



Final Flames (Viking Ancestors: Age of Embers Prelude)

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Category: Historical

Description: Hearts sizzle when a fiery demi-goddess seer and a Viking dragon shifter come together.

Rune has long sensed the impending change in her Scandinavian homeland but didn't foresee the role her closest friend, a dragon she secretly loves, will play in this transformation. The possibility of losing him forever looms, casting a shadow of uncertainty over her future.

Jorn has loved Rune since the beginning, but with growing unrest between not just dragon kingdoms but seers, confessing how he feels might risk her safety. Things grow even more precarious when they embark on a journey to a truth that will spark the beginning of the Age of Embers.

Will Jorn and Rune end up together, or is fate determined to keep them apart? Find out in the mystical, steamy tale that begins it all.

#SlowBurntoFierySteam #HFN #FriendstoLovers

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“ W HERE AM I?” Rune whispered, taking in the dark mystical forest around her. Softly glowing orbs drifted here and there, illuminating vibrant green trees caught in darkness. “Why am I here?”

She knew she slept. Dreamt. But she rarely knew much more than that. Only that she was brought here time and time again, forever awaiting a response.

Would someone reply this time?

Repetitive dreams were nothing new. Rather, they were often connected to her seer magic. Other times, to her inner demi-goddess. All gave her a glimpse into the future and showed her something important. Yet all gave her an answer the first time. None ever repeated until now.

“Where am I?” she asked again when the orbs flickered for the first time, hinting at a variation in the dream. “Why am I here?” And for good measure. “What do you want to show me?”

Strangely, she got a response from a familiar voice asking her the same.

“Where am I?” came jorn’s deep rumble. He melted out of the darkness and stood before her, yet didn’t seem to realize she was there. “Why am I here?”

Even in a dream, her heart leapt at the sight of him. How could it not, given his lack of a tunic? Easily a head taller than her with broad shoulders and a muscular warrior’s build, he had grown from a relatively shy boy into an admirable Viking. His features had become more chiseled, and his dark hair and beard thicker.

“jorn,” she exclaimed, her worry at the strange dream increasing. “I’m right here. It’s Rune.” She tilted her head in question. “Can you see me? Hear me?”

She tried to touch him, hoping to snap him out of the strange spell he seemed to be under, but her hand merely slid through him in this otherworldly place.

Yet he felt her. Better still, his inner beast felt her because his dragon eyes flared, and he spoke soft words she didn’t expect, albeit hoarsely and with emotion. “Is that you, Rune? Are you there?”

As if their connection invoked it, thunder cracked, and lightning struck a nearby tree, running the length of its trunk in a blaze of fire.

“Rune,” jorn roared, staring at the blaze in horror. “No!”

“What are you looking at?” She shook her head and tried to stop him when he raced toward the blaze, but he couldn’t hear her, nor did he seem to realize she had been standing right in front of him. “Stop, jorn, I’m right here!”

Yet he did not.

Instead, clearly under the impression she was in harm’s way, he pulled out a blade and flew toward the tree.

“jorn!” she cried, racing after him, terrified when she realized he wasn’t slowing down. His life was in jeopardy because those flames were no more natural than the lightning bolt that had created them.

“Please, no, jorn,” she wailed when he crashed into the fiery trunk and wasn’t consumed in flames but even worse.

He was consumed in utter darkness.

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Scandinavia

983 A.D.

Seven years before the Age of Embers begins.

“Jorn,” RUNE WAILED only to bolt upright, not to utter darkness consuming him but to her spacious cave at the top of Mt. Galdhøpiggen.

“You had the dream again, my daughter,” her mother Revna murmured from her perch near the fire. Outside of Rune herself, Revna was the most powerful seer ever born to Midgard. “Only this time, you saw more.” Her dark, luminous, knowing gaze settled on Rune. “You saw your closest friend consumed in darkness.” She cocked her head and considered Rune. Flames flickered over her skin, a reminder of her inner Fire Demon. “But then we both know he is much more to you than just a friend.”

“Yet I get the distinct feeling he should not be,” Rune said softly, not about to deny it when her mother sometimes knew her better than she knew herself. She pulled her legs up to her chest, rested her cheek on her knees, closed her eyes, and sighed. “Now more than ever I sense we will be torn apart should we ever come together.”

“Yet you call out for him in your sleep more often than not, sweet child.” Having closed the distance effortlessly and without sound, her mother’s gentle hand landed on her shoulder. “Call out for him because love cannot be denied no matter its outcome. Especially love that has existed since the moment you laid eyes on each other as babes.”

“Such love,” Rune whispered before she could stop herself. She opened her eyes and stared into the flames beyond her mother, who crouched by her side. “I still remember the first time we were laid beside each other before we could even walk.” She fondly recalled how fascinated they had been when they gazed at one another, and his dragon eyes flared to life for the first time. “He was a late bloomer until that moment.”

“He was,” her mother acknowledged softly, brushing hair back from Rune's forehead. “Yet in that singular moment, looking into your eyes, he shifted into a dragon for the first time and stood guard over you.”

“I know.” Fighting emotion, she pressed her lips together. Despite her tender age at the time, she still recalled staring up at his little black dragon in awe. “I wondered even then why he was so protective...then continued to wonder over the years.”

“He was protective because he loved you.” Her mother wiped a tear from Rune's cheek she didn't realize had fallen, and with good reason. She didn't cry. Ever. Revna steered Rune's chin until she had no choice but to lift her head and meet her mother's eyes. “And now the time has come to find out where that love came from because we both know it came from somewhere.” She pressed her palm over Rune's heart. “It did not ignite the first time you gazed into one another's eyes, but far sooner. Before your hearts beat for the first time in this life.”

“Yet you will not tell me where our love first blossomed,” she whispered when she couldn't quite find her voice. “When I know you and my father, Loki, could give me the answer. Loki, a god above all gods.”

“Not above all gods,” her mother chastised gently. “That is a role only filled by Odin, our All-Father.” Fire flickered over her mother's skin, then traveled over Rune's, reminding her while she might not have inherited much Fire Demon, she still possessed its element and resilient, unwavering strength. “Your answers lie in your

dreams, daughter. They always have.”

“Then my answers lie with jorn,” she replied, never so certain of anything.

“ I would hope so ,” his deep voice rumbled in her mind before he appeared at one of several entrances to her sky-high mountainous sanctuary. His great black dragon landed, shifted into his equally glorious human form, and he scowled at her. “What was that, Rune? Why did I just see you in the worst nightmare I've ever experienced?”

She glanced back at her mother only to find her gone, undoubtedly back amongst the gods with Loki. While she still walked this mortal plane when she chose to, her heart would always be with the God of Chaos. A god she'd found great love with who had given her a daughter she loved just as deeply.

“Tell me about your nightmare,” she replied to jorn, sure to wipe away any remaining tears before he got a good look at her. Pretending to be sleepy as if just roused awake, she pulled her fur around her and squinted at him. “And good morn to you as well, jorn.”

“ Is it good?” jorn grumbled. He sat on the boulder across the fire from her and narrowed his eyes. “Because it did not feel good when I tried to protect you from magical flames born of a lightning bolt only to see you swallowed by darkness.” His dragon eyes flared, telling her just how distressed he was. “You died, Rune. Right there in front of me.” He clenched his strong jaw, and a vein ticked in his temple. “I'm certain of it... right there in front of me even though I couldn't see you.”

“Yet here I sit,” she reminded gently, fighting the urge to rush into his arms and hold on tight. Never let go. Unlike their nightmare, he wasn't shirtless, but it didn't matter. He was as handsome as ever in his black leather tunic, pants, and heavy boots. Every inch a Viking with numerous tattoos and a sizeable, well-sharpened battle axe

strapped to his back.

Yet despite his impressive bearing, he was different from his warrior brethren in a way that had long appealed to her. While multiple small braids were woven into his dark locks and a few into his beard on occasion, the talismans woven into his hair warmed her heart. How could they not, given they had collected them together as children? All had a story, too, whether it was a tiny feather or something else.

All had been part of a journey that only ever brought them closer.

Not as close as she would have liked, but close enough because he was here now, comfortable seeking her out in a place most dragons didn't dare frequent. More so, approach a seer who made those outside of their immediate kin and friends wary.

“Ja, there you sit,” Jörn agreed, echoing her words. His ebony eyebrows bunched, and his narrowed light sage green eyes remained trained on her. “Yet I sense it has not been easy for you either.” He shook his head. “That you are in as much distress as I despite trying to appear as though you just woke.” He sniffed, and one eyebrow rose slowly. “Suspicion lent credence, given your mother was just here, and we both know she only appears when you need her most.”

She both hated and loved that he knew her so well.

Especially right now.

“Mother was worried,” she granted, determined to keep busy and distract him with food and drink, only for Jörn to chant a cup of icy cold water into her hand.

She frowned at him. “I do not need this.”

“It's the best way to rid yourself of the residual Fire Demon that steamed your skin

overnight,” he countered. “So you do need it, and we’ve long talked about how you should begin every morn with it.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest and kept eyeing her, not about to let her distract him. “Tell me what you dreamt, Rune. Tell me what you saw.”

While tempted to lie, something about staring into his eyes, especially when he was in this sort of mood, made her confess.

“I did not die in front of you, jorn,” she said, setting things straight. She sipped the water, grateful for its cooling effect on skin she’d hardly realized steamed because she had been so worried about him. Doing her best to suppress emotion she didn’t want him seeing, she clarified what had happened. “ You died in front of me .” She buried how terribly impactful that had been in a few more sips. “Terrified for my safety, you ran toward the fiery remnants of a lightning strike, thinking I was in harm's way until you were gone.”

She swallowed hard and shivered at how intense and heart-wrenching it had been. How real it had seemed. She could still smell the burnt wood. Hear the explosive crack of fire. See the sizzling flames.

Despite trying to hide it, she knew he could tell how upset she really was and wanted to hold her and lend comfort as he had in their youth, but he hesitated. Uncomfortable coming too close, he held back.

She understood it, too.

Understood why they should never be together like that.

She was head seer now and had obligations. He lived in a world where political ties between dragon kingdoms became increasingly important. Tensions were rising, and it seemed they were all on the precipice of great change.

Change where there was no room for a seer and a dragon shifter to be in love.

Change she feared might go one step further in due time, and she wasn't sure why she felt that way other than division was descending, and when that happened creatures tended to remain amongst their own kind .

“So we shared a nightmare,” jorn said, pulling her back to the here and now. He stood and appeared to be heading her way as if determined to lend comfort after all, only for the last thing they expected to keep him away.

Something that made it clear their mutual nightmare had undoubtedly happened for a reason, and an unforeseen, daunting journey lay ahead.

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jorn KNEW TWO things upon waking that morning. First? If he could crawl back into the nightmare he'd just suffered and destroy anything that meant to harm Rune, he would. Second?

She needed him and needed him now.

When he felt that way, as he had occasionally over the years, he flew to her, closing the distance between them as fast as possible. He tried not to panic when he landed in her cave, a place few dragons dared tread, and shifted to his human form. When he found her alive and untouched, with the last remnants of Demon Fire dew burning off her, he breathed a sigh of relief.

In truth, it had taken everything in him not to scoop her up in his wings and keep her close and safe, given she'd just been taken from him in a nightmare, but he fought the urge. However, he could not fight the anger, fury, and fear he'd felt as he shifted into his human form and forced himself to sit across the fire from her when that was the last thing he wanted to do.

She spoke, but it was difficult to focus on her words because his heart hammered so loudly. Hard to focus beyond the terror he'd felt when he thought she had been ripped from him eternally.

"I did not die in front of you, jorn," she said, or so he thought. "You died in front of me. You ran toward the fiery remnants of a lightning strike, thinking I was harmed, but it was not me. It was you."

Yet it hadn't been him. He saw the strike and knew the tree was going up in flames,

but that was nothing compared to the flames that would come from her.

Flames followed by darkness that would take her away from him.

“So you were there,” he half exclaimed, half growled when she admitted she had the same nightmare at the same time. Determined to let her nowhere near their dream again and desperate to pull her close despite long vowing to keep his distance, he started her way. At least he tried before a little black dragon swirled over the flames between them, creating a fiery circle in the air before it bounced off the rock wall nearby, yelped in pain, and then vanished into the layer of mystical fog that frequented the floor there.

“jorn,” Rune cried, leaping after it only for him to catch her first.

“No, Rune.” Before she could fall to her knees and seek out what had to have been a mirage of him when he was younger, he pulled her into his arms and held her close for the first time in years.

Held her close as a man rather than as a child.

“No,” he murmured firmly in her ear, resting her cheek against his chest when she struggled. “I’m gone now, and I won’t lose you for hours, if not eternally, to the mythical fog.”

Only she understood its ethereal dimensions, so he would be unable to bring her back if she searched its magical realm endlessly for a ghost that was no longer there.

“But you’re not gone,” she whispered, her voice raspy with emotion. She inhaled choppily, as if she’d not only been crying but wanted to breathe in his scent. “You’re right here, my friend.”

“I am.” He stroked her hair, trying to calm her despite feeling more and more tense. “And I always will be. You have my word.”

“I know,” Rune murmured. She inhaled deeply again and pressed her cheek closer against his chest in a way that made it clear she fought her feelings for him every bit as much as he fought his for her.

They had always loved each other, but at some point, their love had morphed into something deeper and unspoken. A craving that made being around her the past few years both essential and difficult. She consumed his every waking thought and often followed him into his dreams.

Now, she had followed him into a nightmare that chilled him to the bone.

He inhaled just as deeply as Rune, pulling in the sweet scent of her long, silky ebony locks. She had always been by far the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, with large, dark, thickly lashed, luminous eyes and stunning near-ethereal features.

“We have to follow it, jorn.” She lifted her gaze to his face. “We have to follow your little dragon because it’s trying to show us something.” Her eyes narrowed as she felt things only she could feel. “Perhaps even remind us of something...at last.”

By at last, she referred to what they knew was coming but didn’t know how it would take shape. For years, she’d known the destinies of several of their friends, including Ulrik himself, were tied to the future and twenty-first-century women. She had even set things in motion in ways only her inner goddess understood, let fate come what may. Or at least that’s how she phrased it. While vagueness like that would have, and had, upset their friends in more recent years, it didn’t bother him.

He understood she was special and loved her all the more for it.

“We can’t follow anything yet.” He sighed and pulled away before the intense arousal he’d been fighting became obvious, fully aware it was probably already too late for that. “Remember Ulrik will be coronated King of the Fortress today, in preparation for soon becoming high king of the region.”

“Of course,” she said softly.

He knew Rune was tempted to wring her hands as she sometimes did when nervous but caught herself. Instead, she chanted under her breath and smoothed her hands down a simple dark brown linen dress, freeing it of wrinkles. Based on the cauldron hanging over the fire as she tried to figure out one potion or another, he suspected she’d fallen asleep in said dress last night. Rather than fidget, she stood up straighter, sure to appear unsettled, like her mother had taught her, and smoothed her expression like a proper head seer.

He had always liked that Rune let him see the real her. The less seductive, powerful demi-god seer side. Not to say he didn’t find everything about her seductive, down to personality quirks she’d long struggled to overcome. Quirks she still showed him on occasion, like now, as she drifted to one of the larger exits, bit the corner of her lip nervously, and stared out over the sweeping melon-colored sunrise and glittering sea in the distance.

“Once today’s celebrations are over, I will go anywhere with you, Rune,” he vowed, joining her. “However discreetly.”

Their time together had become more secretive than it had been when they were children. Back then, everyone laughed and played and got along. The growing sense of distrust between not just dragon kingdoms but seers had not existed.

“Our time together has become discreet of late, hasn’t it?” Rune sighed and frowned at him. “This growing tension between everyone and increasing squabbling is

unfortunate. It hasn't amounted to much yet, but I fear it will, and soon." She rolled her shoulders, trying to ease her distress. "There are dark days ahead, my friend. Truly dark days..."

"Then we will face them together," he assured her.

"However discreetly," she reminded wryly and looked to the sea once more as if perhaps she could see in the distant turbulent waves where their future might take them. Saw the waves of time in a way no one else could.

"However discreetly," he echoed, hating it as much as she did, but times were changing, and he suspected she'd long known that was going to happen.

"Yet we are not quite there yet, are we?" Her gaze drifted back to him. "We are all still one people until we are not?"

"We are." Needing to touch her again, he slipped his hand into hers and gestured at the food and drink she'd manifested by the fire. "So let us eat, my friend, and then make our way down to the festivities."

Despite their mutual nightmare and seeing his little ghostly dragon, a manifestation that made no sense, they were able to enjoy their time together. That tended to be the way with him and his closest friend, though. They might be vastly different creatures but they both possessed humanity and cared deeply about each other. So after they sat down, the weight that had descended lifted, and as always, they enjoyed each other's company.

"Aren't you curious where I think we should go?" Rune asked at one point in the conversation. "Where I think your younger self was trying to lead us?"

"No." Jörn swallowed the last of his meat and shrugged. "I trust you will know where

that is.”

“You put a lot of faith in me when I have so little in myself right now,” she said softly, nibbling on her bread. Honest with him in a way she would never be with another. After all, a head seer should be all-knowing. If they weren't, they certainly should not let others know. Rune did, though, and he prayed she always would. She deserved a good friend if that was all they were ever allowed to remain because she had so few. Whether seer or otherwise, people had trouble getting close to her emotionally because, so much of the time, she had to remain vague.

They did respect her, however, and that was of utmost importance.

“You are the only one I would ever put all my faith in, Rune.” He reached across the small round table, took her hand again, and squeezed it, urging her to meet his eyes once more—to see not just his human but dragon halves—because both sides could only ever be honest with her. “We will figure this out, min lille elskling.”

As he'd hoped, a small smile curled her mouth. “It has been a long time since you called me your little love.” Her finely arched eyebrow swept up. “Is it so appropriate now, I wonder? We're not children anymore.”

“No.” He met her small smile. “But you are still smaller than me, and I still love you.” When fear flashed in her eyes, he ignored his sinking heart and said what needed saying. “As my dearest friend, of course.”

“Of course,” she murmured. Her gaze lingered on his face in a way that renewed his hope that one day they might become more. “Because that is...what's best.”

Not seeing it that way any more than he suspected she did, he offered a jerky nod of agreement and downed his water, hating every moment of the charade they were far too used to playing of late. They had become too practiced at pretending they didn't

feel the simmering heat between them because it was for the best.

“Because it is,” she whispered hoarsely, following his thoughts in the way of dragons even though she was no dragon. She squeezed his hand in return, closed her eyes, and pressed her forehead against it. “It has to be because I’m so afraid I am going to lose you. That...”

She trailed off when the flames in the rock-rimmed fire pit flared, and the same sizzling circle his little dragon had created appeared, only this time, ethereal standing stones stood within them. Though they only appeared for a moment, it was long enough for Rune to know what came next.

“After the festivities, we travel north.” She gripped his hand for a moment longer as if she didn’t want to let it go, and then rested it on the table as though she were letting it go forever. “And you might not much like where we go.”

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R UNE BOTH LOVED and hated every minute she spent with jorn that morning before they set out for Ulrik's coronation to become King of the Fortress, which would begin, better yet resume, something which had already begun. Something she couldn't foresee in its entirety yet but would bring much change.

Change she and jorn stood on the precipice of together.

Were these moments at the top of Mt. Galdh?piggen's Peak the last of so many they had shared over the years? Would they leave and never come back as the friends they were now? What she had long hoped they might become beyond that? Because if nothing else had become clear after he pulled her into his arms when she'd tried to catch his little black dragon, it had been that she was desperately in love with him.

It was the first time jorn had held her against him since they were children and embraced like the good friends they had been, making obvious they were far more than that now. So said the fierce arousal she'd felt when he'd wrapped his arms around her to calm her. Between his spicy, earthy scent and the pure strength emanating from him, it was a wonder she hadn't forced him to take her then and there because she had that kind of power. Especially when, despite trying to hide the heavy weight of his cock against her, she sensed it took everything in him not to take her right away, too.

Yet that could not be. At least not right now. Mayhap never. Instead, they had to go their separate ways and treat each other rather frigidly these days at social gatherings. Be friendly enough, but nothing like it once was.

"I will see you there," jorn said after they had eaten and once again stood at the

cave's edge. He looked at her as he always did, whether he realized it or not.

With so much love, it hurt.

"You will see me there," she murmured, wishing they could stay in this moment forever and never leave this cave. "Until then, min store kj?rlighet..."

A little light came to his eyes at her calling him her big love as she had when they were children because he was always taller and bigger than her. He inhaled deeply, as if rallying the strength to leave her, lowered his head once in respect of the high seer she was, then leapt off the cliff and shifted.

She bit back tears as his magnificent dragon rose into the air. What she wouldn't give to climb onto his back and fly away with him, leaving all her premonitions and worries behind. Unfortunately, she'd been born into the high seer position, which meant protecting her fellow seers must come first. That, in turn, meant steering clear of loving a dragon shifter, of all things, until she understood where everything was going.

So, she dressed appropriately for a seer of her ranking attending a Viking dragon king coronation and kept her head held high and a cool, seductive smile in place when she joined the festivities at the Fortress later that day. Her head held high because she was who she was. Daughter to Loki and the most powerful seer ever born. A cool smile because she must remember her station yet remain accepted. The seductive part? Inbred from her Viking seer heritage to make her appealing to all. Something that came so naturally half the time she didn't realize she did it.

The Fortress was overflowing with people and good cheer, speaking to Ulrik's popularity. Wares were sold inside and outside the great wooden wall surrounding the village, and the air smelled of brine, sea, various meats, and freshly baked bread. Drums played a steady beat, and flames crackled in hanging bowls and from various

torches.

“Thank you for coming, dear friend,” Ulrik said, jolting her from her thoughts. She blinked, startled to realize his coronation had ended, and he now stood before her with a hand resting on her shoulder and a crown upon his head. “It means so very much.”

She stared at the tall, handsome, dark-haired Viking king with his metal crown and saw it aflame for a moment before she blinked and saw her childhood friend, who had only ever been kind to her. One who had always trusted her until that very moment when their eyes connected, and his brow furrowed.

“What is it, Rune?” Almost as powerful in his own right, Ulrik frowned and shook his head. “I do not understand...”

“But you will someday, my King,” she whispered, barely understanding what she meant as she pulled his face down to hers, kissed his cheek, and murmured words in his ear born of a goddess. “Until then, never give up on those you love. You can distrust me, but never distrust them.”

He pulled back and looked at her, equally startled for a moment, but despite how powerful he was and would someday be, he would never be as powerful as her. So it was no surprise when his features relaxed, he wore the thankful smile she wanted him to wear on such a special day and resumed greeting others as if their exchange hadn’t hinted at future strife between them.

jorn looked handsome as ever in black leather with a black fur cloak. He stood a ways off beside his brother Magnus, also known as the dragon prince, and his father, King Knud. She and jorn shared a lingering look before she tore her gaze away and smiled at Rafe when he joined her.

As tall, handsome, and imposing as his fellow Sigdirs, Rafe was equally uncomfortable being there. While he didn't appear such, she knew he was because his mystic Celtic bloodline had been distrusted by many since the Great War a generation ago, making him almost as much an outsider as her.

"I am surprised you came," she commented, having always gotten along well with him. "I rarely see you at celebrations these days."

"And you know full well why." He sipped from his horn of ale. "I would not miss this, though." Pride lit his gaze when he looked at Ulrik. "The Fortress's new King deserves to have everyone celebrate this day, for it marks the beginning of his destiny, does it not?"

Like Rune, Rafe—wizardly Viking that he was—understood things others didn't. She knew it was no easier for him than her to keep secrets and have others so wary of him, but he did it with quiet grace.

"Today does mark the beginning of King Ulrik's destiny," she agreed. "For much change will soon be upon us."

"And trials and tribulations abound for him," Rafe echoed, his eyes turning the aquamarine of the sea behind him.

"I would say," she murmured, still unclear what those would be.

"As am I," Rafe said softly, following her thoughts when she allowed it. "All I am clear about is it has to do with women from the twenty-first century."

Something she had told Rafe many moons ago when she'd sent him down his own path, fully aware his magic would help him see things clearer as time went on.

“Twenty-first-century women are part of Ulrik's trials and tribulations,” she murmured, homing in on who headed Ulrik’s way. “But not all...”

“Our new King of the Fortress,” Zane boomed, spreading his arms as he swaggered toward Ulrik. He pulled him into a tight embrace before holding him at arm’s length and nodding once with approval. “I cannot tell you how good it is to see you take your rightful position. One that will soon, if we are all so lucky, lead you to becoming king above kings.”

Zane was different than his brethren on several fronts. Not only did he suffer from multiple personalities, one side far more ruthless than the other, but he was of Ancient and Múspellsheimr bloodlines, the latter far more prominent. That meant his darker half tended to be more like the dragons from their home world, Múspellsheimr, an awful place of brimstone, fire, and heartless beasts that enslaved their females and used them for breeding.

While Zane wasn’t that bad yet, he had the bearing of a more primal tribal sort, with the sides of his head shaved and his dark hair braided back. Even bigger than his brethren, he had numerous tattoos and piercings as well as several slashes in his eyebrow, signifying his rank among his kind.

“And those who stay at the Keep and call the Realm their own are his kind,” Rafe murmured, eyeing Zane warily as he and Ulrik laughed and chatted. “And I sometimes wonder if that does not suit him a little too well.”

She knew he spoke of Zane and Magnus’s struggle for power at the Keep. A position that would make one or the other its ruler in Ulrik’s absence. What Rafe referred to specifically was more than Zane ruling but possibly usurping Ulrik someday. Something she could neither confirm nor deny, only that she had sent Zane on a path years ago, too. One only her inner goddess understood.

A path that could lead to great or terrible things.

Zane's gaze skirted over her, and he nodded once in her direction, acknowledging her presence as he moved away from Ulrik to talk with others. Not surprisingly, he kept his distance for now and ended up joining King Knud and his sons.

"I sense tension there." Rafe spoke more softly than before, lest anyone overhear them. "A darkness that fluctuates around the four of them."

"There is." She rested her hand on Rafe's forearm, hoping he understood this particular darkness would only make his own life more difficult. "One we all must be wary of."

"And I am." He gave her a look of reassurance. "Worry not, my friend."

"You ask a lot," she murmured, worried about all of them and terrified of something unseen. "Just be careful, Rafe. And stay vigilant."

"I will," he replied. "As you know, I have created my own sanctuary behind the Stronghold where no one can touch me if ever it comes to that."

"Ah, yes." She smiled. "Rafe's Realm, I believe you call it."

"That's right." He was about to go on but quieted and gave her a look when Zane and the others headed in their direction, no doubt intentionally brought on by Zane himself, as these days he enjoyed riling people up.

That put her and Jörn together when they tried to remain apart. Now, she could only hope Zane behaved because he would be the first to point out any affection she and Jörn had for each other. More alarming, the first to point out the change in Jörn's dragon when he was near her now. A change born of him holding her in his arms that

morning and all the sensations and realizations that had come with it.

A change she sensed could cause great trouble indeed.

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jorn HAD FELT the change in his inner beast the moment he'd flown away from Rune's home at Mt. Galdh?piggen's Peak that morning. An awakening of sorts that made putting distance between them excruciating. A feeling he did his best to repress as he and his brethren, as well as Zane, approached Rune and Rafe at Ulrik's coronation celebration. While it made his heart soar, it didn't help when he noticed she'd woven the tiny talismans he'd given her over the years into her hair, reminding both his human and beast that he was in her thoughts as much as she was in his.

Typically, jorn and Rune tried to avoid each other at festive events, but Zane insisted on bringing them together, without a doubt, to taunt Rafe. Something jorn knew his father and brother were just as wary of because these days one never knew what Zane would do or what he was capable of. His personality fluctuated more often than not, and his ruthless side seemed predominant of late.

Rune looked more beautiful than ever, with charcoal lining her captivating eyes and a long, flowing black dress that hugged curves made for pure sin. Curves and enchanting beauty, just about every man there tried to keep their eyes off of considering who she was.

He had long wished she'd dress less seductively, but that was her way as it was her mother Revna's before her and her grandmother Vigdis's before that. She was a seer with residual touches of Fire Demon, so there was no stopping her dark allure. Because it was dark, thickened by divinity and mysticism despite her kind heart. It was also part of the powerful magic that made up every part of her.

There was no looking at her without envisioning what she could do to a man beneath the furs and what he would do to her in return. No getting away from imagining how

she could make him feel. All the pleasure she would offer. He had certainly fantasized about it over the years, forever praying word never got back to him about her lying with a fellow seer or, worse yet, a shifter. It was ultimately her choice, but it would have broken his heart.

“So good to see you again, Rune,” Zane exclaimed, setting jorn on edge in a way that had his inner beast simmering close to the surface. Zane’s appreciative gaze roamed over Rune languidly. “I do not know how it is, but you grow more beautiful by the day. By the very moment.”

Rune offered Zane a gracious smile and nodded thanks to Rafe when he wrapped a black fur around her shoulders to ward off an icy wind. Gusts had begun blowing in off the sea that jorn suspected Rune had created herself to cover up what Zane so appreciated. Something she usually wouldn’t do nor care about had she not undoubtedly sensed jorn’s inner dragon growing possessive.

“You are lovelier than ever, Rune.” His father, King Knud, lowered his head in respect of her status along with his brother, Magnus, who did the same. Naturally, jorn followed suit, pretending it had been many moons since last he saw her. All the while, he kept a discreet eye on his brother and Rafe, well aware of their love for her. He’d worried for a time she might return their affection, but it hadn’t happened yet.

“Thank you, King Knud,” Rune replied graciously before offering a wistful smile to everyone. “We are too long apart these days, my friends.” Her gaze flickered over Magnus, Rafe, Zane, and jorn. “Too long since we frolicked as children and had great fun together.”

“It has been,” Zane agreed, aiming his next barb at Rafe with a wink. “But then, we are no longer children, and some of us prefer to separate ourselves from our brethren in mystical realms meant to keep others away.” He shrugged. “So what are we to do?”

“Enjoy each other’s company when we are able,” Knud counseled, however warily, glancing back and forth between Zane and Rafe. Zane because he strove for unrest, and Rafe because Knud distrusted those of Celtic blood.

“But of course, we shall enjoy each other’s company this eve,” Zane boomed, downing half his horn of ale before glancing ever so briefly between jorn and Rune. “Mayhap some more than others?”

jorn had wanted to bring a blade to Zane’s throat when he’d so openly admired Rune. Now, he wanted to sink his dragon teeth into his neck when he implied there might be something between them. An insinuation that could not only make life more difficult for Rune but keep them from seeing each other because the last thing jorn wanted was for her fellow seers to question her loyalties. Especially if tensions grew between kingdoms and species and seeds of distrust took root more permanently.

So while Zane’s behavior, be it taunting Rafe or hinting there might be something between jorn and Rune, wasn't something he would typically let rile him, it did this time. The pure rage his inner beast felt made that more than apparent.

In fact, it was so strong he forced himself to lower his head cordially to everyone before pleading he needed to relieve himself. What else could he say? Nothing that would make sense given he walked away from a newly minted conversation with the head seer herself.

He made a point of not meeting her eyes before he left because he knew if he did, his dragon would surface with a sheer need to protect her. Be close to her. If that happened, he and Zane would fight to the death.

Of course, rather than relieve himself as there was no need, he made his way to the shore and stared out over the choppy water, darkened by an incoming storm, and longed to be alone with Rune. He didn’t care if he never got to lie with her. He just

wanted to be around her. Make her smile because they came so rarely these days. Make her laugh. He couldn't remember the last time she did, and the sound was magical. One of the sweetest things he had ever heard.

"Good eve, jorn," a soft voice said before Ulrik's sister, Mea, joined him. Always gentle and kind with a mystical way, she smiled warmly. Lovely with long blonde hair and delicate features, he was amazed she hadn't taken a mate yet. Then again, most of them who had played together as children hadn't.

"How are you, my friend?" she continued softly, eyeing him in a fashion that told him she likely already knew but would never say it aloud. "Did you enjoy the coronation?"

"I did." He met her smile. "Becoming a king, soon to be high king, if all goes well, suits your brother. I don't doubt for a moment he will excel at both positions."

"Nor I." Her gaze drifted to the white-tipped waves rolling in from the sea, and her smile faded. "Yet I worry..." Her voice dropped an octave. "As I know you worry."

Soon to apprentice under Rafe as a mystic dragon, he wasn't surprised she'd gleaned so much. Trouble would not just be upon them in little time, but jorn would only know that if Rune had shared it with him. A seer goddess his kind was spending less and less time around.

"It is not what you think," he said discreetly, lest their words catch on the wind. "It is not—"

"But it is," she said just as softly, her gaze compassionate when it returned to his face. "As it should be, my friend...as you both deserve." She rested a hand against his chest and inhaled deeply as if pulling in his inner struggle before she nodded once and offered him a small, reassuring smile. "Whatever happens, whatever goes wrong

over the years, never stop feeling how you do now, jorn.” She shook her head. “Never stop loving her, for her path is not an easy one...no easier than yours will be, I suspect.”

Before he could reply, she bid him a good eve and wandered along the shore alone. But would she remain that way? Somehow, he doubted it when he caught Magnus’s close friend Arne fade out of the shadows and make his way down the shore after her.

“You dare ,” a boisterous female roared before her laughter rang out.

jorn couldn’t help but grin as Tyr raced down the shore with ?se tossed over his shoulder. Long-time close friends, they had been devoted to Ulrik since the beginning. Tyr now ruled the Dragon Lair, and ?se would soon be promoted to Ulrik’s second in command.

“I do dare,” Tyr replied right before ?se punched him in the side, and he fell to a knee with a grunt. When he did, she flipped out of his arms, leapt to her feet, and held her blade at the ready.

Watching ?se, with her black braids and numerous weapons strapped to her fit body, and Tyr, with just as many weapons, his visage made fiercer by a facial scar, fight against each other was always a sight to behold. They were amongst dragonkind’s mightiest warriors and lived to battle.

So said the way ?se lunged at Tyr with her blade, only for him to block her with a mighty battle axe. They proceeded to go at each other hard, slicing their blades this way and that, always barely avoiding the other’s thrust, neither holding back.

If their blade met its mark, then so be it.

They were well-matched, and their battling became a well-orchestrated dance. ?se

ducked when Tyr thrust. Tyr leapt when ?se swung and tried to hit him low. Again and again, beautiful in its way, they battled, sometimes roaring at each other, sometimes laughing. They mostly laughed until Tyr got the upper hand and slammed ?se to the ground. His laughter dwindled when their lips hovered close, a breath away, before ?se spied the pretty little cook picking up dishes off tables and shoved Tyr away.

“Come, my friend.” ?se leapt to her feet and held her hand out to Tyr despite her appreciative gaze lingering on the cook, who eyed her with a blush and made her way back into the village. “Let us go feast.”

“ Ja .” Tyr grinned, grasped her hand, and stood, waving hello to jorn before they returned to the celebrations. jorn waved in return and went to look at the sea again until he spied Rune making her way through the shadows along the outer wall.

Moments later, he spied his little black dragon peeking out the gate. His dragon looked jorn’s way, nodded, and scurried after her. Whether by Rune’s design or not, he understood it was finally time to follow her and make their way back to a nightmare they needed to better understand.

Little did he expect it would take them on a journey he never could have imagined.

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R UNE HAD BEEN counting down the hours for a sign she could leave Ulrik's coronation celebration without offending anyone and finally saw it when she spied Jörn's little black dragon. He was tromping along a wooden table investigating the succulent meat laid out only to go still, perk his head, and look directly at her.

"Jörn," she nearly whispered, sensing his overwhelming need to be close to her again.

The only way to do that was to make their way back to their nightmare.

"I must take my leave now, friend," she said to Rafe, as he rarely left her side. She nodded once. "Tell King Ulrik I wish him well always and will see him again soon."

He nodded once in return, seeming to understand she was embarking on a physical and spiritual journey. "Travel safe, my friend."

Keeping to the shadows only a seer and goddess could find during such a raucous celebration, Rune pulled up the fur hood of the cloak Rafe had given her and made her way out of the village and along the wall, certain Jörn would follow her from where he stood at the shore.

As she traveled, the first snowflakes of the season fell, and a sharp chill edged the wind, telling her theirs would be a more challenging journey but one that warmed her blood regardless if it meant she could be with him. If they could step away from all they were supposed to be for a few short days and be together, even if only in friendship.

Chanting into supple leather trousers, a leather tunic, and sturdy boots beneath her fur

cloak, she left behind fading daylight and climbed up the rocky path behind the Fortress into the mountains and ever-darkening forest. She finally stopped well beyond prying eyes and waited on a ledge overlooking the dark sea below. Other than the distant sound of drums and merriment below, all was peaceful, and the easy swoosh of wind through the trees put her at ease.

There was no sign of Jörn's little dragon, but she hadn't expected there to be. Not at this juncture when the man himself appeared moments later. As always, her heart leapt at the sight of him when he melted out of the darkness and stood at her side once more as if he'd never left it.

"Are you well?" His hand slipped into hers as they gazed at the distant sea together, her with seer sight and him with dragon eyes. "Were the festivities too..."

When he trailed off, she knew he'd worried about her the moment she was among so many of his kind. He had feared something would happen to her he might not be able to stop.

"Yet you need not fear nor worry," Rune murmured, following not just his thoughts but his heart. She squeezed his hand rather than look at him just yet because if she did, she might never look away. "All went well, my friend. There is no need to worry because—"

"Yet there is a need to worry," he said through clenched teeth, squeezing her hand in return. Fire flared in his dragon eyes when he looked at her. "Zane is too bold by half, and you are—" he ground his jaw and narrowed his eyes, trying to get his emotions under control— "you are you, Rune." She stilled when he cupped her cheek, making clear just how much he was losing control of his inner beast. "A target for many these days even as they lust for you. Surely you realize you are both distrusted and desired by my kind. So lusted after, it could become dangerous for you at any time, never mind the uncertain future of which you speak."

“Again, you need not worry about me,” she whispered because it was hard finding her voice when she was lost in his warm touch. Lost in the fear and desire she saw in both his human and dragon eyes because both were there. Both were terrified for her. Helpless to do anything but lean her cheek into his touch, she closed her eyes and simply relished the feel of him. “I am very strong, min store kj?rlighet . Very powerful.”

She didn’t care if the childhood endearment was too much. It felt as natural on her tongue now as it had in their youth, however different the meaning might be between children and a grown man and woman.

“You are strong because fate has given you no other choice,” he said softly, brushing the pad of his weapon-roughened thumb over her lower lip, invoking a sharp rush of heat that pooled below. “Yet you need not be with me, min lille elskling. With me, you can shed your obligations and worries because all I require is you as you are here...now... us as we are here and now.”

“What is that, though?” she murmured, keeping her eyes closed because she didn’t want to open them to a reality where she might not be able to be with him. So she kept them shut even as she felt him move closer with the quiet stealth of a dragon and felt his heat burn through her cloak, past her clothing to the bare flesh beneath. “What are we truly?”

“I think you know exactly what we are,” he said softly, his mouth so close to hers she could feel his hot breath fanning her lips. “What we have been for years now.”

How she wanted to close the distance and kiss him but feared what might happen if she did. What if their nightmare revealed, as it insinuated, that they would be torn apart forever? Did that mean he would be killed for loving her? That the dissent already growing between their kind would lead to his end if her fellow seers caught wind of it? His fellow dragons?

“We should not,” she managed hoarsely, swallowing hard. “Not until I better understand if it will mean you harm.”

She opened her eyes and stepped away before his lips found hers because he was moments from kissing her, and the truth of it was right there in the anguished way he looked at her.

“I do not care what happens to me,” he ground out, fighting his inner beast’s urge to take the matter out of her hands. “Not if it means finally being together as we should be.” As if daring her to say otherwise, he narrowed his eyes and shook his head. “As I know you want every bit as much as me.”

“I do,” she confessed, taking some small comfort in saying it out loud. She was in just as much pain thinking it might not be possible. “But your life means more to me than my own wants and needs, jorn.”

His gaze held hers for a long, tortured moment before he hung his head and clenched his fists, still fighting his inner beast. “Then it is settled...for now.” After he inhaled deeply, trying to gather himself, he raised his head and looked at her again. “We are, as we have always been, the closest of friends.” He narrowed his eyes again, only with a flicker of his inner beast flaring in his unwavering gaze this time and made clear there were limits. “Yet if we discover something along the way that allows us to be otherwise, there will be no stopping me from taking you, min lille elskling. No stopping me from seeing you lose yourself in the way I make you feel because it will happen again and again until you are addicted to it. Addicted to me .”

The possessive way he said it, combined with the vivid thoughts he wanted her to catch of the many ways he intended to bring her pleasure, made desire shoot through her so sharply her knees weakened. Defending herself against the ruthless onslaught of sensual visuals, she forced herself to close her mind to him.

“I do not like it when you do that,” he murmured, the heavy arousal straining against his leather pants impossible to miss.

“Nor do I like when you try to cripple me with need to get your way despite my wishes,” she countered.

“I have only done it this once.”

He fell into step beside her when she made her way into the woodland lest she give herself to him then and there like she wanted to.

“Though I wish I had told you how I feel far sooner,” he went on, grumbling about his hesitancy. “Wish I had told you years ago, and often at that.”

Her too, given a few short years ago, when times were better, she would have given herself to him and him alone. Not to say she’d given herself to any other in the meantime. She had not. Could not.

“Why?” he said softly, startling her when he caught her thoughts because he shouldn’t have been able to. Yet she felt his stark relief when he slipped his hand into hers again as they traveled. “Why could you not take another when so very many were, are, willing? Would die for it, even?”

Though she knew better than to answer honestly, given his inner beast had clearly locked onto her in a way that could bypass her seer powers, she knew, hoped, he would eventually find out. Even if they couldn’t be together in the flesh, he should know she had saved herself for him.

She was about to respond when a flash of light caught her attention through the steady snowfall, and she stopped. “Did you see that?”

“I did.” He pulled his axe free, took up a defensive position in front of her, and held his weapon at the ready.

“jorn, I’m a powerful seer with divine magic at my disposal,” she reminded him, as she had multiple times over the years when they had come across anything suspicious together. “So I think I should be standing in front of you, ja ?”

“Over my dead body,” he growled. His skin sheened black with his inner dragon, telling her he was moments from shifting. “As I have told you time and time again, when we came across one thing or another, be they a stray warrior or a woodland creature with bad intentions, I will protect you, not the other way around.”

“And as I have always said, how very alpha of you.” She sighed and ducked around him. “Yet this time—” she gestured at the Light Turned Drifting Orb— “we are finding our way back to a nightmare and all that went wrong.”

“We are .” He frowned and kept his axe right where it was. “A nightmare that could easily manifest and try to harm you.”

“Or,” she said softly, smiling in awe, “it could do the very opposite.”

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jorn LOWERED HIS axe when his little black dragon peeked its head around the tree ahead beneath a softly glowing orb that had begun drifting in the dark, snowy woodland. “What is it doing, Rune?”

They were journeying into the mountains chasing a mutual nightmare, so one never knew.

“Playing, I think.” Rune turned a soft smile his way. “You were awful playful in our youth.”

“Was I?” He kept his weapon in hand rather than sheath it as the little dragon hopped from rock to rock, enjoying the slippery snow.

“You were.” Rune’s gaze flickered between the little dragon and him. “If I recall correctly, you did it to cheer me up because I was facing so much responsibility at such a young age.”

“You were,” he agreed, remembering it well enough despite saying otherwise. He recalled how hard he had tried to put a smile on her face and make her laugh, only for both to fade over the years under the weight of her obligations. “Why do you think we see this now?” He gestured at his little dragon as it hopped from rock to rock and continued into the woodland. “What is the point other than to lead us somewhere daunting?”

“Mayhap so we remember the journey behind us before we look to the journey ahead.” Her gentle, knowing gaze lingered on him. “Remember the things that led us to where we are today. To this very moment and how we feel about each other.”

“Yet I recall every last moment,” he said softly before he could stop himself, struggling to keep his distance. When he’d touched her soft cheek earlier and breathed in her sweet breath, moments away from finally, at last, kissing her, he’d been impacted so strongly it was a wonder he hadn’t ravished her then and there.

It had taken everything not to pull her against him and taste her at long last. Feel her plush lips beneath his. Almost more than he had in him to keep from watching her give in to the intense feelings that had been building between them since the very beginning because he would ensure it happened. Then it had taken every last bit of willpower, not to keep her close when she stepped away. He’d longed to show her how good it could be between them because it would be. He would see her cries of pleasure never end if it was the last thing he did.

And he would gladly meet his end if he could.

Yet he felt her fear for his life and safety and understood it because he’d always felt the same way about her. Even so, he had gleaned much out of their exchange, even if he didn’t get what he ultimately wanted. He now knew with certainty because she’d spoken it aloud that she wanted him just as strongly. Even better? Despite not saying it, he’d caught her thoughts and knew she had lain with no other.

The relief he’d felt at that was so strong it was a wonder he hadn’t yanked her into his arms and claimed her before another could. His inner beast was that frantic, desperate to take her virginity and make her his. Yet he loved and respected her too deeply, so he held back. He would never force her to do anything, despite how easily he could take it because she wouldn’t fight him in the end.

Never fight him when she loved and craved him just as much.

“If you recall our many childhood memories,” Rune said, bringing him back to the present. “Then following your little dragon is but a means to refresh them...us.”

Seeing no harm in that and sensing nothing dangerous about it, he sheathed his blade, and they followed his dragon. The snow had picked up, and the weather was bound to get worse, yet it mattered little. They had spent countless hours of their youth frolicking in far deeper snow and in far worse storms.

“We were never trailing little ghostly dragons and drifting orbs, though,” Rune said, following his thoughts. She offered him a small, almost playful smile as they pressed against an increasing wind and made their way through the forest. “You have to admit it's interesting, if not a tad fun, all things considered.”

“I would not call it fun.” Yet he did enjoy seeing a small smile on her face, so he offered one in return. “Interesting? Ja. Fun?” He kept his grin in place but narrowed his eyes. “That’s not something that feels part of this moment.”

“Why not?” She smiled at the little dragon as it nearly fell off a slippery stone. When he tried to catch himself, he inadvertently scooped up a wad of snow with his wing and whipped it at a branch overhead, only for it to plop down on his head. “We always had great fun in this kind of weather, did we not?”

“We did,” he granted, eyeing his little dragon as he roared a teensy bit of fire in defiance at the snowy bits that had so ruthlessly attacked him, seemingly satisfied when they vaporized into steam. “Back when we were—”

He sputtered when a wallop of balled-up snow hit the side of his head, just as it had many moons ago when he and Rune were children. At first, he thought it might have been affiliated with his little dragon, but when he looked Rune's way, she wore a teasing smile and shrugged, making clear she'd been the one to throw it.

“You dare ?” he exclaimed, as astounded now as he'd been when they were children, and she'd done the same thing. Like then, he refused to smile in return but scowled to get his point across that no dragon, be they child or man, liked being hit with a ball of

snow.

“It seems I did dare.” Her teasing smile dropped just as it had when they were young, and her eyes rounded in mock horror. “How terribly painful it must have been for such a mighty beast.”

He couldn't help offering a small smile in return, just as he had so long ago, remembering the moment like it was yesterday. “Not painful but annoying as only icy frozen water can be to a fire-breathing beast.”

“Without a doubt.” Though Rune didn't laugh, she did chuckle, sending his heart soaring yet again because he'd missed the sound so much. Then, just as she had once upon a time, she trudged on through the snow in the direction of a little dragon who had vanished.

Not about to let her get away with her ruthless attack any more today than he had years ago, be she a powerful seer or not, he balled a wad of snow and whipped it at her shoulder.

“You dare ,” she admonished, her eyes round when she stopped and looked over her shoulder at him, repeating her past words. “Do you remember who I am ? What I'm capable of, dragon?”

For a moment in time, he saw the girl she had once been. A little seer with the weight of the world on her shoulders, yet always lighthearted when she was with him. Always the best part of his day. Every single one since they had bonded as babies, and he loved her all that much more for it. So, despite these trying times, he would give her this moment and memory. Not a hard thing to do because her smile was infectious, and the memory a truly good one.

“I remember who you are, yet it seems I did dare.” He grinned and rounded his eyes

just as she had, repeating what he'd said long ago. "How terribly painful that must be for such a high and mighty demi-goddess seer."

She met his grin in return, and that was it. They were right back in that moment, no longer bearing the weight of responsibility and division but happy and playful, when Rune balled up snow and whipped it at him before taking off. Grateful for the numerous glowing orbs that manifested and kept her in his line of sight, he balled up snow and chased after her.

After that, keeping true to what his little dragon had incited, it was all great fun as they went after each other, laughing as they whipped snowball after snowball in each other's direction. Most missed because she was as limber on her feet as he and a warrior in her own right, so she could duck and avoid easily without using magic.

Some landed, though—one against her chest and another smack dab in the middle of his face. That one, as it had when they were young, made her toss back her head and laugh. In turn, he laughed, and it felt glorious and yet again infectious because Rune's laughter was like nothing else—pure joy to those around her.

Eventually, the wind and snow became too harsh, and the orbs slowly dimmed, and with them, her laughter, as if the darkness beyond spoke to her in ways no one understood but her.

"We should rest for the night." Rune closed her eyes and tilted her face up to the snow and wind. "It will get worse before it gets better."

"Then I will hunt and—"

"There's no reason to hunt when we can manifest what we need." Her gaze fell to his face. "Though I do appreciate it."

“Outside of rushing to your side as I did this morn, I always catch fresh game for you.” He frowned. “Since I was old enough to understand how to do it because you felt magically manifested food was not as pure as it could be. Not of the Midgardian process of giving a life to sustain a life, as is the natural order of things.”

“And it is not, but I won’t have you out in this.” Her gaze drifted to the creaking pines overhead, then the darkness beyond. “Not here, for we have entered the Forest of Memories, and it’s not safe.”

“Yet it was plenty safe when we frolicked here as children.” More than familiar with the forest and its haunting ways, he frowned. “It frightens me no more now than it did then.”

The Forest of Memories tended to replay memories for those who dared step foot in it. Some were good, prophetic, and natural, and others more unsettling. Some were even born of another life.

“Yet mayhap it should frighten you,” she said softly, manifesting a tent against a thick ash tree nearby. “Let us settle for the night, and I will tell you why.” Her sad gaze drifted to his face. “Let me remind you of things we forgot...things that only just came to me now within the power of this place.”

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W HILE RUNE HAD no idea why their memories of spending time in the Forest of Memories as children had been repressed, she suspected it had everything to do with the darkness that would soon befall their land. She said as much, too, as they settled into the tent she had manifested against a sizeable ash tree.

“We saw things, jorn,” she said as he sealed the flaps against the blustery wind and snow, and she lit a small fire to warm them. “You and I saw things when we played in this forest, and I am only remembering them now.”

She wished they could go back to all the fun they’d had just minutes ago tossing snow at each other, but the time for that had passed. As had the laughter that filled her, made better by him laughing too. It had been too long since she heard him laugh, and it had warmed her heart. Warmed every part of her, for that matter.

“What did we see?” jorn asked, no doubt alarmed by her expression. He manifested wooden plates of food and cups of ale and mead, removed his snow-caked fur, and sat beside her at the fire. “Tell me.”

“Memories, I think.” She sipped her mead and stared into the flames. “Of this place in another era. An earlier one. Flashes of us...but not us.”

When he frowned in confusion, she elaborated.

“I think we were together in another life and even though we saw us together, I don’t believe we truly understood what we witnessed.” She met his eyes, and though she hesitated to share should the images make things more difficult between them, she rested her hand on his forearm and let him see. “We were very much in love, if I’m

not mistaken.”

In response to her touch and opening her mind to his, Jörn's dragon eyes flared, and he glimpsed at what she saw. A young, hooded couple walked alongside a river holding hands, sometimes laughing, other times not. Sometimes, they chatted while gathering herbs and other medicinal substances, and other times, they argued.

“But they were always so in love,” he murmured, trying to follow the memories, but as it had been for her, they faded and cut out as if they were only ever supposed to remember so much.

“If that is not the proof you need that we are meant to be together, just as we were before—” he pulled his hand back when she knew he was tempted to cup her cheek again and risk being shunned— “I do not know what is.”

“It's proof of something,” she granted, equally tempted to grab his hand and rest it against her cheek anyway but held back. “Yet I cannot say if it means your safety in this life if we love as we should.” Something about the dashed flicker of hope in his eyes made her cup his cheek instead. “Yet I hope...” She bit back emotion. “So very much, min store kj?rlighet.”

His dragon eyes warred with his human eyes as he cupped her hand with his and leaned into her touch as she had his earlier. He longed for her as she longed for him, but despite the flailing of his inner beast to claim and make her his, Jörn fought his urges and rose above them.

“And that's what I have always loved about you most,” she whispered, adoring him more than ever for staying true to who he had been since birth. “You have such immense inner strength and admirable will. A truly kind heart that will only ever seek the best for others. A need to find peace amid dissent.” Desperate for the connection, she rested her forehead against his. “And whether you will ever truly believe it, those

traits, what you are at the core, makes you just as powerful as the high king Ulrik will become and me, the seer you love.”

jorn offered no response, but she hadn’t expected him to, given she could say such admirable words, but he couldn’t act on how he felt. He could not kiss her for the first time or lay her back and come between her thighs. Could not sink deep inside her as they both craved so intensely. Yet that didn’t stop their need for each other from intensifying. So much so when their breathing picked up and the heat simmering between them bordered on the point of no return, she forced herself to pull away before their desire grew unstoppable.

“We should eat and rest, my friend,” she said softly, nudging one of the plates of meat he had manifested closer to him. “And mayhap speak of lighter things?”

“Are there lighter things?” He was no more interested in food than she was as his gaze lingered on her face. “Because I sense those are swiftly falling behind us.”

While tempted to sink into his gaze and travel down a path that would lead to his mouth on hers and his cock buried inside her, she rallied every bit of strength she could and gave him the sort of smile she knew he longed for. One that would make him smile in return if she did it long enough.

“Well, I remember how our snowball fight ended the last time we had one as children.” She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. “But do you, I wonder?”

Despite clearly fighting a smile, he gave in, reminding her how his handsomeness was accentuated when happiness overtook him. True happiness, free of the boundaries that had slowly grown between his kind and hers.

“If I recall correctly, we ended in a dual made up of equal parts snow whipped at each other and snow smothered in our faces,” he mused, remembering how they had been

relentless in their raging battle until they were both soaked, lying in the snow together staring up at the sky.

“Do you remember how we were laughing so hard we could not catch our breath?” She couldn’t help chuckle, loving the way it felt as Jörn chuckled too. “I think that might have been one of the best days of my life.”

“On that, we agree.”

She thought for a moment he would grow serious, as days like that were so far away now, but he seemed to understand she wanted this time to be happy. More cherished memories of them together whether they could love as they wanted to or not.

“If I recall, the day after our snowball fight only got better,” Jörn went on. He winked, showing his playful side no doubt for her benefit. “You decided it would be great fun for me to shift and take you for a ride so we might dry off using the wind.”

“Which, of course, did not go well at all.” She laughed and sipped her mead, remembering what a mess they had made of things. “It was my first attempt at riding your dragon, and I ended up in the sea because we were foolhardy and determined to make a show of it.”

“We were,” Jörn granted, grinning at the memory. “After all, we thought ourselves quite powerful and clever.” He flinched. “Little did I realize how slick my scales would be.”

“Indeed,” she concurred, recalling the rush of the whole experience and then the mortification. She sat up straighter and notched her chin like the ruler she had thought herself at the time. “I believe you warned me I should use a harness, but I was quite full of myself in those days and wanted to show the world I could easily ride a dragon without one.”

“Yet you did anything but.” He sipped his ale and kept chuckling. “Instead, as we swept in from the mountains, then out over the sea and circled back in what we thought was a rather impressive display, you leaned over, thinking to steer me, and slid right off.” He narrowed an eye and offered a crooked grin. “You should have known I could not be steered, friend.” He sat up a little straighter and notched his chin, too. “For wee dragons, especially when young and foolhardy, are stubborn and arrogant things.”

“And you were until you were not.” She narrowed an eye in return. “If I recall correctly, you valiantly raced into the sea after me, only for the wind to catch you unaware, leading you to belly-flop into the water. That left your dragon stunned, and I, having crashed into the water from too high a height, was equally stunned and sank right alongside you.”

“Yet it was not all that terrifying, was it?” he said softly. “Not really.”

“No,” she agreed just as softly, remembering the moment they realized they might very well die together. It had been peaceful until it had become something else, and she saw the amusement on his face, telling her he recalled it just as vividly. “Given how fascinated we became by the great whale swimming by.”

It was a telling moment that reminded them, with the great beast's gentle beauty as it passed between them, that they were great beasts, too. To this day, it amazed them it was so brazen given he was a dragon, however little at the time, but she suspected perhaps there was more at work. Perhaps the beautiful whale had been sent by her father, Loki, to remind her of life's wonders and, better still, that in his eyes she was one of them.

“And that whale did make us remember who we were,” Jörn mused. “I shook off my fall and swam after you as you ignited in seer light. After I scooped you up, we were going to burst out of the sea together, a great display, to be sure.”

She winced and bit the corner of her lip before chuckling again. “Yet it did not go as valiantly as we’d hoped, did it?”

“No.” He chuckled as well and swigged his ale. “How could it when my father swooped down after us and carried us out for all to see whether we liked it or not, much to our shame as a relatively large crowd had gathered.”

“It was not our finest moment,” she granted, remembering how embarrassed they had been as Knud flopped them down on the shore and made an example out of them. He had cared little if Jörn was his son and Rune, a powerful seer, as he explained how foolish and deadly it could be to pull stunts like that without proper training.

“No, it was certainly not our finest moment.” Jörn kept grinning. “But what fun in the end, ja?”

“Fun, indeed.” Rune recalled how they had spun the story to a crowd full of curious children, who had hung on their every word. “How we had executed the whole thing on purpose so we might communicate with the monstrous beasts of the deep.” She puffed out her chest. “We were nearly ready to rise up out of the water as mighty warriors who now understood the sea’s wondrous secrets.” She motioned as if snagging something from someone else’s grasp just as she’d done years ago when they spun their tall tale to their avid audience. “Yet your father ripped our glory from us before we could.”

They laughed at that, and the smiles and laughter didn’t stop as they reminisced about story after story from their youth and felt something neither had felt in too long.

Joy.

Happiness.

Freedom from who they were. What she was. He was.

And the two of them felt and cherished it for hours. They ate, drank, and enjoyed each other's company until, as they had as children, they laid down, pulled furs over them, and whispered to each other by the fire's dying embers.

jorn made no further move to turn things romantic but seemed as content as her to reflect on happier times and their life together. Just as he had when they were children, he wrapped his hand with hers beneath the furs while facing each other and murmured his take on this story or that while the wind and snow battered the tent. She did the same, loving every moment until they must have drifted off because the next thing she knew, jorn was shaking her awake.

"Something has changed," he said softly but urgently. "Something is very wrong."

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THE MOMENT THE weather shifted outside their tent, jor's eyes shot open. His inherent need to protect Rune was as strong as it had been since they were babes when he'd shifted for the first time to protect her.

Something was wrong.

Despite it being the last thing he wanted to do after such a perfect night of laughing, talking, and being together, he roused Rune.

"Something has changed," he said softly but urgently. "Something is very wrong."

"What is it?" Rune asked drowsily. She sat up on her elbow and blinked at the dim light coming through the tent. "I do not..."

She trailed off when she sensed the same as him. Despite their fire being down to ashes, the air was warmer, and the wind and smattering of snowfall mixed with icy pellets against the tent had stopped.

"We are no longer on the edge of a cooler season but mayhap closer to midsummer," he murmured, pulling a blade free before he moved toward the entrance, determined to protect her.

"jor?" she whispered, her thoughts coming through clearly enough. She was forever amazed by his need to protect her when it should be the other way around. But they had been doing this since childhood, so it was not changing, nor would it ever. Since the moment he'd been laid down beside her as a babe and their eyes first met, she was his to protect.

“Ja?” he whispered back, making a gesture that she stayed back and positioned himself so anyone who dared burst into the tent would have to go through him first.

“Yet again, I must remind you I’m the most powerful seer ever born and a demi-god,” she whispered. “So I should protect you. ”

“No,” he bit back under his breath. “I am a dragon... your dragon, so I will protect you .”

He heard her all-too-familiar sigh before she chose not to stay behind him and moved to his side. She rolled her eyes as she held up a small blade to defend herself, well aware he preferred seeing a weapon in hand to the immense magic of which she was capable nowadays. Magic she was nowhere near harnessing when she had fallen off his dragon over the sea.

“Might we open the tent flap and see what waits to slay us?” she whispered.

“You mock ?” He frowned at her. “At a time like this in the Forest of Memories?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” She flicked her wrist and held magical flames in one hand and her blade in the other, just as she had in their youth when she’d thought him stubborn. “When I can do this and so much more?”

“I can do that too,” he ground back.

“I know,” Rune exclaimed softly. “You are a dragon.” Clearly not as concerned about the environmental changes as he was and determined to behave just as she had when they had squabbled as children, she twirled her forefinger and shrugged. “But can you do this?”

He bit back a smile when a tiny black dragon, mimicking himself of course, curled up

into the air, flicked its spiked tail at him, and roared fire at the tent opening until it became transparent for them but not anyone lurking beyond, keeping them well hidden.

“I think we both know I cannot do that,” he said softly, forever amazed by what she could do. More so, the whimsical way she went about it despite the darkness lurking in her via her seer and Fire Demon heritage. He imagined she would always be that way no matter where life took her. She would help via magic in a fashion some might find jarring but would, as their surroundings became clearer to them, show a person what they were meant to see.

In this case, it was an entirely different forest than the one they had been in the night before. Instead of barren branches, the towering trees were mightier and thicker with vibrant green leaves. The air smelled different. While there was still the scent of sea salt, it was earthier. The soil beneath their feet was darker and richer.

“Is this a memory?” he said, jarred by how familiar everything seemed.

“I believe so.” She stepped out of the tent before he could stop her. “And we are safe...relatively speaking.”

“That does not sound safe at all,” he grumbled, joining her with his blade still at the ready.

“Yet it is.” Drawn by something, she drifted further into the forest. “At least for us, caught in a memory such as we are.”

Determined to defend her, he remained by her side and kept scanning the forest and sky, certain there was trouble to be found here. Darkness, to be sure.

“Do you hear that?” Rune whispered, walking through the woodland as if she knew

precisely where to go. “So many voices...so many stories...so much love...and heartache.”

“I hear nothing.” He frowned and shook his head, disliking the tears brimming in her eyes. “We should go back and remain by the tent until this memory passes.”

“We are not here to remain by our tent,” she murmured, “but to find our way back to our nightmare...back to our truth.”

The moment she said that a small clearing appeared ahead with several magnificent standing stones, some higher than others. The very stones they had seen in the fiery circle over her fire at Mt. Galdhøpiggen’s Peak.

The same circle his little dragon had created the first time they saw him.

“Do you hear them?” Rune whispered reverently as if she didn’t want to interrupt the sanctity of the location. “ See them?”

“I see the stones,” he replied, “but hear nothing outside of water in a nearby river and the wind in the trees.”

“You do not see the runic symbols?” she marveled, approaching the largest stone slowly, clearly respectful of it. “Nor the memories that gave them life?”

He shook his head and kept eyeing their surroundings warily as she reached out, touched the stone, and traced her finger along things he could not see but didn’t doubt were there.

“So beautiful,” Rune whispered, her voice choppy with emotion. She placed her palm against the stone, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply before visibly shivering. “Yet dark, too. Sadness and grief.” She relaxed as she saw more. “Yet still so much love.”

A small, sensual smile curled her mouth. “And so much passion.” When she opened her eyes slowly, her outfit morphed into a long black hooded dress cinched at the waist, and she gave him a look that brought his inner beast to attention. “Not just others’ passion, but ours.”

As if responding to her revelation, a loud roar filled the sky, bringing him to attention in an entirely different way, and he scanned the sky with a frown. “That was a Múspellsheimr dragon.” He inhaled, trying to catch its scent only to pick it up faintly, telling him it was upwind and a distance away. It also gave him a general idea of its bearing. “One even larger than those of our era. A first-generation Múspellsheimr beast.”

That meant it had begun life on Múspellsheimr and ended up here on Midgard.

“Yet it has no interest in us.” She slipped her hand into his and pulled him after her. “Quite literally.”

He didn’t understand what she meant until he heard muffled groans from further into the woodland. Rune put a finger to her mouth, slowed near a towering tree trunk, pulled him close to her side, and pointed to an area just ahead.

It took a moment until the shadows lifted, and the dappled sunlight shown down just enough for him to see a couple making love beneath furs in a bed of grass. Although he couldn’t make out their features from this distance, the sound of their passion was unmistakable.

As was the feel of it.

His cock swelled with the sensation of what the man felt because jorn had lived it in another life. He had been in that woman’s arms. In Rune’s arms.

And it had felt exquisite.

From pressing his lips against her warm, soft skin to burying his cock deep inside her until he lost himself, he felt everything the couple experienced. The sensation of their sweat-slicked skin as their passion intensified and their mingled groans of pleasure. He even smelled the sweet musk of their lovemaking.

Then he felt even more when Rune reeled him closer until her back was against the tree, steered his gaze away from the couple to her face, and looked at him in a way that made his vision haze red with his inner beast.

She didn't say a word but pulled him closer and closer, stood on her tiptoes, pulled his lips down to hers until they hovered close but didn't touch, and whispered, "You can kiss me now, min store kj?rlighet. "

Not needing to be told twice, he wrapped a hand over her lovely backside, hoisted her against the tree to accommodate their height differences, and finally, at long last, closed his lips over hers. Having long imagined how this would go, he thought he would kiss her softly at first, savoring the moment, but he did the opposite. Between feeling what his incarnate felt combined with finally tasting Rune's sweet lips, he had no choice.

No doubt in the throes of what her incarnate felt, too, that was exactly what Rune wanted because she groaned in pleasure when their kiss turned hungry right away. She was just as desperate for what had been kept from them. Where he'd heard first kisses could sometimes be awkward, theirs was anything but as they fell into the rhythm they had shared in another life and their tongues tangled in perfect rhythm.

He had never felt anything so good or tasted anything so delicious, especially when their kiss deepened, fueled by the feel and sound of their incarnates' pleasure increasing. Their desperation to feel the same thing firsthand became a driving force,

and he yanked up her skirts, bunching them in the back to protect her flesh from the bark, and hoisted her more firmly against the tree.

In turn, she did exactly what he hoped she would.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:52 am

R UNE HAD NEVER been so eager for anything as she was J?rn when the standing stones they had come upon in a memory showed her they could love. Had loved. There was a path forward that didn't harm him, so it made perfect sense she would pick up on their incarnates making love nearby.

What she hadn't expected but should have was how impactful seeing them beneath their furs in the soft grass would be. How she and J?rn would feel what they felt, smell each other's scent in the heat of passion, and hear their groans of pleasure. Sensations she was so desperate to feel firsthand, she steered J?rn's lips to hers and finally kissed him for the first time. Not sweet and slow but full of all the pent-up need that had built up between them over the years.

In fact, her need was so strong there would be no getting him back to the tent before she took him. It had to be here. Now. Against the tree near their incarnates making love, feeling what they felt while discovering more sensations on top of that.

Just as desperate, J?rn hoisted her against the tree and yanked up her skirts, exposing her sensitive flesh to his still-clothed rigid length. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his shoulders and ground against him, trying to assuage the terrible ache building inside her.

Pleased with her wanton need and driven on by her aggressiveness, he freed himself from his leather trousers and rubbed his rigid, steaming length against her swollen center. The sensation, in combination with how he dug his hand into her hair and forced her gaze to his dragon eyes, nearly made her come undone, but he held her at bay by slowing and kissing her again.

That's when she realized this moment was as monumental for him as it was for her because he, too, had saved himself for her—something dragons were not known for with their never-ending drive to reproduce. Fortunately for them both, they need not suffer the awkwardness of a virginal encounter because of what they were. Dragons knew on a primal level how to please their mates from the beginning to increase the chances of their seed taking root, and seers, especially ones as powerful as her, were born with the knowledge of carnal pleasure.

So they kissed and loved, rubbing against each other slowly until it became too much. J?rn released a deep, throaty growl of need, kept his hand wrapped in her hair, and met her eyes again before he let her slowly sink onto his heavy length.

Her eyes drifted along with his at the untouchable feeling of coming together. Finally feeling the incredible sensation of their flesh experiencing what their hearts already did. It felt that intense as his thick arousal stretched and filled her, and everything inside expanded and swelled.

The same sensation she felt inside her incarnate as J?rn filled her and fully seated himself. A slow, sensual burning flame turned into a building fire. Their mating would not last long this first time because they were so pent up with need, but she knew it would be remarkable. J?rn made that clear when he groaned at the feel of her, braced his hand against the tree, released a low primal growl of warning that he needed all she could give him, and thrust.

After that, the swelling sensation became a roaring inferno, and she met his movements, digging her nails into his shoulders and her heels into his backside. In turn, he clenched her backside tightly and thrust harder until all the sensations from their last life and this one culminated in not a slow, cresting peak but a crashing explosion, and they let go together. He pressed deep and locked up inside her with a roar, and she cried out when euphoria filled her, and her body let go.

It didn't stop there, either, but went on and on, her pulsing and milking him until he'd emptied himself inside her. The moment was better than the greatest magic and more intense than the mightiest dragon. She had thought she couldn't love him any more than she already did, but as his lips found hers again while they drifted down from how high they had taken each other, she did.

More than she thought possible.

She had no idea how long they stayed that way, lost in each other, their kissing as passionate as their lovemaking. Deep and heartfelt. So consuming that when they became aware of their surroundings again, cold wind blew, morning sunlight dusted the forest in purple, and they stood among snowy drifts.

"It seems we have returned to our time," he said huskily, adjusting himself as he manifested a fur around her shoulders and swung her up into his arms. His adoring gaze never left her face. "Which means we best return to our tent."

"That might be wise," she murmured, her voice not quite right either. She sensed another storm looming in the distance. "We will need shelter sooner rather than later."

"Without a doubt, we will," he agreed, ready to head that way, only for her to chant them there moments later. He lowered her to the ground and gave her a look. "Couldn't you have let me carry you just this once?"

She smiled because he'd tried to carry her valiantly a time or two in their youth when they came upon trouble, but she'd always chanted them out of harm's way first.

"I might have let you carry me all the way—" she made a point of thinking about it before she gave him a slow, sensual look, crawled into the tent, and tossed a sultry smile over her shoulder— "but that would have meant waiting longer to feel you

inside me again.”

It seemed that ceased any further exasperation because he was right behind her. Not bothering to seal the tent, he knelt in front of her, yanked her against him, and crushed her mouth beneath his in another hard, hungry, tongue-tangling kiss. Eventually, he slowed and kissed her more gently, determined to savor the moment and cherish it before he pulled back and looked at her lovingly.

“I cannot tell you how many times I have imagined what we just shared today over the years, min lille elskling .” He caressed her cheek. “And it was always perfect, yet what we just experienced and will continue to enjoy was far beyond my expectations. You are far beyond them in ways I cannot express.”

He slowly untied the strings at the front of her dress until the upper swells of her breasts were visible, then lowered one shoulder before lowering the other. All the while, his gaze remained on hers until the top half of the dress pooled around her waist, and his eyes fell to her fully exposed breasts. His pupils flared, and his breathing switched along with hers as he touched one and then the other, sending shivers of awareness through her.

“Every part of you is so beautiful,” he murmured, marveling at the sight of her before he brushed his lips over hers, peppered kisses down her neck and along her collarbone until he found his way to her breast and pulled a taut, pebbled nipple into his mouth while pinching the other.

“J?rn,” she whimpered, digging her hands into his hair. He sampled first one breast, then the next, sending red-hot fire blazing down to her center. It seemed he sensed it, too, because his hand rode her thigh until he found her soaked center and pressed first one, then two fingers deep inside her.

If that didn’t have her groaning in pleasure, the sight of him when he bypassed

undressing them and chanted away their clothes certainly did. Outside of her nightmare, it had been many moons since she'd seen him without a tunic, and he had filled out considerably. He was perfect. A masterpiece with chiseled, tattooed muscles, she wasted no time flicking her tongue over, relishing the salty taste of his taxed skin.

When he rubbed the pad of his thumb over the tiny nub at the center of her pleasure and curled his fingers inside her, she shuddered and ran the flat of her tongue up the spiraling tattoo on the side of his neck. Grunting with approval, he sat back on bent knees, lifted her until she straddled him and replaced his fingers with his cock.

They groaned with pleasure again as he filled her, only this time, however impossible she would have thought it, it felt even better. There was no material separating them, and flesh finally came against flesh.

Soft curves against hard muscle.

Woman against man.

Seer against dragon.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, buried her nose in the spicy scent of his neck, ground her hips, and took him deeper still. Instead of taking her hard this time, he wrapped her up in his strong arms, held her as tightly as she held him, and moved with her, entrenched in every sensation they pulled from one another. They loved slowly, merging in ways that transcended flesh yet were still grounded in desire.

Raw lust.

Pounding hearts.

Soul-drenched love.

Then, to be expected, as pleasure swelled inside them again, it morphed into more friction as they struggled to get closer. Their skin slicked with sweat, and they moved faster and faster until her breath caught in a moment that felt like it spanned across time, and she let go in a blinding light of release.

One that showed her almost more than she was ready for.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:52 am

jorn KNEW TWO things as Rune cried out in pleasure, and he exploded deep inside her yet again. He would never let her go now he'd felt the extraordinary pleasure of lying with her and that, this time, their lovemaking had shown her something just like the standing stones had.

“What is it, min lille elskling ?” he said softly once he could find his voice. He cupped the back of her head when her tears trickled down his neck where she'd buried her face during passion, as eager to breathe him in as he was her.

“Change,” she whispered hoarsely. “So much change. Too much change.”

While tempted to ask what that meant, he knew better. She would not tell him. If she did, it would only ever be what she felt he needed to know. What could not alter fate. Yet this time felt more personal as if it had to do with the two of them, so he had to try.

“Tell me.” He tilted her chin until her teary gaze met his and continued soothing her by stroking her gently here and there, offering comfort where she needed it most. From the moment he'd first kissed her, his inner beast understood her body. What eased her tension and brought her the most pleasure.

“I cannot tell you,” she whispered, looking at him with her heart in her eyes. “You know that.”

“I do,” he conceded, doing his best to set aside the indescribable feeling of her tight sheath still pulsing around him despite her grief. How intensely her body responded to his. “Do I not have the right to know my fate, though? The fate of the woman I

love? My mate?"

"Not if it could change what I feel coming." She cupped his cheek. "Because some things are bigger than even us, min store kj?rlighet. Some things have to matter more."

"Nothing matters more than you," he said because it was true. He searched her eyes. "Surely you know that, Rune. Feel that." He shook his head, refusing to let fate get in the way of them finally being together. He pressed his hand over his heart. "This." Then, he pressed it over her heart. "And this, our heartbeats as one, matter more to me than anything. They always have and always will."

Rune offered a small, wobbly smile and placed her hand over his. "You have my heart." She rested her other hand over his heart. "As I have yours and they will always beat as one, true flames, final flames, my love." She shook her head. "Nothing can extinguish final flames as they are eternal."

He wasn't entirely sure what to make of her answer other than it was cryptic in the ways of seers and gods. Of prophecy and seeing the end before things had even begun.

He knew that was all she would give him for now because, despite seeing more inside her mind than he had before, it would only ever be as far as her divinity allowed. His safety and the fate of so many would always come first.

"Just love me, jorn," she whispered, her voice ragged with emotion. "For now, just hold me in your arms and love me."

Understanding there would be no more answers and needing to comfort her above all else, he did as asked, and loved her. Over and over, as morning turned to afternoon and afternoon to dusk. Cold wind and icy snow pellets replaced the sun just as she'd

foreseen and battered the animal skin surrounding them.

He barely caught any of it, though, but lost himself in Rune and the endless waves of intense pleasure she brought him. Nothing felt like being inside her and filling her with seed time and time again. Nothing so primal yet deeply stirring to his soul. She was everything and more to him as she let go in his arms and gave herself to him. Sometimes, she rode him, and other times, he took her from behind, enjoying the raw, animalistic way of taking her like a dragon, but always, they ended up with their limbs wrapped around each other, struggling to get closer.

They must have drifted off in each other's arms at some point because he stirred awake when thunder cracked overhead. For the first time ever, he was startled to find Rune awake before him, sitting at the tent opening, staring into the darkness.

"We have to go soon," she said softly, sensing he had awoken. "We have to be somewhere."

"Where?" he asked, concerned because she seemed to be in some sort of trance or perhaps even caught in a dream or memory. He chanted them into clothing and wrapped a fur around her. "Where do we need to be, Rune?"

She pointed into the woodland and whispered, "That way."

Everything morphed around them when she said it, and he was no longer crouched in the tent behind her but back in their nightmare, surrounded by verdant trees. Back in another memory. A different era.

Another life.

The only difference now? He could see so much more, from the standing stones just through the woodland to the churning storm overhead. One not born of violent

weather but of the gods.

Of Valhalla, fate, and the Nine Worlds.

“Yet born of darkness too,” Rune said softly as he tried to pull her into his arms but could not in this otherworldly place. “A time between times.” Her gaze drifted to an area no larger than the simmering remnants of a sizeable bonfire. “The true onset of the Age of Embers.”

No sooner did she say it than ear-piercing thunder cracked overhead, shaking the ground, and a lightning bolt crashed into the same tree from his nightmare, only this time, things unfolded differently.

He didn’t lose Rune to flames and darkness any more than she lost him.

Rather, she slipped her hands into his, and her dark, luminous gaze rose to his face, connecting with his eyes as the lightning ran the length of the tree trunk, zigzagged across the forest floor, and sizzled out between them.

“I do not understand,” he said softly, confused by how a nightmare could transform so much.

“Because there is a nightmare within it,” she said just as softly, following his thoughts. “Yet there is so much more.”

Again, her words seemed to ignite what happened next because, one by one, five small fiery rings ignited where they held hands, and flames shaped much like an ivy leaf, or a heart as their twenty-first-century matriarchs would put it, sparked inside another fiery ring over their heads. Something in their era that symbolized fidelity and devotion.

“Final flames.” Her tender gaze never left his face. “Born of love and embers.”

As the fiery circles faded, the embers rose like sparks on the wind, and Rune kept speaking, but for some reason, her voice grew further and further away, impossible to make out. Panicked by the sensation and thought of her drifting away from him through time and space, as though a thousand years spanned between them, he tried to grab hold of her only to bolt awake in their tent.

“Rune,” he cried out, only to find her sitting beside him, watching him with a small peaceful smile. A fire crackled, and food and drink awaited him.

“Good morn.” Her skin was aglow in a way he hoped had more to do with their lovemaking than anything else. “How are you feeling?”

“Confused.” He sat up, glad to see her alive, well, and right here. So glad, he ignored the food, pulled her onto his lap, buried his face in the crook of her neck, and inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. “And grateful you are still right here when I thought you were drifting away from me.”

“Yet I did not,” she murmured, dropping a soft kiss on his temple. “And if I ever did, min store kj?rlighet, I would find my way back to you, whether in this life or another.”

Her words might sound comforting enough, but he knew well the double meanings that could come out of a seer’s lovely mouth, never mind a goddess’s.

“What was that, Rune?” He dropped kisses along her jawline and brushed his lips across hers, needing to taste her before he cupped her cheek and met her eyes. “What did we just witness? Why did we lose each other in our nightmare only to find each other at the true onset of the Age of Embers, as you called it?”

Or at least he hoped they had truly found one another because his inner beast felt on edge in a way that made it hard to see a clear path from everything they'd just witnessed. Then again, the path of a seer and goddess was never entirely clear to a dragon.

Even to the dragon who loved her desperately.

“As I said, we will never truly lose each other.” Rune pressed her lips against his palm before cupping his cheek, too. “Because I will never stop loving you.” She brushed her lips across his in return and traced his jawline and beard as if memorizing the cut of his features. “Not ever, jorn.”

“Nor I, you,” he swore despite the flicker of sadness he felt deep within her. A place only his dragon was allowed. Though difficult to push past his lips, he forced himself to say the words because she deserved comfort and to know his love and devotion to her was undying. “I will gladly follow you from life to life if we are not destined to finish our days together, Rune. Will—”

She put a finger to his lips before he could say more. “Speak not of destiny and fate, but trust me always, ja ? Know that...” She paused for a moment and seemed to search for the right words. Her loving gaze never left his face. “Know that wherever I might end up as time goes on, I will make my way back to you.”

While she said it and meant it, he couldn't help but wonder if she trusted her own words because there was a hesitation in her soul that told him she worried about what stood between today and tomorrow.

What the future held.

Something he began to question when a commotion resounded outside their tent that proved unrest was no longer in their dreams and nightmares but very much here and

now.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:52 am

“ B E CAREFUL, joRN,” Rune warned when they heard a commotion outside their tent then the roar of battle. Fighting she had known was coming but hadn’t expected it to be here in the woodland so close to where they were. But then the gods were strange like that, understanding their fates far better than she.

While Rune could have hidden them within magic, she knew the moment jorN looked out and saw a handful of his father’s men clashing with Zane’s warriors, he would step in and try to reason things out.

“Stay here,” jorN said around clenched teeth. He chanted himself into supple leather suited for potential battle, grabbed his axe, and raced outside.

Meanwhile, Rune chanted the tent away and stood unseen, watching sadly as fate unfolded. She could only be grateful they were in the Forest of Memories, where shifters were wary of embracing their dragons, so they fought as men.

All men jorN and Rune had known since childhood.

“What is the meaning of this?” jorN roared, striding toward the fighting men, his inner beast blazing in his eyes. “Lay down your weapons, for we are allies!”

“Not anymore,” one of Knud’s men growled, swiping his axe at Zane’s man, only for Zane’s warrior to duck and slam into him, bringing them to the ground.

“ Why ?” jorN roared even louder at the furious warriors going at each other. “Why are we not still allies?”

Her heart leapt into her throat when he put himself between two fighting men and used the flat of his axe to stop one of his father's men from driving his sword into one of Zane's warriors.

"Have you chosen the enemy over your own then, jorn?" Knud's man seethed, his dragon eyes flaring at him over their crossed blades.

jorn's dragon eyes flared back. "He is my own as you are my own."

"Again, not anymore," another of Zane's men fumed, driving his blade through the side of the warrior jorn had just stopped.

jorn's eyes widened in disbelief as the man he'd stopped fell to his knees, and Knud's five remaining warriors were taken down in a well-orchestrated slaughter before jorn could stop them.

"No," jorn roared but stilled when a blade came to his throat and his lower back, held by two different warriors and in locations that would be fatal.

Rune swallowed hard and bit back tears, rallying her inner strength to stay away. Moreover, forcing herself to keep from downing any who dared harm jorn in one magical swoop because this moment had to happen.

"Where do you stand, jorn?" the warrior with his blade to jorn's neck growled. "With your father, who so ruthlessly killed Zane's mate, or with Zane, who did little more than retaliate and get justice?"

"I do not understand," jorn said through clenched teeth, his narrowed gaze remaining on the warrior before him. Rune sensed him mapping how he would down all six men if he moved fast enough but worried, as he always did, that she might be left vulnerable if he failed.

“Have you not heard?” the warrior with the blade to jor’s back said, his voice dubious. “I find that hard to believe when you are related to the enemy and therefore more connected to his dragon than most.”

“Yet I have not heard,” jor ground out, narrowing his eyes over his shoulder at the man with a blade to his back. “Although I hesitate to believe any warrior, be they Zane’s or my father’s, who would stab a man in the back and deny him an honorable death. Deny him a seat at Odin’s table in Valhalla. Especially a man I know to be a good one and a longtime ally.”

The warrior’s gaze lingered on jor’s face for a long, drawn-out moment as he weighed how to handle things. Would he end the fates and lives of so many here and now? Because it would be that if he took Rune’s love from her. She was strong, but not that strong. Not ever if jor’s life was snuffed out. May the gods strike her down for thinking it, never mind executing it, but it could all go very wrong if the warrior with his blade to jor’s back didn’t make the right decision.

Even if it meant the loss of so very much—things more important and far bigger than anyone realized—if things didn’t go as she hoped and jor was killed, the wrath she would reap upon them would be enormous. Forget holding back and rising above it because she was a demi-god. She would lay waste to these men in unfathomable ways because righteous divinity and seductive seer aside, she still possessed a dash of Fire Demon, and nobody wanted to mess with that.

The moment lingered too long for her taste as Zane’s man decided how to handle jor, the seconds ticking by in a lethal dance before, fortunately for him, he made the right decision and stepped away, gesturing to the others to lower their weapons, too.

“Because you defended one of our own against your father’s man, we will not battle this day.” The warrior sheathed his blade. “But you will have to make a choice, and soon, jor, for your father’s commander killed Zane’s mate, and, in turn, Zane’s

commander killed your father's mate, so war has begun."

Before Jörn had a chance to respond, Zane's men melted into the woodland, leaving him alone amid six slain warriors he had once called friend. When he fell to a knee in grief and lowered his head, she went to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. There were no words to express how sad she felt for him, those who had fallen, or what had begun.

"Yet you need find your words," Jörn said roughly. He stood and frowned at her. "What is this, Rune? What has begun? Is this the true onset of the Age of Embers?"

"It is." She rested her hand against his chest and gazed into his eyes with all the sorrow she felt. "Yet it will be seven long years before the embers rise and fate takes everyone where it will. I'll tell you more, but first, we must see to the dead and wish them a safe journey to Valhalla, for they have earned it this day."

Though desperate to understand what was happening, Jörn had just as much respect for the dead as she, so in the way of Viking dragons, he helped her lay out the bodies with their blade in hand so they might carry it to their All-Father. They then covered them with stones, as setting them adrift on the sea in a fiery pyre was not an option from so high up in the mountains.

After praying to the gods over the fallen, Rune chanted the two of them back to the home of the seers, Mt. Galdhøpiggen's Peak, and Jörn pulled her onto his lap in front of a small fire. As always, a light layer of fog swirled over the floor, forever giving her glimpses of the past and future. The sun peeked out here and there from behind black-bellied clouds, dabbling the sea in flickering gold light.

"After today, things are going to change rapidly, min store kjærlighet," she said softly, manifesting a cup of ale on the small wooden table beside them lest he need it. She knew, however, he would not bury his grief in anything mind-altering but face it

head-on so he might understand. She also knew he was torn between staying with her and going to his father's side. He worried about not just Knud but also his brother, Magnus.

jorn's brow furrowed, a heavy frown settled on his face, and his steady gaze remained on the flames. "What can I expect?"

"The sort of unrest and division you saw today for many years to come." She pressed her lips together against a wave of emotion. "You will have to pick a side, jorn."

"And what of us?" he said, his voice hoarse with emotion when he looked at her. "What becomes of you and I, min lille elskling?"

"That I cannot say other than it will not be for a while." She cupped his cheek, inhaled deeply with just as much emotion, and nodded once. "We have time, jorn."

"Which tells me there will come an end to our time, and you cannot say if we will find our way back to each other." His jaw tightened when she gave no response telling him he was right. Yet his love was as fierce for her as hers was for him, so he said all he could. What she'd said mere hours before. "I can tell you, as you have told me, we will find our way back to each other because you are my mate, and I love you, my final flame."

"And I, you, my final flame," she swore, closing her mouth over his because that was all she could do now. Not just that but she wanted to, craving his taste as if it had been gone from her too long, even if it had only been mere hours. His life had nearly been taken, so these precious moments meant more now than ever.

Feeling the same and needing the escape intimacy could bring, not to mention desperate to be close before they were ripped apart, jorn repositioned her until she straddled him, chanted away their clothing, and sank deep inside her. Their groans

mingled, and pleasure speared them, taking them away from it all, at least for a brief time before he had to leave.

She kissed him deeply after lovemaking, then watched his great black dragon swoop out over the sea toward King Knud's kingdom and into a new future.

The time they had just spent together, wrapped in one another's arms, drowning in pleasure, would eventually become stolen moments, then cease altogether until, by the grace of the gods, they found their way back to each other. Until then, they would find happiness.

More than either could have hoped for, given the darkness ahead.

Kings and kingdoms would fall into disarray, warring and illness would take root, and mayhem would last several long years until the Age of Embers finally caught fire, and King Ulrik was drawn to a woman across time. When that happened, it would begin an era that would either see dragonkind flourish or come to its mighty end in the embers born of its own fire.

Rune would become an intricate part of everything, destined to travel a thousand years into the future to help five women who were so much more than they realized. Better still, she would help five couples and fated mates find each other across time, which would make everything right again or do the very opposite.

Yet there was hope in that.

A chance.

Hope in five more final flames born of the Age of Embers.

How else could it be given she and Jörn's fire was right there at the beginning, leading

the way as a loving, burning, and eternal final flame?

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:52 am

“D ON’T DO IT!” a booming voice roared. “Don’t leave me!”

Keira tried to make out the voice. Was it male? Female? All she knew was it held great power. Wanted to keep her safe. Away from where she had no choice but to go.

A fiery maelstrom she raced toward year after year. Over and over.

I’ll stay this time , she swore. I’ll listen to the voice and stay safe.

“Stay with me!” it repeated. “Don’t go!”

She would this time. Had to. Otherwise, she would face a fiery death.

“I have to!” she cried, torn between the voice and what she had to do.

Between life and death. The voice and unthinkable pain.

“Yet you must not,” the voice rumbled, coming through clearly as masculine for the first time. “For jeg kan ikke redde deg fra dette !”

“I know you cannot save me from this,” she gasped, somehow understanding him. Overwhelmed by sudden emotion, she spun, but he wasn’t there. “Where are you?”

Even though she knew she had to, she warred against the compulsion to race into the flames billowing through the forest. Did not want to conquer the ring of fire getting ready to swallow her, nor reach the flaming crown at its base and witness the awful embers swirling within. The remnants of a faceless death.

Only now, when she glanced that way again, there was a face. Two faces. Blurry profiles of a man and woman facing one another between the branches and twisting roots of a tree. She blinked and tried to make them out, but they grew harder to see.

“No,” he roared from behind her moments before fire streamed over her head at the fiery ring. Not just any fire, either.

His fire because he was a dragon ?

She tried to spin again and finally lay eyes on the person behind the voice, but it was too late. The same urge that always overtook her became too strong, and she raced at the incoming flames, determined to extinguish the destruction.

Determined to face a fight, she always lost.

Close. Closer. Cloying smoke.

Then, whoosh , just like always, she catapulted straight into hell.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:52 am

Winter Harbor, Maine

2023

KEIRA SCREAMED IN pain and bolted upright only to discover she wasn't going up in flames and choking on burning, oxygen-deprived smoke but dragging in cool, refreshing air. Out of habit, despite the time of year, she'd left the hotel window open for this very reason, grateful as nausea abated as quickly as it had swelled.

Right on time, her phone rang.

She answered the video call from her best friend, Athena, and managed a wobbly smile. "How do you do that, sweetie?"

"Know when you're waking from one of your nightmares and need some grounding?" Athena issued a warm, comforting smile and shrugged. "Just one of those pesky gifts we don't like talking about, I suppose."

By pesky, she meant side effects of their inner beasts. A part of them they would rather not dwell on too much, and with good reason. After all, she and Athena had met years ago in an online forum for dragons with fire problems. Flaming issues, they liked to joke. Either they hated or loved it a little too much and were considered unstable by the rest of their kind.

In Keira's case, she was infatuated with putting out fires, so she became a firefighter. A bit of a no-no for their breed as they took pride in creating fire, not dousing it. Either way, she had only ever shifted once when she was younger and hated it.

Especially the fire-breathing part.

“Ah, yes, pesky gifts,” she muttered, yawning. “I’m not sure I have any of those.”

“Of course you do.” Athena's brilliant blue eyes were more prominent than usual behind her thick corrective lenses as she pushed her black horn-rimmed glasses up her nose. “You’ve just become really good at suppressing them.” She eyed Keira’s hair and chuckled. “Mostly.”

“Hell.” Keira blew a stubborn crimson curl out of her eye that hadn’t been there the night before, sighed, and rested the phone against the lamp on the bedside table. “Damn stubborn hair.”

She tried her magical best to keep it short and dark, but it always returned to its normal mayhem within a few weeks. So, with another fed-up sigh, she clipped up her long, red, moody curls and grumbled under her breath because she wouldn’t be able to fix them for a few days. A worlds-worst-hair reminder her inner beast enjoyed inflicting on her.

“I never understood why you hate it so much.” Athena headed outside and kept talking. “Most women would die for your hair. Especially me! To have all those long, wild, luxurious curls that, depending on your mood, can’t decide what color they want to be. And every last shade, from the light red to the dark, looks stunning against your skin color. They really do.”

Unlike Athena—curious scientist that she was—Keira had never bothered with a DNA test but imagined she was a variety of nationalities based on the light bronze hue of her skin. Generally speaking, she’d never been one to fuss over her looks and couldn’t care less how men saw her. The hair, however, had been a nuisance on the job, so she did her best to keep it short and practical.

She was about to respond, but Athena beat her to it when her eyes lit up. “Guess

who's heading for his car too?" She grinned and tucked a lock of smooth black hair behind her ear. "I'm going to say hello to him before heading north. See you soon!"

"Drive safe," she tried to say, but it was too late. Athena had spotted the hot guy who just moved in next door. At least hot in her eyes with his crooked wire-rimmed glasses and studious nature.

Keira checked the time only to realize she needed to get going, too. As usual, when she thought about the chalet she and her friends would rent over the next few months, a rush of excitement shot through her. When she had seen the listing, she'd had an overwhelming feeling it would be the perfect getaway for them. Even though most people traveled to these parts during the summer, they liked the chill of winter. What better place to find that than in coastal Maine?

Even better? An Alberta Clipper was passing through with the potential for a more significant snowstorm later in the week. Her kind of weather. She loved everything about it, including driving in it. So, even though she wasn't going all that far after she bundled up, she thoroughly enjoyed the slippery drive north through Winter Harbor.

A commute made all that much better by her building anticipation.

She had parked in front of the chalet for hours yesterday, staring at it, but hadn't gotten out, so the owner didn't spy nosy footsteps in the snow today. An owner who, as it turned out, would be staying in the log cabin just up the street. According to Rune's emails, she had been out of town and felt more comfortable being at the spacious oceanside chalet when Keira first arrived.

"Oh, wow ," she whispered when she pulled into the driveway. How had Rune accomplished so much in so little time? The driveway and walkway had been shoveled, and the home was tastefully decorated in spruce and soft white twinkling Christmas lights.

She was just about to knock on the front door when it swung open, and a stunning woman with shimmering ebony hair and fair skin smiled. “You must be Keira.”

Her voice was as warm and soothing as her smile.

“I am.” She couldn’t help but smile, too, if for no other reason than the strange sense of familiarity she felt toward her new landlord. Not just at the sight of her but the sound of her accent. One she couldn’t quite place. Or could she? “And you must be Rune.”

“I am.” Rune stepped back and welcomed her into the cinnamon and apple-scented home with well-polished hardwood floors. “I apologize that we were unable to speak sooner. The connection between my ancestral home and here can be a tad...how do you say, vanskelig ? h?re. Krapp .”

A chill washed over her, and she stopped short, understanding the words perfectly. “Hard to hear. Choppy.” Startled because the male dragon in her nightmare had just spoken the same language, she looked at Rune. “What language is that?” Then, before she could stop herself, “And why do I understand it?”

“It’s Norse.” An odd yet comforting warmth spread through her when Rune rested her hand on Keira’s shoulder before helping her out of her down jacket. “As to understanding it, I’m afraid I cannot say.”

“Why do I get the feeling that isn’t true?” she whispered, only to catch something out of the corner of her eye in the darkened recesses of the hallway. A blink later, it was gone, but she could have sworn she’d seen the outline of a tiny red dragon.

“Come.” Rune steered her down the hallway. “Let us get you settled in before Athena arrives. I wasn’t sure what everyone celebrated at this time of year, so I decorated with diversity in hopes of making all feel welcome.”

Her jaw dropped when Rune led her into an open-concept, top-of-the-line kitchen rich with mahogany and stainless steel that sidled a massive living room with floor-to-ceiling windows. A towering Christmas tree twinkled alongside a crackling fire, Hanukkah candles, Kwanzaa decorations, plus a variety of other festive trinkets.

That wasn't what caught her attention, though.

Rather, her gaze went straight to a variety of huge, lifelike paintings of Viking ships with dragons sailing over them. "You know what we are, don't you?" she murmured, drifting without realizing she moved when the towering ash tree beyond the windows caught her attention. "That's it. That's the tree from my nightmare..."

The tree that had appeared in the fiery ring.

Although bulb-free, the impressive ash emitted a lovely golden glow that seemed to spread across the whole of Frenchman Bay. Light she instinctually knew most couldn't see.

"It is the Yggdrasil," Rune said softly, respectfully, joining her at the window. "And ja, I know what you are, my friend."

"Yet, you aren't dragon." If she wasn't mistaken, Rune grew more beautiful by the moment. Her deep, dark chocolate eyes almost seemed a mysterious shade of black. "Are you?"

"No." Rune handed Keira a chilled bottle of her favorite beer. One she hadn't seen her grab from the refrigerator but instead magically appeared out of thin air. "But I am a friend to your kind."

Every instinct told her to go on high alert, but whatever juju Rune possessed kept her calm and unafraid. Kept her from hightailing it out of there because somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew most would. Whatever Rune was, she was more powerful

than a dragon shifter. Far more powerful. And that, of course, would apply to a dragon that embraced magic regularly to begin with.

Which was definitely not Keira.

She was about to question Rune further when her phone rang. It was John, a friend and fellow firefighter, no doubt checking in to make sure she'd made it safely. Rather than answer, she'd text him when she had a chance. No sooner did she pocket her phone when it rang again. This time, it was another co-worker, Alex. She shot off a text to both of them that she was okay before the phone rang again.

Cameron.

Concerned by the sudden influx of calls, she answered. Maybe someone had gotten hurt on the job. "Hey, Cameron, everyone okay?"

"Yeah." She heard the amusement in his voice. "Just glad you decided to pick up for me and not them."

Even though they were just friends, he was the biggest flirt of the bunch.

"I picked up because I thought someone was hurt." She bit back a smile because she loved every last one of them and rolled her eyes. "Tell everyone I'm safe. Talk to you guys later."

She hung up and pocketed her phone before he could reply.

"I imagine that happens often—" knowing amusement flickered in Rune's thickly lashed eyes— "especially if you grow distressed."

When Keira frowned in confusion, Rune went on.

“Whether you realize it or not, you are stunning, Keira.” Rune touched one of her damnable curls that had escaped. “More than that, you are one of them in your own way. More comfortable among men, and they sense that. Like you even more for it.” Her gaze swept over Keira. “I cannot imagine what you do to those poor humans you think mere friends. Yet they, like male dragons, are prone to being more protective of you and clearly sense your distress on some subliminal level.”

“I highly doubt that,” she assured, saying more than intended, but Rune had a way about her. Not to mention, Keira preferred bluntness to skirting around things. “And just to be clear, I don’t sleep with co-workers. Our relationships are purely platonic.” She shook her head. “And I sure as heck don’t sleep with dragons.”

The mere thought of it made her queasy. Why would she ever be attracted to a dragon? They created the one element she made a living at extinguishing.

Rune said nothing to that but urged her to enjoy her ale, as she called it, and make herself at home. Typically, Keira would have grown confrontational by now, but again, something about Rune kept her alarm at bay as she sipped her beer and kept eyeing everything, including the tree outside.

That is until her gaze wandered to a sizeable portrait hanging above the fireplace mantle. A spiked helmet was affixed to the wall on one side and an equally daunting sword on the other. Weapons and a portrait she could have sworn hadn’t been there moments before.

The painting depicted Viking ships that seemed mightier than all the rest as they faced off on a dark, stormy sea. Their striped sails billowed in the wind, and crowned men stood at their helms. Although impossible to see clearly from a distance, they were fierce in a way that made her grow uncomfortably warm.

“It is quite the portrait, is it not?” Rune’s gaze never left Keira. “Terrifying yet incredibly alluring all at once...just as fire can be...just as he can be...”

“Who?” Her attention shot from the warrior on the left ship to Rune. “Who is he?” Almost as if trying to break free from a waking dream, she blinked a few times. “And why is that tree outside glowing?” She frowned and shook her head. “Better still, who are you again? Because I've never felt anything like you.”

Once more, Rune was about to respond when they were interrupted.

This time, by the doorbell.

“Ah, there she is.” Rune smiled, took Keira’s empty beer, and handed her a full, icy-cold one before heading for the door.

What the? Keira frowned at the empty bottle Rune tossed in the recycling bin. As far as she knew, she’d only taken a few sips from it.

“Hi,” came Athena’s voice from down the hall. “I'm Keira's friend, Athena.”

How the hell had her friend made a two-hour drive on messy roads so quickly? More and more confused, she glanced at her phone only to nearly drop it when she discovered almost three hours had passed since she'd arrived. Impossible. She had been here maybe ten minutes, tops.

For the first time in longer than she could remember, her vision hazed red with her inner beast as she strode to the kitchen only to confirm that, yes, Athena was here in record time. No, not record, but impossible time, considering it had passed so quickly.

“Hey, there,” Athena said tentatively, her smile fading when she saw Keira’s dragon eyes. “Are you okay, sweetie?” She went to flick her wrist at Rune, undoubtedly intending to use magic on her to hide Keira’s eyes, but their hostess lowered Athena’s hand and shook her head.

“It’s all right, love. I know she's half dragon.” Rune helped Athena with her blazer-type snow-covered brown jacket and looked at Keira with what could only be described as sympathetic compassion. “Keira is just adjusting to the beginnings of a very unexpected adventure here in Winter Harbor.”

“Don’t you mean vacation?” Athena’s finely arched ebony eyebrows furrowed as she headed Keira's way. “What’s going on?” She frowned from Rune to Keira. “Because you seriously don’t look all right. I’ve never seen you so upset. I’ve never seen you...”

Athena trailed off when something caught her attention over Keira’s shoulder. Something that made no sense at all and seriously ratcheted up Keira's alarm.