



# Mastered by the Viking

## (Bound and Betrothed #6)

**Author:** *Felicity Brandon, Anna Quinn*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Can he prove he loves her, before it's too late?

Shy and reserved, Astrid can't believe that anyone would want her as their bride, let alone a strong and handsome man like J?rgen. She longs to submit to his seductions but knows his interest will wane once he's bedded her.

Daring warrior J?rgen has never lacked for female attention, yet the only woman to wholly capture his heart is Astrid. Though she refuses to accept his intentions are true, J?rgen is determined to demonstrate his devotion.

Uncovering the source of the island's terrible curse together, J?rgen has the chance to win her over. But even if love conquers all, can they convince the others that mortal danger is at hand?

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

## CHAPTER 1

The thirty-first day since the men's shipwreck on the island of Høy

"Hush now. I'm right beside you. There's naught to fear."

Through the haze between sleeping and wakefulness, a gentle touch caressed Jørgen's cheek.

He jerked upright.

Dawn light permeated beneath the door and around the edges of the goatskin curtain at the rear window of the hut, illumination enough to discern Astrid beside him on the bed.

"You're trembling." Sitting up, she laid her hand upon his chest. "Was it... as before? Your dream?"

Jørgen captured her hand with his own, holding it fast over his heavy-beating heart. "Aye... the same." He swallowed, making an effort to steady his breathing.

'Twas always the same—tossed upon the sea, an invidious mist, the splinter of wood, and soul-rending screams. Cries that carried him from the ship, through darkness to visions that could not be memories—for too much was unfamiliar.

Voices of men he'd never met but whose fear he could taste. Faces contorted with pain, his and theirs combined, then an endless void, pressing upon him, blackening

his blood.

J?rgen clutched at his head.

Was this madness? Coursing through him by night, breathing upon his neck by day. He was never rid of it—this feeling of something close but out of reach. Whispers in the dark.

He'd woken after the wreck without any discernible injury upon his body, but his mind...

“You can tell me. ‘Tis the best way to dispel sleep terrors. It’s all I want... for you to find peace within yourself,” Astrid soothed.

If she only knew.

Her hand remained upon his chest. Beneath her touch, his skin prickled, his senses heightened by her proximity. The flame she ignited in him could not be assuaged by comforting words, any more than his nightmares could be dispelled.

This woman with hair that glints gold, her gaze as intense as a storm-ravaged sea. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes upon. Perfection in the way she moves, in the timbre of her voice, in how she looks at me.

No matter that he was a stranger, that she knew nothing of his past.

A shudder ran through him.

The torments of his dreams were nothing in comparison to the torture of holding himself back from all he desired of Astrid. He wanted her with a fierceness he could hardly control.

Night after night, permitted to cradle her in his arms, to devour her subtle, womanly scent, aware of her slenderness and her curves—yet all forbidden to him.

He wanted not just to embrace while whispering lovers' words but to push her legs wide and sink into her warmth, to thrust and thrust, losing himself in the sensation that no amount of self-pleasuring could emulate.

He battled to contain that hunger.

A battle he'd won... so far.

He didn't know how much longer he could restrain the impulse to take her... not when she lay beside him so invitingly, with nothing between their bodies but her flimsy shift. Not when she touched him as she did, with gentle fingertips that he yearned to trail lower, to take his arousal in hand, and....

But she was a virgin maid.

He'd known from the first, long before she'd admitted as much. Untouched in all the ways. Never kissed even—upon those sweet lips or anywhere else.

Knowing so made him want her all the more, despite his promise. From the start, he said he'd never force himself upon her. In return, she assented not to keep him bound.

The secret was theirs. Her chastity and his compliance.

A secret it took all his will to respect.

She'd been entirely candid about the wreck and his fellow men of Skálavík—lost and found. Candid, too, about the purpose for which he'd been given to her and the circumstances that obliged it—the illness that had brought about the women's plight,

left alone upon the strange island.

There were details she skimmed over, but he sensed 'twas because they were as puzzling to her as they were to him.

Perhaps there was more, something she was afraid to tell him. He could only hope those confidences would come in time, as her willingness would to take him as her lover.

It was why he was there, after all—to put a child inside her.

Her fear would have to be overcome.

As for the restraints upon him, life was becoming easier. He, Rutger, and Eldberg gained greater freedoms by the day, moving among the women unchallenged, for the most part. All the better for them to labor.

He'd not yet spoken with Gunnar nor with that poor sod Viggo, who was now blind, he'd been told. Not with Rangvald either, though that was no loss in his mind. J?rgen had never liked him, but he'd worked alongside Rangvald four years or more within Eldberg's guard. If a man's eyes were windows to the soul, Rangvald's was darker than J?rgen had desire to become familiar with.

"Please, rest." Astrid's expression was beseeching. She exerted subtle pressure, pushing him back upon the mattress.

As he gave in, she nestled at his side, giving a sigh of contentment. She lay still, but he could not.

I can no longer act as if I'm made of wood.

Turning to face her, he rested his hand upon her waist. Immediately, she stiffened.

“Don’t be afraid.” J?rgen’s arousal was not fully hard but sufficiently emboldened for her to sense it. For all his promises, it was the time to broach the chasm between them. They could not continue as they were.

“I can’t help it.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“I’d never cause you pain.” J?rgen’s hand shifted to the small of her back, imperceptibly drawing himself closer.

“Not intentionally, perhaps, but...”

“It doesn’t need to hurt.” The thump in J?rgen’s chest hastened.

She was cautious, but her will was weakening. She wanted him to pursue her, he was certain.

“You trust me?” He brushed his lips on her forehead.

“I want to, but...”

“You’ve only to say the word, and I’ll cease, but I don’t think you’ll want that. Not once I’ve begun.” Bringing his other hand to her breast, J?rgen skimmed over her nipple through the gauzy shift.

Astrid drew breath sharply but didn’t retreat.

That’s it, my beauty. Let me teach you how good this can be.

He moved to kiss her mouth, but she turned her cheek hastily.

She was naturally shy. Undoubtedly wary.

It didn't deter him.

A woman might refuse a simple kiss while still enslaved by her baser impulses. He knew exactly how to play that game. How to entice and seduce. How to make the coyest of maids shiver with delight.

Moving lower, J?rgen kissed her breasts through the fabric, being careful not to bite or suck too hard.

Not this time. No matter how much you want to.

Take things slowly.

Once she grows accustomed, 'twill be she begging for rougher couplings.

Her body is made for pleasure.

Feeling her nipples tauten brought a responding excitement to his loins. She made some sound of protest, but her hips angled toward him, so his cock rubbed upon her thigh.

Oh, yes!

His balls drew tighter.

She was going to let him do what was inevitable.

Progressing down her belly, he took his kisses to her mound, then lifted her shift.

“J?rgen, don’t! I can’t!” Wriggling, she strained against his shoulders.

Nonetheless, her legs parted as his mouth claimed her. She offered no resistance as he took his place there betwixt her soft thighs.

“By the gods, you’re beautiful.” Lathing her, he teased, flicking the tiny bud, then extended his tongue, letting it be the first part of him to enter her.

He could not suppress his groan.

‘Twill be so good inside her.

Perhaps the best way is to breach her quickly. Let the pain be overcome in an unexpected rush.

Then, he might hold himself still while her body grew accustomed to the sensation of being filled. He could do that, couldn’t he?

J?rgen wasn’t sure.

Dropping his hand, he encircled his girth, rubbing back and forth as his tongue imitated the deed. He was so close. It would take but one blinding thrust to penetrate, to soak her with his cum.

A dousing of seed changed a woman’s sheath, he’d heard said, making it more receptive. Once she was over the shock, she might willingly submit to more of what he had in mind.

Fucking was something he was good at, after all.

Even when spent, his cock stayed hard. He could make a woman reach her climax



three times or more before his sacs were ready to empty again. Only after that second coming did his member need a little more time and attention to recuperate.

Back in Skálavík, his reputation on that score earned him as much company as he ever could desire. Women aplenty had sampled his skills. On some memorable occasions, more than one at a time...

Astrid twisted against the incursion of his tongue and the nuzzling of his nose against her mound. She pushed against his head, though her thighs clenched, engaging him.

She was close herself. He knew the signs.

Her breath came in faster gasps, and her scent was more potent—milk and honey overlaid with the salted tang of the sea. She was moaning, murmuring something to herself.

Women were usually babbling all manner of filth by that point, telling him what they wanted—harder, faster, rougher—not just his mouth but his fingers and his cock, of course. A good tongue-lashing and he had them articulating every wicked thought in their heads.

Had him surrendering to all the wicked thoughts in his head, too.

Not that any of it was truly heinous.

Even a married woman could dabble discreetly on the side. A good fucking up the arse put paid to any worry of an unwanted child.

Ah, yes, there was nothing a woman wouldn't do with the right motivation.

Throwing back the furs, Jørgen fisted himself harder. He wished the room was

lighter. He'd like to look upon Astrid's pretty slit while he licked, watching her nub swell and darken and seeing the cream drip from her sheath, knowing he was responsible. He wanted to watch her face when he pushed her over the brink.

Just thinking about that was tipping him dangerously close.

He was going to...

Rising above her, his erection parted her fleshy labia. He'd have liked to linger there, teasing her some more, stroking the smooth cockhead over her nub. Fingering her, too, before he lunged, but there was no more time.

No matter how narrow she was, he had to get inside.

Astrid moaned louder, murmuring his name.

Gods, yes!

She wanted him, and it was going to be glorious.

J?rgen was about to make his thrust when there was a crash behind him. The door was flung back on its hinges, leaving him blinking against the flood of light.

"Hard at it, I see." His jarl's voice boomed from the threshold.

Astrid shrieked, slamming her legs closed.

"Get your braies on and follow me. There's work to be done beyond riding your wench." Eldberg gave a bark of laughter.

By the time J?rgen turned back to Astrid, she'd rolled away, her knees drawn up to

her chin. Her shift was yanked over her feet.

Hel's teeth!

J?rgen's jaw clenched near as tight as his fists.

There was to be no pleasure, after all.

### CHAPTER 2

Late that afternoon

Adding a final ladle of water to the tub, Astrid dipped in her toes.

Ah! Sweet Freya! 'Tis just right.

She wriggled down, adjusting a rolled-up cloth to support her neck. By bending her knees, she could almost entirely submerge herself.

She closed her eyes, letting the warmth of the bath soothe her aching body. Fishing was hard work, dragging net after net. Not that she couldn't manage. She had strong arms, and her technique was good—throwing wide from the stern, then catching the wind in her sail. On a good day, it took only a few hours to fill her baskets.

Except there had been fewer of those days lately.

The fish didn't seem to congregate as close to the island as they once had, obliging her to sail further out, which made everything so much harder. As sturdy as the boat was, its size made it vulnerable to the stronger waves that broke around the outer perimeter of H?y, and she knew better than to risk being overturned.

Locating the soap, she turned it slowly, breathing in the honey and milk aroma as she lathered her hands. 'Twas a new bar, given to her by Signy the day before.

Astrid was all too aware of how the scent of mackerel lingered, and ridding herself of

that was more important than ever.

Now that J?rgen shares my bed.

She sighed wistfully.

Though he's so eager to poke me with his thing, I doubt it would matter if I had a dozen fish strapped about me.

Having a man as handsome as J?rgen lusting after her was flattering, naturally, though she'd an inkling he'd behave the same with any woman who lay beside him at night. 'Twas a wonder she'd kept him at bay so long.

The difficulty was not so much his efforts to copulate with her as her fear over what would happen once she'd given in to his seductions.

She'd seen it before—men telling women all sorts of love nonsense until they gained what they were after. Then, their interest vanished, and they were off, pursuing someone else.

People seemed to assume she didn't notice what went on, but just because she didn't gossip didn't mean she was simple-minded.

J?rgen's attention was focused upon her at present, but she knew how quickly that would change once she'd given herself fully to him. It would be na?ve of her to think otherwise.

Speculation already swirled over who J?rgen might be sent onto when her time with him was complete. Since he'd been working in the settlement, there had been ample opportunity for the women to gain a look at him, and they'd done so avidly. Astrid had seen how they devoured him with their eyes and wasn't deaf to their lewd

comments.

Oh, yes... there were women aplenty who were keen to take him on, and her three cycles of the moon would soon pass. One was already gone.

All the more reason to give in to passion, to find out how it would be—to have your body worshipped in that way, to know what it's like to lie with a man.

Thoughtfully, she rubbed soap lather over her arms.

She'd never imagined herself belonging to any man but her father, and he'd never pressured her into a betrothal. She supposed it had suited him, having her not only working alongside but keeping house. Men weren't interested in her in any case—or none she found attractive.

She knew what people whispered behind her back, not just that the scent of the sea clung to her but that she was strange in some way—too quiet, too shy, and had no conversation unless it was to talk of currents in the water or how to set a sail to take advantage of the wind.

She accepted she was different from other women, but was that entirely bad? If it wasn't for her, who would go out to fish? The job had been that of the men. Now, only she knew how to navigate out of the bay. She'd offered to teach anyone who might like to join her, but none had taken up her invitation.

It had saddened her for a while, but she'd resigned herself to her life as it was.

She caught the fish, took a share to each home, and received something in return. There were many crafts she'd never bothered to learn, for others supplied her with what she needed. Bothild, Hevinda, and Agneta wove fine cloth; Signy and her mother harvested honey; Grethe made her mead and goat's milk cheeses; Hedda

hunted for game; Frida tended her vegetables; and Elin provided them with tonics and healthful potions.

Every woman of the island has their skill, and mine is to go out in the boat.

Even if I do feel lonely at times.

Except that she didn't feel so set apart anymore, not since Jørgen had been around.

Each day, it became harder to resist the way he nuzzled her neck and wound his arms about her waist, the way his hand remained upon hers whenever she handed him something, his fingers lightly brushing her skin.

Irritated, Astrid punched the water.

Who was she kidding? Even knowing Jørgen was glancing her way made her tremble.

She couldn't keep her gaze from straying toward him.

In bed together, oft times, she could hardly breathe for excitement, wrapped in his heat and his earthy scent. Very much aware of his hardness pressed into her bottom—that part designed to go inside her, to make the baby she was intended to have.

She wanted to give in to those feelings, and though her knowledge was scant, she had an idea of what to expect. When the ache grew strong between her legs, she was supposed to let him lie there. There was a channel from which her monthly blood flowed, and that was where his phallus would enter.

What he would do once he was inside, she wasn't entirely sure. She'd seen the pigs and goats mounting one another, but it was all over so rapidly, there was hardly a

chance to discern the mechanics.

J?rgen had told her it would be pleasurable, that it wouldn't truly hurt or, at least, not for long. She wasn't sure she believed him. It was both frightening and exciting to think of his thickness pushing into her body. Even more frightening to think of the baby that might grow—of carrying it, then delivering its huge head through that same tiny place.

What if the child ripped her in two?

It must happen sometimes because there was always much screaming, and not everyone survived the ordeal. She'd tried to find out about it, but the older women refused to enlighten her, telling her 'twas something she needn't worry herself over yet.

Even if she didn't die, she'd be left with a baby to look after. No doubt, someone would help her, but the ultimate responsibility would be hers. Would she be a good mother?

For the love of Freya, it was too much!

First, she thought she wanted something, then she decided not, only to find herself wavering again.

Perhaps Elin was right.

The last time Astrid had seen her, she'd confided a little of her worry.

Elin had said some things needed to be 'felt' rather than turned over in the mind, but she should take the time she needed to feel comfortable with J?rgen. She'd promised that Astrid would know when the moment was right.



Had that time come?

That morning, when J?rgen had tried to kiss her upon the mouth, she'd turned away, fearful of him discovering how much she longed for him. Her words could refuse him, but her lips would surely give her away, and she wouldn't allow that to happen—for J?rgen to discover the extent of her rapture over him.

'Twould be humiliating.

He'd surely pity her—the silly young girl mistaking lust for heart-filled sweetness.

When he went to his next chosen mate, they might lie together and laugh over how gullible Astrid had swooned in his arms.

Even so, she'd come close to submitting.

Never had she known such feelings as when he'd kissed her breasts and between her legs.

Holy Freyja!

His tongue inside her had near made her scream, bringing with it such a haze that she cared not for anyone or anything else in all the world—only that J?rgen wanted her, and she wanted him.

His finger had felt awkward, but at the same time, she'd needed him to push deeper. A yearning had taken hold to let him do as he willed, even if it did hurt.

Elin had warned her that there might be bleeding but that there wouldn't be any real harm, and once she was used to the act, her body would crave more.

Running her hands over her breasts, Astrid thought back to when J?rgen had done so—the way he'd covered her with his whole hand, cradling her flesh almost reverentially. When he'd teased his thumb against her nipple, a stab had shot through her, low and deep, painful and pleasurable at the same time, and she'd almost grabbed his head to claim the kiss she'd previously denied.

She pinched her nipples, imagining his mouth upon them, kissing softly at first, then harder, tugging with his lips, then his teeth.

A groan escaped her.

Oh, yes, she did crave it.

Not just the roughness of his mouth but his heaviness over her. She wanted his thigh to push her legs apart and for him to nudge his arousal where his tongue had licked. Even if it hurt, she wanted it—to feel his girth stretching her, to have her closer to him than any other.

Joined together, they would mate, and she'd know how it was to be loved by a man's body.

He would be hers.

With one hand upon her breast, she slid the other down to cup her mound and slipped her finger within, finding the place J?rgen had centered upon.

Astrid stroked, the ache there becoming a determined throb. When J?rgen was inside her, would his phallus caress that place as his tongue had done?

She tried to imagine but could not.

Perhaps she needed his tongue, after all.

Next time he lay beside her, dare she ask for him to do so again?

Could she be so bold?

To spread her thighs and ask him to kiss her there?

To abandon herself to that pleasure?

She could picture that—having him sup upon her, as if he were a starving man and feeding upon her cream for sustenance. So hungry that he grasped her legs and pushed them wider, refusing to cease until his need was satisfied.

Astrid tweaked her nipple hard, all the while touching herself. In her private fantasy, only her body could quench his thirst.

Only hers.

With a whimper, she shuddered, clenching tight as waves traversed her body. Writhing beneath the water, she gave herself to the man who filled her thoughts.

Someone was watching as Astrid surrendered to pleasure.

J?rgen had returned from his day's work upon the hillside. As he passed the small opening at the rear of the hut, he heard the unmistakable moan of a woman in the throes of sensual delight.

He moved aside the goatskin which hung at the window.

Beside the firepit, Astrid lay in her tub. He was granted a tantalizing glimpse of her

breasts. Her fingers roved there, caressing urgently. Clasp ing one rosy nipple, she pulled it, biting at her lip as she did so. Her other hand was hidden, reaching betwixt her legs. From the hungry sounds escaping her lips, 'twas obvious what was afoot.

Arch ing her back, Astrid unwittingly offered more of her body to his view, raising her hips above the water. By the gods, she was delicious, indulging that wanton part of herself.

A pang, fierce and hot, jolted J?rgen's loins.

Regardless of her virginity, she was passionate. He'd ached to possess what no man had yet claimed, to teach Astrid the wonders she was made for.

Yearning burned through his veins.

A maid so greedy for physical satisfaction needed a man.

He would take her, and when her initial resistance was torn down, she would welcome him inside her body, sheathing him in heat. She would gasp and writhe, undulating beneath him.

J?rgen's mouth was suddenly dry.

He'd savor every moment, and by Thor, he was going to make sure she enjoyed it, too. Could an untried maiden reach her peak the first time of breaching? If 'twas possible, J?rgen was the man to do so.

By the time he was finished with Astrid, she'd be opening her legs to him morning, noon, and night.

Grasping where his cock sprung eager, J?rgen rubbed himself through his braies and

watched as the woman before him succumbed to ecstasy.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:24 am*

### CHAPTER 3

Astrid sat up, sloshing water over the rim of the tub. The room was suddenly flooded with late afternoon sunlight, and without turning, she knew who'd entered.

As he bolted the door behind him, she drew up her knees to her chest.

Blood rushed to her cheeks. Such thoughts she'd been having, and now J?rgen was there!

In her nakedness, she was defenseless.

Something about that sent a thrill through her, as well as fear.

He said nothing. Nevertheless, she was aware of him kneeling behind, leaning in close. His breath stirred the hair at her nape, above which she'd pinned her single plait into a coil. She swallowed as he pressed his lips there so gently, she melted and tipped back her head.

Still, he did not speak, other than to murmur her name, taking his grazing mouth along her hairline toward her ear.

Then, his hands were upon her, kneading the muscles of her neck and her shoulders. His fingertips swept over her back, and his thumbs ran upward, more firmly, on either side of her spine.

Those hands burned with heat, yet they made her shiver.

She pictured them reaching around, covering her breasts, stroking and fondling. She had only to lean backward to resume her relaxed pose, and he would touch her in that way—she was sure of it.

Not just her breasts.

Oh, sweet Freyja!

The temptation to give in consumed her, but her anxiety remained.

Was it what she wanted? To submit to him? To allow him not just to touch her but to consummate this... arrangement.

All the weeks, she'd been afraid of how things would be if she ceded. Was she ready to find out and to deal with the consequences?

A baby, perhaps.

Undoubtedly, J?rgen's attitude changing toward her once he'd gained her compliance.

How swiftly would that happen? As soon as he'd done the deed or the next day? Longer, if she was lucky, but soon enough, he'd be bedding someone else. He certainly wouldn't think of her then. For him, 'twould be as if she never existed.

Astrid clasped her knees tighter.

"You're thirsty from your labors?" she asked awkwardly. "There's water in the jug, stew if you're hungry."

"I'm ravenous, but not for stew."

As he pulled her against his body, his chest hair tickled against her back. No sooner had he come in than he must have stripped off his shirt.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” His head dipped again, kissing inward from her shoulder toward her neck. “Breathtakingly beautiful.”

Astrid knew that wasn’t true. She was just an ordinary girl.

No doubt, he repeated the same to every woman while luring them to offer up what he wanted.

Still, it was good to hear him say such things.

The kisses grew more persistent, his mouth tasting her skin, his teeth gently nipping.

Astrid moaned. By the gods, what was he doing to her?

His arms came from behind to encircle her waist. “You know what I want, my lovely.”

Instinctively, she brought her elbows into her body.

“Don’t be frightened.” He whispered close to her ear. “There will be so much pleasure. More than you can imagine.”

She relaxed only a fraction, but it was enough to allow him to slide his hands up to her breasts.

“So perfect.” He buried his face in her neck. “Am I the first, Astrid? The only man to have gazed upon your breasts, to have caressed them?”



She squirmed in response. “You know you are.”

He growled his approval.

“And you want me to do more, don’t you? Not just to touch you here...” He caressed her silken flesh, circling with flattened palms, then teasing her nipples between thumb and forefinger.

“You want me to devour your sweet dumplings, to suckle long and hard.” His teeth nipped her lobe. “To feast on your little virgin teats while I sink into your wetness—your breasts slippery with my saliva and your cunny slick around my driving cock.”

The words were vulgar.

Obscene.

He spoke as if they were rutting animals.

She ought to hate him talking like that, but she didn’t.

Her crux throbbed, and her nipples ached, wanting more of his rough kneading, wanting all the things he described.

Even though I mean nothing to him and never will.

One of his hands glided down her belly. As soon as he reached her mound, her legs parted, wanting him to touch between them, her body responding regardless of her reservations.

Expertly, his fingertip skimmed where she quivered.

Whatever resistance she harbored, her body was oblivious. Already, a wonderful tingling sensation swept over her.

His voice was gruff. “I want to fuck you.”

She gasped as his forefinger pushed inside her.

“And the pain will blend with the passion until you know not where your body ends and mine begins. I’ll lift your legs and thrust. Not tenderly but fast and deep. So deep, you’ll fear tearing in two.”

His degrading talk was oddly arousing.

“I know how you’ll smell. Musky, your cream dripping over my cock, coating my bollocks. I’ll be root-deep, grinding against your swollen clit, and you’ll plead for more.”

A rushing feeling took hold of her, a burst of something sudden she couldn’t control, and her sheath clenched tight around J?rgen’s finger.

As she cried out, he bit down, open-mouthed, into the taut sinew where her neck met the slope of her shoulder. She shuddered with pleasure, even while she whimpered against the cruelty of his teeth.

The room spun as he lifted her from the tub, and her breath caught when he tumbled her atop the bed. She landed with a gasp, desire dominating her instinct to flee.

His finger had been so good, the pleasure building and overcoming her; such sensation—all inspired by his touch. Fascination with what more he offered rooted her to the bed.

“Look at you.” His dark-glinted gaze was entirely upon her as he shrugged out of his remaining clothes. “Sprawled out and mine for the taking.”

Eyes wide, she inched away, her throat suddenly dry .

The organ that sprung forth from his braies was colossal. Surely, nothing that size could be comfortable inside her.

Perhaps it was better that she remained a maid, after all.

“Oh, no, pretty.” He leapt after her, stalking closer until he was between her thighs. “You’ll not get away this time.”

“But...” Her heart raced. The hunger in his eyes told her that there would be no negotiation. She was naked beneath him, still slippery from her bath, and what happened next was surely inevitable. Torn between passion and fear, she didn’t know what to do.

Not that there was much choice.

Leaning over, J?rgen reached for her hands and pinned them gently over her head.

“But nothing.” His head lowered to nuzzle at her neck. “You’re more than ready for me.”

She moaned at the caress, her legs splaying despite herself. She did long for him and could only hope the deed would be swift and not too painful.

“Please.” She didn’t know what she begged for as he rose over her, aware only that the place he craved was wet and wanting.

He was a fine specimen of a man, and she knew, at last, that she was ready for him to make her a woman. She stared into his eyes as he pressed his manhood to her core. All the while, he held her gaze, the connection between them unbroken.

She called out at his first thrust, her mouth parting at the searing hurt. Never, in all her years, had she known pain like it, yet the intense, needful expression on J?rgen's face thrilled her.

“By the gods!” His jaw tightened as he moved deeper before slowly withdrawing. “You’re holding me... so tight!”

“J?rgen, I—” Once more, she intended to dissent, but he slammed into her, robbing Astrid of breath. Her mind spun, incapable of thought, as he drove deep, over and again.

The act was so much rougher than she'd expected. Would the coupling do her damage? Yet her body was taking him more easily with each stroke, and the rending within her sheath was no longer a searing pain but a dull, persistent throb—a pulse matching that of her pounding blood, welcoming J?rgen's invasion, wanting it more than anything, no matter the cost.

Momentarily, he held himself still, buried in her body.

“So... good.” His breathing was labored as his fingers entwined with hers. “By Odin! Was any man... so favored?”

Rocking his pelvis, he rubbed mercilessly where Astrid was most sensitive, and she cried out, this time not in pain but in fevered pleasure.

His body was so hard while hers was soft, his form so obviously built to dominate, while hers was designed to yield.

No matter the discomfort, their connection felt right. She longed to be subdued, to feel his weight and power.

When he began thrusting once more, a wave of darkness washed over her, and pinpricked stars winked in the periphery of her vision.

Her murmurings made no sense, her mouth filled with assent and protest. The ferocity of J?rgen's staff stole all reason.

He, too, was moaning, uttering profanities interspersed with her name. When, at last, he shuddered to his satisfaction, a sheen of sweat covered his body, slicking hers beneath.

His eyes glazed as his head hung over hers.

"Astrid." His voice was gentler, his lips grazing her shoulder until his head settled.

She turned, not wanting him to see her glistening tears, which sprung from a place she could not fathom. She blinked them away.

He was embedded in her still, and she was sore, though no more than she'd anticipated. She sensed the act was born from devotion rather than impiety. Even so, she couldn't shake the sense of having been ravaged.

Her body was weary yet alive with sensation; she adored the rapture but was puzzled by the ferocity.

I'll never be the same again.

'Twas a strange thought, fast followed by one more somber.

Nothing shall be the same, but it doesn't change what will come.

I've given myself to him. It's only a matter of time before I lose him altogether.

### CHAPTER 4

The thirty-second day since the men's shipwreck on the island of H?y

The dream came again.

'Twas ever the same, yet always shifting, preventing J?rgen from making sense of what he saw. Stumbling in darkness, he breathed the rancid aroma of rotting meat. Low voices chanted, and through the gloom, he beheld a pool of water. A chalice was dipped within, then thrust his way. Against his will, his fingers were forced to take its stem.

"Drink!" The order was hissed from the shadows, the cup rising to his lips. There, its rim pressed, tipping liquid into his mouth.

Nay!

The protest filled his mind even as the fluid slipped down his throat. He sensed that whatever he drank would cause him ill. As his stomach cramped, doubling him over, he knew he must escape the chanting voices and the dank, enclosing walls.

"Nay!" The word burst from his lips.

Sweat-slicked, he bolted upright in the bed, fighting to control the blood pounding through his veins. Frantically, he reached for the woman at his side.

Astrid.

The relief was immense. She was there. He was safe.

Astrid's cool hand found him. "You had the dream again?"

He said nothing. He hated waking that way, head-fogged with madness, and as badly as he yearned for Astrid's comfort, he didn't want to infect her with his dark lunacy.

She stroked his cheek. "Please, I want to help."

Snaking his arm about her waist, he drew her close. "If you want to soothe me, give me something else to think about."

His staff was already swelling, nestling against the soft fur of her mound. However, when his fingers crept to the warm place betwixt her thighs, she snapped them closed.

"We must talk!" She sounded affronted. "How can I help you otherwise?"

He sighed, certain she could not.

No one could erase the grim images in his head. They'd plagued him since he'd washed up on this shore, and neither mead nor her warm confines dispelled them.

"The only help I need is the solace of your body." He kissed her shoulder, yearning for more of her.

Her tone was emphatic. "Not now, J?rgen. I'm worried about you."

He turned away from her concern. The last thing he sought was pity.

"Let me fetch, Frida." She slipped from the bed before he could counter her. "She can interpret your dreams. 'Twould mayhap ease your turmoil."



He was doubtful, but watching Astrid draw on her gunna and shawl, he conceded the battle. She had a determined streak when her mind was set upon something, and she'd bring Frida whatever he might say.

There would be no more rest or pleasure until Astrid had her way.

Frida came surprisingly swiftly.

Astrid made him dress, then settled him on a stool before taking herself outside. For her sake alone, he consented to the farce.

Let her friend pretend some all-seeing skill. He would go along with it, then take Astrid back to bed as soon as they were done.

"Still your thoughts." The diminutive Frida pressed her palm to his. "Place yourself in the dream. I sense things. Maybe, I can..."

J?rgen grimaced. To recall those harrowing scenes was the last thing he desired, and he was resentful of being asked.

"You're concentrating?" Frida's eyes were closed, but he kept his open, observing the crease between her brows.

He made efforts to keep his mind blank. Nonetheless, the dark crept in. 'Twas impossible to hold it back. With it came the feeling of dread, of wracking agony, the compulsion to run from that place. He knew none of it was real, yet it gripped his heart and squeezed.

Frida took a sharp intake of breath. "So much anger! There's pain... and fear. A confined place. The air is dank."

He swallowed. “What else?”

For some moments more, she held his hand tightly. Then, unexpectedly, she snatched hers away.

“Glimpses of the past; nothing more.” She shook her head. “Forget what you’ve seen. What’s gone by cannot hurt us.”

Scowling, he rubbed his temple. ‘Twas hardly as if he wanted to be visited by nightmares.

As to them being scenes from bygone days, from where she garnered that conclusion, he knew not. They certainly weren’t memories of his own past.

“Tell me.” She looked at him intently. “Have you dreamed of anything else ?” She hesitated. “Of some... catastrophe?”

“What?” he asked, though he’d heard perfectly well. “What catastrophe?”

Frida wrapped her arms about herself. She was shivering.

“There’s fire.” Her eyes sought his, and he saw terror there—enough to send prickles over his skin. “Flames and smoke. People screaming.”

“Nay! Naught like that.” Shuddering, he drew back, unsettled. Perhaps she really could see what was past or what was to come.

Nausea swelled, as if he might vomit.

What she’d spoken of was more horrifying than even his visions.

He needed to get out into the air, away from her and the hut.

Frida feigned a smile, though her face was ashen. “That’s... good. I’ll take my leave, but please, if you see anything more, send for me. I would know of it. I must know.”

She slipped out then, leaving him alone and shaken.

“J?rgen?” Astrid dashed inside. “Frida seemed... upset?”

“That woman has problems of her own!” His answer was curt. “She was no help to me.” He bit his tongue against berating Astrid for bringing her to him. “But you’re right that I need to discover the truth.”

He could abide no more of the torment—night after night, waking, drenched in sweat, pressed upon by the shadows of his dreams.

The madness had to end.

“‘Tis surely the trauma of the shipwreck,” Astrid offered.

“You don’t believe that any more than I. What has the wreck to do with that place I see? Ungodly, dark—a cave, perhaps—where the smell of death hangs heavy in the air.” He surveyed her face for some hint of recognition, but Astrid diverted her gaze.

“There are many caves on the island, but I prefer to be on the sea, in the light and fresh air.”

Urgently, he clasped her hand, pulling her to him. “I’ve seen a beach during these night terrors, too. No sandy dunes nor a bay but shingled, with steep rising cliffs.” It was all so vivid. “You know of such a place?”

“I may.” She eased her fingers away. “But it’s not somewhere we should visit. There’s bad energy there. I’d rather we didn’t speak of it.”

As harrowing as the dreams were, he knew there was only one way to rid himself of them. He needed to find the place and discover its dark truth.

“Don’t argue with me.” His tone was resolute. “If you know where this cave is, Astrid, then take me there.”

### CHAPTER 5

Later that day

She was trying not to stare.

However, it was near impossible, with J?rgen looking as he did—bare chested, his torso glistening with sweat as he rowed them across the chop of the waves.

Rounding the headland had put them in the lee of the wind, obliging them to drop the sail. J?rgen had taken up the oars, insisting she keep her eyes upon the coastline to alert him.

Steadily, he pulled, sinews bunching and relaxing beneath smooth, ink-patterned skin. As he leaned back, her gaze fell to his abdomen, hard-ridged and tight.

His braies sat low on his hips, revealing the defined V-shape that led to his...

“Are we close?” J?rgen’s voice interrupted her reverie.

“Yes, not far now.” She turned away, fixing upon the stacks rising from the sea.

Not that she needed to pay much attention to their progress. She knew full well where they were headed. Another hundred or so strokes on the oars, and they’d be in view of the place.

Angrily, she chided herself. Was she so under his spell that she couldn’t drag herself

away? So hungry for more of what he'd given her that she couldn't behold his body without thinking of him pinning her beneath him? Couldn't wrench from imagining herself naked and those rough hands gripping the oars taking hold of her? His touch was possessive and thorough.

Since yester-evening, she'd thought of little else than how it had been to have him inside her, connected so intimately. The pain of it was forgotten, replaced only by yearning.

Instinctively, her inner muscles clenched, as if in remembrance of what they'd clasped and what they desired to receive again. She squirmed upon the bench.

Much good it does me!

Now I've known such intimacy, 'twill be even more desolate when I'm alone again. He'll soon enough be in another's bed and will think of me no more.

That thought hardened her a little. She was letting her feelings run away, leaving her soft and vulnerable when she should know better.

She realized, suddenly, that J?rgen had stilled the oars, letting them rest upon the cups, so the boat bobbed upon the water. His profile was turned to the shore, scanning the rocks, his jaw squared in concentration. He pushed his palms through his hair, smoothing it from his forehead.

Astrid made herself look away. Uncorking her water pouch, she took the tepid liquid into her mouth.

"This seems familiar. Something about the crags. What say you, Astrid?"

'Tis uncanny. Is this truly what he's seen in his dreams? He knows the very contours

of the cliffs?

“Only a little farther.” The stretch of shingle was almost in sight. Another twenty strokes and he’d see it for himself.

How much to tell him? She was uncertain.

Early on, she’d explained the island’s predicament—their men ailing and those who survived having left. She’d told J?rgen of the purpose for which he was with her, while making the bargain—for him to respect her taking things at her own pace.

He’d been honest, too, making no attempt to conceal his desire to leave, along with his crewmen. ‘Twas only natural that they were eager to return home. It would happen eventually.

She’d been to inspect their ship. The hull needed work; oars were required, preferably a mast and sails. J?rgen hadn’t asked for her help, but she sensed he was working to affect repairs.

She’d avoided raising the subject. ‘Twas better for her not to know. In any case, the wrecked boat remained on its side upon the beach. They wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon.

No doubt, there were things he was keeping back, but the same was true of herself. She hadn’t told anyone—not even Bothild—what her father had confided about their ritual. She’d sworn to keep the secret.

Only since learning of J?rgen’s dreams had she begun to wonder if that was wise.

“You often sail this way to fish?” He reached for his own flask, taking a long draught.

“My father didn’t favor this stretch. Never good for fishing, he said. I’ve come this way a few times, but the catch has been disappointing.” Astrid looked out across the water. “It’s ever harder all around the island. I’ve been pushing farther out, although that’s difficult, too. The boat isn’t made for stronger waves.”

J?rgen nodded. “You work hard. I respect that, but it must be lonely... out here without company?”

Astrid kept her gaze averted.

‘Twas true. She was often heartsore. Not so much for company in general, but for her father. Always they’d fished together. Some days, she thought she was growing better at being alone. Others, she could hardly bear to look at the boat.

Fishing was everything. All she knew. All she was good at. If she couldn’t sail, she’d stop being who she was. She kept to her routines, sharing her catch. People had to be fed.

“I’m not complaining. It’s peaceful. Early morning and dusk, the sky is so beautiful, it hurts to look at it.” Her voice trailed away. What was she doing, rambling like this? He wasn’t interested in any of it.

J?rgen leaned forward. His foot nudged hers.

He was looking at her, and his eyes were soft. Was he going to touch her face? To kiss her? She hadn’t let him do that—not on the lips. If she did, she really would be lost.

However, there was no kiss.

Instead, he took up the oars, picking up the rhythm that drove them onward.



“Tell me again what you know of this place.”

“Nothing!” She made herself remain calm. “Only that it was... somewhere the men came, sometimes...”

J?rgen looked in the direction of the cliffs again. She saw the moment when he spotted it—a patch mottled grey and white, sloping down to the water’s edge and farther up an opening splitting the sheer vertical.

A flash of something passed over his features—a tremble of trepidation—his jaw tightening.

Resolutely, he angled the oars, sweeping with his left arm to guide the boat inward toward the landing place.

Despite the sun’s warmth, a chill moved beneath her skin.

It wouldn’t matter what she said.

There would be no stopping him.

## Page 6

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### CHAPTER 6

J?rgen jumped out as they hit the shallows. Either side of the boat, they guided it out of danger of the waves, dragging it a safe distance up the beach.

Taking in their surroundings, he was struck once more by how uncanny the place was. So much seemed familiar. Crunching over the shingle, he approached the crevasse, which appeared to stretch deep into the rock.

He glanced back at Astrid, still standing by the boat.

She knows more than she's telling me.

He'd been moved by her story. She clearly missed her father, and he'd wanted to comfort her. Though everyone had someone they'd lost. You had to get over such things, not dwell on them.

Still, he'd thought about kissing her. Her gaze had dropped to his lips, and he'd known she was thinking about it, had been waiting for him to make his move.

She'd wanted the caress—after so long refusing.

She'd surrendered in every other way but that.

Her last bastion.

He could fuck her, but she hadn't let him steal even a single kiss, and he wasn't so

low that he'd force her. A kiss had to be willingly received—and reciprocated.

He'd been tempted while the moment was there, but if he'd done that, he wouldn't have wanted to stop. When he kissed her—and he fully intended that to happen—he wanted to have all the time in the world to discover Astrid's lips the way he'd explored the rest of her.

Once she'd kissed him, there would be no more barriers. She'd melt like fresh-churned butter.

He turned away, moving once more toward the cavern. Only when he reached the entrance did he pause. Dread crept over him as he peered into the shrouded interior. The opening was perhaps three times his height, narrow in width and narrowing farther as it progressed.

The sea didn't appear to reach the entrance—the lower portion, sanded orange like the cliff itself, was quite dry.

There were similar crevasses along the fjord of Skálavík, though those differed in being accessible only by boat. He'd explored them as a child, he and his friends, their howls and boyish laughter echoing around the chambers. Bravado had drawn them there, despite the danger of navigating out again onto the choppy waves of the fjord.

He'd experienced his share of fear, wondering what might lurk in the parts of the cave he couldn't see. A child's imagination could conjure all manner of monstrous things, but never had he felt as he did then, standing on the threshold of the sinister place.

Bathed in sunlight, a chill seeped from the darkness.

"J?rgen, wait!" Astrid clung to his arm. "Don't go in."

“Why? What’s in there?” It was time she was honest with him.

“Nothing,” she answered hastily. “It’s just... I think it’s where they used to meet.”

He knew who ‘they’ were—the men who’d once inhabited the island.

Those who were gone.

“Something here harmed them?” He lifted her chin, making her look at him.

“I don’t know.” There was desperation in her eyes. “But... your dreams! You must feel it! This place... it’s...” She shuddered.

He relented, pulling her close, resting his cheek upon the crown of her head. Her arms reached around him.

It reminded him of another time and another set of arms. Him kneeling and his niece, Svala, throwing herself about his neck, asking to be lifted.

A lifetime ago.

“Wait here. I won’t be long.” Gently, he detached himself.

‘Twas a pleasant notion, having a woman worry for his safety. Not since he was a child had someone begged him to act with caution. His mother, of course.

Astrid wasn’t his mother, but her pleading was genuine.

“If you go, I’ll go with you.”

“There’s no need.” He could tell it was the last thing she wanted to do.

Nevertheless, her hand slipped into his.

The passageway ran deep, curving slightly, and he cursed himself for not bringing some source of light.

“That smell! What is it? Something... rotten?” Astrid kept hold of him firmly. She’d made him promise not to let go.

“Could be.” Whatever it was, the scent grew stronger the farther they ventured—fetid, like decomposing meat, overlaid with a sourness he couldn’t place, and something else, like eggs gone bad.

Water dripped from above, pooling somewhere and resonating as it splashed. Astrid’s breathing was audible, as was his own, seeming louder in the enclosed space.

“Let’s go back,” she urged. “Please.”

“We won’t stay long.” He squeezed her hand.

Following the wall, he pressed on.

He could see almost nothing but sensed the chamber widening—a shift in the air, a subtle change in the sound made by their feet.

They were alone surely, yet he sensed another presence, one that had drawn him there, that wanted him to go onward.

There was a natural ledge in the rock and something upon it. Skimming his fingers along, he found a shallow dish filled with... fish oil? There was a taper and, alongside, a set of flattened, sharp-edged stones.

Someone had been there and left behind their lamp.

“I need both hands.” Gently, he brought Astrid’s farther up his arm until she was linked in the crook. She made no complaint, but he was aware of her shivering.

J?rgen struck the flints. The spark was instant and surprisingly bright. He struck again, closer to the taper this time. A third strike and the spark caught the oil-soaked fibers.

Pursing his lips, he blew, coaxing the flame. It was modest but, after such darkness, ‘twas as welcome as dawn after a starless night.

Beside him, Astrid drew a sharp breath.

They were standing within a larger chamber, the upper reaches of which were beyond the illumination of the little lamp.

Along the ledge stood a goblet. Taking it up, he inspected it. ‘Twas carved not of wood nor baked of clay but wrought from some metal, and dregs remained. Some ill-conceived impulse made him raise it—first to his nose, then his mouth.

“Nay!”

The moisture had barely touched his lips when the vessel was dashed from his hand, landing with a clatter and rolling away.

Astrid was frantic. “Who knows what was in that cup? Did you mean to drink it?”

“Of course not. I was only... curious.”

He didn’t know what had come over him. It had been as if something had whispered

in his ear, telling him to take the goblet.

‘Twas as in my dream. Being forced to accept the cup, its contents swallowed, and then...

How could he have been so foolish?

“Come now, I beg you.” Astrid began tugging him but just as suddenly stopped. With a yelp, she pressed to J?rgen’s side. “There’s something on the ground!”

Taking up the lamp, he let its glow fall at their feet, whereupon Astrid let forth a true shriek.

The place was littered with dark shapes. He could make no sense of them at first—tiny, hunched bodies, contracted claws, and wings—some close-wrapped, others half-open, twisted at an unnatural angle.

It explained the stench. How long they’d been dead was hard to say. Sweeping an arc with the lamp, he took in the macabre sight.

“What killed them? It’s too horrible!” Astrid buried her face against his arm.

Dizziness pervaded his head, clouding his thoughts. The foul smell, the rotting carcasses, the saturating sense of death and fear, such as he’d experienced in his dreams. The cave was suffocating, its air polluted.

“Must get out.” His legs were strangely weak, his knees buckling. A mist passed over his eyes, and he staggered, dropping the lamp.

As it snuffed out to black, he knew nothing more.

### CHAPTER 7

Astrid's scream rang piercingly through the chamber.

This can't be happening! Please, Freyja, no!

Dropping to her knees, she scrabbled for the lamp. It had fallen from his hand as J?rgen had keeled over but, by some miracle, hadn't extinguished. Cupping her hand around the taper, she brought it close, willing that there was enough oil left in the reservoir to maintain the flame.

"J?rgen! Wake up!" She shook him and patted his cheek. Her head was muddled, and she sensed nausea rising, but she couldn't let herself think about that. She needed to get them both out, and that meant acting fast.

She lowered her ear to J?rgen's mouth.

Was he breathing? 'Twas hard to tell, for her own was erratic. However, a gentle stir reassured her.

"You must wake up! You must!" Desperately, she yanked his hair, then pinched his nose.

That brought on a splutter, and his eyes flew open.

Thank the gods!



Somehow, she got his arm over her shoulder and wrestled him to a sitting position.

“Get up, J?rgen. That’s an order. On your feet!”

He murmured something as she helped heave him upright.

“That’s it. Now walk!” He was deadweight leaning on her, barely shuffling, his boots scuffing the ground as she half-carried him.

She couldn’t carry the lamp, but finding the way back wasn’t hard. She kept close to the wall, and before long, the distant beacon of the tunnel’s entrance became visible.

Gritting her teeth, she pushed on, telling herself that the squeezing in her chest and the thump in her head were a good thing. Those discomforts told her she was alive, and she was determined to keep it that way.

Keep stepping. One more. One more. You’re almost there.

‘Twas within sight of the beach that J?rgen collapsed again, taking Astrid down alongside. That time, there was no reviving him.

Sobbing, cursing, she linked her arms beneath his, clasping fast around his chest. Summoning all her might, she dragged his prostrate form the final, short distance.

At last, wasted and weary, she reached daylight and crumpled to the ground. Coughing and heaving, she deposited the contents of her stomach. For some moments, she lay, resting her head upon the stones, waiting for the nausea to subside.

But she could ill afford to indulge her feelings of sickness.

Again, she checked his breathing.

‘Twas shallow, but steady.

Thank the gods, she’d been less affected than he. If they’d both succumbed to the putrid air in the cave...

At first, she’d thought herself only faint with fear and revulsion, but when J?rgen succumbed, she could deny the truth no longer. Something foul occupied the place, and ‘twould have claimed them both had she not moved quickly.

I must get him to Elin. She’ll know what to do.

He’ll be fine once he’s away from this place.

She couldn’t allow herself to think otherwise.

The thought of J?rgen suffering as her father had done.

The thought of him... dying.

Nay. It shall not be!

Her shoulders ached, and her legs could barely support her, but she managed to drag him again, aided that time by the steep slope of the shingle, his body slithering over sea-smoothed pebbles. Reaching the boat, she angled it upon its side and rolled him within.

He grunted as she did so, and she arranged him as comfortably as she could before taking up her flask for a draught of water. Dabbing some upon J?rgen’s lips, he moaned. She cast droplets upon his face, lifted his eyelids, shook him again, and begged him to wake—all without success.

Astrid bit back her tears. Giving in to despair wouldn't help. No matter her exhaustion, she needed to launch the boat, then take up the oars.

Almighty Freyja, help me!

Settling the boat upright again, she directed all her weight at the stern, then stumbled, falling to her knees. The vessel skated over the pebbles, gaining momentum.

As it hit the lapping waves, becoming buoyant, she gave a sob of thanks. Once it was over, she'd offer the greatest of libations to the goddess. Scrabbling the last few steps, she splashed through the water and levered herself into the boat.

Astrid was used to rowing, but she'd strained herself hefting Jørgen from the depths of the cave, and her muscles burned.

The sun was less intense, masked by gauzy clouds, but the sea's current was against her, and the wind would be, too, once she rounded the headland. She risked drifting out to the open sea.

Jørgen was still inert, though several times, she'd thought he might rouse.

Was he dreaming of the cave? The contortion of his features, interspersed with occasional moans, told her it was likely. Another good sign, she decided. If his mind could conjure dreams, then it would return to the sentient world, eventually.

There was a place within sight where crags jutted from the cliff in a low curve. They weren't overly jagged, and the water was deep—a haven for a while.

Pulling hard on her right side, she brought the prow about.

Having stowed the oars and thrown a loop of rope around a protrusion of rock, Astrid

slumped forward, finally allowing herself respite.

What was I thinking, bringing him out here? I should have known no good would come of it.

She looked up as J?rgen sighed and shifted slightly. Moving from the rowing bench to sit in the cradle of the boat, Astrid took his head in her arms. She raised the upper portion of his body, and his lips parted. He murmured something.

Hurriedly, she uncorked the water pouch and touched it to his mouth. When he took a little of the liquid, swallowing it down, her tears pricked.

Mighty Freyja was certainly watching over them.

She sent him to me, and she wants J?rgen to live.

A flicker of his lids and J?rgen's eyes opened. He blinked, attempting to focus on her face.

"You're safe." Her pulse beat extraordinarily fast as she consoled him. "I won't let anything hurt you."

It was a strange position to be in—her looking after him. He was so much stronger and more experienced. It was supposed to be the other way around—a man protected his woman, risked his life for her if need be.

Perhaps J?rgen would.

Of course, he would.

If I'd been the one to falter, he'd have carried me out.

He'd have endured any pain to save me.

Was that wishful thinking?

“What happened? The walls were closing in. That smell! And... dead things...”

“Stay still,” Astrid soothed. “You didn’t dream it... not this time. We were in the cave.”

Glancing about, he took in their surroundings, and his confusion was obvious. “I don’t remember...”

“You staggered most of the way back before fainting.”

He frowned, clearly trying to gather the memory. “Then... you dragged me?” Incredulity echoed in his tone.

It was reasonable. Sheer will alone had given her the tenacity. Nevertheless, she had her pride.

“I’m used to hauling nets of fish. You think I can’t lug you a few steps?”

He raised his brows at that. “You’re stronger than you look.”

“Barely.” She offered him the water again. “I was dizzy, weak in the legs, nauseous. I retched on the beach.”

Jørgen drank, then reached for her hand. “You saved us both. It must have been difficult—even with these fisherwoman muscles you boast of.” His mouth quirked with the hint of a smile, but it faded just as swiftly. “You tried to warn me. We could have died there, like those...”

“Hush.” Astrid clasped her other hand atop his. “I think... I needed to see the place as much as you did. It was haunting your dreams, and it did mine, though in a different way. My father told me more than I shared with you. I suspected something in that cave caused the illness—that which befell our men. Now we know. Whatever it is resides in that cavern.”

J?rgen shook his head. “‘Tis no monster, merely some foulness in the air. Your men lingered there too long, or mayhap the effect was cumulative.”

“‘Twas their secret gathering place, and no woman was supposed to know of it. Sometimes, they were gone several days, taking with them provisions, but they can’t have stayed within the cave all that time.” She shuddered. “They must have used the beach, camped there, venturing into the cave for some part of their rituals.”

“The cup... I saw it in those nightmarish visions, handed one to the other. Flames lighting their faces and then wracking pain. What were they drinking? Some concoction of forest mushrooms?”

“I know not.” Astrid shook her head. Her father had never mentioned such a thing.

“Although, ‘twould not explain the bats.” J?rgen rubbed at his forehead. “Unless the vile air is a recent pollution. Those creatures have not been dead so very long.”

Slipping her hands from his, Astrid looked away.

“Are you keeping something back? Astrid, tell me!” He clasped her by the elbows, his expression vehement.

“Stop!” She tried to wrestle free, but he was too strong. “You’re hurting!”

“I need to understand! You must see!” He kept hold of her, though less roughly.

Will knowing make him only more curious? Will it draw him back, taking the others with him? Men like their secrets, their own gathering times, their rituals—just as women do. Except women aren't so foolish as to court danger. They have families to raise, children who depend upon them...

Children.

There will be no more children—not without these men.

She sensed J?rgen might return to the cave, even after what had happened, unless she warned him properly. The secret needed to remain so, for everyone's sake—but she'd have to confide in J?rgen.

“There's a sacred pool, somewhere deeper in the cave—fed by a spring. It's said to originate from the kingdom of the Dokkálfar, deep in the hillside.”

“The dark ones.” J?rgen looked grim. “They who send mischief and disease to humankind? And your men drank from this pool?”

Astrid squirmed. “Perhaps the bats did, too.”

“And yet, 'twas only the last occasion on which the drinking of it made your men so very sick...”

She could tell what he was thinking—that she was still holding something back, some puzzle piece that would make sense of this horror.

“I know naught else. I swear to Freyja! The last time the men were there was for the álfablót ritual. Perhaps the dark ones were displeased with their offerings. Truly, I'm as lost as you. If the water and air inside the cave have become corrupted, I know not when it happened nor why.”

“ álfablót.” A shadow passed over J?rgen’s features. He let go his hold upon Astrid. “The time when the veil is thinnest between the dead and living, when we beg protection of our ancestors. And to that place they gathered, one they believed holds a portal, of sorts... where water flows from the dark realm to this.”

Astrid made no answer.

There was none to give.

An evil they didn’t comprehend lurked in the cavern, and if J?rgen wasn’t careful, it might yet have a fresh sacrifice.



### CHAPTER 8

Some things are beyond comprehension. Whatever was in the cave, 'twas not meant for her to understand nor J?rgen. The island's men had made that place their own and paid a terrible price.

“You won't go back. Promise me!” Astrid pleaded. “Those dreams of yours—they're a warning, don't you see? From my father, perhaps. If he's watching over us, he'll want to save you from what befell him. I want to believe it's true... that he wishes us well.”

After a brief hesitation, J?rgen lowered his gaze. “I'm sorry I was so...”

Suspicious?

Angry?

Defensive?

Astrid blamed herself for putting them in danger, but an apology from J?rgen would be welcome. He'd badgered her to do as he wished, then berated her for not divulging everything she knew.

Meanwhile, he'd done little to gain her trust—he had shared almost nothing with her—of his family, his home in Skálavík, or his hopes for the future. She'd persuaded herself that he owed her nothing, but she wasn't content with that anymore. She'd confided so much and he so little.

“My judgment wasn’t what it should have been.” He had the grace to look sheepish. “I was... impetuous and afraid. I’ve feared sleeping for the dreams that come, but none of this is your doing, Astrid. I’m beholden to you...”

“I did what anyone would have.”

Gently, he laid his hand upon her knee. “I’m grateful and... ashamed. It should have been I watching over you, listening to your caution, acting foremost for your protection. None of the rest matters.”

Her heart swelled. He was saying she mattered. ‘Twas not the same as a declaration of love, but she was almost glad. If he made some rash protestation, she would not believe it. Better for him to speak in a tempered way of what he truly felt.

“Tell me of when you were a boyling.” Her request tumbled out. “Some memory you think of often but rarely speak of.”

His gaze flicked to the not far distant shore before returning to her. “There was once someone dear to me who asked me the same, and I told her a story.” He sat back, putting space between them, as much as the boat would allow. “I made the tale daring and full of excitement, of how I explored our fjord and the fissures of its cliffs. I told her that life is never as long as we would wish, and I encouraged her to seize adventures and laugh in the face of her fears. I told her to be bold.

“I meant only to entertain her.” His stare was hollow. “Instead, she waited until none was watching and took out a boat too large for her control. No doubt, she thought to make me proud, to regale me with her courage. Instead, the tide took her away, too far for anyone to see, and dashed her vessel upon the rocks.”

Astrid knew not what to say. She hadn’t expected such a story, and J?rgen looked wretched. She mumbled her sorrow, the words always said on hearing of tragedy.

What she wanted to know was who the girl had been. Some past love? A first love, perhaps, one who J?rgen had never set aside.

As if hearing her thoughts, he went on. “She was too inexperienced to be exhorted to hazardous adventure. A sweet girl, Svala, my sister’s only child.”

Astrid gaped. His own niece!

“My sister knew ‘twas I who’d filled her head with fancies, but she swallowed all reproach. Nonetheless, she couldn’t remain by the fjord. Her husband was from another place, a day’s ride away. They left to go and live there.”

“Oh, J?rgen!” Astrid’s throat choked with sympathy for him and for the sister who’d lost so much. “‘Twas not your fault. Your sister wouldn’t have blamed you.”

“Not outwardly.” J?rgen’s voice had a deadness to it. “But she wasn’t the same. Nor was I. Neither of us could forget.”

Astrid wanted to protest, to tell him such accidents were the will of the gods, but she wasn’t sure she believed that herself. To insist upon it seemed wrong. J?rgen was entitled to his remorse and his self-punishment. Sometimes, ‘twas the only way to live with grief—to take the blame upon oneself.

Hadn’t Astrid done the same in her sorrow for her father?

“‘Tis the reason... I’ve never taken a wife.” He said it so softly she almost didn’t hear. “I didn’t deserve that happiness. I’ve dues to pay.”

“J?rgen...” Without further thought, Astrid closed the distance between them.

Her hands rose to cup his face, and she brought her mouth to his. The touch of lips

was gentle at first. Her cheeks were wet, but the tears were not all her own.

Then, his hands were in her hair, encircling her waist, pulling her closer. The past could not be changed or forgotten, but it could be obliterated for a short time.

Her fingers worked quickly, freeing him from his braies. She pulled up her skirts and straddled his lap. There were no more words as she took him inside her.

Their coupling was swift and greedy. His mind and emotions were a maelstrom, but his body took over, responding to Astrid's. He pulled her gunna over her head and the shift she wore beneath, wanting—nay, needing—to have her naked atop him.

The lithe movements of her soft, feminine body were arousing enough, but having her kiss him as she rose and fell, grinding her mound upon his pelvis, all the while releasing sweet gasps and moans...

He gave her his tongue, and she sucked upon it, delicately at first, then as fervently as she claimed his cock.

When she sobbed his name, holding herself rigid while tremors shook her, 'twas his undoing. The torrent rushed, streaming to fill her, and he held fast, clinging like a drowning man to the one thing that could save him.

He came too quickly and too fiercely, gulping her down like mead when he should savor her as finest wine from the land of the Lombards. Nevertheless, the release took with it the pain he'd been carrying.

A wash of languor flowed through him then.

Tenderly, he laid Astrid upon the sacking at the bottom of the boat and, tugging off the rest of his clothes, bunched them to cushion beneath her lower back and head.

Her slender fingers stroked his chest, his nipples, his abdomen, his buttocks until he was hard for her again. He made love to her, slowly this time. No more a virgin, her body accommodated him, meeting the rhythm of his thrusts while the boat rocked gently on the water. She raised her legs higher, hooking them over his, to welcome him deeper.

As his crisis approached, he lifted her from beneath, the better to hold her against him as he buried deep. She was drenched—from her own desire and the earlier spurting of his seed.

When they'd regained their senses, Astrid tried to sit up.

“The day grows late. We ought to return, and... I want you to see Elin. She ought to examine you to make sure you're alright.”

J?rgen tipped her back. “You need another woman to tell you the state of my body? Relax. Enjoy.” Teasingly, he brushed his lips across her nipple, taking it into his mouth and popping it out again.

By the gods, she has the most beautiful breasts and these puckered buds, like berries ripe to be devoured.

Astrid smiled shyly. “I never have lain outdoors like this before, letting the sun warm my bare skin.”

“Then we should make a habit of it.” J?rgen trailed his hand down the softness of her stomach until he reached her fur. Lower still, he circled her nub. There was no resistance in her, only invitation as she parted her thighs. When he dipped a finger, he found his cum slick there and her sheath eager.

For the love of all Valhalla's Valkyries, she's a woman made for the act of love.

“You like that, Sweetling?” ‘Twas obvious she did, but he wanted to hear her say it. Her body was willing enough, but she was demure in other ways.

“I do.” She gazed at him fixedly, watching as he added a second finger to where he caressed.

“What else do you like?” Again, he kissed her nipple, taking it lightly with his teeth before releasing it.

“Everything you do... everything.” She took a half-hitched breath as he turned his fingers inside her, crooking them to find the ridged portion of her sheath that was most sensitive.

“I know what you need, Astrid.” He continued stroking her, speaking low. “My thick cock, my agile tongue, and my clever fingers... they’re all yours. You like it when I lick you here, drinking your cream? Opening your reddened lips to push with my tongue? Lapping at your swollen place? It’s like a miniature cock standing for me. Oh, yes, you have one of those; a tiny female cock that wants to be sucked and played with, just like mine.”

“J?rgen!” She twisted against him, protesting, though laughing, too.

“Perhaps you’ll do that for me soon—part your lips and taste me. Learn the shape of me in your mouth. Then, when I’m brine-wet and hard as rock, open your legs and let me bury inside, over and over, until you forget you know anything else.”

Her back arched, and she cried for him, submitting to the carnality of all he promised.

‘Twas so easy. She was his, soft and willing.

Taking away his fingers, he brought them to his mouth, licking them clean.

“Ah, my sweet Astrid, I shall never tire of beholding the look upon your face when you come.”

She lowered her lashes. “I can’t help it. Now I know how, it happens in a rush. I try to hold it back, but...”

“You should never do that.” He dropped a kiss upon her shoulder. “It pleases me, knowing I give you so much pleasure. Whatever the future brings, I’ll remember you, always.”

He nuzzled her neck.

If he wasn’t mistaken, his cock was on the rise again. He wondered if she’d oblige him, giving him a sucking. Perhaps she’d find she liked it. He very much hoped so.

Astrid, though, had other ideas. She pushed herself up, groping for her clothing.

He would swear she had tears in her eyes.

“I’ve upset you? What is it?”

“There’s naught wrong, ‘tis only that we should be going. You’ve strength for the oars? We’ll need to pull fast to round the headland.”

He nodded curtly. Clearly, she’d had enough.

There would be other days. Endless days, if he had his way.

He didn’t want his time with Astrid to be only a memory.

### CHAPTER 9

The fortieth day of the men's sojourn on the island

The sun was high in the sky as Astrid walked the short distance to Frida's dwelling, yet she tugged her shawl tighter, chilled by her recollection of the dank atrocities she and J?rgen had discovered.

Something was wrong—not just in the cave but with the island itself and the waters that surrounded them. Astrid hadn't wanted to admit such a thing, but Freyja had guided her to face her fears, and there could be no doubt.

She faced the dilemma of what to do with that knowledge, though.

Dread woke her at night, furling around her body when she should have been content in J?rgen's arms, cold tendrils twining about her limbs.

That unease settled upon her, repelling the sun's ardor.

She'd pondered long on whether to seek out Frida's guidance. She and J?rgen had avoided speaking of what they'd experienced in the malevolent cavern, but the memory of putrid death haunted her. Would Frida see what lingered in her mind, regardless of what Astrid revealed in her words?

'Twas a risk she had to take, for there were other things she needed to ask, and she trusted in Frida's gifts to provide the answers.



If Frida does gain insight into what we found?

Astrid would deal with that if the situation occurred.

It might even be a blessing to share that horror with someone she could trust. Of all the women on the island, 'twas with Frida that she felt the most affinity. If she explained why the secret needed keeping, Frida would understand, wouldn't she?

Of that, Astrid couldn't be certain.

Approaching, she was met by the sight of Frida wrapped close to her man as he leaned upon the wall beside their doorway. His arms snaked about her middle, and they were laughing over something in that intimate way only lovers share.

Gunnar nodded a friendly welcome at her over Frida's head.

"Astrid!" Turning, Frida rushed to greet her, bringing her into an embrace. "'Tis wonderful to see you."

"And you." Astrid noticed how Gunnar's eyes shone with affection for Frida, his gaze following her.

Did J?rgen look at her that way?

She wasn't sure.

"How are you both?" Pushing away her melancholy, Astrid untangled herself from Frida.

"We're well." Frida's smile was coy, conveying just how well their relationship was blooming.

“‘Tis good to hear.” Astrid was pleased for her friend, despite the sudden blade of slicing envy.

She deserved a love like that—a man who craved more than carnality, one who yearned for a union of souls as well as bodies.

J?rgen worshipped her with his mesmerizing physicality but had yet to offer Astrid more.

Meanwhile, she slid ever deeper into her feelings for him. She was in love, that much she knew. As for J?rgen, she feared he viewed her as no more than a convenient distraction until he returned to Skálavík.

“How is that rascal, J?rgen? Not giving trouble, I hope.” Gunnar threw her a mischievous wink.

“He’s well enough.” Astrid forced herself to return his good humor. “We shall have to arrange a visit, so the two of you may talk.”

“Indeed.” Picking up the crutch propped nearby, Gunnar hobbled a few steps to touch Frida upon the shoulder. “I’ll walk in the fresh air while you speak privately with Astrid, but don’t fear, I won’t go far, my love.”

“How is J?rgen, really ?” Frida ushered Astrid inside, gesturing for her to sit. “Is he still having his... dreams?”

“We don’t talk about it. He...” She hesitated, suddenly unsure of how much to confide.

“What is it? You can tell me, Astrid. You’ll receive no judgment.”

Astrid sighed. “He says naught troubles him, but the dreams continue, and I sense they disturb him. He thinks I don’t notice.”

Frida placed her palm over Astrid’s. “Let us read the runes; we may see what they have to say.”

Astrid nodded. Some thought Frida’s power was wrong—terrifying even—but Astrid believed Frida had been blessed by the gods. She trusted in their wisdom and was sure the runes would help to settle her mind.

Frida drew out a small pouch from her pocket. “I had a feeling someone would come today, seeking their guidance. I’m glad ‘tis you.” Indicating for Astrid to hold out her palms, she shook the contents within them—some bone-carved, others marked upon weathered stones, each etched with a symbol. “Think hard upon what you wish to know. Ask the runes, then cast them here.”

The pieces were strangely warm. Astrid cupped her hands around the mysterious fragments, turning her thoughts to what burned in her mind. Then, with a quickening pulse, she dashed the runes across the tabletop.

At once, Frida took stock of their positions, spanning her fingers above where they’d fallen. She leaned close, as if not only to see but to hear what they might whisper to her. “There are... mixed messages.”

“Tell me,” Astrid urged. “Please.”

Frida’s tone was hushed. “I see... something rising from the depths, bringing terror.” She pressed her fingers to her temple. “It reminds me of the darkness in J?rgen’s thoughts when I saw him last...” She paused. When Frida looked up again, meeting Astrid’s eyes, the expression in her own was anxious. “Do you think the place he sees in his dreams is real?”

A strained silence hung between them as Astrid considered how to reply. Just thinking of the cave inspired nausea.

“I know not,” she said eventually, her heart hammering at the lie. Nothing good could come from disclosing the details of the poisonous cavern. It must remain hidden... for everyone’s safety. “As I say, he doesn’t like to speak of it.” That much was true, at least.

Perhaps sensing Astrid’s lack of honesty, Frida frowned. However, she made no attempt to push her on the matter.

“There is more. This rune speaks of love.” She cast her fingers over the gnarly stone. “It suggests you and J?rgen share a powerful bond, one that nothing shall separate.”

“Truly?” Astrid had faith in Frida’s reading of the runes. Nonetheless, ‘twas hard to believe. Her separation from J?rgen seemed as inevitable as the rise and fall of the tides. She’d accepted what must be. He’d return home as soon as the men’s ship allowed the journey.

Frida’s brows lowered. “Is there more I should know?”

“Nay,” Astrid answered hastily. “Only that I’m... surprised.”

“The path of love is oft bewildering.” Frida gave her shy smile once more. “But no matter any seeming division, trust all shall be well. Your union is being divinely guided. I see much joy for you.”

“A baby?” Despite her worry over raising a child alone, Astrid’s hopes swelled.

Frida’s voice remained even. “I see fulfillment and completion—that whatever your heart desires shall come to fruition. A child, perhaps, but you must have patience. All

that you need is being prepared for you.”

“‘Tis good news.” Astrid had been so certain that she and J?rgen were destined to heartache. If the gods had other plans, she was happy to be wrong.

Frida reached for Astrid’s hand. “Your future is bright, but a tempest is to be overcome before those sun-filled days are yours.”

A tempest.

A chill raced along Astrid’s back. Their skies had been unpredictable of late, sudden gales blowing in and departing just as quickly. Was that the sort of tempest coming, as had blown J?rgen into her life? Or was this storm of another sort, connected with the sinister cavern?

“I understand.” Astrid, like all the women of their island, had seen her fair share of tumult. Experience had made her strong.

I can bear any suffering, knowing J?rgen won’t forsake me .

“Keep faith in the gods, Astrid. They’ll show you the path.” Frida scooped the runes back into the pouch, tucking them away in her pocket once more.

Astrid rose to her feet, thanking Frida.

The runes promised happiness. She’d nurture that prospect, feeding it with her conviction until it truly blossomed.

It lifted her heart as she walked out into the light.

Better days were coming.

There was hope.

Perhaps J?rgen loved her, after all?

### CHAPTER 10

The forty-eighth day of the men's sojourn on the island

The last of the women hailed Astrid farewell, balancing a basket of fish on her hip. None seemed to mind receiving their mackerel further on in the day, and it saved effort, having them meet her upon the beach to help distribute the bounty.

Having stowed her boat, Astrid scrambled up the dunes, then stopped to look back. The sun was dipping into a beautiful sunset.

The gods were watching over her, Frida had said, and who was Astrid to argue? She'd resolved to open herself to new ways of doing things—and not just when it came to fishing. J?rgen had been coaxing her to remain with him long after her usual rising time. Instead, it was he who did the rising—twice or thrice before he'd release her from the bed furs!

Astrid smiled to herself. She was becoming quite wanton, putting pleasure before duty, but J?rgen declared the fish would still be waiting for her, and he was right. Those past days, the sea had been remarkably calm, allowing her to sail a little farther out, and she'd been able to fill her nets swiftly.

Meanwhile, J?rgen continued helping with various tasks around the settlement and still found time to prepare their evening meal.

What had happened on the far side of the island had become like a figment of her imagination, blended with her father's half-forgotten stories. She and J?rgen shared

an unspoken agreement to avoid speaking of it, and his bad dreams seemed to be subsiding. The gods wanted them to be content, and she was determined they would be.

Reaching home, she paused before entering. The door was ajar, and the fragrant scent of cooking wafted out.

Her pulse gave a small skip. She was hungry enough to eat straight away, but it was entirely possible J?rgen would have other ideas. The day before, he'd had a hot bath waiting for her return. While she'd soaked, he'd fed her from a platter of cheese and fruits hot-seared upon the skillet. When her hair had dried, he'd plaited it, weaving with such skill that she'd almost fallen asleep as he tugged gently upon the lengths. He'd put her to bed then, and they'd made love.

The stew of rabbit hadn't been eaten until much later...

With her heart glowing warm, she stepped into the hut. "Something smells good." She didn't see him at first, for J?rgen was at the very back of the room, bending over the old chest in the corner.

"Astrid!" He started at the sound of her voice, the trunk's lid banging shut.

"Are you... looking for something?" She couldn't think what that might be, for the chest contained only an old sail, spare rope, and needles and hemp she used for repairing nets.

"I'm sorry." He leaned back against the trunk. "'Twas wrong of me to pry without you here."

"'Tis no trouble." Astrid came over directly. "Here, I'll show you."



“Nay. There’s no need.” His hand shot out to rest upon the lid. “I saw enough. Just old things. Naught of interest. Come, supper is ready. Take a seat, and I’ll serve us both.”

As he walked away, she turned back to the chest. A thought had sparked in her mind, and she had to know.

As soon as she opened the lid, it was obvious. Someone had been at work, mending the rent across the old fabric. The tattered sail was no longer pushed to the bottom of the trunk, and a threaded needle sat atop its folds.

“Astrid!” J?rgen’s voice held a panicked edge. “I didn’t think you’d mind. We’re making good progress. A few more days and?—”

Astrid guessed perfectly well his intention and that of his jarl. She cut him off. “Of course, you need the sail.”

Dropping his chin to his chest, he rubbed at his hair. “I shouldn’t have gone behind your back. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to...”

Steal? Lie to me?

When would he have told me? She straightened at the goading question. Close enough to his departure that there was less time for me to make a fuss? Or perhaps he’d have explained it one night at high tide, deaf to any protest as he carried me down to the beach.

Frida had made her believe she and J?rgen were more than just lovers. Weren’t they supposed to be in this together?

All men are like this. They only tell us what they think we need to know. We’re

expected to fall in with their plans, no matter what.

“I want you to come with me. You know that, Astrid.” He nudged her chin upward, making her look up at him.

“And what shall I do when you’ve taken me there, back to Skálavík?” Anger and disquiet fought in her breast. “You plan to fill me with children? You’ll forsake all others to sit at home? Or shall it be I who does that while you continue your life as it was?”

He looked abashed. “There’s the fjord. You can still fish.”

Even now, he says nothing of loving me, of making me his wife. Is it so hard?

Astrid refused to beg.

“Here, I’m the only one proficient with a boat. Where you live, there must be teams of men. They won’t welcome a lone female.” She didn’t know why she was arguing. Did she even care if she had to give up fishing? What did it matter?

A new desperation entered his eyes. “That might be true, but I’ll provide for you, Astrid. You can have an easier life. I’ll set up a home.”

He doesn’t even have a place of his own. He’s a grown man who sleeps on a bench in Eldberg’s great hall, his sword within reach. Can he give up that life of carefree carousing?

He hadn’t described his life in much detail, but she could guess what it must mean, being a member of the jarl’s personal guard.

“Why do you really want me to come? Speak plainly!”

“There’s something wrong here. We both know it!” J?rgen responded to her snappishness. “Perhaps your men were right. This island is cursed!”

“Aye, ‘tis cursed!” Astrid raised her voice to match his. “We womenfolk are cursed to know nothing but unhappiness.”

J?rgen heaved a sigh. “You must know I need you. You’re the only one who knows the route through the rocks of the bay. How are we to leave without your guidance?”

A wave of aversion overtook her, near as strong as that she’d felt in the cave.

He only needs me to navigate.

“For the love of the gods, see sense, woman!” J?rgen tilted her chin upward. “I’m leaving, and you’re coming with me.”

She shrugged him away, hardly trusting herself to speak. “I’ll keep your secret, but that’s all. There’s naught else to say.”

There was, of course.

He ought to say he loved her, to vow that he’d stay on the island rather than take her against her will, that she was the only thing that mattered. It was asking too much, but she wanted it, nonetheless.

“Do what you must. Take the sail. Take food. I won’t stop you.” With that said, she ran for the door before the tears burning in her eyes formed tracks down her cheeks.

### CHAPTER 11

The forty-ninth day of the men's sojourn on the island

Jørgen was weary, ill-tempered, and heavy of heart. Being obliged into Eldberg's company was doing little to lift his spirits.

They'd been working upon a tree they'd felled, clearing off the side branches and bark for Rutger to work upon. Taking respite from their labors, they sat upon the trunk, drinking from their water pouches but exchanging barely a word.

He'd come clean to his jarl, letting him know Astrid was privy to their plans. Eldberg hadn't seemed much to care, as long as Astrid kept her silence.

The sun was dipping to its final portion, blazing the sky in shades of gold. Dusk was a special time. He and Astrid would oft sit, looking across the bay as twilight fell, sharing moments from their day or snatches of memory. Then, he'd lead her into the privacy of her home, where kisses led to other intimacies.

Sweet Astrid—the only woman I've ever loved or e'er shall.

And I've ruined it all.

How had he let that happen?

After Svala's death, he'd been eaten by grief. The last thing Jørgen had imagined was deserving a family of his own. That belief had kept him at Eldberg's side, seeking

nothing beyond shallow pleasures.

‘Twas ill-judgment, failing to ask permission for the sail, but he’d told no lies, merely omitting to keep Astrid fully informed. He’d been upfront about his desire to leave the island, and they’d agreed, hadn’t they, after discovering that ill-favored cavern? When the men departed this place, it went without saying that he intended to take Astrid with him.

All the men would do the same, surely, bringing their wenches? Even without Eldberg’s edict that they persuade their womenfolk to take up oars alongside them, what man would want to leave behind his bedpartner?

He’d made it clear to Astrid that he needed her. How many ways did a woman need to be shown that a man cared? He was a considerate lover, he cooked for her, heated water for her bath, chopped firewood, and kept the hearth tidy. Odin’s teeth, he’d even braided her hair.

What more did she want?

“Ah, here’s the wastrel, joining us at last!” Eldberg glowered at Rutger as he emerged from between the trees. “You’ve barely enough daylight to make it worthwhile! Let’s hope you’ve put the day to use in other ways, eh? Buttering up that wench of yours. Just make sure you’re here at dawn to continue the work.”

Rutger scowled but didn’t contradict his jarl. Instead, he set to work with his chisel, shaping one end of the trunk.

Eldberg took a swig from his water pouch. “We can slide the mast down the hillside tomorrow night, then roll it across the beach, concealing it beneath the hull.” He cracked his knuckles. “Only a few more nights, and we’ll be ready to make our departure. Think of that! Back to Skálavík, lads!”

“Aye. The sooner we’re off this island, the better.” J?rgen kicked at a stone.

Astrid would go with them, willing or not; Eldberg would see to that. He’d tie her to the mast if given no other choice. That thought made J?rgen’s blood boil, but Eldberg would kill him afore he’d let Astrid slip his grasp.

“For all its beauty, this place makes me uneasy.” J?rgen suppressed a shiver. “I shan’t have peace until we’re far from here, preferably with our own fjord in sight.”

Eldberg slapped him upon the shoulder. “Spoken like a true man of Skálavík. As for Astrid, I trust you’ve won her over sufficiently to do all you command. She’s not the only one with knowledge of our plans. I’ve made a pact with Elin and with the old woman Bothild to safeguard the wellbeing of any woman who comes with us. They may remain in Skálavík, and I’ll safeguard them like my own kin or aid their return if they wish it.”

“And you’ll hold fast to such a pact?” ‘Twas not the first time J?rgen had pressed the point.

Eldberg’s eyes narrowed. “A man is only as honorable as his word. Even if we bundle women on the boat by force, ‘twill be for their own good. I’ve little doubt when they’ve tasted what Skálavík has to offer, they’ll be glad we brought them.”

‘Twas not an answer that reassured J?rgen.

Rutger had said little since his arrival. They both knew the truth. Eldberg’s actions would be governed by what suited him when the time came.

“We’ll be five... ten with our wenches,” Eldberg went on. “At least four more strong arms are required on the oars. Six would be better. They need only row as long as it takes to get us out of the bay. Once we’re in open waters, the sail and wind will take

over.”

“Why only five?” Rutger looked up from his work. “Are Rangvald’s injuries still severe enough to preclude him from taking an oar? In any case, Elin will want to do her part.”

Eldberg’s expression hardened. “Rangvald won’t be coming. I’ve not burdened you with the truth, but that cur tried to kill me. He’s been locked up, and there he’ll stay.” A sneer entered his tone. “Once we’re gone, the women may do as they like with him.”

J?rgen cast another sideways look at Rutger. If Rangvald had been foolhardy enough to challenge his jarl, he’d lit his own death fires. J?rgen could hardly pretend regret. There was no love lost between him and Rangvald, and he suspected Rutger felt the same.

J?rgen had felt sorry for him, of course, learning of Rangvald’s injuries. They were severe enough that he’d likely never wield a weapon with his former skill. Even so, his compassion only went so far. Rangvald was not a man to inspire loyalty or friendship.

“And keep that information to yourselves,” Eldberg growled. “‘Twill go easier for these women if they believe us to have their best interests at heart. Discovering they’ve a would-be-murderer in their midst won’t help anyone.”

J?rgen bit his tongue.

The island’s women had more to worry about than Rangvald, wretch that he was.

Only a few more nights...

He had to make Astrid change her mind, for he couldn't remain upon this black-hearted island, nor did he wish to leave her there. Something terrible was coming, and he wouldn't abandon Astrid to an uncertain fate.

He'd been pretending that his dreams had abated, but the opposite was true. He still woke to a dagger skewering his temple and a mouth of bile.

The monsters of his imagination drew closer, and they were showing their teeth.



### CHAPTER 12

The fifty-fourth day of the men's sojourn on the island

J?rgen had insisted upon coming, though she'd made it clear she could manage without him. 'Twas a bitter echo, sitting there with J?rgen opposite, as they'd done on the day she'd taken him to the cavern. Thankfully, the breeze was with them, allowing Astrid to use the sail as they set off around the headland.

J?rgen would take the oars when needed, but she'd avoid asking for his help for as long as possible.

'Tis a fishing trip like any other. Get the nets filled, then head back.

Except it wasn't like any other.

These fish were destined for a feasting celebration—to be grilled over hot embers on the beach. All would be gathered as sunset drew close to witness the binding vows of Viggo and Signy.

Some said it was too soon, not even two sennights since Signy's mother had fallen to her death, but Bothild had upheld the couple's request.

Signy had come to Astrid, filled with excitement at her news, and Astrid was pleased for her, of course. Signy deserved to be happy, and the way Viggo behaved with her, so gentle yet protective, 'twas clear he valued her love.

No doubt, the wedding would inspire others to declare themselves—Frida and Gunnar, for instance. Even Grethe, mayhap. Astrid didn't go out of her way to spend time with Signy's cousin, but when she'd last seen her, the change in Grethe had been marked.

I shall be alone, as I was before.

Either the runes, or Frida, had been deceitful.

There would be no husband. No baby, either. Astrid's bleed had come in full flood the evening after their argument.

Moving the sail so it sat neutral to the wind, Astrid slowed the little boat's speed.

"You can haul the fish in now."

He might as well do something useful rather than simply sitting there, looking like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Jørgen did as she'd shown him, using the long-handled hook to bring in the net they'd been trailing behind the boat.

Astrid made no move to assist, letting him struggle awkwardly, his hands unused to the task. She allowed herself a small smile as the net sloshed over the side, sending a gush of seawater and flapping mackerel into Jørgen's lap.

Muttering some choice oaths, he transferred the fish into a lidded basket by his feet.

"'Tis only practice you need; a shame you'll be gone before you've the chance to improve," Astrid remarked archly.

“You’ve every right to berate me, but you must know how I feel, Astrid. I beg you... don’t keep punishing me.”

Astrid scoffed. “By not letting you back in my bed? A few days on the floor will hardly kill you. That’s all it will be, isn’t it? You must have near finished repairing that sail.”

He had the decency to look contrite. “As you say, it won’t be long. That’s why I have to make things right between us.”

“Off in the morning, are you?” Astrid’s anger rose again, prickling her neck with heat.

J?rgen looked down at his hands. “Just before dawn.”

A stab of pain wrenched Astrid’s stomach. She’d been taunting him, but it was true. He really was leaving, and he was only just telling her. She didn’t know whether to burst into tears or grab him by the foot, tipping him overboard.

“You want my forgiveness before you set off? A last fuck in the boat, for old times’ sake?”

He flinched. “I need you to come. Astrid, please!”

“I’ve drawn for you the path through the rocks. ‘Twill have to be sufficient.” She turned away. She couldn’t bear to look at him anymore.

“Eldberg may force you.” J?rgen sounded wretched. “I don’t want it that way, but I won’t have a choice. You might hide?—”

She jumped in. “You expect me to run like a rabbit up the hillside and find myself a

burrow? I shan't miss Signy's wedding, and the celebrations are likely to continue through the night. Or were you thinking to knock me unconscious and leave me on one of the beaches on this side of the island? I'm supposed to clamber up the cliffside and trek back after you've sailed away? Like some mountain goat?"

Tossing the lid from one of the baskets, she grabbed at a still-flipping mackerel and threw it at him. By luck more than aim, it hit him on the side of the head.

Sobbing, she took up another and sent it flying after, but he raised his arms this time, deflecting it so that the fish plopped back into the sea, silver-belly first.

Astrid buried her head in her hands. She hated him and loved him... and hated that she loved him. 'Twould be so easy to agree, to let him take her away. They might even be happy for a while, while she was useful to him, but what would be the point if he didn't truly love her?

"I'd stay here if I thought 'twas possible, but Eldberg would have to think me dead and you alongside before he gave up looking. And I want you to be safe. My dreams... I'm frightened, Astrid, for this place and for you. No matter what I tell myself, that fear remains. If I could hide us both, perhaps I would, but you'd still be in danger, and I can't allow that."

Astrid looked up but didn't know what to say. The way he was speaking, 'twas as if he really did care—as if he valued her wellbeing alongside his own.

"I don't want you to feel obliged. I ask nothing of you..."

J?rgen thumped his forehead with his fist.

Startled, Astrid cried out, and he relented at once, taking her hands.

“That’s not true. I want many things. I want everything! I want you, Astrid, to love and protect. You by my side. Only when you’re in my arms am I complete. ‘Tis all for you... every moment of every day. ‘Tis you in my mind and in my heart. Let me cherish you, Astrid. Let me show what I can offer.”

She flung herself about his neck, burying her face beneath his ear, and felt his arms come about her, strong and warm.

He truly means it.

He wants me not just for what I can give but for what he wishes to give me.

He was kissing her then—fervent caresses that covered her face. Then came a deeper embrace that stole her breath and made her forget where they were.

Only the low rumble of thunder brought her to her senses.

A storm? How can it be? The sky was clear a moment ago.

She pulled away.

The thunder rolled on, making the very sea about them quiver and the boat rock.

The look upon J?rgen’s face was one of sheer horror. He was pointing to the hillside.

“Nay! It cannot be!” Gripping the side of the boat, she stared where his gaze was fixed.

Trees were shifting downward. Some way off, where the summit of the mountain reached skyward, smoke billowed upward. “What is it? Is there a storm on the other side? Has lightning set the forest ablaze?”

“I see no storm.” J?rgen’s eyes were wide. “But I’ve heard of such things in the old sagas. Trolls who bring with them fire that resides in the mountains, destroying all with their fists and the thump of their feet. Mayhap the dark ones have woken them to do their bidding.”

Astrid screamed as rocks broke away from the cliffs before them, tumbling over the precipice into the sea below.

She clung to J?rgen.

Is the world coming to an end?

It seemed the breath had left her body.

“Quickly!” Taking up the oars, J?rgen began turning the boat about. “We must get back and warn the others.”

### CHAPTER 13

What will we find when we reach the settlement?

Huts tumbled by the quaking earth or a landslide burying all?

J?rgen felt sick to think of it. Gods willing, most of the women, and the men, too, would already be upon the sands, making preparations for the wedding.

J?rgen prayed to Odin, over and again, as he and Astrid made their way back. 'Twas the worst of luck that the wind was now against them, but he hauled on the oars for all he was worth.

The ship was near ready. With swift action, they could be sea-bound before the day's light was lost.

Astrid was in shock, hugging herself at the other end of the boat. He wanted to comfort her but couldn't relent from rowing. She said naught, but her lips moved; she was praying, too, no doubt.

As the wide stretch of the bay came into view, he discerned people on the beach, a cluster close by where the longship rested. The water was near its highest point, making but a short distance to slide the ship, and that could be done with the hull on its side. It would right itself as it hit the waves. Then, before long, the turn of the tide would be in their favor.

"Stow the oars," Astrid said of a sudden. "I'll use the rudder from here."

J?rgen did as he was bid. They were approaching the eastern scattering of rocks, the peaks barely visible above the waves, and the power of the tide would carry them toward the beach. All of Astrid's concentration would be required.

Touching sand, J?rgen jumped out, pushing the boat through the foam. He spotted Gunnar breaking away from where the others were gathered.

J?rgen scanned the shoreline. The dunes blocked his view of the curving arc of homes, but he could see there had been movement on the hillside; the main ascending track had disappeared beneath foliage.

The mountain on the far side was entirely hidden from this portion of the island. Squinting against the lowering sun, he tried to make out signs of the smoke they'd seen, but 'twas impossible to tell. The direction of the wind must be blowing it away.

"Praise Odin, 'tis good to see you." Ashen-faced, Gunnar clapped him on the back. "'Twas likely the best place, out upon the sea."

"What happened? Is everyone safe?" Astrid lost no time in climbing from the boat.

"A trembling of the ground." Gunnar leaned heavily upon his crutch. "Trees were toppling. Several came down on the huts. Praise Thor, 'tis now ceased."

J?rgen frowned. His gut told him that the lull would be short-lived. Whatever was happening, it was far from over.

"I must speak with Bothild." Astrid touched J?rgen's arm. "Tell her what we've seen... all of it."

She was right. There could be no more secrets. The women had to know the danger they were in.



Meanwhile, there would be no stopping Eldberg.

He'll fill it with those young and fit, but what of the older women? Can we carry them all?

J?rgen was unsure.

Even if it were possible, he wouldn't wager on his jarl giving space to those he considered worthless.

He'll more likely make room for livestock than the elderly.

There was much weeping, though the children seemed mostly unperturbed, running about excitedly, chasing goats that had escaped from their pen.

Sprinting up the sand, J?rgen came alongside the ship, where Rutger was securing the mast. The seaweed which had concealed their repairs had been cast aside.

"About time." His jarl glowered at him. "Fetch the sail and whatever victuals you can lay hands on, then get your wench. We're leaving on the tide's turn."

Several women had clearly decided to throw their lot in with them, heaping belongings not far off. However, others were arguing, tugging at the bundles, shouting their objection.

"Don't go!" One of the elderly women was pleading. "This is our home."

"Be sensible." Vangreth stepped forward. "The shivering of the ground is a sign from the gods. 'Tis time for us to leave, just as the men did."

"Go where? With these strangers?" The woman let up a wail.

J?rgen glanced at Eldberg. From the set of his face, he knew the truth. There would be no space for anyone his jarl didn't deem useful. As soon as the women realized that, the situation would turn ugly.

"Hedda, you'll speak for us." Another of the older women implored. "You warned us not to trust these men, but we need them. Make them stay."

From all J?rgen knew, Hedda was a strong woman, opinionated and decisive, yet she stammered something unintelligible, seeming not to know how to respond.

"The matter is out of our hands," Frida spoke, suddenly at Hedda's side. "Vangreth is right that the gods have spoken. I've seen signs—portents of what awaits. The destruction we've witnessed is just the beginning."

"Freyja, preserve us!" The elderly woman fell to her knees.

'Twas Signy, dressed in her bridal finery, who dropped down to comfort her.

Frida threw a meaningful look at J?rgen. She'd seen what was in his mind, and she'd hinted at her own premonitions. What had she said—about fire and smoke, a catastrophe of terrible proportions?

His blood ran chill. 'Twas all coming true.

Another of the older women scoffed. "I'm sorry to say this, Signy, but I believe the earth's trembling was a warning for you from Freyja herself. Your marriage mustn't go ahead. Your mother knew it, and that man of yours murdered her to get his way." She scowled at Viggo, who was clenching his fists.

Signy immediately jumped up. "Agneta! How dare you say such things! I was there with Viggo and my mother. Her fall from the cliffs was naught but an accident. As to

Viggo becoming my husband, that's for me to decide."

A hubbub of heated voices chimed in, the women upon the beach having drifted closer. Even the children had stopped their play, and the youngest were clinging to their mother's skirts. A babe in arms added its lament to the commotion.

"Peace!" A single voice rose amid the throng, and the crowd parted to let her through.

"Bothild, thanks be!" Signy ran to her. "I know not what's happening, but it's no judgment upon Viggo or myself. Like Frida, I've been noticing things... such as with the bees. The island has been trying to warn us."

"We've seen things too." Rutger's woman, Grethe, added. "In one of the upper pools. A great crack in the earth. I told Bothild, something's strange. Now, we have trees walking down the hillside."

Bothild nodded. "I fear we must abandon this place, as our men did before us. I've spoken with this jarl, and he's vowed to place every woman who accompanies him under his protection to be well-provided for—a promise he'll keep, being a man of honor."

Jørgen noted the way she fixed Eldberg with her eyes, as if challenging him to deny it. The old woman was canny.

The clamor began again, this time with exclamations more eager than wary.

Quietly, Astrid rejoined Jørgen, and they exchanged looks.

He took her meaning. Bothild knew the worst but was choosing not to mention what was yet unseen upon this side of the island. 'Twas wise, no doubt, for panic would ensue if the women knew the full extent of their trouble.

“What’s this?” Hedda seemed to start awake. “You’ve been plotting with my grandmother? Did she know then, before me, that you planned your escape this day?”

“Calm yourself, my love,” Eldberg spoke beneath his breath. “‘Twas the morrow I intended to sail and would have told you this very evening.”

J?rgen had rarely seen his jarl so ill at ease.

“Hardly time for me to prepare!” Hedda’s voice rose.

“If I’m to make room for these sag-breasted old sows, your paltry possessions must stay,” Eldberg hissed from the side of his mouth.

J?rgen was almost enjoying seeing his jarl so indisposed. His amusement, however, was interrupted by Astrid’s elbow between his ribs. An inclination of her head told him to follow as she sidled away.

“I must get the sail.” He spoke low. “You see how it is, Astrid. Once it’s threaded to the mast, Eldberg will depart the beach.”

J?rgen hoped she’d make no objection. After what they’d seen, the details were irrelevant; he just needed her to come with him.

Astrid waved her hand dismissively, hurrying toward the dunes. “Bothild has told me to fetch Elin. Naught but a slight ague, she told me, though I fear something greater is amiss. Bothild has been letting no one see her these ten days and more.”

“Aye, of course.” He’d no objection to that, as long as they were quick.

As soon as they were out of sight of those upon the sands, Astrid picked up her pace, running past her own hut to one further down.

“Elin,” she called through the door only once, waiting barely a heartbeat before pushing it open. “Are you here?”

The place was in disarray as J?rgen entered, with stools overturned and various items tumbled from the table.

“What’s happening?” A feeble voice came from the darkest corner of the room. “Everything was shaking, and I heard shouting. I called out, but no one came.” The woman in the bed blinked, squinting across at them. “Is that you, Astrid?”

J?rgen hardly recognized she who’d examined him in the early days of landing upon the island. The Elin he’d met had been self-assured and precise in her movements. Now, she struggled to sit up.

Whatever tincture Bothild might be giving her, ’twas surely potent, for Elin’s eyes bore an unfocused look.

“Have you come to fetch me to the wedding? I wanted to go but Bothild said it was too soon—that I had to stay and rest.”

“Come, we’ll get you properly dressed and take you down to the beach.” Astrid’s voice betrayed only the slightest tremble. “You mustn’t miss out.”

“I’d like that.” Elin allowed the furs to be thrown back and her legs guided over the side of the bed.

Astrid hunted about for a moment, locating a gown of decent thickness, which she passed over Elin’s head. As Elin moved her arm, J?rgen noticed how she winced.

Astrid’s fingers were unsteady, but she pinned the gunna in place and was looking about for a shawl. “Her boots, J?rgen. Help me, won’t you?”

Those were close to the bed, so he slipped them onto Elin's feet and began cross-lacing the leather thongs.

A disquiet was growing within him. What had Eldberg said of Rangvald? That he'd attacked him in some way and been locked up? Where was he exactly? Not here, at any rate, nor upon the beach.

Astrid had not remarked upon it, and Elin seemed in no state to notice, though she must be aware...

"Ask her about Rangvald," Jørgen tugged on Astrid's hem.

"Hush," Astrid hissed. "Bothild said..."

"What did Bothild say?" Elin stifled a coming yawn. "Is Rangvald allowed to see the wedding, too?"

Her face lit up as the thought came to her, and it decided Jørgen's mind.

"Aye. Know you where he is? Tell us, and I'll bring him."

Elin's face fell. "I've not seen him this long while."

Jørgen fought back his irritation. 'Twas hardly the time to be searching blindly, but what could he do?

"We can't." Astrid glared. "'Tis too dangerous to delay?—"

Elin grabbed Astrid's arm, wincing again. "They won't hurt him, will they? Promise you won't let them!"

“All’s well.” Astrid shot J?rgen a cautionary look. “We just need you on your feet.”

J?rgen’s conscience was in knots. Regardless of his dislike for Rangvald, he couldn’t leave him—if only for the sake of Elin, who clearly felt something for the churl.

“If ‘twas me, Astrid, you’d want someone to look for me, wouldn’t you?” J?rgen persisted.

“Aye, I suppose.” Astrid’s shoulders sagged. “I’ll start back, collecting the sail as I go. If you don’t find him quickly, you must come yourself. Swear to me, J?rgen...”

Though she was annoyed, he could see the deeper emotion in her expression.

She did care.

Grabbing her, he stole a kiss.

By Odin and Thor and all the gods, he hoped it wouldn’t be his last.

### CHAPTER 14

An unnerving urgency swam in J?rgen's body, pushing him on even as his limbs grew weary. He was exhausted from the rowing and from the trepidation rising at the unraveling events, but there was no time for rest.

Rangvald was out there in the settlement somewhere—locked away for his crimes—and J?rgen was resolved to find him.

It mattered not that he had no liking for the cur.

Did anyone? As far as J?rgen knew, Rangvald had no friends amongst the band of men from Skálavík.

Certainly, no one on the beach had been looking for him.

Nevertheless, it was indefensible to abandon one of their own. That stood true regardless of whatever violence the churl had enacted.

Astrid was also at the forefront of his mind. No matter her protestations for his safety, he knew her friend's happiness was important to her—and that meant finding Rangvald and reuniting him with Elin.

Whatever happened afterward was beyond his control.

First, I must find him.



J?rgen scanned the curve of huts, surveying the debris left by the tremor—rocks dislodged from the hillside, broken branches, and entire trunks felled at the roots in some cases.

Though tension twisted inside him, he set about the task of searching each dwelling, making his feet pick up their pace, moving swiftly from one hut to the next. Yet, even as he charged about the women’s community, he sensed his mission to save the wretched man—much like the island—was doomed. Eldberg had made his feelings clear. Even if J?rgen brought Rangvald to the ship, their jarl would likely deny him permission to board.

J?rgen’s efforts could end up being for nothing.

“I have to try, regardless,” he muttered, dashing past another hut where the roof had caved to a fallen tree. “I can’t just leave him.”

Whatever Eldberg’s view, J?rgen believed in compassion. If his jarl rebuffed Rangvald, that would be between Eldberg and the gods. J?rgen would know he’d acted as his honor demanded.

As for facing Eldberg’s fury, J?rgen had no fear he and Astrid would be left behind. Eldberg needed strong arms on the oars. However angry he was, his jarl was a practical man—his wrath would wait for Skálavík’s shores.

Reaching the longhouse, J?rgen threw open the door, surprised at how untouched the longhouse’s building remained after the ground’s violent trembling. Stools and cups had been thrown from their places, but the structure remained largely intact.

“Rangvald!” Peering around, J?rgen called out, aware of the passing time.

Who knew if the hillside would quake again? He’d no wish to be trapped inside if

another avalanche of stone and forest came down upon the settlement—one perhaps worse than the first.

Astrid would be anxious, waiting for him. Above all things—even saving Rangvald—he would be at her side upon the longship when Eldberg launched.

“We’re forsaken!” A young woman he’d not seen before appeared from one side, squealing as she ran past him. She clutched a bundle of what he assumed were personal possessions, her eyes wild, as though she didn’t notice him standing there.

“Rangvald. Where is he?” He called after her, but the wench was long gone, clearly hastening to the sands.

Her sudden absence seemed to amplify the silence of the longhouse, making Jørgen’s breathing seem all the louder.

Where are you?

He stalked around the abandoned space, his exasperation growing as he ducked into the chamber from which the woman had fled. ‘Twas a stark room housing several pallets for sleeping on the floor; there was no place in which a man might be hiding.

The right-hand chamber off the main hall of the longhouse was just as empty, though more richly furnished—clearly the one where his jarl had been sleeping with Hedda.

As if Eldberg would keep a prisoner in his own sleeping chamber! Even my jarl is not so perverse.

But it made sense for Eldberg to keep Rangvald somewhere near.

I’m running out of time!

How long before he conceded defeat? He might return to Astrid, knowing he'd done what he could. After all, Rangvald was no friend of his!

J?rgen tried not to think of what fate awaited the man if he didn't find him. How long would it take the fire he and Astrid had seen to reach this part of the island? Perhaps Rangvald would die before then, crushed by rocks from the hillside.

Can I live with that stain on my conscience?

Trying to find him wasn't enough.

J?rgen had to do so.

Fighting desperation, he charged from the longhouse out into the cooling air. The gods had charged him with this undertaking, and his sense of decency compelled him to continue. No matter that, deep down, he was starting to wonder if it was even possible. Rangvald could be anywhere, and even if J?rgen's crusade was divinely led, only the gods knew what state he'd find the man in.

The import of his task warred with his absolute resolve to return to Astrid, his dread rising as he searched the neighboring landscape.

"Rangvald!" J?rgen hollered again. "By the gods, where are you?"

For a long moment, all was quiet, until J?rgen heard something.

A woeful groan?

It was faint, but he would swear 'twas close.

Rounding the corner of the longhouse, he spied what might have been a woodshed,

though there was little remaining. A toppled tree appeared to have tumbled down the hillside, losing most of its branches along the way and piercing the structure through.

If he's inside...

Jørgen's stomach turned over.

"Rangvald?" He heard the waver in his voice, at once fearful yet emboldened that he'd found him.

A gruff, male voice answered. "Who's there?"

It is him!

Hope rose within Jørgen, despite the state of the shed.

It has to be!

Rushing over, he shook the rickety door, snapping off the flimsy bolt and yanking it open, pulling it from what remained of its hinges.

There, pinned beneath the wayward tree and surrounded by splintered wood, was a crestfallen Rangvald.

"Thank Almighty Odin!" Jørgen bent down to assess his condition. It appeared the trunk had lodged in such a way that it hadn't crushed Rangvald's legs, but its position prevented him from getting up.

Covered in dirt, blinking, Rangvald seemed dazed. "Leave me be." His eyes were dull, as though long hours of isolation had worn him down. "I'm of no use to anyone. Let me die here!"

“None of that!” J?rgen snapped. “Eldberg is set to leave. We need to get off this island!”

“There’s no hope for me.” Rangvald sounded confused.

Had the poor mongrel spent one too many nights alone? Perhaps the hours of darkness had driven him mad.

“Enough of your half-witted nonsense.” J?rgen shook his head. “Elin needs you. Pull yourself together, man!”

“Elin?” Rangvald’s head rose at her name, his expression etched with pain.

J?rgen lowered to his haunches, meeting Rangvald’s focus. “She’s waiting for you, but it’s not safe. You wouldn’t forsake her like that, would you?”

“Nay!” Rangvald’s eyes blazed. “I... I love her.”

J?rgen was taken aback by the words.

So, the churl was capable of caring for someone other than himself. H?y had altered him, as it had J?rgen.

“I’ve lost her already...” Tears pricked Rangvald’s eyes.

“Only if you give up!” J?rgen countered. He looked again at the trunk beneath which Rangvald was trapped. Could he lift it?

The tree was modest in circumference, but the timber dense. Regardless, ‘twas not something to be debated. The thing had to go, and J?rgen was the only one at hand to do the job.

In truth, it could have been worse; the roof was still intact—at least for the moment.

“When I raise this up, you move.”

Rangvald frowned but managed a single nod.

“Good man.” J?rgen sent him a brief smile of approval. “As soon as you feel the weight lift, shift yourself.”

Crouching, J?rgen wrapped his arms about the trunk, getting a feel for its weight. Then, slowly, with gritted teeth, he rose, creating the merest of gaps above Rangvald’s body.

“That’s it. Quickly now!” It took all J?rgen’s might to hold the thing while Rangvald eased himself out from beneath.

As soon as the other man was clear, he let it fall again, the trunk crashing to the ground.

Mayhap the gods had aided him, but J?rgen felt a well of pride, nonetheless. Mayhap the gods were watching over Rangvald, too, for the way the tree had punctured the wall of the woodshed, it had missed the reclining man by a hair’s breadth.

Rangvald was still prone upon the ground, looking somewhat stunned.

“No time to lose.” J?rgen offered a hand to help him up.

Rangvald’s groan as he came upright, clutching his ribs, indicated some injury, but attention for that would have to wait.

Slinging Rangvald’s arm about his shoulder, J?rgen got them both outside.

“Eldberg?” Rangvald heaved in a breath. “He’ll never abide me joining you.”

“Leave Eldberg to the rest of us,” J?rgen assured him, although he had no idea how that would be accomplished. Their jarl had never been a malleable man.

As though the island was angered by Rangvald’s sudden freedom, the earth beneath them began to quake again, building in intensity, the noise growing thunderous.

Glancing up, J?rgen froze. The hillside was moving, and with it, a chunk of rock from one of the uppermost crags was dislodged. Though ‘twas some way above, the boulder was tumbling, bouncing downward, terrifyingly, on a path toward them.

There was no time for thought. Rangvald gasped as J?rgen began dragging him, but they’d both be crushed if they didn’t stir themselves.

J?rgen hardly knew how his legs carried him, for the ground bore the sensation of rolling, as if the land had become sea, moving in waves under their feet. Meanwhile, the inside of his head thrummed. Even his eyeballs were being shaken, like dice in a cup.

Supporting Rangvald as best he could, J?rgen ran straight for the beach.

Give me strength, Odin.

Get me on that ship.

Get us off this island.

Get us away.

He daren’t look back.

If the gods saved him, he'd take it as a sign.

Marriage, babies, and a home back in Skálavík.

I'll give Astrid everything and more.

I'll be the man she needs.

The man she deserves.

As they reached the dunes, J?rgen flung them both to their relative sanctuary.



### CHAPTER 15

The beach shivered, as if some great worm moved beneath, swimming through the sands, its body rippling the grains. The air, too, seemed to vibrate, causing not only the ground to tremble but all living things to quake.

The torment of the earth was surely worse than the last tremors had been. The very crags were crumbling, cascading giant slabs of rock, and the forest was slithering downward, as if the trees stood upon some great cloth being yanked from under them.

Astrid squeezed shut her eyes against the strange shaking of her vision.

Sacred Freyja, spare us, I beg you.

“‘Tis the last of days!” someone screeched.

“The gods are doing battle.”

“We all shall die!”

The rumble was within Astrid’s bones and teeth, commanding her to fall to her knees.

My J?rgen! Is this the end?

You should be here with me.

Was he already dead?

Nay! I cannot bear it. If we are to die, let it be together—not like this.

Astrid wrapped her arms over her head, tucking herself small.

‘Twas surely true. The world was being destroyed.

“Ragnarok!” Another took up the lament. “First with fire and then with flood!”

Astrid screamed as water washed up, catching her unawares, making her fall forward, her hands burying in wet sand. It took her a moment to realize it was receding again.

She knelt up as the next wave came in. Of course, ‘twas only the tide, sending water rushing upon the beach.

The yells and shrieks about her were subsiding, subdued into keening moans and whimpers. The tremble of the earth was lessening, and with it, their sense was returning.

“Rutger, Viggo, Gunnar, and you, Vangreth, help me slide the boat!” Eldberg was already at the stern. “On my count, we heave together.”

Astrid sat upon her heels, watching as the longship met the water. Awkward as it was, the hull upon its side, with the top of the new-fitted mast scraping the sand, the boat had not far to move before it joined the waves.

Rutger left off as soon as they were in the shallows, rolling a narrow cross beam from where it lay on the sand, maneuvering it to pass through a hole carved in the upper portion of the mast.

“‘Tis done!” he shouted to his jarl. “I’ll secure the sail while you load them aboard.”

“Then push her out.” Eldberg put his shoulder to the stern once more. “She’ll be skyward as soon as her bottom clears, then we’ll fit the oars and away.”

‘Tis happening! Astrid could hardly believe it. They’re leaving!

Several of the women were already pressing forward, holding bundles before them, eager to board.

J?rgen!

Panicked, Astrid scanned the beach.

He must be here!

Dread gripped her.

If he were upon the sands, he’d have come to me already... or he’d have gone to aid his jarl.

She cast her gaze toward the settlement, desperate for some glimpse of him. The huts were only partially visible above the dunes, but she could see the longhouse or, rather, what remained of it.

The hillside directly behind the larger building was strewn with ravaged trees. Some of the crag had surely tumbled down the slope, taking all in its path. Where the longhouse had once stood, there was only wreckage, the beams jutting jagged, like battle-broken bones.

If he was inside when the building collapsed...

Burying her head in her hands, she wept.

What consequence was anything if J?rgen was gone? She would stay here and let the destruction take her, too.

“Rangvald!”

An excited shout startled Astrid from her melancholy. Elin was running toward a limping man, half-dragged by the one beside him. Though his head was down, there was no doubt in her mind. ‘Twas J?rgen!

Once he’d lowered Rangvald upon the sand, she flung herself into J?rgen’s embrace.

“My love, my sweet one.” J?rgen rained kisses upon her cheeks, her eyes, her nose, and her chin until his mouth met hers.

Astrid’s heart leapt with wonder, gladness, and a bliss that carried away all else. The intensity of J?rgen’s kiss told her he was of the same mind. Nothing would part them. She was wholly his, and he belonged to her.

Only a violent shout and scuffling nearby brought her back to her surroundings. To her surprise, Viggo was rounding upon Rangvald. He’d dragged him to his feet and landed a punch before Eldberg forced his way in.

The jarl immediately took Rangvald by the throat. “You dare show your face!”

“Stop this.” Elin beat upon Eldberg’s back, but Signy dragged her away.

J?rgen stepped between the two men. “He’s no use to you dead. Leave now; settle grievances later.”

Eldberg cast J?rgen a scathing look. “Says the one who fetched him! I ought to choke the pair of you!”

“And who then would row your longship?” J?rgen set his jaw. “Take us both or neither!”

Eldberg’s eyes were filled with rage, but he shoved Rangvald away. The man crumpled to the ground and Elin went at once to tend to him.

“For Odin’s sake! We’re all your men!” Gunnar had joined them. “The gods spared us to wash upon this shore, and we should leave as one. The light is fading. We must depart while we can.”

“Aye! Leave!” One of the elderly women looked upon them with venom. “Much good may it do you! The world is crumbling, and you squabble like children.”

Another sent up her wail. “‘Tis the end of days! What use setting upon the sea? We all are doomed!”

More of the women clustered around, some urging Eldberg to waste no more time, others hurling derision.

Astrid clung to J?rgen once more. Searching his eyes, she saw uncertainty there.

“Not the end! Not if we leave!” Frida implored the angry women. “There’s a chance for us on the ship.”

“To drown at sea? You think ‘tis better than to die here?”

“Fall to your knees and pray! ‘Twill serve us better!”

“The wench is muddle-minded!”

Gunnar pulled Frida close as insults rained, shouting his defense of her. “She speaks

to save you! Are you so blind?"

"Cease!" Bothild's voice cut through the tumult.

Frida looked boldly into each face. "The island may be dying, but there is a path for us. I've seen the place these men hail from, for Freyja has shown me in my dreams—a narrow waterway between cliffs and a harbor safe from storms, lush fields protected by mountains on all sides. I see us there, settled and content. I see marriages and children."

Gentler murmurs rippled through the throng, but the peace was once again broken by the arrival of Hedda.

"Why stand you about like ninnies?" She threw her scornful gaze upon them all. "Vangreth and I have done all the work, fitting those blasted oars to the cups. The ship is afloat, and the tide shall soon turn. Stay or come, but make haste!"

"We go!" Eldberg clapped Viggo on the back. "All who are with me, climb aboard. As to the rest, may the gods make death merciful."

"Wait!" Signy ran forward, addressing the jarl. "Viggo serves you gladly, but the farmstead back in Skálavík—return it without claim or condition. It is wholly his."

Eldberg's lip curled, as if he would refuse, but Hedda answered before he'd the chance.

"Of course, he agrees!" A punch upon Eldberg's arm had him grumbling reluctant assent.

"And I make a request for Rangvald to be pardoned... of whatever misdoing you charge him!" All heads turned at Astrid's unexpected interruption.

“That cur!” Eldberg growled. “Never!”

“You shall, or I refuse to guide you from the bay!” she answered without hesitation.  
“Take me against my will if you dare!”

“Is this your doing?” Eldberg snarled at J?rgen.

“Gods above, do as she asks, and be done with it!” Hedda’s elbow once more came to serve. “Or I shall sail off without you myself!”

Eldberg’s eyes bulged with temper as he looked from one face to the next, then he smacked his thigh and gave a bark of laughter.

“A man must pick his battles, and I shan’t argue with you, my headstrong Hedda. Mulish and willful you are, but I’ll concede for your sake.”

There was a flurry of activity, of splashing through the shallows and bundles tossed aboard. Rangvald stayed wisely distant from his jarl but sent a nod of thanks Astrid’s way and another to J?rgen.

Astrid cast a rueful glance at the hillside. With the sun setting over the western horizon, the northern side of the island was near in darkness, and she detected the faint glow of the fire they’d witnessed that afternoon. No one else seemed to have noticed yet, their attention all being upon the longship.

How fast were the flames spreading? She supposed it mattered not. Even those who’d been most adamant against joining the men seemed to have accepted the wisdom of leaving the island, thanks to Bothild.

J?rgen beckoned Astrid, interlinking his hands so she might step upon them, while Gunnar was at the rail, ready to heave her over.

Rutger was shinning the mast, attaching a close-furled sail.

“No chickens!” Eldberg barked as Hevinda and Agneta were hoisted in with plump hens under each arm.

No one was taking notice. Astrid was certain that a good few of the bundles were making clucking sounds.

“And absolutely no goats.” Eldberg gnashed his teeth as Viggo raised three bleating nanny goats over the side, one after another.

“I’m not leaving without Brunhilda!” Grethe was already seated next to a ginger-tufted creature whose tongue whipped out rather rudely.

“Think of the milk, my jarl. All these goats are heavy of udder.” Rutger clearly knew which side his bread was buttered on.

Only when Eldberg’s back was turned was a chain of kid goats passed up and promptly hidden under skirts.

Astrid stood at the prow of the boat, the better to see their way. Down below, Signy sat upon one of the rowing benches, her fine gown drenched wet and dirty, her coronet of flowers in disarray.

Her gaze was directed at the rail, no doubt awaiting Viggo.

Their day of joy had turned to horror, but Astrid had faith that all would be well.

The gods had restored Viggo’s sight—at least in part—and brought J?rgen safely back. They’d united Rangvald with Elin and given Gunnar to Frida. Even Grethe and Hedda were in love; ‘twas plain. The ship was fit to take to the sea in just the nick of



time. That was no coincidence.

Their patron goddess, Freyja, had not brought the men to the island to raise a new generation there, but she had brought them with a purpose—to save all the women, taking them to a new home.

At last, Viggo and Jørgen climbed the rail.

They were all aboard, except for...

“Hedda! For the love of all Valhalla’s Valkyries, what are you doing?” Jarl Eldberg hollered.

Forty heads and more craned to look over the side.

Hedda stood ankle-deep in the waves. “I’m frightened! You know I cannot swim.”

“I’m not asking you to swim.” Eldberg leapt over, landing with a splash. “‘Tis a longship. We row, then we sail. By and by, we reach our destination.”

“I know that you lackwit!” Hedda stomped her foot. “Still, I’m afeared!”

“‘Tis because of our sister, Branka,” Frida called out. “‘Twas her drowning that brought about Hedda’s wedding to that loathsome Einar.”

Eldberg looked contrite. “For that, I’m sorry. For your poor sister, and for you marrying a man who clearly deserved no woman at his side, least of all you. But you must get on this ship, Hedda, afore the dark makes our way too perilous. I’ve wrecked upon this shore once, and I’d rather not again!”

The mention of the shipwreck did naught to calm Hedda’s worry, as was evident by

her remaining where she was.

“You’ve just ordered every blessed woman of the island onto my ship—along with half the livestock. Are you telling me you won’t get on yourself?” Eldberg was obviously losing his temper, for his neck was red as a boiled crab. “For once, can you not do as I say? Mayhap you might trust me to know what’s best!”

Oh, dear, thought Astrid. She won’t like that.

“If you’re so clever, why haven’t you asked to marry me?” Hedda shot him eye-daggers.

“The island is falling about our heads, and you won’t leave until you have me planning a wedding?”

Astrid could almost hear Eldberg’s teeth grinding.

Hedda looked as if she might cry.

“Think of the child!” ‘Twas Elin who called out this time. “Hedda, you must board! For the babe’s sake!”

“A child?” Eldberg looked dumbfounded, then ecstatic, then dumbfounded again, all in the flash of a moment.

“‘Tis but the size of a cherry stone.” Hedda tossed her head. “A fig, perhaps, if he takes after his lolloping oaf of a father.”

“Ha!” Eldberg smiled broadly. “I’ll wager you’re carrying twins, and ‘twill be Loki’s humor if they’re both girls, the spit of you, sent to torment me.”

“You see! Even now, you jest rather than professing your love!” Hedda was certainly digging in her feet.

“Of course, I love you, Dearling.” Eldberg’s gaze swiveled to the ship momentarily, and the red in his neck flushed through his whole face. With his wild mane of coppered hair, ‘twas something to behold.

Astrid almost felt sorry for him, having to declare himself while they all watched.

“Enough to make me your wife as soon as we reach Skálavík?” Hedda pouted.

“Aye! Try to stop me!” Eldberg rolled his eyes.

“And you won’t grow tired of my stubborn ways and sharp tongue, of the way I won’t do as I’m told, of me answering you back?” Hedda’s lip was trembling.

“‘Tis those things, amongst others, that I most love about you, you daft wench! You’re the most rousing woman I’ve ever met and the most contrary, which is exactly the way I like it.” Eldberg practically bellowed the words.

“Can you never pay me a compliment without berating me in the same breath!” Hedda folded her arms. “Admit it, you bone-headed oaf, you’re not as gruff as you like to make out, and ‘tis my love that has softened you up!”

“Aye!” Eldberg gave a heartfelt sigh. “For the sake of peace, I’ll concede. I’m not the same man as landed upon this shore, and you’re not the same woman, come to that.”

“Ha, you’ll next be telling me ‘tis the result of your bedsporting mastery!” Hedda huffed.

Eldberg grinned broadly. “Aye. Am certain ‘tis true, and I look forward to continuing

your education between the furs, but I'll be doing that as your husband. As for my prowess in making you the happiest of wives, the skalds shall compose a saga telling of my devotion and shall sing it upon every feast day. I intend to grow old, telling you how much I adore you. Though that may be sooner than I hoped! I'll be silver on chin and crown by the time we make it across the sea."

Finally, Hedda stepped deeper into the water until she reached Eldberg. Thereupon, she thumped his chest. "Why didn't you say all this before?"

"Because I'm a lustsome, prideful addlepate, as you like to remind me." Eldberg then picked Hedda up, throwing her over his shoulder.

Upon the ship, there was a collective sigh of relief.

Once safely past the rocks, Astrid glanced back. Full night cloaked the far side of the island, and a glow half-circled the mountain's summit.

'Twas eerily quiet upon the ship without the oar's motion. Even the men were subdued.

"Full away," cried their jarl, a signal to Rutger, who promptly climbed the mast to let down the sail.

The breeze teased the cloth as it was tied into place, then filled it full as the rudder turned, letting them harness the wind.

Astrid lingered at her vantage point, high up on the prow, not yet ready to join the others in the belly of the boat.

From his rowing bench, J?rgen looked to her and smiled, and a familiar, comforting warmth filled her. They'd encountered darkness and danger but had come through it

all. If there were trials ahead, she had conviction they'd weather them.

His jarl sat not far below, holding Hedda in the protection of his arms. She leaned into him as they spoke, and the wind carried their words to Astrid.

"You forgive me for being late in confiding our plans?" Eldberg's lips brushed against Hedda's hair. "I was afraid to tell you... in case you wouldn't want to leave."

"And what would you have done if I'd refused?" Hedda gazed up at him.

"Abducted you, of course."

He received one of Hedda's playful punches. "'Tis not the way. Husband and wife need to be honest with one another."

"I'm learning."

The pair fell silent again.

Astrid looked across the water. The moon was clear-visible, rising through pale, shredded clouds.

When she glanced down again, she caught the glisten of tears on Hedda's cheek.

"I'm sorry... for your island," Eldberg said quietly.

"That isn't why..." Hedda sniffled. "I'm happy, despite all."

Eldberg whispered. "I was told, an age past it seems, that I would find treasure on this journey. You are my treasure, Hedda—beyond compare with gold or jewels."

Astrid looked away then, for the two kissed in earnest.

Carefully, she made her way to where J?rgen sat. He said naught, but, holding her gaze, he let the expression in his eyes speak for him. There was so much she wanted to say, but they had time. Years and years ahead, if Fate was kind.

Some instinct made her turn, even before Frida's shout, clasping the rail as she pointed.

The fiery halo had grown, as if heat spewed from the depths of the mountain and rose far into the sky.

A pyre on which our island burns.

J?rgen pulled her to him. "Don't look."

In any case, the view was suddenly veiled, for they'd entered a mist, its tendrils meandering betwixt the benches. The wind had dropped, yet they moved onward, the waves no longer heard as they glided through the enveloping fog.

When they emerged again into the clear night, the island was no longer visible.

All behind them was obscured.

Only the way forward was clear, and the ship sailed on.

### EPILOGUE

On a day when the sun was warm and the breeze light, six weddings took place on the clifftop above Skálavík, looking down upon the sparkling waters of the fjord.

The brides wore open-sided gowns of golden silk embroidered with the meadow flowers of their new home and circlets upon each fair head, twined with wild roses for passion and daisies for fertility—though it appeared a good number needed no assistance in that matter.

The men were garbed just as finely—thanks to Eldberg's generosity—in tunics of finespun ochre wool adorned with thistles on the yoke to symbolize their tenacity. The love of a good woman had softened their jarl, some said—though with a new design of ink patterned upon his cheeks and war braids on either side of his face, beaded with amethyst, Hedda believed he'd never looked more dangerous or more enticing.

The handfasting was made with lengths of ivy to bind each couple strong, though these brides required no help in that regard. Their men were bound without need of rope or chains, for the ties of devotion were strongest of all.

That wasn't to say a length of something soft upon wrists and ankles wouldn't ever find its way into the bedchambers of our lovers. For what woman would deny herself the chance to be worshipped so utterly, obliged to deliciously submit as her man had his way?

Perhaps, on occasion, the men allowed their good ladies the same command, for all

prudent men knew a woman must have her dominion.

Vows made, the brides ran laughing down the hill to the wedding hall with their grooms chasing behind, and much kissing there was as each was caught.

Eldberg made a great show of presenting Hedda with his sword, and she gave him her hunting dagger in exchange. With it, he cut his palm and hers, intermingling the destiny of Skálavík's men and the women they were proud to call wife.

Tribute was also paid to those who'd failed to return—the ten oarsmen whose families grieved and who Eldberg had sworn would want for nothing.

The gods had surely spun the mist and stormy sea that caused the shipwreck, but 'twas the sacrifice of those poor, drowned men that brought about the love-matches on the island and the saving of Høy's women.

The feasting lasted long into the night, and the drinking horns were raised in more toasts than any could number. Amidst such happiness, even the deepest rivalries were mended and loyalties pledged once more. These grooms had shared adventures no other could understand, and such brotherhood was worthy of preserving.

When, at last, Astrid and Jørgen retired, with the wedding kitten he'd given her curled at their feet, she fell into a contented dream. She was a child again, running to her father, then lifted aloft, carried safe. Waking, the arms about her were those of Jørgen, and her own pulled him into her embrace.

Beneath the furs of other beds, each bride and groom slept entwined, safe in the protection of their love.

'Twas a good feeling to be wed.

For there were no secrets between those whose hearts were open. All things were



seen, even when words went unspoken.