspian moved to ask for a private moment with one of the teachers from my school. I didn’t even know he had his eyes on someone!

After that rather pleasant conversation with Barden, Viktor and I kept our heads down and skilfully avoided everyone as we rushed back to our hut. It hadn’t been lived in for months, and it was absolutely freezing and lacking life upon entrance, but neither of us could be gladder about being back.

We would be more than happy to indulge everyone in our wild sea stories later, but right now, we needed some time to ourselves. After all, the last time we had been here, we had both been newlyweds, and it took me ages to look him in the eyes after I sucked his cock for the first time.

Privacy was necessary after spending months at sea with the entire crew surrounding us all the time.

As if he could read my mind, Viktor palmed himself over his breeches as he slowly approached me, a dark glimmer in his eyes. “How about we consummate our marriage bed, wife ?”

### EPILOGUE

#### 5 YEARS LATER

After that first rather eventful trip out at sea where everything that could have possibly gone wrong did, in fact, go wrong, I had genuinely taken to life at sea. Since then, I joined the crew on one of their lengthier missions every year and a few shorter, more local ones when I saw fit. Though thankfully, none had been nearly as long as that first one.

Today's mission was shorter, leaving in the morning and returning before it got dark, but I felt too seasick to join them. However, I planned to send someone in my place.

Our very own baby, Haskell. However, he loved to remind us that he wasn't a baby but just as much a man as his father.

A little over four years ago, Viktor and I became parents to a little sailor, and this time next month, we were set to give him a little brother or sister. We were both hoping for a little princess, but we wouldn't mind in the slightest if we gave Haskell a little brother.

"Mama!" Haskell yelled as he came sprinting toward me at full speed like the little ball of trouble that he was. He had Kis in his arms, who looked more seasick now than she did when she was aboard The Serpent. "Mama!" He yelled again.

My lips tugged down at the corners, and I braced my hands on my hips, a mock stern look on my face as I stared at my son.

“Haskell Daewon Thostenson!”

The little boy, who was the spitting image of his father, came to an abrupt stop at the use of his full name and stared up at me with adorably wide eyes. He was in trouble, and he knew it.

“What have I told you about running with Kis in your arms? You know it makes her sick, and then I have to clean up after her,” I lightly chastised him, only half-serious. I know he meant well, but I truly despised cleaning up after Kis.

Haskell let go of Kis to fist his tiny little hands around my waist, an adorable little pout on his face.

“Don’t be mad, Mama. I’m sorry,” he whined, tugging on my skirt.

It was impossible to stay mad at Haskell for long. Not when he looked at me just like his father did when he was in trouble and wanted an easy way out.

“Fine,” I sighed dramatically, reaching down to pick up the little boy. “Mama won’t be mad, but you’ll have to do something to earn my forgiveness.”

“Yes!” Haskell replied enthusiastically. “What do I do, Mama?”

“You’ll have to give Mama a kiss.”

I may have only wanted one kiss, but Haskell didn’t stop there. The both of us were a giggling mess, and with each kiss, my heart swelled to the point where it felt like it would explode in my chest.

And to think, when I married Viktor five years ago, I never knew that I could love someone more than I grew to love him. I didn’t know my heart could fit another person into it, but it had the moment I found out I was pregnant. And then it grew

even bigger when I found out I was pregnant again earlier this year.

Speaking of the devil, a husky chuckle sounded in my ear before a pair of strong, muscular arms wrapped around my waist from behind. His hands immediately smoothed over my large stomach, pressing harder when the baby immediately kicked. The baby had been very active lately, and Viktor loved it. I did, too, but being eight months pregnant and being both bigger and heavier than when I was pregnant with Haskell was starting to take its toll on me.

“I’ll apologise to Kis and clean up the mess if she’s sick.”

I huffed and spared him a disapproving glare over my shoulder as Haskell continued to giggle like the beautiful, bubbly baby that he was.

Viktor and I sure did make a beautiful child. And soon, we would have another one.

“You’ll already be out at sea by then.”

“But I’ll be back tonight. I can clean it up then.”

I quirked an eyebrow at him, knowing that he hadn’t thought this one through. “And what am I supposed to do all day? Just stare at it and wait for you to come back?” My voice dripped with sarcasm.

“I’ll make it up to you later, my siren.” Viktor rested his chin on my shoulder, briefly turning his head to kiss to the side of my neck.

A shiver ran down my spine at the kiss and the double meaning, and his chest rumbled against my back as he laughed.

“I’m going to hold you to that, pirate.”

Viktor couldn't resist teasing me with another kiss before he turned his attention to Haskell, who was entertaining himself with a strand of my hair, twirling it around in his finger. I quickly reached and freed the poor strand because I knew what would soon follow if my son had his way. He had been a hairpuller as a baby, and four years on, nothing had changed.

"What does my favourite boy say about coming out to sea with me? Give Mama some time to relax?"

"Yes!"

"If you take him out on The Serpent with you, I won't be able to relax. I'll be too busy worrying about him all day," I pouted.

"Maybe next time, Haz." Viktor booped Haskell on the nose. "Maybe your baby brother or sister can also join us."

Viktor had made it very clear to Barden that this would be his last mission until after our new baby was born. Last time, Barden kept pushing for Viktor to go out on this mission and that mission, and he barely made it back in time to witness Haskell's birth. And that was mostly because I refused to give birth without him by my side and holding my hand to help me get through it all.

"Mama," Haskell whined and struggled in my arms, wanting to be let down as he spotted a group of children around his age—his little toddler friends—walking past us toward the shore with some of their parents.

Viktor took him from my arms and nuzzled him to his chest before putting him down.

"Papa will come find you to say goodbye soon, Haz."

He kissed our baby's forehead, and we watched as he scurried away, no doubt to get



up to some mischief, just like his father.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay without me today, my siren?” Viktor asked with a sigh.

“I’ll find a way to manage,” I teased and leaned my head back to rest it against his shoulder, basking in the warmth and love only he could provide. “You won’t come back too late, right?”

“We plan to be back for dinner at the very latest,” Viktor promised me with a small, frustrated groan. “I love being out on sea, but I don’t like leaving you when you’re so close to giving birth.”

“Me neither,” I sighed and snuggled further into his arms. “But this will be the last one for a little while, so savour it.”

“Barden is already talking about another one next week, said to last a few weeks. I’ve already said no, but he keeps insisting. The crew can go ahead if they want. There’s no way I’m leaving you again, Astrid.”

“I really hate Barden sometimes,” I grumbled under my breath.

“Me too,” he groaned and nuzzled his face further into the crook of my neck, holding me a little tighter. “I don’t know if I can leave today, Astrid. I don’t want to leave you.”

“What do you mean? You said you’ll be back before dinner.”

“It’s still too long,” he groaned. “I hate not having you near at all times. I hate not being able to go and see you or talk to you whenever I want. I hate being unable to hold you in my arms like this whenever I want. It was bad enough having to leave you those few times after we got back from our first mission together, and it was still you and me. It’s so much harder now with you and Haskell and, soon, with our

second child as well.”

His hands dropped my waist to rest on my protruding belly, his touch so tender and soft.

“I love you, Astrid, and when we’re not together, all I do is think about you. I keep worrying that you’ll go into labour and I won’t be there by your side. That I won’t be here when our child is born.”

“I’ll keep my legs shut until you come back.”

Viktor threw his head back and laughed, the melodious sound warming my heart in a way that only this man could.

“I know this is hard, Viktor,” I whispered, turning around to face him. I cupped his face to bring it down to mine, resting his forehead against mine. It was challenging to hug him this way with my large, pregnant stomach, but we made the best of it. “But I’m still a month away from giving birth, and you’ll be back this evening anyway. I know you worry about me and Haskell, but we’ll be perfectly fine until you return. When you do, you won’t have to leave for another mission until after the baby is born, and we can go back to joining you on The Serpent. Barden can whine, complain, and stomp his feet as much as he wants, but there’s no way I’m letting you go for too long before I give birth. It’s far too risky, and I refuse to give birth without you by my side.”

Viktor squeezed his eyes shut and leaned forward just slightly to caress the tip of my nose with his.

“You always know what to say, my siren.” He pressed a soft, chaste kiss to my mouth. “I love you so much. I don’t know what I would do without you. You’re the light in my life, guiding me out of the darkness. You’re the best wife I could have asked for and an even better mother to our children. I can’t wait to spend the rest of

my life with you by my side, on land and at sea.”

Call it pregnancy hormones, but his heartfelt words brought tears to my eyes, and I angled my face to press my lips harder against his.

“I love you too, Viktor,” I whispered against his mouth, sucking gently on his bottom lip while my arms were wrapped tightly around his neck, keeping him as close to me as possible. “Hurry up and get back to me because I can’t stay for long without my husband.”