







# Seduced by the Viking (Bound and Betrothed #5)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Can trust be traced from the ashes?

Conceited, arrogant, and built like a prize stud, Rutger is a red-blooded Viking.

But his brash, bad boy demeanour hides a chasm of pain.

He has known love, only to have his heart cleaved in two by a faithless woman.

Grethe's hopes of marriage and children were cruelly dashed when her fickle betrothed abandoned her.

With Rutger as her captive mate, she'll punish him as she'd like to punish all men.

Hot-headed and stubborn, the two are intent upon the other's torment.

Nothing can change the way they feel.

Can it...?

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Six shipwrecked Vikings.

An island of isolated women

Enter a world of seduction and suspense, told against the forbidding backdrop of a mysterious, secluded island.

Nothing is as it seems...

This dark romance series features six strapping warriors determined to lay down the law. The women who claim them as mates might think they have the upper hand, but they're about to discover what it means to be loved by a Viking.

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:26 am*

## GLOSSARY

braies – trousers

drukkin – inebriated by alcohol

Freyja – the most renowned of the Norse goddesses, influencing love and fertility, but also battle and death

gunna – a simple gown, over which a long apron is usually worn (pinned just below the shoulders)

jarl – the chieftain of the community

to swive – to have sexual relations

thrall – a slave (often captured during raids)

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:26 am*

### CHAPTER 1

Early morning, after the men's ship has wrecked upon the island

Was he dreaming?

If so, it was the best sort of dream.

Warm breath skimmed his neck. Lips grazed upward, working upon his earlobe. Her teeth gave a playful nip.

Aye, my lovely.

Rutger turned toward the alluring woman—all curves and yielding softness. She was a keen one, saucily licking his cheek before passing the tip of her tongue across his lips.

That's it, sweet one. Kiss me deep.

Spluttering as the questing tongue filled his mouth, he drew back, but the lass pressed upon him with unbridled enthusiasm.

Unexpectedly, she gave a snorting sneeze.

Rutger's eyes flew open.

'Twas dark, but he could feel the heat of the wench above him and smell her too—a

piquant, earthy tang.

Straw prickled against his back and bare buttocks.

Not again!

He'd vowed not to let himself be lured into swiving in places such as stables. Not after the last time, when he'd rolled into a pile of something pungent. No man should be scrubbing that sort of muck from his arse-crack.

Rutger's arm was wrenched back as he shifted to sit up.

Odin's moldy toenails!

He gave a grunt of pain. What was this? Something rubbed about his wrist. Rope, was it? Had the wench tied him? He jerked against the binding and found it surprisingly firm.

Despite the discomfort, he gave a low chuckle.

He liked feisty women. 'Twouldn't be the first time he'd let one bind him and have her way.

He reached with his free hand to liberate himself, only to have a sharper pain stab him across the fingers of his left hand. By the gods! It felt as if they were broken. Tentatively, he curled them up and gave forth a string of curses.

How drukkin was I yester eve? Head-soaked enough to fall and not remember?

He recalled carousing in the longhouse, drowning his sorrows, and giving his weasel brother a piece of his mind. He'd landed a good one and been rewarded by Ragnut

skulking off with his nose bloodied.

The rest was indistinct, but wasn't he supposed to be setting off with Eldberg this day? The sooner, the better, as far as Rutger was concerned.

The woman he'd sought consolation with might be real, but he did remember dreaming of something else—of rowing down the fjord, away from Skálavík, and out onto the open sea. There, the wind was brisk in the sails. A long, strange, rambling dream it had been, ending with a storm on the waves and a mist that had surrounded them suddenly, as if from nowhere.

Rutger gave himself an inward shake.

If he was late in joining his jarl upon the dock, he'd be at risk of receiving a bloody nose himself.

Though how I'm to row with this pain in my fingers, I don't know.

"Help me, woman." He groaned. "You've had your fun. 'Tis time for me to show my face elsewhere."

He assumed he'd given satisfaction. Ale wasn't the best companion to prowess, but his staff was generally reliable. Even now, it was standing to attention—as it always did first thing in the morn.

The wench said nothing beyond making a mirthful bleat of sorts.

Rutger screwed up his eyes, then opened them again.

Dawn light was creeping beneath the door of wherever he was.

Above him, the wench stared back with wide-set golden eyes.

By the gods, how drukkin was I?

He'd a healthy regard for all womenfolk, having five sisters of his own, not to mention a goodly number of aunts and female cousins, his own mother still living, and his grandmother, too.

But this woman...

He'd never seen such a nose. 'Twas large and flared, breathing heatedly upon his face in short puffs.

And her hair...

He liked a redhead, and this wench had a copper-colored mane, but was that a tuft on her chin?

'Twas a step too far, being tickled by a woman's beard while giving her a kiss.

Leaning in, she gave him another of her frolicsome licks, then butted her head full against his chest, knocking him back into the straw. Looming over him, she twitched long ears, while down below, the weight of a heavy udder brushed his leg.

Thor's gonads!

Rutger moaned in disgust.

A female, but no human one!

What trick was this? Had J?rgen brought him there, leaving him to the creature's



amorous attentions? 'Twould be like him to create such a jest at Rutger's expense !

No doubt, he was laughing himself stupid.

Rutger turned his head away as the animal extended its tongue once more. With its hooves planted on either side of his body, he was trapped.

He could only hope J?rgen would return to free him.

Once he'd done so, Rutger would devise some way to have his revenge, and he'd laugh twice as hard.

Rutger was ruminating on that when the door flew open. Light flooded the space, and women's voices drifted in.

"Urgh! The stench in here! Is it just him or that daft goat of yours making all this stink?" the first said, sounding snappish.

"Brunhilda doesn't stink!" The second retorted. "At least, not usually. Mayhap 'tis her heat. I put her in here for that reason. She deserves a rest before being mated again."

The voices came closer, though Rutger could see neither woman, the monstrous goat blocking his view. He considered calling out, but the women were babbling away. One thing was for sure. They were fully aware of him.

J?rgen must have made some arrangement with the pair.

"By the gods! Look at that!" The first voice rang out again. "His perverted man-part is pointing to the rafters. 'Tis Brunhilda that roused him!"

Color burned on Rutger's cheeks.

As if my love-hammer would jut skyward for a goat!

What sort of man did these women think he was?

"His man-part is a good size." The second voice neared. "But so crooked! Has Brunhilda sat on it, do you think? Mayhap, she's broken it."

As if! Rutger gnashed his teeth. Over his dead body would he let a randy goat sit on his phallus.

"All man-parts bend one way or the other." The first woman cackled. "Surely you know that, Grethe? Don't tell me Sven never presented you with a glimpse of his dangle-dong."

The one called Grethe snorted with disgust. "I'm not talking to you about Sven, and I'll thank you not to mention him or his man-part again. "

"So tetchy! The sooner you get this one inside you, the better. It might put you in a warmer mood." The first woman sighed. "But don't let him talk you into any other shenanigans—nor leave the goats in here unattended. One tup may be enough. Sit astride his lap, then move up and down as I explained to you. 'Twill take less time than to pluck a hen. We'll soon know whether the seed has taken root. If not, we'll keep trying. The mackerel entrails have been far from auspicious of late, so it may require another cycle of the moon. It would be well for you to look out for any favorable signs and use those to guide you. The night my Sven was conceived, the fish guts were full to bursting, which everyone knows is an indication of?—"

"Urgh!" The other woman interrupted with a retching sound. "I've no desire to hear about you and Uncle Knud copulating nor anything relating to Sven!"

Rutger inwardly growled. Whatever joke this might be, 'twas going too far. If these two thought he was going to lie here while they did as they liked with him, they had another thing coming.

The talk of fish was making him queasy and, as for the business about his seed, it made no sense.

Unless 'twas some cunning plan to trick him into marriage. Rutger's blood went from a simmer to a boil. He'd been down that path before—or almost, he should say, having narrowly escaped.

Ha! If this Grethe wants a ride, let her try, and we'll see who has the upper hand! I'll make her sorry for trying, that's for sure.

Closing his eyes, he kept still.

The advantage would be his.

Having ushered out both Aunt Ulva and Brunhilda, Grethe went to the rear of the room and pinned back the goatskin curtain.

'Twas true that the place was over fragrant. A little air would be good, but she'd no intention of leaving the door wide while she performed any intimate acts. The matter was degrading enough as it was without someone poking their nose in to see what was afoot.

The man-beast was still asleep, which was a blessing. She'd no wish to stare into his eyes nor to talk to him. Freyja forbid, he was a chatty sort.

Not that he wasn't handsome in his way. She rather liked the sharp cut of his jaw and neat beard, the straightness of his nose and manly brow. She wouldn't mind looking

at him while doing the deed.

In fact, she might go as far as to picture her former betrothed tied up on the other side of the hut, having to watch while she rode the stranger's staff—all the while knowing he'd be getting no such attention. She hoped wherever Cousin Sven was, he thoroughly regretted abandoning her.

It was a regular daydream, imagining him tormented by thoughts of her—Grethe, the most beautiful and alluring woman he'd ever met or ever would!

It would serve the snake right to have been shipwrecked himself, just as these men were—except to wash up on an island devoid of anyone at all. Somewhere he'd have plenty of time to ponder on the mistake he made and to wallow in misery.

Grethe smiled to herself. Such musings were a comfort of sorts.

Spurred on by the notion of Sven filled with jealousy and remorse, she let her gaze roam the stranger's muscular legs and arms, broad shoulders and chest, and taut abdomen. On every limb, as well as his torso, there were symbols inked. Some she was familiar with, having seen them engraved on cups and totems and on the hilt of the weapons and shields their men used to take with them on their long sailings, heading off to trade. Others were new to her.

None of the men of their island had painted those symbols on their bodies. At least, not that she'd ever heard about. Perhaps she was wrong. It wasn't as if she'd seen any of them fully naked—not even Sven, though he'd tried plenty of times to get her clothes off.

A sour taste came to her mouth, as it always did, thinking of Sven.

The man before her had a pleasing body. 'Twas not too hairy—a dusting of light

brown across his chest, growing denser, to where his phallus sprang forth. His man-plums nestled high, which was another sign, according to her aunt, that the male was ready to mate.

Kneeling down, Grethe gave his arousal a poke, then flinched as the thing gave a sudden jerk.

Men's bodies are so peculiar. How do they keep their minds on anything but their man-parts, having them swinging about in front of them all the day?

'Twas a relief to think she wouldn't need to spend much time looking at the thing. For all his handsomeness, it was far from ideal, performing the mating act with someone who had straw in his hair, goat lick on his face, and who hadn't even had the chance to whisper sweetling words to her, telling her he'd burst if he couldn't embrace her.

Pah! That was what Sven was like, and though I liked it at the time, what good came of it? All were lies, for he cared naught at all when the bitter moment came. Sailing away with the other men, he didn't even bother to wish me farewell.

The only consolation regarding her current situation was that she'd claimed the stranger first. 'Twould have been unbearable to wait in line for some other woman to finish with him before she might have her turn.

Her old rival, Vangreth, would be gnashing her teeth. She'd certainly be pushing herself forward for the man when Grethe had no more use for him.

A wayward thought snaked to the front of Grethe's mind. Even if her bleeding time ceased, indicating she was carrying a child, she might pretend otherwise, simply to make Vangreth wait! 'Twould mean keeping the stranger longer, but the annoyance would be worthwhile to see Vangreth grow ever more impatient.

The hussy had been always trying to lure Sven away. She'd practically thrown herself at him, obliging Grethe to make some concessions of her own. She'd made sure to keep Sven keen by giving his staff a rub now and then. Once, at his insistence, she'd put it in her mouth, though that hadn't been pleasurable at all—having him shove it down her throat without a by-your-leave, so that she could hardly take a breath.

More agreeable had been letting him stroke his member between her legs. She'd almost enjoyed that and had gone as far as letting him enter her with just the tip. He'd wanted to do more, but it was far too uncomfortable, and she'd been a little frightened, truth be told .

Ulva had pulled Grethe aside when the betrothal was first arranged, explaining how babies came to be. To her surprise, it seemed her aunt fully expected Sven to make free with Grethe, even before the marriage, but advised against letting him spill his seed inside.

An awkward conversation that had been, though Grethe appreciated her aunt's straight talking. 'Twould have been humiliating to have people gossiping behind her back about how she'd forced Sven into a hasty performance of the wedding ritual because of expecting his child.

Well... there's no point in delaying. I know exactly what to do, and if Aunt Ulva is right, perhaps one tuppung will do the job. I shan't need to bother with him again, though that won't stop me from keeping him here—just to spite Vangreth.

'Twas an ungenerous plan, but Grethe couldn't bring herself to care. She doubted not that Vangreth would treat her just the same. As for the man restrained at her side, he'd have to bear it as best he could. He'd be safe, at least, and there would be time for those fingers to heal.

He deserved no more consideration. A man as attractive as he had doubtless turned a

great many women's heads and taken full advantage—just as Sven had wanted to with her. How many hearts had the stranger broken along the way?

Oh, yes, I have his measure! I refuse to feel guilty. Even if the cur stirs awake, he'll hardly find me riding him displeasing.

Lifting her skirts, she sat astride his hips, feeling for his member. 'Twas hot in her hand and firm in her grip, yet the skin was as soft as that of her inner thigh. Awkwardly, she positioned it, and as the head met the parting of her labia, she eased downward, taking the bulbous head within.

She gave a soft gasp.

Had it felt so with Sven when she'd let him toy with her in this way?

She wasn't sure.

Perhaps it was because she was in control of her own movement and the stranger utterly at her disposal that she felt more at ease. Certainly, there was a wetness at her crux.

Proceeding, Grethe bit her lip, amazed at her body's ability to accommodate him. Just a little farther and he was entirely embedded within her sheath. Sitting upright, she took several deep breaths, adjusting to the sensation of fullness.

A surge of satisfaction rose at having conquered the man's phallus. All it had taken was the belief that she might do it. The courage to put her own needs first. Faith in herself to take charge.

"How easy was that?" With a smile of self-congratulation, she addressed the man prone beneath her.

Then, to her utter shock, he sat up abruptly and flung his left arm about her waist. She was clasped to him as tightly as could be, staring into eyes of a tawny hue.

Slowly, his mouth curved in a wicked grin.



### CHAPTER 2

Whatever was going on, Rutger would take the upper hand, and that started with him giving the wench exactly what she was angling for. There could be no doubt about it, for she'd wasted little time in sitting astride him.

With his arm wrenched behind and the fingers of his left aching to blazes, the position wasn't ideal for vigorous swiving, but Rutger was determined to give it his best.

'Twas of no matter that her expression was as shocked as if he were a corpse rising up to claim her rather than a hot-blooded man. Holding her as firmly as he was able, Rutger adopted a method he rarely bothered with, moving her up and down as fast as possible.

Fuck, yes!

The quivering in his bollocks told him the effort was reaping results.

As for the lass, her hands were fastened upon his shoulders, her bosom buffeting his chin with each bounce. 'Twas a shame she was fully clad. From what he could surmise, the breasts in question had a good weight to them. Unrestrained, they'd present a lively sight.

His imagination took over, picturing erect, rosy nipples and the noise she'd make as he took one into his mouth. Sucking upon a goodly aroused peak always sent the ladies over, and Rutger prided himself on being a generous lover.

Even if some don't appreciate it!

Against his will, an image flashed into his mind of his former betrothed, Tyra, sitting upon his lap, much as this lass was. She'd used him as suited her, and it was his brother Ragnut's cock she rode now.

Fuck them both!

Rutger gritted his teeth, jerking the woman straddling him all the harder. She squeaked in response, digging her nails where she clasped him. Her noises were surely of enjoyment—panting and mewling, then a louder cry as he thrust upward for his final release.

Holding her fixedly, he pumped inside.

Immediately, a wash of relief came over him, his bones softly humming and his thoughts languid. With a sigh, he flopped horizontal again.

The wench sat upon him still, her gaze bewildered.

Rutger surveyed her through narrowed eyes. She was much as any other—her hair, plaited in a circle about her crown, was middling fair, her eyes some shade of blue, her features regular. Her lips were good, full and reddened, tinged with the same flush that stained her cheeks, as all women possessed after they'd received a thorough swiving .

There was little else remarkable, yet Rutger was surprised he'd never noticed her before. The curve of her hip and bosom was enough to draw a man's attention. Even in Skálavík, where attractive women were plentiful, one as well-proportioned as this would not go unnoticed .

His focus returned to her face. The dazed look had gone, replaced by something more determined. Her jaw was set, and her expression was wary.

“A pleasant romp.” He ought to humor her, he supposed; ‘twould gain his release all the quicker. “Didst reach your woman’s peak?”

“Ha! As if I’d delight in coupling with a clodpole like you!”

“And yet, I heard you make moan.” Cushioning his head in the crook of his arm, he made himself more comfortable. “The sort of moan a woman only makes when she’s enjoying herself.”

“Pffft!” With a purse of her lips, she climbed off, pressing unnecessarily hard as she did so, right upon his bladder. “Any moan I did make was in protest at all the shaking about.”

The wench was bending over now, brushing down her skirts. It afforded him a nice view of her cleavage.

Two dumplings—one for each hand.

Again, his mind strayed to the thought of how she’d look naked. Was there time for a second bout? His cock was softening, but he’d a talent for a swift turnabout. A few strokes of his hand would see him on his way.

Even better, a few strokes of hers.

“You’re a pretty maid, to be sure.” Ignoring the various aches in his body, Rutger sat up again. “I must away soon, Sweetling, upon a perilous journey, but the memory of our bedsport shall hearten me. Come closer, little rosebud. Untie me, won’t you? Then give me a kiss.”

Standing over him, she folded her arms. “Brunhilda might think you’ve kissome lips, but I’ve more sense... and stop using those love names!”

Rutger gave an inward chuckle. Clearly, ‘twas the lass herself who thought his lips ‘kissome’, and she no doubt liked his sweet talk. Tyra—deceitful wench that she was—had been the same, seemingly protesting when she was naught but eager for a mounting.

“As for untying you, put that notion out of your head. You’re mine, to do with as I like, and you won’t be going anywhere.”

Odin’s nads! This one’s feisty!

A jolt of desire shot through Rutger’s groin. If she wanted him as her plaything, it might be worth incurring Eldberg’s wrath. He’d no objection to being a slave to her whims—for a while, at least.

“I’m all yours, Heartling, and I’m very obliging. If there’s something particular you want, you’ve only to tell me.” Rutger wiggled his brows.

In fact, I’d like that very much.

He’d tried encouraging Tyra many a time to describe to him exactly what she’d like. She’d never deigned to do so, then had the gall to throw it in his face, saying he’d no idea how to please her. Women were contrary creatures, pretending to want one thing, then veering another way.

The woman—Grethe—pulled a face. “I’m not your Heartling, you sapskull! And,”—she let out an exasperated breath—“stop acting as if you’re enjoying this. You’re not supposed to! I’ve tied you up, and you’ll do as you’re told.”

Rutger couldn't help but grin. "I'm all ears... and cock. Quite a lot of cock." He made a suggestive thrust with his hips.

The wench was a funny one, but he rather liked it. No sooner did a thought seem to enter her head than it was out of her mouth. 'Twas refreshing.

"Insufferable!" Most rudely, she poked out her tongue, then pushed his chest with her foot.

'Twas her mistake, for Rutger—quick as a flash—grasped her ankle. One yank and she was off balance, tumbling full on top of him in all his glorious nakedness.

Opening his legs, he trapped hers within. "You were showing me your tongue?" He darted out his own. "I've a suggestion as to what you can do with it."

"Oaf!" She struggled, pushing with her fists, but there seemed no real strength in the protest.

When he brought his left arm across the small of her back, he noticed how her gaze dropped to his lips. She moved slightly, rubbing against the hardened part of him.

Breathing hard, she lowered her mouth, plainly wanting him to make a move. It took no effort at all for him to touch there with his own. Gently, he pressed his lips to hers, tugging and coaxing, before sucking her tongue into his mouth.

Fire and blood! His heart was pounding .

She tasted delicious. Of honey, mostly, as if she'd been eating the stuff on purpose, just to taste sweet for him.

Pulling back a moment, she murmured something. It sounded like 'loathsome clump,'

but then she dove in again, and Rutger swore it was she kissing him rather than the other way about.

With a throaty growl, he let her do just that.

### CHAPTER 3

A fire of lust burned between Grethe's legs, insisting she continue to enjoy his mouth. He groaned, opening to receive her tongue and prolong their union.

She hadn't expected to crave the stranger nor to wish for another coupling so soon. Yet, staring into his eyes, she had the strongest urge to ride him again.

That would show Sven!

She shifted, untangling herself from the prison of his limbs.

I'll take what I want, riding him to the peak—which is more than Sven ever accomplished!

She imagined it was her old love bound before her as she pulled at her sleeves. Rolling down her bodice, she swore it was Sven's eyes she saw widen.

"Here! Show me what you can do to please me."

"Gladly." Despite his damaged fingers, he brought his free hand to cradle one breast before pinching the bud hard between thumb and forefinger.

The noise that left her mouth was guttural.

His breath was warm against her skin as he took her nipple between his lips and tugged hard, drawing it deep.

By the gods!

The sensation ratcheted her desire.

“Suckle me!” Grethe hardly recognized the hoarse command as her own, but her hips jolted forward as she instructed him. “Worship my breasts!”

She’d never dared speak so to Sven, but she imagined him now, tied up and forced to please her—as the newcomer was doing.

Ha! What fun it would be to make Sven satisfy her that way!

Or, better, to compel Sven to witness as she mounted the stranger over and over, taking everything she longed for. She’d revel in Sven’s powerlessness, knowing he’d never enjoy what she was giving willingly to this stranger, knowing he never would!

The thoughts amplified her arousal, demanding she move over him until her hips rocked at their own pace.

Without hesitation, she hoisted her skirts to find his staff and, clasping his organ, maneuvered it into position. Her labia were wet, enabling him to slide effortlessly between her folds. With his attention firmly on her bosom, she grazed the place that brought pleasure at the apex of her thighs, chasing the tumult she knew was possible.

Coming up for air, he replaced one suckled breast with the other, and Grethe dove back into the fantasy of Sven’s rightful humiliation.

Oh, yes! This was far superior to the first frenzied bout of rutting.

What would she say to Sven as she ground upon the stranger’s staff?



She'd tell him that he'd never have the pleasure. Make him writhe with frustration as he listened to her noises of copulation. Make him regret that loss, as the rasping giant's face contorted with ecstasy, shooting his seed full inside her!

Grethe dropped back her head. Limited she might be in her knowledge of the ways of men, but she'd toyed with her body enough to know how to achieve her satisfaction. If she kept up this pace, that's what would happen. Both she and the man between her thighs would soon be shouting in triumph.

It's what Sven deserves.

For him to witness my delight while he receives none!

With her eyes closed, she envisioned him held captive, obliged to watch her coupling.

The nub between her legs tingled as she ground down upon the stranger's hard length.

Sven should be here. He should be made to suffer! He should be ? —

The image was splintered by the wave that crashed over her, eclipsing all thought of Sven. Overcome by the weight of sudden pleasure, her body tensed as she shuddered to her climax.

Only distantly was she aware of the stranger's grunting satisfaction. However, when she opened her eyes once more, she was met by his conceited expression.

"You have quite the appetite!" There was no hiding his smug smile.

Her euphoria was immediately dampened, replaced by irritation.

“And now I’m done with you.” It had been a mistake, making herself vulnerable by letting him see her engulfed by passion. Better to remain guarded and in control.

Yet when the promise of pleasure beckoned, I so easily yielded!

She’d intended to relish his torment, commanding him as she took what he had to offer. Inadvertently, she’d come across as far too willing. The fool would think she was available to rut whenever it pleased him. He’d be insufferable!

“You’ve had your fun.” He gestured to his withering staff. “Now, untie me. I have places to be.”

Hadn’t she already settled this matter? Clearly, the oaf hadn’t been listening.

“Too bad.” She yanked her sleeves back into place, covering her breasts, then rose to stand above him. Mindful of how he’d grabbed her before, she stepped to the side. “You’re mine, given to me when your ship wrecked upon our shore. ”

A crease split his brow. “Shipwreck?”

“Aye.” A cruel desire to inflict pain upon him stirred inside her.

The man with the inked body was not Sven, but he was the closest she’d get to revenge upon any man. She wanted him to hurt, for him to know even a fraction of the pain she’d endured after Sven had forsaken her.

“Only a handful of you were found, now shared among us. As for the rest of your crew, there was no sign. No doubt, swept off by the sea, they’re long since drowned.”

“You’re wrong.” His frown deepened. “We’re to sail today. I need to get to the harbor. Cease this nonsense and let me go.”

She paused at his apparent bewilderment. Did he truly not know what had happened, or did the brute only feign ignorance?

I wouldn't be surprised.

Grethe struggled to have faith in anything that came from a man's mouth anymore. It was another legacy Sven had left her.

"You're going nowhere." Whatever remorse arose in her at his confusion abated just as quickly.

Men were tricky creatures. She'd do well not to dwell on his feelings.

"You'll stay where I want until I'm finished with you." She folded her arms across her chest, pleased by the way he slumped. "Keep me happy, and I'll consider finding this jarl for you." Grethe had little inclination to do so, but a compliant captive would make things go easier.

He rubbed his temple. "I don't understand. We were to sail this day, and yet now you say..." His voice trailed away, his brows knitting in obvious turmoil.

"It's as I've told you." She huffed, lowering her hands to her hips. "You'd do well to listen. Now, rest there." She pointed to where he was sprawled, as though he had a choice. "I'll see what can be done to feed you."

"I..." Once more, his words halted, but she'd no patience to stay and soothe him. He'd have to come to terms with his lot, just as she had done.

Turning on her heel, she stalked away. She'd enjoyed the rutting more than was right, but it was almost more satisfying leaving him on his backside in the dirt, reeling from her revelation of his true circumstances.

She took one final glance behind her. Slumped on the ground, the stranger looked forlorn. Grethe barely bit down the smile that rose to her lips.

Good.

He was just as she wanted him.

### CHAPTER 4

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

Grethe barely bothered to conceal her yawn.

How long had she been seated about the longhouse fire, listening first to Bothild droning on and then Elin?

Long enough to know that she didn't care for this impromptu summoning of the island's Council, the purpose of which eluded her.

What business was it of hers how the other women were getting along with their men or how the prisoners were faring in recovering from their injuries? She hadn't the least interest, and her behind was already half-numb from sitting upon the floor.

Elin was enjoying the attention, no doubt, being called upon to give her verdict on everyone and everything, as if being the island's healer bestowed her with some all-knowing power.

Grethe was gratified to see Hedda looking similarly irritated. Their former jarl's wife wore a perpetual scowl, but there was a particular impatience to her today. Drumming her fingers upon one knee, she kept peering toward the curtain that shielded her sleeping quarters from the main body of the longhouse.

That's where her man would be, bound up—as Rutger was back at her own hut.

Hedda had made a great fuss of the danger the men presented, but she'd fallen in line, like the rest of them, when Bothild had allocated one of the shipwrecked clods her way. Knowing Hedda, she'd be making the poor sod's life a misery. Then again, she might be relishing having a piece of prime meat at her disposal—a giant of a man with flaming red hair.

If he's built in proportion, Hedda will have plenty on her hands.

Grethe allowed herself a smug smile.

She'd wager a whole barrel of mead it was so, and that—for all her protestations—haughty Mistress Hedda had been taking advantage, just as Grethe had.

That very morning, Grethe had sat upon Rutger while facing the other way, giving him a most charming view of her backside while she rode to her tumult. He'd been within a hair's breadth of his own release when she'd jumped up, leaving him pleading.

Grethe toyed with her bottom lip. She'd tied a strip of linen at the base of his cock, instructing him to keep it stiff for her. 'Twas an amusing twist on her usual teasing games, although she wasn't sure it would work.

Mayhap it would...

Although, perhaps not if this meeting goes on much longer.

Surreptitiously, she shifted position so the heel of her foot might press between her legs, but it only made her mindful of what she truly craved.

Am I having too much bedsport for my own good ?

She pondered upon it when the mention of her name brought her back to the present.

“The man who resides with Grethe has three fingers broken on his left hand.” Elin was speaking. “He should keep those bound until I say otherwise. However, he has no other injury of note.”

“One working cock is all he needs.” One of the old crones, Agneta, cackled, bringing a responding hoot of laughter from Grethe’s Aunt Ulva.

Grethe glared at them both. She didn’t like being the subject of such jesting.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Ulva leaned over to pat Grethe’s hand. “Crude words or no, the outcome is the same. You’ve a duty to us all in ripening with child. ‘Tis a blessing from Freyja that these men are partly incapacitated, for it shall make your coupling go easier if they’re a little weak.”

Grethe snatched her hand away.

She wasn’t seeking advice, and certainly not from her aunt. As for ‘ripening’, she’d leave that to Freyja’s will. If Grethe was destined to be a mother, all well and good, but she wasn’t sure how far she cared.

Most of the others— Elin, Frida, Signy, and Astrid—were probably on their knees from morning ‘til night, offering libations and gifts to the goddess.

Grethe wasn’t like them.

She never had been, and she didn’t wish to be.

She hadn’t ever really pictured herself with a child, even when she’d been betrothed to Sven.

Of all the women encircling the firepit, the only one with whom Grethe felt some sort of affinity was Hedda, strange as it was to admit. Hedda was a sour old thing, nearly twice Grethe's age, but she didn't take anyone's nonsense and unabashedly spoke her mind.

Better than being a timid mouse—like Cousin Signy and daft Astrid—or jumping at my own shadow as Frida does. I wouldn't be surprised if they're all still virgins.

Grethe swallowed down her laughter.

Hedda and Ulva were now arguing about something, and Signy looked mortified. Bothild, as usual, was smoothing the waters.

Grethe looked again at Hedda.

How had she not noticed before...

She'd tied a neckerchief about her throat, but Grethe could see perfectly clearly; the skin was marked with little bruises—the sort one got from those sucking little kisses Sven had once given her.

Cheekily, Grethe fingered the edge of the kerchief. “‘Tis warm today for such covering. I hope you aren't sickening.”

“What? No, of course not!” Hedda attempted to pull up the covering, but Grethe was determined to have her fun.

With a tug, she yanked it down, revealing the telltale marks.

“Lovers' kisses! Our Hedda has been more than enduring... she's been enjoying!” To her satisfaction, there were a few gasps from about the circle, followed by giggles.



Agneta slapped her thigh. "This jarl she's bedding must be doing something right!"

Hedda looked as if she'd like to murder them all. "The cur has been incapable of restraining his lust."

Grethe gave a whoop of laughter. Getting a rise out of Hedda was priceless.

"'Twould not be the worst thing to take pleasure in a man's company, granddaughter." Bothild gently interjected.

"'Tis nothing of that sort," Hedda folded her arms. "But I may have been wrong in my first desire to simply kill these men. There is work to be done, and some are capable."

"I think it's cruel not to let them speak to one another." Signy piped up. "They must be lonely. They should be allowed a meeting, and giving them something useful to do is a good idea."

Grethe didn't give a pig's scrotum how 'lonely' the men might be. She was content having Rutger right where he was, under her command, and she intended to exploit that as soon as she could escape this dullard meeting.

She made to protest, but her indignant exclamation was overborne by the sounds of assent made by the others.

To her annoyance, Bothild seemed to be agreeing that some men were fit enough to be assigned duties.

"As long as they show themselves pliant and no danger to our women, all will be well."

Curses!

Grethe's mind spun ahead.

She didn't like the idea of him having his freedom—even if it was just to carry firewood or something of that sort .

Ulva was nodding. “Let them work, but if they step out of line, I'll stand with Hedda in wielding the knife!”

Grethe bit her lip. She believed her aunt would do it. As for Hedda, she wasn't so sure. Not now. Nonetheless, there were other women who'd been on her side, who wouldn't need much encouragement to take out their bitterness on the strangers.

Rutger was a lout, but he was hers. No one else ought to hurt him.

There were other possibilities, too.

Suppose Rutger took a fancy to one of the other women. Vangreth might put herself forward as a guard while the men undertook some task or other.

That hussy would have no compunction in secretly offering herself—to Rutger or any of the others!

Grethe's blood began to heat.

In her mind's eye, she could see it all—out of sight somewhere, Vangreth lying back with her skirts hoisted, letting the men have their way with her.

A few days of that and she might end up with a dumpling in her belly! Before me or any of us!

Grethe clenched her fists. The final thought in her mind was the most worrying of all.

What if Rutger prefers her over me?

What if she asks to have him as a true husband, and he agrees?

The humiliation of it would be too much—being set aside as if she didn't matter.

She couldn't bear for that to happen again.

She wouldn't let it happen!

### CHAPTER 5

Rutger worked at the rope with his teeth and his left thumb. Another tug or two and he might just ease his hand from the restraint. That thought spurred him on—of being able to rest his right arm without having it dangling in this awkward position.

Not that it would be good for much—at least, not for a while. He'd made sure to move his fingers regularly and to rest his elbow on his knee to take the weight off his shoulder, but the limb remained slightly numbed. It would take time for the feeling and his strength to return on that side.

Twice before, he'd come close to freeing himself, but the wench had spotted the loosening of the knots and tightened them all the more.

She was a vixen—keeping him that way, treating him like some sort of bedthrall. Most of the time, she flounced off once she'd taken her own pleasure.

He'd tried calling for help, but she'd come running, threatening to tie both wrists and gag him. Wearily, he'd accepted his situation. Wherever his comrades were being kept, they didn't seem in a position to rescue him, and no one else appeared to care about his predicament.

But nor could he do entirely nothing.

Having a strip of linen tied about his engorged cock was the last straw—and with the fingers of his left hand broken, he hadn't a hope of untying it. He'd tried willing away the arousal without success.

Odin only knew what further torments she had in mind. He'd no eagerness to find out how inventive she might be.

If he but freed his arm, he might remove this latest indignity, then leave this prison. He'd find somewhere to hide and see if he could locate his fellow men.

Wetting his lips, he persevered with his task, biting at the loop while rotating the tip of his thumb within the small opening he'd created.

It was working! The rope slackened, the pressure abating about his wrist. He moved his right thumb into his palm, reducing the circumference, then gently eased downward.

In a sudden rush, his hand was through, and his arm fell with a thump to the floor. Rutger winced, but the relief was immense.

Thank Odin's hairy arse-crack for that!

The limb lacked feeling, his shoulder aching and his fingertips tingling in a perturbing way, but he was confident the discomfort was temporary.

He gave it a rough shake and flexed his hand.

How long would it take for the sensation to return? For him to effectively use his fingers?

He looked despondently at his trussed-up phallus. There was no chance of getting the tie off yet, not unless he suddenly developed the ability to reach his cock with his mouth.

'Twas something every growing lad attempted at some point, and Rutger knew full

well he'd no hope!

Still, there was nothing keeping him there. His legs might be weakened from lack of use, but he'd faith he could stand. The rest he'd make up as he went along.

The wench had made a point of telling him that the other inhabitants of this isle knew full well his predicament, and that none would be coming to his aid—that he'd be apprehended if he attempted to escape.

It wasn't going to stop him, but it looked like he'd be doing it stark bollock-naked. His clothes were nowhere to be seen, and there was naught obvious in the room that might serve to cover him.

He'd had plenty of opportunity to survey his surroundings, and the place was little more than a storage room—a log-built hut housing barrels along one side while ceramic pots filled a shelf above. Someone was a prolific preserver, for sure. The barrels no doubt contained apples or some such thing. The pots were of the sort his sisters used for stewed fruits. He'd a mind to reach up for whatever was inside. Grethe had kept him fed, but there hadn't been much in the way of sweet treats. He was partial to a good dollop of jam on his bread .

Shakily, he righted himself, leaning against the wall for support. However, before he'd the chance to take more than two steps, the door flew open.

Grethe paused upon the threshold for no more than an instant before slamming the door behind her and grabbing a broom from the corner. Rutger barely had time to blink. The rough-bristled end slammed into his chest, knocking him off balance, straight into the straw.

In a trice, she was astride his chest, her eyes blazing. “What's this? You think to leave? To sneak away like a thief?”

The strength of her thighs clasped about his rib cage made reply difficult, but Rutger puffed out his protest. “What... did you... expect?”

The wench is delusional if she thinks I’ll willingly stay like this!

“You men are all the same!” Cruelly, she took the bandaged fingers of his left hand and squeezed them within her own.

Rutger gasped at the sudden pain. “For pity’s sake!”

Was there no end to his humiliation? A humble carpenter he might be, rather than one of his jarl’s inner guard, but he had his pride. No man should be reduced to this, begging a woman to cease her torment.

Rutger had no wish to cause her harm. ‘Twas wrong to use his brawn to inflict injury upon a woman. Nevertheless, he could endure no more.

One concerted shove sent Grethe off balance and onto her back, where he pinned her with his weight. Her shock lasted only briefly before anger took over.

“Loathsome oaf! Get off me!” With flailing arms, she attempted to claw his face. She’d surprising strength, fueled by her rage.

He clamped his hand over her mouth. “Cease this fishwife behavior, and I shall.”

To his relief, in spite of her flashing eyes, her struggling ceased, and the sensation of her body beneath his became familiar—that of a soft and yielding woman. For several moments, they merely looked at one another.

Rutger raised himself slightly but remained alert. Grethe could not be trusted. Even while she appeared pliant, she was likely plotting. He wouldn’t put it past her to twist

about and cause more pain.

“I’ve some questions. The swifter you answer them, the sooner I’ll let you up. And don’t lie to me, Grethe! I shall know if you do.” He removed his hand from her mouth, pushed downward with his lower body, and was gratified to see her eyes widen.

It hadn’t been in his mind to interrogate her, his assumption being that she would always choose to spin him falsehoods, but this was an opportunity he couldn’t afford to miss.

“You say I’ve been given to you, that others know I’m your captive, but I challenge that it’s the truth! Do your menfolk know of your diabolical ways—of how you force me to fuck all times of the day, as if I were some concubine from the East?”

“Pfft! You do think highly of yourself. I doubt you’d fetch much were we to take you to market!”

“You’re evading the question.” For all that his blood was boiling, his voice was calm. “Shall we see how you like it if I tie you hand and foot?”

“Try it, and I’ll scream.”

“Not if I stuff your mouth with straw, you won’t.” He took up a handful, holding the prickly strands threateningly close.

Fury flashed across her features. No doubt, she was heaping every sort of curse on him, but she kept her lips pressed closed.

“Tell me!” Rutger hated to admit it, but he was rather enjoying himself. Even with her wildcat ways, he’d a sense that Grethe was, too. She’d raised one of her legs,



exposing herself above the knee—almost as if she wanted him to shove his hand beneath her skirts.

“Alright. But I’m warning, you won’t like it.” A defiant glint entered her eyes. “There are no men here. The goddess Freyja punished them. She saw how badly they treated us women and sent a horrible, foul disease to strike them down. You should have seen them writhe, crying out in pain! Freyja made them suffer. They’re all dead—except for a handful who ran away. Freyja let them live, but only to show us what pathetic beasts men are. They set sail as fast as their cowardly legs would carry them.”

The look upon her face was malevolent .

“Ha! Now you’re wondering if you’ll be next! Perhaps you shall, once Freyja has seen that the six of you have done your job... impregnating our women. That’s the only reason we’ve kept you. So don’t go complaining about me riding your puny phallus! You’d better make sure you’re hard whenever I want it.”

A strange sensation swept through Rutger, as if a mist veiled his mind. His stomach lurched, and he wondered if he might vomit.

All she’d said... it was too much to take in.

Could it be true? This place was utterly devoid of men, ruled by women alone? ‘Twould explain a great deal.

So, he was... what? To be kept like some mating bull, with no purpose but to service the wench or some other woman?

As for Freyja’s supposed deliverance upon the island’s men... he’d never thought of her as an avenging deity, but what did he know? Was it the goddess who’d brought

their crew to grief, shipwrecking them there?

He squeezed shut his eyes.

None of it made sense.

For himself, at least, he could think of no action so grave it warranted this fate. He'd been angry with Tyra and Ragnut, and there had been times he'd wished ill upon them, but only in small ways—a wasp sting or two upon Ragnut's arse or a sudden rash of boils.

Wearily, he surveyed Grethe. "If what you say is true, I must see my jarl. Him and the others from my ship. If you deny me, I'll gag and bind you, then set off to find them myself."

"Nay!" There was panic in her voice. "You mustn't! That is, there's no need." The whirling of her mind was evident as she searched for some excuse or other, the better to delay him and deceive.

You think yourself so clever, but I've the measure of you, wench!

"'Tis decided. You're to be given freedom, in moderation, to help with tasks about the settlement. You and your jarl—he of the flaming hair—and one more, whose name I forget. The others from your ship need to heal before they're useful for such work."

Despite all, he'd an inclination to believe this new piece of information, to believe the rest, too—of some mysterious illness, perhaps divinely conjured. He could discern no advantage in her inventing such a story.

"What I mentioned before, of our men, I was only trying to scare you," Grethe added

hastily.

“Is that so?”

She must think me a simpleton to be deflected so easily.

But I’m soon to see Eldberg. He’ll know more, without doubt.

His jarl was not one to be hoodwinked nor forced into anything against his wishes. Rutger would venture this new turn of events had Eldberg’s hand in it.

“Let me up now.” Grethe squirmed, as if frustrated at the way she was trapped. Of course, the movement did nothing but rub her against him.

For all her apparent complaint, he’d wager she was wet as an eel.

Desire shot through him.

“I might do once you’ve untied this.” Kneeling up, he gestured to the base of his penis.

She stared at the sizeable erection. “Do so yourself if it’s bothering you.” She smiled slyly. “Or leave it be. You might find it useful...”

As ever, the wench was eager to provoke him into a rough coupling, caring naught for any discomfort on his side.

“If you insist on keeping me thus, you’ll suffer the consequences.” His answer was gruff.

Grethe’s tongue darted out, licking the corner of her lips.

It was tempting to order her to fellate him. Would she know what to do? Even if she did, the cloth was so tight, he mightn't manage release. The constriction above his balls was tampering with the natural way of things.

It was hard to tell with Grethe exactly what she knew and what she didn't. Attempting little variation in her bedsport, she tended to sit upon him, facing front for the most part. She hadn't the slightest inkling of what he could really do to her.

She was no innocent, but she trembled then, as if unsure of what might happen next. Well, if she wanted to test him, he'd ensure he didn't disappoint.

"You want me inside, don't you?" As he pushed up her skirts, she raised her bottom, making no effort to stop him bunching the fabric about her waist.

He paused, taking in the sight of her—that soft, springy bush of curls from which the telltale sliver of pink protruded.

"So much talk, yet so little action." She lifted her chin, challenging him, as always.

"Don't worry yourself on that account." Rutger trailed his fingers down her inner thigh. "There's going to be fucking. My way and lots of it."

A flicker of excitement lit her eyes.

"You think you know what you want, but I'm going to show you something else." He let one finger enter between her labia, encountering immediate slickness.

"More words." She took a hitching breath as he explored her sheath. "I do hope you're not going to disappoint me."

"You can tell me yourself after I've finished with you. You've had things your own

way far too long, and you deserve to be chastised. Something to make you regret all you've done."

"Punish me then." She smirked. "I'll warrant you'll suffer more than I will."

The wench was obnoxious but also luscious, seducing his finger deeper inside with the clenching of her inner muscles.

A haze of lust descended upon him, and he could no longer wait.

Bringing her knees together abruptly, he twisted her onto her side.

"Hey!"

Her objection was lost as he turned her again, this time onto her front, and dragged her up onto all fours. Her skirts he flung forward, so her peach of a bottom sat high and exposed.

She began to say something, but the first slam of his phallus put paid to that.

Holding either side of her hips, he fucked her hard. Enough to make himself come, were it not for the damned cloth biting into his flesh. He was panting as he withdrew, his shaft coated with her juices.

Whether it had pained her or no, she made a groaning sound and parted her legs farther, inviting him to proceed.

"You want more?" With the flat of his right hand, he smacked her upturned rump. "Always greedy, expecting me to deliver."

He gave her another slap, then several more, each fiercer than the last, all in the same

place, ceasing only when the muscles of his arm screamed for relief.

A fiery flush pervaded the assaulted cheek, but she merely gasped out in her usual taunting manner, “I didn’t say... you should... stop.”

The wench was incorrigible, determining he teach her a lesson—that he was her superior in years and experience, that he ought to be treated with more respect.

He glanced up at the shelf of preserves. An idea struck him, and it mattered not what was in those pots. He would use it upon her and make her repent her gibing.

Throwing her skirts higher so that they covered her head, he rose, swiftly taking down the nearest of the vessels. When he saw what was inside, he couldn’t help but laugh.

‘Twas entirely perfect.

“What’s so funny?” From the floor, Grethe pushed away the fabric from her face. She was in time to see him dip his finger into the contents, then retract to lick it clean.

“I forbid it! That’s not for you!” She struggled to rise, but he was too quick for her.

Pressing the heel of his hand into her lower back, he kept her where she was. One tip of the jar sent a stream of viscous sweetness along the crack of her behind, dripping downward.

“Nay!” she shrieked, but the deed was done. “Foul, clumsy lout!” She was fair spitting with rage. “There’s water in a pitcher by the door. Fetch it and wash me clean.”

“I think not.” Rutger surveyed his handiwork. Then, bending, he dragged his tongue

upward through her folds.

“Beast!” She moaned, writhing as he set upon her.

‘Twas a first for him, feasting upon not just a woman’s cream but honey, too. He poured out some more.

“Stop, I say! ‘Tis wasteful and... and...” She struck the ground. “I don’t like it!”

“Is that so? Then let’s try something else. Something I like very much.” Spreading her cheeks, he exposed her puckered hole and, without ado, inserted his tongue there.

Grethe jumped in surprise. “Deviant! What man likes to do such a thing? Cease hold of me this instant!”

He laughed harder. The sport was proving even more amusing than he’d hoped, though he believed not for a moment that she truly disliked what he was doing.

She wiggled her posterior like a she-cat.

“I’ll show you what else I like and, thanks to this cloth tied about my cock, I’ll be able to keep going as long as it pleases me. Remember that, Grethe, and think on it!” He dragged his erection through her honeyed cunt, upward until he was aligned with her tightest place. A nudge forward saw the bulb of his phallus enter her, and she let out a yelp.

“What? ‘Tis the wrong place! Stop that!”

Her writhing succeeded only in taking another portion inside. He hoped her adjustment came quickly, for every sinew of his being was focused upon his cock and the need to push deeper.

She gave a half sob. “‘Tis terrible! An invasion!”

Rutger held still and was rewarded by Grethe pushing back against him.

Praise Odin.

He let out a long breath. She had only half his length but was swallowing him, slow and sure.

“I hate you!” she gasped, but the words were belied by her movement as she eased back, then forward, then back once more.

“Why are you not moving?” she said at last. “Am I to do all the work?”

Rutger gave the widest of smiles.

He was going to enjoy her immensely.



### CHAPTER 6

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

Rutger took a deep, lung-swelling, life-affirming inhalation of briny sea air. It was good to be outside again, even if he was roped at the ankles, attached to J?rgen and Eldberg, with the watchful eyes of their female guard upon them.

The rope was ridiculous, mind you—between them, they'd have no trouble in removing it, were they ready to do so. Eldberg, ever cunning, had impressed upon them the necessity of appearing compliant, so the rope stayed, regardless of the inconvenience.

Although, from the look of the she-warrior whose eyes followed their every movement, a dash into the forest, even without the rope to hinder them, might prove a challenge. She looked strong as an ox, with height almost to match that of their jarl, and the club she brandished while giving her orders might easily split a man's skull.

Rutger was of two minds as to whether she'd be brave enough to do so, but he'd no inclination to find out.

In any case, as Eldberg whispered while they set about replacing the hut's thatching, such restrictions soon would ease if these women thought them willing workers.

“Willing in all the ways, eh, lads!” Eldberg gave Rutger a nudge that near sent him toppling from where he was perched. “Make them think we're glad to be here. Once they're less wary, we'll be free to roam about. All the better for plotting our escape!”

Already, there was talk of moving them up the hillside to work on some sort of water channel. Eldberg's mind was two steps ahead, formulating a plan to hide some of the timber they'd be felling and to secret some of the tools. Rutger's left hand was still compromised, thanks to those blasted fingers, but he'd skill enough in his right to do as his jarl asked, carving new oars for their ship.

Though Odin only knows how long that will take!

Repairing the hull and fitting a new mast would come later. Jørgen was tasked with procuring a sail or two.

Rutger paused in hammering down the sheaf of bundled twig and marram grass, casting his gaze along the shoreline. The settlement comprised little more than thirty huts, all of wood, and one larger dwelling—the longhouse, where Eldberg was billeted. Tall dunes separated them from the expanse of the curving bay, while the hillside rose steeply on all sides, covered in lush forest.

The view from farther up would be worth seeing. Even from the modest elevation of the roof, 'twas a picturesque sight—the sun glinting upon the rushing tide, the water a crystal turquoise over pale sands.

An idyll, one would think, for Grethe had assured him they wanted for nothing. An idyll for him, almost, since he was no longer restrained.

Grethe's lust for him only seemed to grow, and she was an eager student in the ways of bedsport. Her sharp tongue had even lost some of its edge, employed to coax and charm him.

Nevertheless, he missed the bustle of Skálavík and the chaos of his clucking sisters and their broods.

And ‘twas untrue to say the island women wanted for naught. Save for themselves, there was not a man to be seen. Even the children running upon the beach were girls. Grethe had told no lie in proclaiming the place free of menfolk.

The women went about their work while some of the older folk sat at their doors. No single thing was out of the ordinary, but the atmosphere was subdued. Even the hills above them—surely teeming with all manner of bird and beast—seemed quieter than he would expect.

Naturally, Rutger had wasted no time in sharing what he knew with Eldberg, but his jarl had seemed already aware. Rutger wasn’t surprised. Eldberg had, no doubt, made it his mission to winkle all that was pertinent from the woman he was bedding.

J?rgen, too, had received his report with little more than a nod. Rutger would swear J?rgen knew more than he was letting on, hiding something—perhaps even from Eldberg.

Rutger turned to see J?rgen looking wistful. Eldberg had moved off to the far end of the roof, where he was catching bundles thrown up by their she-guard.

“A beauteous place, though I cannot look to the ocean without seeing those treacherous rocks that brought us so to grief.” J?rgen shook his head sadly.

Rutger understood all too well what he was feeling. He could hardly believe they were now but six. Three times as many had set out from Skálavík—good men, most with families.

J?rgen’s abrupt clutching of Rutger’s arm was almost painful.

“‘Tis more than the rocks that stir my unease. I remember little of that night, but what I do makes me tremble. The way the waves began to roll and the wind’s howling!

Then, that strange, creeping mist... Tell me, for the love of Thor, what you recall. My mind is so clouded. And this place! Something is wrong! You must feel it!"

The intensity in J?rgen's eyes filled Rutger with sudden dread.

"Nay... 'tis your imagination alone." He turned away. 'Twas a fallacy that naught had returned to his memory. Snatches of that terrible night visited his dreams, but such mind-wanderings were of no use to anyone.

Their ship had wrecked.

Men had died.

But he was alive.

J?rgen would do best to keep his focus grounded rather than wandering to the depths.

Rutger had faith in his jarl. If anyone could get them home, 'twas he.

With her picnic basket over her arm, Grethe halted for a moment, allowing herself the pleasure of watching Rutger balanced atop the roof, wielding a mallet. Like the other two, he'd taken off his tunic, baring his torso to the sun, muscular in the back and shoulders and trim at the waist. Muscular all over, as were the other males .

She knew exactly what lay beneath Rutger's braies , and she'd no complaints—a tight arse, strong thighs, and a cock that always rose to the occasion. She even liked his bollocks, strange, dangling things that they were. She liked the way they drew up high when she kneaded them and the way they pulsed when Rutger was spilling his seed.

If she sat atop him—which was still the best of the sex positions, as far as she was

concerned—she could just about reach behind and clasp his plums as he submitted to his final thrusts. It gave her surprising satisfaction, knowing he liked her doing that. There were lots of small things she was learning that had the power to make him gasp and groan.

So much the better!

Grethe's gaze alighted on Vangreth, who also stood looking up at the three half-naked men.

Look all you like, but hands off! That one in the middle is mine!

As she'd anticipated, Vangreth had taken swift advantage of the opportunity to place herself closer to the incomers. As of the following day, they'd be working up on the hillside, out of sight of the rest of the islanders.

Grethe could well imagine Vangreth stripping off a few layers, then enticing one or more of the men to join her, but if Grethe had anything to do with it, Rutger would not be tempted.

She was going to make sure all lustful thoughts were fulfilled by herself and hump him so thoroughly, he'd not a drop of seed for anyone else.

"Hey, there!" Grethe called out. "I've victuals for the workers. The milk is still warm from Brunhilda's teats."

If that doesn't get Rutger's mind upon rutting, nothing will. The man is obsessed with breasts.

"Stop right there!" Vangreth raised her hand as the first of the men began descending the ladder. "'Tis me who says when the prisoners get to eat."

“Well, one of those prisoners belongs to me, and I say he’s hungry now.” Grethe reached into the basket and took out the portions of food intended for the other two men, setting them upon a nearby stone alongside two stoppered flasks. “By all means, make the others wait if it’s your whim, though this milk might start curdling in the sun. Rutger is coming with me, and I’ll be taking him a way off.”

Grethe smiled sweetly at Vangreth’s scowling face.

“‘Tis near my fertile time, and I need him to make a particular effort. Food first. Swiving after. I might make him do it twice, just to be sure.”

Vangreth’s eyes bulged with anger, but she could hardly argue. The begetting of children was more important than roof mending, and Grethe had ultimate charge over her mate.

The men didn’t wait for further debate, all three of them hot-tailing to the ground.

“There are nuts, fruit dumplings, and a rabbit leg for you.” Grethe laid out a blanket while Rutger drank from the flask. “We can eat now or wait until after.”

With a satisfied sigh, he wiped his lips with his forearm. “You don’t waste any time, do you, Sweetling? As horny as a field of rams, that’s what you are.”

“Charming!” Grethe folded her arms in mock offense. She’d given up telling him not to use love terms with her. In truth, she quite liked it, though she set no store by him using them.

He was right that she was hungry for more than the contents of the basket. She wanted his braies off and his cock inside her as swiftly as possible.

She’d picked a secluded spot for the tryst, a little way up the hill, behind Bothild’s

hut. No one would disturb them. Even were they to do so, she didn't much care. Let them see how well she had her man trained and that she could take her delight wherever and whenever she fancied it.

In a trice, she had her gunna over her head, then her undershift.

With my dumplings on display, he won't be bothered about the ones in the basket!

"Swiving first." Rutger loosened the braies and kicked them off before fisting his phallus.

Really, when one became used to the ways of men, they were very predictable.

"I give you leave to choose our position—at least for the first go." He wiggled his eyebrows. "I've a hankering for you bent over, but I'm not fussy."

"As if I need your leave for anything! I liked you better when you were tied up and kept in the dark." Just to be contrary, she rolled over onto her belly and clamped her legs firmly together.

"And I like you just as you are now, with the sun warming you. Open up for me, Sweetling, and I can take my first course."

As she'd hoped, a hard slap came to her bottom. He flopped down beside her, so she took a matching swipe at his behind, her hand making a pleasingly loud smack on his flesh.

He grinned at her. "Ha! You can't resist me."

"Nay. 'Tis you who cannot resist me," Grethe countered.

“Only because you spend all your time luring me with your wiles. When you show a man your luscious arse, what other thoughts is he supposed to have? I’ve been halfway hard all the morning, imagining what I’d like to do with this ripe peach.” He placed a playful bite upon her left cheek.

“I cannot blame you, I suppose.” She looked at him over her shoulder.

“Aye!” The glint in his eyes was well-ignited. “Nice arse, nice breasts, and a hot, tight cunny. I like the way your scent grows stronger when you’re slippery for me and the way your bud swells up, protruding like the tip of a tongue between your netherlips... asking for me to kiss it and slide my cock beneath. ‘Tis as if it’s speaking to me. Your other orifice is just as alluring. When I split your cheeks, your puckered place gapes open and closed, asking for a good fucking.”

“By the gods, man! You don’t need to utter every crude thought that comes into your head!” Did he speak about her like this with the other men? The idea was mortifying yet strangely arousing. She wouldn’t mind Rutger boasting about how much he enjoyed their bedsport... if he would but leave off mentioning her arsehole!

“You’d prefer I just showed you what I like...” Gently, he eased her onto her back. “Showed you what I know you like...” He trailed his fingers lazily about one nipple, then the other, before pulling a rosy peak into his mouth .

He wasn’t being gentle anymore.

Quite the opposite.

Her hips rose to show she liked it.

With a contented sigh, she surrendered to his play before he made his way down her stomach, fastening upon her bud, as he called it. There was nothing for it but to let



him have his way. Some light flicking with his tongue, alternating with him drawing the little thing into his mouth, and she was panting and crying, melting like butter.

She was soon pulling his hair.

On the other side of her peak, she seemed to remember grinding herself upward onto his face. From the look of him when he emerged from between her legs, it was definitely possible.

“How was that?” He was smirking. “Passably pleasant?”

Arrogant addle-pate.

“Passably. Now, come here.” She dragged him by the ears. “There’s more to my body than that. I want you to kiss my neck.” ‘Twas a small request. A silly thing. The sort of softness real lovers engaged in, but it was what she wanted.

Sliding upward, his hands skimmed her waist. He nuzzled beneath her lobe, took it between his teeth, tugged and nibbled, then followed the long sinew from her hairline to her collarbone and up again. Working along her jaw, he found her lips. His kisses there were just as leisurely—bringing with them the tang of Grethe’s arousal. ‘Twas a strangely intimate thing, this sharing of juices—his brine and her cream intermingled below and tasted upon the tongue.

Somewhere in-between, she’d allowed him to rest in the cradle of her thighs. His erection had found her sheath quite naturally and pushed inside.

He moved slowly, gliding back and forth in an easy rhythm. His mouth caressed hers in the same fashion, his tongue exploring, then drawing hers forward.

‘Twas lustful, but something else, too.

Her body felt light and sensitive to every sensation—his chest hair across her nipples, the light graze of his testicles where her bottom met her legs, his breath upon her face.

He pushed deeper but kept his pace, making her wait for each measured thrust. If he kept this up, she'd come again. She could feel the exquisite pressure building.

Tugging her bottom lip, he brushed his nose to hers.

“I could grow to like this way of mating as long as we fuck fast afterward. I could lay with you every morn, noon, and night until the end of days. It would always be good, Grethe, being inside you.”

“Don't get ideas.” Reaching around, she gave his rear a pinch. “You're mine—for now—but I shan't be keeping you. This lasts only as long as I want it to, so mind, or I may feed you to Vangreth. Then you'll be in trouble.”

“Hmmm.” He hummed against her mouth, grinding down a touch harder.

Grethe bit her lip.

Oh yes, she was going to come, and it was going to be glorious.

### CHAPTER 7

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

Tightening the shawl around her, Grethe stalked toward the hut where Rutger slept. Despite their growing fondness for bedsport, she insisted he stay there—away from her. To have him in her bed would send quite the wrong message. He was still hers to mate and restrain, but however good the intimacy was, she was glad of the separation.

The man had far too effectively wormed his way into her head—even when they weren't together, she thought of him. Making him sleep in the portion of her home reserved for storage and mead-making was only sensible.

“Good morrow, Sweetling.” Rutger rose from the straw to greet her, jerking at the ropes secured to his ankles. “How I've missed you!”

She glowered at his praise, pondering again why she persisted with the illusion of bondage. It was patently obvious he could release the rope if it suited him, yet he remained.

He was always there when she returned to him.

Because he wants to be.

She stilled at the thought, balancing the dish of bread and honey she'd brought for him to break his fast.

That's why he stays! He must like me.

If only she could bring herself to truly believe it.

"I was wondering when you'd come and feed me." His eyebrow cocked in the mischievous way she'd come to enjoy. She'd wager if she roamed his braies she'd find more than merely a smile waiting for her.

Not that she was in the mood for such play.

Her monthly bleed had returned, bringing with it the usual cramps and melancholy. 'Twas always an annoyance but the pain seemed greater this time, perhaps for what it signified.

There was no infant growing in her womb. All that fucking had amounted to nothing.

"Stop your complaining, you selfish oaf." Sighing, she thrust the plate into his hands. "You men have no idea how lucky you have it." All he had to worry about was his staff getting hard. He knew nothing of her anguish.

Rutger's chin rose at her words, a crease appearing in his brow as though he sought to argue, but apparently, hunger had the better of him.

Just as well .

She leaned against the wall as he ripped into the bread and shoved it past his lips.

I've no patience for him.

It wasn't that she was disappointed not to be with child. Freyja knew Grethe had never yearned to be a mother. She far preferred her independence and could only

imagine what a cumbersome bind a child would be on her time and body, but the idea that she'd failed in the one objective tasked of her was vexing.

It was as if she lacked something that would inherently make her a woman, as if she wasn't good enough...

Just as she hadn't been good enough for Sven.

What if one of the other women was already with child? Hedda, for instance. They'd never hear the end of her boasting about the achievement!

Life would be unbearable as, one by one, the others fell pregnant.

Grethe squeezed her eyes closed at the troublesome thought. She was only supposed to keep Rutger for three moon cycles. Suppose she needed longer? Would Bothild permit it?

With other women on the island clamoring for a man to mate with, it would be hard to justify him remaining with Grethe, but she'd die if that wench, Vangreth, got her hands on him.

And if my belly does start growing? What then? The task will be accomplished, and I'll have to let him go, won't I?

Unless I plead a case for making him a true husband.

Pah! As if I'll let him be the ruler of me!

She wasn't so deluded by the pleasures of bedsport as to believe Rutger harbored softer feelings. 'Twas all a game to him, which he'd grow tired of, eventually.

Tired of this place and tired of me.

“What is it?” Rutger’s soft tone interrupted her woe. “Whatever troubles you, my staff is ready to put a smile back on your face.”

“Not everything in life can be resolved by your staff!” she snapped. “Eat and leave me be.”

He frowned, no doubt confused by her change of tack. Until now, Grethe had been gleeful to receive his seed as often as he could provide it, along with the consuming high their coupling provided.

She couldn’t help that her uninvited guest had crushed her desire. What woman wanted to fornicate while dealing with such pain?

Not that he’ll understand! I could be gushing crimson, and he’d still want to stick himself up there.

Rutger was no different from Sven or any of the other self-seeking swine, who’d sailed off without a care for the women they’d left behind. He could stay in the straw and fist himself stupid for all she cared.

Yet, when her body was entwined with Rutger’s, there were moments when she believed his caresses stemmed from more than lust alone. His touch was like fire on her flesh, branding her with need.

She rubbed her temples. She longed for him to want her—over Vangreth or any of the others—and it thrilled her to know he craved her body, but to think there could be more was imprudent.

Rutger was fond of sweetling words, but she paid those no mind. Men would say

anything to get what they wanted. It was folly to think otherwise, and she should know better.

More fool me!

Clenching her hand into a fist, she fought to hold back her tears.

Stop! He's not here to love me or be loved.

Rutger, like the other shipwrecked men, had only one task—to father children. All the women were in agreement.

Her irrational feelings were, no doubt, due to her bleed, or perhaps so much sex had fogged her thoughts. Either way, she needed to take herself in hand. It wouldn't do for Rutger to see her so affected.

"We should go to my quarters." Forcing down her emotion, she untethered the ropes from his ankles. "I'll clean you up there."

"I see." He pushed the empty plate away. "You want me to take you by the fire, is that it?"

"You're impossible." Throwing the bindings aside, she scowled. "I mean to make you presentable. No one would swive you in this state!"

'Twas a lie, of course. She'd ridden him in far worse conditions and not given a fig, but she wouldn't have him going about his duties looking unkempt—as if she were incapable of looking after him.

"You are eager to have me, then?" Rutger chuckled as she hustled him forward.

“Nay, I’m weary of you.” Why did he persist in trying her patience? “Now, move it! There’s water for you in the cauldron.”

They’d only just settled by the fire when the flame-haired giant who called himself Rutger’s jarl appeared at the door.

“Rutger, Grethe...” Eldberg stooped to enter without waiting for her assent.

“What brings you here?” She folded her arms across her chest, scanning the face of the invader warily.

This is what it’s come to!

The slow erosion of our rights, now that men are back on the island!

Even in ropes, they thought to take control, entering her domain without an invitation. Such assumptions would only grow.

“A word with... your man. If I may.” Eldberg’s lips twisted as though something amused him.

Grethe struggled not to show her irritation. Rutger was hers—even if only temporarily—and she wouldn’t allow herself to be riled.

Or, at least, I won’t give him the satisfaction of seeing it!

“Go ahead. I’ve other matters to attend to.” She gestured to her seat, moving away to fold some linens.

“I want to thank you for what you did yesterday, Rutger.” Eldberg lowered to the stool, which wobbled beneath him. “I won’t forget the way you and J?rgen came to



my aid. Your quick thinking saved my skin.”

Grethe glanced round at the warm words, her curiosity piqued.

What was afoot? ‘Twas the first she’d heard of any incident. Besides which, it seemed unlikely a man as huge as Eldberg would require assistance from anyone. Hedda had her work cut out with that one.

“Of course.” Rutger’s sentiment seemed as sincere as Eldberg’s. “I’m at your service, always. How are you today?”

“All is well,” Eldberg assured him. “My Hedda has been looking after me.”

Grethe’s surprise grew. She couldn’t imagine Hedda being described as belonging to any man, let alone running around after him.

As for the assistance Rutger had given Eldberg, he’d mentioned nothing at supper the previous evening. If he had exhibited bravery, ‘twas refreshing to think of him keeping it to himself. Most men, in her experience, were only too keen to blow their own horns. Modesty, of any sort, was unusual .

She searched Rutger’s face, eyeing him with curiosity as he pressed questions on his jarl, appearing concerned and compassionate. ‘Twas a side of him she’d not seen before.

Have I judged him too harshly?

Then and there, she decided. Whatever was to happen, she must know his true intentions.

Did he harbor feelings for her, or was their connection born of nothing more than

pleasurable circumstance? A man would take any chance to exercise his staff, of that much she was certain.

She would know Rutger's mind. Only then might she allow herself to succumb to her burgeoning need—to open up to him, to be vulnerable.

Eldberg's interruption might give her an opportunity to find out.

"I'm just stepping out," she called over. "We need more water."

Rutger's gaze flitted to the vast vessel already housing more than enough of the resource, but he nodded, making no protest.

The conversation halted as, taking up her shawl, she made her way out into the light. With the door ajar, she crouched to one side of the entrance, keen to hear what was being said inside. Straining to listen, she tensed as Eldberg's voice came to her.

"... you're managing to sweet talk the wench?"

Sweet talk me?

How dare they speak of her that way!

"She can be hard work." Rutger sighed. "But her appetite for swiving shows no sign of abating."

"Good man." Eldberg's laughter rang out. "Now she's gone, you must tell me of your oar making. Our plans to escape depend on your talents."

Grethe's eyes widened.

Oar making? Since when has Rutger been making an oar?

She'd seen him working with wood on more than one occasion—practicing his skills while his fingers healed, so he'd told her—but nothing had been mentioned about sculpting a paddle, nor had she seen such a thing.

Hurt twisted beneath her ribs.

If Rutger was fashioning oars, that meant... they were planning to leave...

Eldberg was using Rutger's expertise to assist their departure .

Rutger is leaving!

She gripped the side of the hut as shock took hold.

In bewilderment, she raised her face to the sky, blinking at the waning sun. Its illumination lit the dunes and the sea beyond, but it lacked the strength to warm her anymore. The seasons were changing, their slow march as relentless as her own cycle.

And man's fickleness is just as predictable.

Any chance of her trusting him was destroyed in that one moment of cold betrayal. Once more, she'd contemplated risking her heart and been repaid with treachery. Had the gods truly made her so unlovable? Tears welled in her eyes, though she despised herself for the show of futile emotion.

How can I have been so foolish as to believe he might have affection for me? Might love me even? No man is capable of it—not truly!

She pressed the heel of her hands to her eyes.

Rutger was running away without her—just as Sven had done.

In the pit of her stomach, she understood what that meant.

She was destined to be alone forever.

### CHAPTER 8

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

"Ah, here you are! Rangvald will be so pleased." Elin stood upon the threshold of her home, beckoning to Rutger.

Grethe had accompanied him thus far, but when he looked back to speak to her, she swiveled abruptly on her heel, giving not so much as a farewell.

"Goodness! How quickly you've been working." Elin took one of the crutches Rutger was carrying and ran her fingers over the smooth wood.

"'Tis nothing. These, and the ones I crafted for Gunnar, were the work of a few hours only." 'Twas not entirely true, for Rutger was somewhat of a perfectionist. He'd worked late those past days, polishing away the rough knots. However, he never had been one to court praise. 'A job well done is its own reward,' his father had always said, and Rutger held it as his own maxim.

The gods had blessed him with carpentry skills, and he saw it as his duty to use them for the benefit of others wherever possible. He'd offered to make several more stools for Grethe, for example, in a style shaped to offer greater comfort. She'd declined, protesting, in her usual slightly gruff way, that she'd no desire to encourage a host of people to come visiting, purely for the pleasure of testing out his new designs.

Elin looped her arm through his. "Come now. Rangvald is waiting. I'm sure he'll enjoy hearing your news. It gets very dull for him, being confined indoors."

‘Twas welcome, Rutger thought wryly, to see a woman smiling at him rather than scowling. He’d thought he and Grethe were beginning to rub along nicely, but there had been a change. He couldn’t pinpoint what exactly, but she’d suddenly grown snappish. Every conversation seemed to end in her berating him about something or other. Even their frolics had come to a standstill, with Grethe refusing to let him touch her.

Odin only knew how he was supposed to get her with child!

His jarl would have his guts if he knew the state of things. Eldberg had some notion of making sure their women were ready to provision the ship, even pulling the oars when the time came.

Good luck with that!

Grethe would be as likely to set the longship alight or gift them mead laced with poison. Only a few nights before, she’d told him what was in those barrels of hers. More mead than a man could drink in a year! And had she offered him any?

Not a chance!

She’d poured herself a mug and made him watch as she drank it down, letting him know how tasty and thirst quenching it was—and that he’d be having none.

The depths of her cruelty knew no bounds.

Elin was another fish entirely—patient, gently spoken, thinking of others’ needs. His fingers were well on the way to being healed, though still a little tender. Elin had kept a check on them, making sure the linens holding the splint were tight. Grethe certainly didn’t seem to care.

And yet... when he'd been shaping the second crutch, he'd seen the way Grethe watched him at work. More than once, he'd thought she might ask him some question as to his way of doing things. She'd even inquired whether the fingers of his left hand pained him, holding the wood steady while he applied his tools with the right.

He'd offered to show her how to hold a whittling blade and had gotten as far as putting his hand over hers, drawing the knife downward in long, smooth strokes. He'd thought she was softening to him again, but it hadn't lasted long. She'd jumped up all of a sudden, her eyes sparkling in that dangerous way he'd come to know well, making his heart beat faster. Making him want to pull Grethe close, to kiss her and much besides.

She'd snatched the blade and thrown it across the room, sending the crutch flying after. Then, she'd made a show of binding up his ankles and made him sleep at the foot of her bed.

He'd given that episode a deal of thought without being able to make sense of it.

Elin bustled about, pulling up a stool to where Rangvald was resting, his back turned to the room.

She pressed something warming into Rutger's hands and he gave the bowl an appreciative sniff—stew, thick and nourishing, with plenty of meat.

“Rangvald, my love. Wake up.” Elin rubbed his arm. “You’ve a visitor.”

The masculine form upon the bed grumbled, shifting only so far as to peer over his shoulder.

“‘Tis Rutger, you see,” Elin persisted, plumping the pillows and obliging Rangvald to sit upright.

Rangvald gave Rutger a curt nod. 'Twas hard to tell if he was pleased to see him, but that was usually the way with Rangvald. His moods were as inscrutable as Grethe's were volatile.

"He has a gift." Elin beamed, holding up one of the crutches. "You'll be walking about in no time, though not today, perhaps. We'll start slowly, with me to help."

Rangvald made no acknowledgment, only saying, "I'll take some of that stew." He eyed Rutger, who was making short work with his spoon. "Then leave us be, woman. You're in a fussing frame of mind, and I've no patience for it!"

Passing Rangvald his portion, Elin shook her head chidingly, but her smile was indulgent. "Of course, have privacy. Then, you can grumble to your heart's content... both of you!" She gave Rutger a subtle wink. "I won't be far off, so you can summon me if... you think of anything you need."

"Off with you, then!" Rangvald called out gruffly, even as she was halfway out the door.

Rutger dug into the stew, looking up occasionally at the other man over his spoon. From the way Rangvald held himself, Rutger could tell he was in some discomfort.

'Twas strange to see one of Skálavík's most skilled warriors laid up as he was. Always, Rangvald had an air of superiority. It was there still in the set of his jaw and his unyielding stare but tempered by an innate weariness.

"She shouldn't have gone behind my back," Rangvald said at last. "I don't need them... those things." He gestured in the direction of the crutches propped against the wall.

Rutger took the ungrateful statement with a pinch of salt. Rangvald was proud.



Accepting that he required physical assistance and was reliant on others to provide it would not sit well with him.

“But ‘tis me you’ll be helping,” Rutger said simply. “These are only the second I’ve crafted. Gunnar has the first, and I’ve been told there are improvements to be made. I’d be interested to hear your thoughts when you’ve time to make use of them.”

Rangvald gave a grunting reply.

“She’s a good cook, your woman. Kindly, too. You’re fortunate there.” Rutger scraped his spoon around the remnants in his bowl.

Rangvald’s mouth pressed thin. “‘Tis no more than I’m due. She gets what she needs in return.”

Rutger gave a wry smile. “You know then what these women need from us and why?”

“They want us mating with them, treating us like rams sent to copulate with the herd.” Rangvald’s lip curled in disdain.

“‘Tis the sort of thing I’d have dreamt about before coming here—being shipwrecked on a lush island filled only with women, held captive, and ordered to bury myself balls-deep day after day.” Rutger sighed.

“And now?”

“I’ve my hands full with Grethe. The thought of servicing more of these women—however beautiful they are—holds less appeal than I’d have expected.” Rutger wasn’t about to tell Rangvald that Grethe had shunned him of late.

The rest was true. There was only one woman who occupied his thoughts, and it was no longer Tyra.

Rangvald grunted in agreement. “Women are troublesome. Keeping one content is work enough.”

“Happy to mount just your own she-goat, eh?” Rutger laughed at his own joke, but Rangvald didn’t look amused.

“Elin is no goat!”

Rutger held his hands up in apology. “Of course, she isn’t.”

Clearly, Rangvald’s feelings for the woman ran deeper than he was letting on. With Rangvald glowering at him, Rutger tried a change of tack.

“Our jarl has been to see you?” He leaned in closer. “He’s told of... our plan?”

“I know what he chooses to tell me. Our jarl gets what he wants, and we obey.” Rangvald snarled. “I’m supposed to lie to Elin... no matter my feelings or hers. Nothing else is of consequence, is it?”

Rutger was taken aback. As a member of the jarl’s personal guard, Rangvald’s loyalty should be unquestionable. Yet, the way he was speaking told another story.

Rutger wasn’t sure he wished to know why. Whatever was afoot between Eldberg and Rangvald, he’d be better off staying out of it.

“Does your woman suspect?” Rangvald probed. “Do any of them?”

Does Grethe know? Rutger pondered a moment.

He'd been working on what appeared to be the same piece of wood for several weeks now—except that he'd been carefully swapping in new lengths of timber and hiding each oar as it neared completion. As far as he knew, she hadn't discovered his deceit, but she was no simpleton.

Does she know more than she's letting on?

Rutger rubbed at his beard. It would explain her foul moods and refusal to let him near her.

In fairness, she'd have every right to be angry. It didn't sit well with him to mislead anyone, least of all Grethe. Regardless of her callous treatment of him, her puffed-up ways, her argumentative nature, and her always wanting the last word, she'd wormed into his affections, and he disliked the idea of hurting her.

Grethe was a whirlwind, alright—and he'd thought he knew women! The gods only knew what his sisters would make of her when he brought Grethe home.

She mightn't go willingly, but his mind was made up. When Eldberg declared it time for them to leave, Grethe would be coming on their ship—even if he had to tie her up and throw her over his shoulder.

He'd failed in securing Tyra's love, but he wasn't going to make that mistake again. For all her annoying habits, Grethe was the one for him; he knew it as surely as his own name. If he could only make her believe his devotion, he had faith she'd tell him she felt the same.

After all, no woman could be that cantankerous toward a man unless she was harboring secret love notions.

Rutger smiled to himself.

Yes, 'twas obvious. The poor wench was smitten, and her crabby antics were due to her being unsure how he felt in return.

Lucky that I've a few surprises up my sleeve.

He could hardly wait to show Grethe what he'd been making just for her. All women loved gifts, and he'd wager his life she'd never received anything akin to what he'd been crafting.

All will soon be right again, and my feisty little Valkyrie will be swooning for me once more.

Rutger let out a hoot of laughter.

"So glad I'm amusing you!" Rangvald cast a scowl worthy of Thor himself. If he'd been in possession of a thunderbolt, Rutger was in no doubt he'd be struck down on the spot.

"'Tis not... that is... I'm a lackwit!" Rutger jumped up. "And, no offense intended, but I've better things to do than sit here when I could be with my woman. I wish you well, Rangvald, you and Elin. Don't waste time there. Who knows if we'll ever get off this island or back to Skálavík? I'm not sure I even care anymore as long as I've Grethe in my arms."

Rangvald's gaze narrowed, following Rutger as he sprinted for the door.

### CHAPTER 9

Could things get any worse?

Grethe looked skyward, offering up a silent prayer for Freyja to give her patience. On the walk back from Elin's hut, she'd been unfortunate enough to bump into Ulva, with no chance of evading the inevitable tongue-lashing.

Always in a foul temper, her aunt was even more unbearable today. Thoughtlessly, when Ulva had asked how matters were progressing, Grethe had given her a truthful answer and was paying the price.

Grethe's bleeding time wasn't due for another seven nights or so, but she knew for a fact that 'twas another cycle in which she wouldn't be carrying a child. Such a thing wasn't possible without intercourse, and she'd been denying Rutger any such favors.

"Useless, that's what you are! As useless as that daughter of mine. I should have known just by looking at you. Too much bile for your own good! You're so sour, you're likely barren." Ulva's pitch rose. "My Sven had a lucky escape! Not just from the curse but from you!"

Grethe's skin was thick where her aunt was concerned, but Ulva's last insult cut to the quick.

"You can't even keep this one where you need him!" Ulva's gaze strayed somewhere over Grethe's shoulder. "Letting him wander about freely on his own? What are you thinking, girl?"

Her eyes slid back to meet Grethe's again. "Coming from Elin's hut, I see." Her aunt sneered. "That one's desperate for a child. I wouldn't put it past Elin to sleep with your man as well as her own if it improves her chances."

Grethe cast a quick look over her shoulder and was horrified to see Rutger no more than a few steps away .

'Twas mortifying! He'd surely heard everything.

However, as he came to stand beside her, Rutger curled his arm about Grethe's back.

"Greetings, Mistress Ulva." Rutger's tone was polite yet firm. "'Tis commendable for you to look out for your niece, but whatever misfortunes there have been, I'm certain they're in the past. Grethe has me looking after her now, and I'll make sure she has no regret for her choices."

Grethe gulped against the lump that sprung to her throat. Rutger's coming to her defense was unexpected. More than that, his proximity was comforting, and he'd spoken of 'looking after her'.

Not that she gave credence to any of it, but she was grateful for the words, however honey-coated, and for the reassurance of the hand resting upon her shoulder.

Almost as surprisingly, her aunt made no retort to Rutger's speech.

"How goes it with my shipmate, Viggo?" he went on. "I understand he's with your daughter. I've not had the chance to speak much with him, but I'm sure he's well cared for. I wish them well. "

Ulva seemed shaken from her astonishment. "That ninny and her fool! Don't waste your time." Her voice dripped with spite. "Signy won't be saddled with that cretin for

long, not if I have anything to do with it. He'd be better off dead. At least, then, he wouldn't be a weight about her neck—nor mine—eating us out of house and home.”

Grethe was about to remonstrate. However, Ulva swiftly made an about-turn, heading to the hut she shared with Agneta.

“That woman!” Rutger's hand left Grethe's shoulder, balling into a fist, but he made no indication of following nor of continuing the unpleasant discourse.

Relief swept over Grethe. Regardless of her aunt's rudeness, she'd no wish to escalate the argument.

“Ignore her. She's poisonous.” They were sentiments Grethe had often thought, though she didn't think she'd ever said them aloud before. Nevertheless, a small part of her felt compassion for her aunt.

Grethe had lost the man who'd promised to marry her, but Ulva had been abandoned by a husband and son.

What did that do to a person?

Resentment had a habit of festering dark and ugly. 'Twas something Grethe understood.

“I'm sorry you had to hear that.” Grethe let out a long breath. She cringed to think of who else had received a juicy earful. Most of her neighbors, without doubt.

“Sven's your cousin?” Rutger turned to her. “He was one of the men who survived but didn't stay?”

“I thought he was clever and strong. He was older. I thought he'd look after me!” She

laughed awkwardly, ashamed to admit how naïve she'd been back then when she'd believed so much without question. "Perhaps I was the one with a lucky escape. It's bad enough having Ulva as my aunt, never mind as my mother-in-law."

"You're better off without people who demean you, that's for sure." Gently, Rutger rubbed between her shoulder blades, hushing her as he did so, as if she were a child needing comfort after scraping her knee.

She ought not to like what he was doing, but it felt good. The tension in Grethe's neck and shoulders eased a little just having him touch her like this. She wanted to lean in, letting him give her a full bear hug. He didn't need to say anything; just to hold her would be enough.

I should hate him—for what I know he's going to do and for what he's done already, sneaking about behind my back.

But she didn't. Not really.

'Twas more that her pride was hurt.

"I could do with a draught of mead," she resolved in the end. "You'll take a mug with me?"

"Nectar of the gods!" The wonder upon Rutger's face was evident as he wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "You made this all by yourself?"

"Well... not entirely. Signy brings me the honey from her hives. There would be no mead without it." Grethe was pleased with his praise, but she knew better than to be carried away.

"But the barrels, the fermenting... and whatever else is involved. That's all you."



Rutger's admiration was obvious.

Don't put too much store by it. He simply likes his mead. All men do. He's on his fifth goblet, and my mead is strong stuff. 'Tis no wonder he's effusive in his compliments.

Stretching over from the stool upon which he was perched, he gave her a nudge. "Is this not as it would be if we were taking our honeymoon?"

"Nay! Nothing like! We aren't married, nor shall we ever be." In truth, Grethe had been looking forward to her 'honey' time with Sven—a whole cycle of the moon when they might closet themselves away and drink as much honey-mead as they liked while tumbling in the bed furs.

'Twas yet another thing she'd been cheated of, though she'd made up for it, to some extent, in having had Rutger at her beck and call.

Until he spoiled it!

"You still wish to have a child, yes?" Rutger was leaning so far forward, she feared he'd fall off the stool altogether. "If so, we ought to be having lots of sex. We should treat this like a true honeymoon, eh Grethe?"

"Lack-brained clod! Let me worry about that." She turned her head away from his mead-sodden breath, but that only left her neck exposed, and he nuzzled there, just below her ear. 'Twas a definite sign of amorousness—at least where he was concerned.

Rutger had a fondness for every part of her body, as far as she could tell, but her ear lobes were right up there, alongside her breasts... so to speak. Not that Grethe was complaining. She liked it when he nibbled her ears.

“That Sven was an idiot,” Rutger mumbled before sucking the fleshiest part of her lobe into his mouth.

“Yes, he was.” Putting aside her goblet, she closed her eyes.

“That aunt of yours isn’t any better.” With a sweep of his arm, Rutger lifted Grethe off her stool and onto his lap. “You shouldn’t put up with it.”

“Also true.” Grethe let herself relax in Rutger’s embrace. He’d planted both feet more firmly, thank the gods, so she had faith they wouldn’t end up tumbling to the floor.

“What about the rest of your family?”

“Cousin Signy’s alright, I suppose. A bit too soft for her own good.”

“You can be soft, too.” Lifting her hand, Rutger brushed his lips upon her upturned wrist. “When you wish it.”

Grethe shivered with pleasure at the featherlight touch. She brought her fingers through his hair, giving a playful tug.

“You’re soft... soft in the head!”

“And what of your parents, siblings?”

Grethe paused. ‘Twas not a subject she liked to dwell upon, for they were gone, and nothing would change that. However, she need only tell him once, then it would be done.

“My mother died several years ago. My father and brother during the troubled time when the curse came...”

Rutger rubbed his right thumb where he'd kissed. His hand looked huge beside her own, the fingers easily able to span her wrist. She appreciated that he could be gentle despite his size and strength.

He would be formidable, she could tell, protecting his family, but he'd never use that prowess for needless harm. He'd never use it against her, not in any true sense. She didn't mind that he used his physical superiority to overpower her during their bedsport. Quite the opposite.

"You've been alone." His voice was quiet.

Grethe gave a small shrug. "Even when my brother and father were living, I felt that way. They were devoted to their work, fishing alongside Astrid's father. When they were home, all they did was sleep or talk about nets and such. My mother was more of a character, making her mead and bartering both that and the fish with the other islanders. I'm like her, I suppose, stubborn and independent. I like my way... in most things."

Rutger nodded. "The women of my family are the same. They're a daunting force when gathered." He gave a low chuckle. "Five older sisters, besides aunts and cousins, my mother and grandmother—all treating me like I'm a youngling of nine or ten rather than a full-grown man. Not that I'm complaining. They love me as fiercely as I do them."

Grethe blinked in surprise. She'd never thought to ask him about his family. She could hardly imagine him surrounded by so many women, all fussing over him, or perhaps she could. There was something about Rutger that made her want to fuss over him, too—cheeky lout that he was!

He was obviously fond of his womenfolk, too, and respectful, it seemed.

She hadn't forgotten, though, what he'd said to his jarl.

If she let him, Rutger could twist her around his finger, then where would she be when he up and left? She'd need to keep her wits about her. Rutger was here for now, and she'd enjoy this while it lasted. Nothing more.

With a wriggle, she abandoned his lap, swaying a little from the partaking of the mead.

"All this drinking has put me in the mood for a sample of your horn." She gave him a push upon the shoulder. "And I'd like something a bit different. I don't want to be the one doing all the work or have you dribbling honey about the place."

Rutger grinned. "I'm ready to oblige, and, as it happens, I've a gift for you."

Grethe's interest was piqued. She liked presents, though 'twas rare anyone gave her anything, unless it was in exchange for mead .

Still, she was suspicious. "I hope 'tis good, this gift!"

With eyes alight, Rutger got to his feet.

"Clothes off, wench, and lay yourself upon the bed furs. I'll be back in two swishes of a tail."

"What is it?" Grethe jabbed her finger at the strange object Rutger was holding for her perusal. It didn't look in the least remarkable. "Is it for tenderizing meat?" Grethe frowned. It wasn't her idea of an exciting gift.

"In a manner of speaking." Rutger ran his palm upon it lovingly. "'Tis all the rage back in Skálavík. I craft more of these than I do of anything else. All the women

come asking for them—thick ones and thin, long and short. Some with protrusions at the top or near the bottom. I wasn't sure which you'd like best, so I made this of medium girth with a ring of nobbles around the head. Once you've given it a go, you can tell me what you think. I'm happy to make more to your own specifications."

"Hmmm." Grethe was bemused. The women of Skálavík clearly took things seriously regarding the making of stew. She could see the benefits, she supposed. A well-prepared side of rabbit would soften in the pot all the quicker. The little nobbles were a clever touch, though she couldn't imagine why he'd chosen to give it to her now when he was stark naked and so was she, with her ankles tied together and her knees bent up to her chest.

The last thing on her mind was what they'd be having for supper, but 'twould be ungrateful to show no interest, and Rutger appeared pleased with himself.

"Is there a particular technique to it?"

"That's down to personal preference. I understand it can be good to start slow, then work up to a faster rhythm." Rutger spat on the nobbled end, running his finger over to spread out the saliva.

Stranger and stranger.

She did hope he'd soon get on with the business of riding her. The mead was making her dozy. If she curled onto her side, she might easily go to sleep.

However, the next moment, something unnaturally hard was prodding between her nether lips.

Grethe let out a yelp of surprise. "What are you doing?"

‘Twas the wooden thing, and Rutger was down there, twirling it about.

“Showing you how it works.” He smiled from the other side of her ankles, which he held firm, keeping her knees pressed tight to her torso.

“What sort of carpenter are you? I’ve never heard of such perversion!”

He laughed as the twirling continued.

Sacred Freyja!

Grethe jolted as a roaring spasm of bliss shot through her.

Rutger nodded in approval. “I see you’ve the hang of it. Your woman juices are flowing nicely. That makes the next part all the easier.”

“What next part?” Grethe was still reeling from the ripples of delight traveling her body.

Rutger adjusted the thing, moving it downward. “I’m told the nobbles are particularly effective upon the cushioned parts just inside your sheath.”

Grethe gasped as the wooden phallus breached her. It didn’t hurt, exactly, but the sensation was peculiar.

“That’s it. You’re getting accustomed already.” Rutger picked up the pace, though thrusting the thing only a short way inside.

Grethe’s eyes widened.

By the gods! It’s happening again!

The way the wooden cock was stroking back and forth was creating sensations she'd never experienced before. Places she didn't even know existed were quivering.

Her second tumult hit almost as ferociously as the first, but he did not pause, pushing into her through the waves. Her clenching only drew the thing deeper.

“Rutger! Stop! ‘Tis too much!”

He stayed his hand. “Are you sure? You’ve not seen the best part yet. While this fills your sheath, I can slide my own hardness up your anus. Think how that will feel, Grethe, front and back receiving my thrusting, both together or one then the other. The thought of it almost makes me wish to be a woman, just for a short while, to see how that would feel.”

Grethe’s head spun.

Two cocks inside her, both controlled by Rutger!

At this angle, his fleshy member would claim her rear entrance in an altogether different way than when she’d been on all fours.

With her ankles tied, she’d be helpless to resist.

‘Twas an exciting notion.

“I’m... not sure.” She couldn’t help the tremble in her voice.

Immediately, Rutger ceased. “‘Tis naught to worry over. We’ve all the time in the world to practice.”

Grethe let go a sigh of relief, though as the wooden phallus left her body, she was

bereft.

“There’s a second gift, which you may like better.” Rutger sounded hopeful.

Grethe craned to see.

Was that... a mushroom?

Tall and ridged, with a disk at the bottom, it wasn’t like any mushroom she’d seen before.

Surely, he wasn’t going to start up on cooking tips again!

“‘Tis like the first, only this is crafted to fill you behind.” Rutger went on. “Then, I can take you in the usual way.”

She took a moment, imagining how that would feel , but Rutger was clearly impatient.

“Grethe, your cunny is so creamed, it’s brimming over. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful. I’m hard as a rock, thinking about fucking you.”

Hearing him talk so sent a pang of lust through her.

“Yes, do it. Quickly.”

She held her breath as the wooden mushroom pressed at her bottom, but Rutger was surely right about her body’s lubrication, for the thing slid inside without much resistance. ‘Twas far easier than she expected, and though it felt ‘wrong’, she liked it. Having her back entrance filled made her crave him all the more.



“Now! Please!” She hugged her knees closer, presenting herself, and with a groan of hunger, he sank inside .

The sensation of being so thoroughly filled and stretched was surprising but in the best, most glorious way.

As he rocked her back, she caught the wild look in his eyes. He moaned between each thrust.

“Sweet Grethe. Yes! You’re so tight! So wet! I can feel it inside you, close to my cock, as if you have another back there. Would you like that? Having some other man beneath you, hammering your arse while I fuck you on top?”

Grethe’s heart raced. Rutger liked to talk thus, of how it felt to be inside her, but he’d never ventured so far, speaking in this way.

A new thrill shot through her, imagining hateful Sven crushed beneath her back, her only use for him being to take his phallus in her behind, the more to enjoy Rutger making love to her from above.

“All men want to fuck you, but I’m the only one who gets to be inside you like this, in your hot sheath. A perfect fit for my cock. I’m the only one who gets to flood you with seed. I’m. The. Only. One...” Rutger’s face contorted as he uttered a guttural groan.

“Yes!” She was panting herself. “Harder, Rutger. Go deep. I need you.”

“Gods! Grethe! Fuck me!” Rutger arched his back, delivering one last driving penetration.

### CHAPTER 10

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

Pale light bled into the room, intruding on her slumber. Turning her face away, Grethe sought to ignore it, but another, more forceful obstacle came to the fore.

Bang, bang, bang!

Her head was heavy—evidence of the days of mead-drinking she and Rutger had enjoyed—making it feel as if it were her own skull being rapped upon.

The beating upon the door was relentless.

“Grethe!” Someone hollered. “You must come! ”

She tensed at the sound of her name.

I don't want to wake!

She moaned, rolling over in bed.

Leave me be.

She squeezed her eyes closed, refusing to allow her lids to flutter open, but the clatter continued, leaving her no choice but to respond.

Stumbling from her bed, she staggered toward the door and, pulling it open, was met by Agneta, looking wild-eyed.

“Ulva!” Agneta was breathless.

“What of her?” The last person Grethe wanted to think about in the haze of her hangover was her aunt.

“She’s d-dead.” Agneta’s lips trembled.

Grethe squinted against the bright light of morning. Had she misheard? Ulva was in robust health. She couldn’t be dead.

“She f-fell... from the cliff. When first I heard, I wondered if ‘twas something to do with that peculiar storm that blew in, then out just as quickly. You must have heard the thunder. Something terrible it was... and the gale! I bolted my door and prayed to Freyja until it went away.”

“What?” Grethe gripped the door frame as fragments of Agneta’s story slid into place. She’d been dimly aware of wind whistling about the place and some distant sky rumblings, but Rutger had been doing something particularly distracting to her at the time. “My aunt’s dead?”

Apparently unable to articulate more, Agneta only nodded.

Rubbing her temples, Grethe muttered her farewells and closed the door to find Rutger sitting up in the bed.

They’d spent the last three days devouring each other in a frenzy of mead-driven passion, but the news of Ulva’s death had pierced their bubble of carnal contentment.

“Ulva’s dead?” He frowned. “How?”

“If you heard she’s dead, then you heard how she died.” Grethe had no patience to repeat the news. She’d barely registered it herself.

“She fell from the cliff.” His voice was grim. “But what was she doing up there if the weather was so bad?”

“How should I know?” Exasperated, she threw her hands into the air. The pounding in her head was making it difficult to think, let alone listen to his inane queries.

What she needed was a mug of water, but lifting the pitcher, she found it empty. The mead was also drained.

Grethe muttered a curse.

Going out to fetch more was beyond her capacity at present.

Slumping onto a stool, she leaned over the table, resting her head in her hands. A morsel of cheese remained on a platter there, and its smell made her stomach churn.

Hastily, she pushed it away.

“Maybe she fell, or perhaps Viggo helped her...” Grethe took a long breath. She’d hardly blame him if he had. Her aunt was barely tolerable at the best of times. If the man’s sight had returned, it would make sense.

Doubtless, he’d had his fill of Ulva’s nagging ways.

“Or Signy, even.” Grethe went on. “Ulva only chided and belittled her. She’s better off without such a mother.”

“Signy? You think she’d murder the woman who birthed her?” Rutger shook his head. “Must you always think so poorly of everyone?”

“Poorly?”

Why was he blaming her ?

“I’m only answering your questions, though what business it is of yours, I don’t know.” She knew she was overreacting, but her thirst and tiredness were too much. She couldn’t help feeling defensive.

“‘Tis not right, Grethe.” Rising from the bed, Rutger tugged on his braies . “You trust no one. Not even your own kin.”

“Trust?” She balked, unable to tolerate his hypocrisy. How dare the man who sought to deceive her make such a criticism?

“You speak to me of trust when you seek to betray me!”

He recoiled as if she’d slapped him across the face.

“What do you mean?”

“Do not play innocent with me!” Her anger was making it difficult to catch her breath. “I know of the oars you’ve been carving, know you’re planning to leave with the rest of your wretched friends!” The words tumbled from her as tears pricked her eyes. She was loath to cry for the oaf, but the enormity of his duplicity washed over her again.

She’d thought to enjoy him while he was there, letting herself surrender to physical pleasure, but ‘twas hard to relish the present when she knew there would be no future.

The treachery in his heart had put paid to any chance of that.

“How long have you known?” Rutger made no attempt to deny the charges.

She was glad. There had been enough lies.

“A while.” She wiped her tears with the heel of her hands. “I heard you and your jarl plotting together.”

“And you said nothing.” He closed the distance between them, but she backed away.

“I’ve done nothing wrong!” How dare he try to misconstrue what had happened? Why should she be culpable for not speaking up when he was so insincere? “‘Tis you who pursue untruths. You tell me of your family and play ‘lovers’, knowing full well you plan to return to them, leaving me here alone!”

“No!” His tone was imploring. “‘Tis not true, Grethe. I intend to take you with me when we go. I want you at my side.”

“Ha!” she snorted, sneering at his pathetic, feigned show of affection. “You’ll say anything to wriggle free of my accusations, but we both know they’re well-founded.”

“Grethe, please.” He raked his hands through his hair. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I could never leave you!”

“Do not lie!” Her fury sparked fresh at his denial. “Let us now be honest, Rutger.”

“I speak only the truth.” He reached for her hand as though the gesture might remedy the hurt he’d caused. “I care for you, and I want you by my side. I wish only to see you happier.”

“If my happiness is what you seek, then you should leave.” She hissed the words at him, shaking free of his grasp.

“You don’t mean it.” He shook his head.

“I know exactly what I mean!” she fumed. “Take your clothes and go. I don’t wish to see you again.”

“Grethe.” He sighed, as if the way she was behaving was unreasonable, like some child needing his guidance.

Far from it!

She was the wronged one, though her righteousness offered little solace.

“Go!” she screeched, racing to collect the rest of his clothing and flinging it at him. “I pray that Freyja sends you far from these shores.”

He hesitated for an instant, glowering back at her.

Time protracted as they stared at one another, a hundred things remaining unsaid. Then, shuffling toward the door, he walked away.

She held back the real torrent of her sorrow until he’d slipped from view.

Staring into the darkness, a numbness fell over Grethe. The day had passed in tears and anguish—her own and that of Signy, who she’d dutifully comforted. Whatever had happened on the clifftop, Signy had her support.

Despite the horror of her mother’s death, there was a fortitude to Signy that Grethe respected. With Ulva gone, she would grow in self-assurance. Grow and thrive,

Grethe suspected, having Viggo at her side .

Now that his sight was returning, his gaze never left Signy. 'Twas obvious the two were in love. If he'd had a hand in her aunt's demise, she trusted that he'd performed the act for Signy's sake rather than any petty vengeance of his own.

A pang of jealousy struck her.

Grethe had always pitied Signy—ill-treated by her father, harangued by her mother, shrunken so far that it was easy to forget she even existed.

Yet she has a man devoted to her, who looks upon her as if she were both sun and moon, while I have nothing.

Grethe turned again upon her mattress, attempting to still her thoughts and invite slumber, but it remained elusive. There was no peace for a mind as tormented as hers.

How can I have been so foolish?

I knew his intentions, yet still, I took him to my bed and allowed myself to believe there could be more.

Her woes seemed heavier in the wake of their spent desire.

She'd hardly managed to eat since their argument, so tangled was she in despair.

She should go to Bothild and confide all.

Let some other have him, so that the island might be provided with a child.

But she lacked the strength. 'Twas beyond her to speak the words out loud.



Bothild will see through my pain and know why I'm giving him up. She'll pity me, just as I used to pity Signy. They'll all pity me or gloat, knowing I've failed.

As to seeing him paraded around with another woman...

If Vangreth takes him, I shall die!

She shuddered, pulling the bed furs higher. She couldn't survive another shameful reproach like that. She couldn't?—

A noise from outside tugged her from her well of misery.

Was someone there?

Her heart hammered.

It had surely been the creaking of the door in the mead room.

It has to be Rutger!

He's been lying awake as I have, turning all in his mind, regretting his actions, thinking of how he might put things right.

What other reason could there be for him to rise in the middle of the night?

She'd screamed at him to leave, telling him she wanted no more to do with him, but he was coming to her, nonetheless.

Because he loves me!

Imprudent hope filled her heart. Rising, she pulled a shawl over her shoulders and

was halfway across the room before a rush of panic struck her.

What was she thinking?

The fiend didn't love her.

If he did, he'd never have lied for so long. Nor would he have let her push him away. He'd have fought back, refusing to be dismissed.

Instead, he'd departed with barely a backward glance.

Just like Sven.

He didn't love her any more than Sven had done.

When Rutger opened her door, seeking to worm his way back into her affections, she would stand strong. Never again would she let herself be deceived.

She held her breath.

No matter what he says, don't weaken. You can't trust him. In your heart, you know it.

With her arms wrapped about herself, she waited.

He's going to come creeping in any moment now.

But no one did.

Straining to hear, she thought there was further movement outside, but it was hard to be sure over the sound of her galloping heart.

What is he doing, making me hold on like this?

Even now, he's utterly selfish.

As time drew on, she began to doubt herself, but she had heard some thing.

A horrible thought struck her. What if Rutger was slinking out to visit someone, but it wasn't Grethe he was intent upon seeing?

What was it Ulva had said... about Elin lusting after him?

Not just Elin, she'd wager. Rutger was strong and handsome. For weeks now, he'd been performing tasks around the settlement. Every woman would have been making eyes at him, and knowing Rutger, he'd have enjoyed every moment.

Was there no end to the humiliation?

I won't put up with it. Not anymore.

Striding the last paces to the door, she yanked it open and stepped boldly out, ready to give Rutger a piece of her mind. However, there was no sign of him .

Grethe berated herself. She'd left it too long. The lout could be anywhere.

Quickly, she opened the door to the mead room.

There was no doubt he was gone.

Nonetheless, I shall find him! Even if it means pressing my ear to the door of every home.

Angrily, she returned outside.

A waning moon hung overhead, enveloped by passing clouds, yet bright enough to illuminate the bay and the low houses nestled above the beach.

It lit the figure of a man hurrying across the sands.

Rutger!

She started after him unthinkingly. If the lout was on his way to a secret rendezvous, she'd catch him in the act. She scampered down the dunes, staying far enough behind that he wouldn't notice her,

The clouds parted suddenly, and Grethe saw him more clearly. Pausing, he hefted something in his arms. He was carrying a pot of some sort.

Nay! Two pots! Of the very sort in which the honey is stored!

Thief! Her jaw stiffened at the violation.

Not only had he bedded her with no intention of honoring her love, but now he was stealing from her.

Though what he's doing with so much honey, I can't imagine. Not unless...

A wave of fury engulfed her.

Meeting another woman and using the honey upon her! 'Twas a step too far.

She'd take both those pots and crack them over his head.

With her indignation burning, she hurried on, following the path he'd taken.

However, as she skirted the lower edge of the dunes, there was a shift in the wind, and a haze drifted across the sands. 'Twas blowing in from the sea, obscuring her view of Rutger.

Unease furred in her belly.

The tide was coming in, foamed water rushing in far-reaching waves across the flat of the beach, yet the sound was oddly subdued, as though the incoming mist swallowed it whole.

An impulse to halt seized her, to return to the sanctuary of her abode. The air was thickening somehow, making it difficult to breathe, while the encroaching fog was contorting familiar landmarks into strange and eerie foes.

Pausing, she steadied herself.

Briefly, the hazy figure of Rutger appeared, approaching the shipwreck, then disappeared from view, merging with the blurring mist.

Grethe shivered. The dampness of the fog seemed to seep within her bones, regardless of her shawl.

She pushed down her apprehension.

You are no child to be frightened of the night. 'Tis only your weariness and heartbreak that cloud your thoughts.

He'd stolen from her and was surely meeting someone behind her back.

I must pursue him.

She was about to follow once more when a deep and distant rumbling halted her again.

Thunder?

She squinted skyward. There had been no sign of an approaching storm, but the weather could change abruptly on the island. With the bewildering sea mist cloaking all, 'twas hard to tell if darker clouds lurked above.

Were these omens warning her against proceeding, wanting to protect her against what she'd find?

Once again, she looked back, considering retreating, but the urge to uncover Rutger's ruse drove her on.

He'd never again fool her!

Nor would there be more dark surprises to unseat her.

Keeping low and with only the swirling fog for company, she crept toward the boat. She half expected Rutger to leap out at her, but as she drew closer, there was no sign of her duplicitous lover.

The hull, still partly on its side, loomed into view. Seaweed had been thrown over to conceal what had been going on, but 'twas clear repairs were underway. Edging around its bulk, she spied her pots of honey stashed inside.

While there were no masts or sails yet to see, the interior of the boat had been patched up. Several oars were piled within, like the one Rutger had made.

Her breath caught as she realized what that meant.

The ship looked almost seaworthy, and there were nearly enough oars to row it out! Clearly, Rutger and the others meant to leave imminently.

Only Rutger has the skill to carve these oars.

He must have been working on them for weeks!

The reality stabbed at her heart.

He'd been keeping this from her the whole time. If she hadn't overheard him with Eldberg, she'd have remained none the wiser—the same naïve woman who'd fallen for Sven.

Not only had he kept from her his intention to depart, but he'd been lying about... almost everything! The progress of his workmanship, these repairs, his provisioning of the boat from her own store. Who knew what else he'd taken?

And all the while, Rutger claimed to care for me.

Fresh tears sprung to her eyes.

Perhaps, tonight, there had been no plan to meet with another woman, but his betrayal in other ways cut her to the quick.

All those times he held me meant nothing because he was planning this all the while! 'Twas merely empty fucking.

Clenching her fists, she turned away.

Surely, she should tell Bothild of the men's intent? She'd know what to do.

Grethe cringed. Her shame wouldn't let her do it. It was bad enough that Rutger had spurned her. She couldn't confess the depth of his treachery to Bothild and the others.

I'll leave them to it.

She wrapped her shawl closer as she backed away from the hull.

If this is what he wants, then why should I stop him?

I told him to go, so he's going.

She'd be better off once Rutger was only a distant memory.



### CHAPTER 11

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

As dusk approached, Rutger climbed the hillside for his rendezvous with Eldberg and J?rgen. Pausing on the upper portion of the track, he looked down upon the bay, where the dipping sun cast its umber glow across the horizon.

'Twas a beautiful sight—one he wished Grethe were at his side to admire, but there was no chance of that now. Since their argument, she'd refused even to acknowledge him.

At first, he'd let her be, allowing the heat to wane from that hot head of hers. Perhaps he'd waited too long, for when he'd attempted to speak with her, she'd refused to open her door, keeping it barred from within. Thrice, he'd chased her down outside, and she'd acted as if he didn't exist.

A tray of food appeared twice daily outside his door, but Grethe initiated no contact between them.

Left to his own devices, he'd been careful not to overstep. Though he and the other men moved more freely among the women these past weeks, he was still under Grethe's care. He'd no wish to see her punished for failing to keep him within bounds.

In the end, it was Signy who'd come to him, urging that he give Grethe her space, that in her own time, she would be ready to open herself to him again. He wanted to

believe it was possible, but he feared otherwise.

He could hardly blame Grethe. Every accusation she'd flung at him had been true. He had deceived her—more than she knew. Many times, he might have confided in her, but he hadn't trusted her to keep the secret of his jarl's plans.

Trust !

A sick feeling roiled in his stomach. After the way Tyra and his brother had betrayed him, he'd thought he'd never truly trust anyone again.

Nevertheless, I want that closeness with someone—to believe they'll never act to deceive or hurt me. I want that with someone I can spend my life with, growing old together, raising children perhaps.

I want that with Grethe.

And yet, you ruined it all—expecting her to have faith in you, no matter all you withheld.

Telling her she was the one lacking trust hadn't helped.

He could kick himself, looking back.

If anyone was entitled to be wary, it was Grethe—after the way that good-for-nothing Sven and her obnoxious aunt had treated her.

Little wonder she'd failed to believe his protests, that he intended to take her with him. He'd not said a word of how he felt for her, of how he'd carry her away against her will if necessary.

He thumped his forehead with his fist.

What are you thinking?

As if Grethe would forgive you for abducting her!

The most laughable thing was that she'd been privy to far more than he'd known, and she'd said naught to anyone. Even now, as far as he could tell, she'd kept his secret.

Turning back to the path, Rutger pressed on. His jarl didn't like to be kept waiting. That was all he had—allegiance to Eldberg.

The thought rang hollow.

Too late, Rutger was realizing what Grethe meant to him and that there was no coming back from his mistakes.

Sitting upon the trunk they'd felled, Eldberg took a long draught from the water pouch before passing it to Jørgen. All the side branches were now removed, and the bark shredded away. Rutger was still chiseling one end, ready for the mast to be wedged into the holding place in the center of the boat's hull. The pegs to which the sails would be attached would need to be inserted later.

"We can slide it down the hillside tomorrow night, then roll it across the beach." Eldberg 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." Jørgen nodded. "The sooner we're off this island, the better. Even Astrid agrees. She's promised to say naught until the time comes, but she shares my disquiet. For all its beauty, this place makes me uneasy. 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.”

Rutger swallowed down the urge to add that Grethe also knew of their intentions. She’d kept silent so far, and he had to assume that would continue.

“Will you hold fast to such a pact?” J?rgen was bold enough to ask.

Eldberg narrowed his eyes. “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.”

Rutger said naught. His jarl’s talk of honor was all very well, but he knew Eldberg’s actions would be governed solely by what suited him when the time came.

“We’ll be five and 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 paused in 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 a sideways look at Rutger. Neither needed to speak. Eldberg brooked no challenge, and if Rangvald had been foolhardy enough to raise some weapon against his jarl, he’d sealed his own fate.

That Rangvald had done so, Rutger did not doubt. He remembered Rangvald’s words when he’d taken him the crutches. There was some deeper rift between Rangvald and his jarl, which neither seemed inclined to elaborate on.

As far as Rutger was concerned, ‘twas none of his business, though he felt compassion for Rangvald, nonetheless. He was too proud to allow Rutger into his confidence, but for all Rangvald’s bravado, anyone could see the man was tormented.

“Keep that information to yourselves,” Eldberg added dourly. “‘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.”

Rutger lowered his gaze. There was more to this than Eldberg was letting on, he felt sure, but there would be no further answers from his jarl.

### CHAPTER 12

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

There were only so many places a man could be locked up. Under cover of darkness, Rutger had worked methodically to discover where Rangvald was being held—a woodstore beside the main longhouse, barely large enough to allow a man to lie down.

How long Rangvald had been imprisoned there, Rutger had no idea, but 'twas a wonder he hadn't run mad. Rutger had thought being restrained in his own quarters was bad enough.

"The door's bolted and chained, but I can easily prise the lock on one side, splintering the wood. I've brought tools with me," Rutger kept his voice at a whisper.

"Nay! I deserve my punishment. Leave me be!"

Rangvald's reply was not at all as Rutger expected.

"I can hide you up on the hillside," Rutger persisted. "There are plenty of places no one would think to look. Eldberg's angry, but he has other things to think about. If we're to get you free, now is a good time."

"You know what happened?" Rangvald pressed closer to the chink in the door.

"Only what our jarl has told me. What possessed you, Rangvald, to attack him like

that?"

Rangvald made a scornful sound. "I regret nothing on that score—only that my clumsy blade injured one infinitely more admirable than our jarl. I might have killed her! My Elin!"

"She's hurt?" Rutger had heard nothing of it.

"Bothild is tending her in secret. Eldberg knows, and that wench of his, but no one else. 'Tis for the sake of maintaining peace. If these women believe us dangerous, who knows the outcome? It may not be me alone they turn upon."

Rutger took a moment to ponder that before shaking his head. "Eldberg is too strong to be restrained, as are J?rgen and I. Even Gunnar and Viggo could defend themselves."

"You'd fight back, would you? Injuring women? You think your own woman—Grethe, isn't it—would forgive that?" Rangvald's tone was one of resignation. "In any case, they aren't stupid. They'd take you while you were sleeping. We may be strong physically, but women are cunning. Try protecting yourself when your arms are already tied!"

"So, you prefer to stay here, simply waiting for what may happen?" Rutger was incredulous.

"What choice do I have?" Rangvald's reply was weary. "When Eldberg leaves, I'll remain. After the dust has settled, Bothild may release me. I'll do what I must to earn these women's trust and to prove myself worthy of Elin. 'Tis her I live for now."

Rutger was dumbstruck. Never had he thought to hear Rangvald speak so .

“Go now.” Rangvald hissed through the door. “If you feel anything for your woman, tell her, and whether you take her with you or remain, guard her happiness. All else is of no matter. Learn from me, Rutger, and do not make the same mistakes. My hatred burns bright, but I was wrong to let it rule me. Love is stronger. Don’t waste it.”

‘Twas late, and they should have been abed, but Grethe was glad of her cousin’s company. She’d come to join her in a mug of mead, and one had quickly become two.

Now, Grethe was loath to let Signy leave.

She was starting to feel she’d misjudged her, or perhaps Signy was changing. Without her mother to contend with, she appeared more assured. Mayhap the man sharing her bed had something to do with it.

Certainly, Signy was a good listener. Grethe had thrown caution to the wind, taking Signy into her confidence regarding her argument with Rutger—and all that had preceded it.

To Grethe’s annoyance, her cousin seemed barely surprised to learn of the men’s plans to depart.

“Of course, you should speak with Bothild, making sure she knows everything.” Signy sipped her mead. “But I doubt she’s entirely without suspicion. It’s understandable the men should think of returning to their homes, and only fair that we allow them to do so. Has Rutger asked you to go with him?”

“He did, but only as some afterthought.” Grethe threw another log into the firepit, giving it a savage poke. “No doubt, he’d find it convenient to have me keep house for him. Not once did he consult my feelings nor consider what I’d be leaving behind.”



“Is there really so much holding you here? Just because it’s all we’ve known doesn’t mean it’s the only place we can be content. After what’s happened, I don’t know if I want to stay. I keep thinking of the final moments on the cliff...” Signy looked wistful. “Leaving may be the only way to find peace.”

“You want to go with this Viggo? He’s still half-blind Signy! Be sensible!”

Hurt flashed in Signy’s eyes, but Grethe couldn’t bring herself to apologize. In love the two might be, but love wasn’t always enough, was it?

“His sight is returning, little by little. We’re both hopeful.” Signy held her head high. “I’m not frightened of what the future brings as long as we’re together. But what of you, Grethe? Something is holding you back. What are you frightened of?”

Grethe was about to protest that Signy was speaking nonsense when the door swung open, banging full against the wall.

Agneta tumbled through, with Hevinda upon her heels.

“Oops!” Hevinda bared a grin, which was more gum than tooth. “Agneta, what are you doing on the floor?”

Signy rose to help. “Are you alright? No one’s hurt, are they?” She looked worriedly at the two women.

“Nay.” Agneta straightened her skirts. “‘Tis mead we’ve come for. Hevinda and I were celebrating, and our supply ran dry. Grethe, you’ll fetch some, won’t you? Hevinda had ten ducklings hatch today, and she’ll give you one of your choice.”

“One puny duckling! Three would be more like it.” Grethe folded her arms.

“Ten ducklings are certainly worth celebrating.” Signy closed the door and led the women to the fire. “Here, Agneta, take my stool. Grethe will give you hers, Hevinda.” Signy shook her head. “Really, Grethe, you ought to have more than two. ‘Tis hardly hospitable to have guests sit upon the floor. You have more mugs, I suppose?”

Begrudgingly, Grethe vacated her seat. “Actually, I haven’t. There’s?—”

“‘Tis no bother.” From her apron pocket, Hevinda whipped out a wooden cup.

Agneta was already proffering hers.

Signy took up the pitcher, filling their vessels, as well as her own and Grethe’s.

“A toast to you both, young pretties that you are!” Hevinda waved her mead aloft. “May Freyja bless and ripen you! And may you enjoy all the hearty swiving that comes along the way.”

“And a toast to the mead!” Agneta took a hearty swig. “Which the rest of us shall make do with since we’ve little chance of swiving .”

Grethe rolled her eyes. How much mead had they partaken already?

“A toast to big, fat, girthy cocks!” Hevinda cackled .

“And men who know what to do with them!” Agneta grinned saucily.

“Some decorum, ladies!” Signy appeared to be suppressing her own amusement. “Don’t tease us. Grethe is feeling love-wrought.”

“I’m nothing of the sort!” Grethe glared at Signy.

“A problem in the bed furs, is it?” Hevinda stroked her chin, from which a single wiry hair sprung. “He’s too quick in the tugging? Or his man-part goes limp at the crucial moment?”

“Not at all!” Grethe felt heat rushing to her cheeks.

Agneta sucked her teeth. “Then what’s the difficulty? You ought to be moon-eyed with all that bed tumbling.”

Hevinda nodded. “I recall when I was first wed, so well-tugged, I barely remembered my own name! Walked about in a daze, I did.”

“Don’t think I could walk much at all.” Agneta gave a hoot of laughter.

Freyja, help me.

How am I going to get rid of these two?

“There’s naught amiss. It’s only that... I’m... I’m not in the mood. Just for the now.” Grethe wished the floor would swallow her up. “‘Tis the tiredness... from all the tugging I was having... before I stopped wanting it.” One thing she absolutely wasn’t going to do was let on that Rutger was planning his escape—from the island and from her.

“I should get some sleep.” Grethe gave an exaggerated yawn. “That’ll put me right.”

The older women made no sign of taking the hint.

“You’re sure you’ve the hang of it?” Agneta had a definite air of suspicion. “And your man knows what he’s about?”

“He gives you the tingle, doesn’t he?” Signy added, trying to be helpful, no doubt.

“A woman needs more than tingles! A throb is more like it. If he’s doing it right, he should make you tremble all over,” Hevinda said.

“Trembling and throbbing and tingling. All those are good.” Agneta nodded sagely. “With the kissing and licking, you should be wild with lust by the time he gives you his cock. The rest takes care of itself.”

“As I said, it’s fine.” Grethe was clenching her jaw so hard, a headache was coming on. “Entirely satisfactory.”

“You don’t look very satisfied.” Hevinda squinted at her.

“Mayhap, ‘tis her man who needs stirring up a bit.” Agneta leaned closer. “A finger up the arse usually does the trick. Have you tried the finger?”

“Or a bit of tongue.” Hevinda stuck hers out, as if Grethe didn’t know what a tongue looked like!

“Enough!” Grethe clamped her hands over her ears. “Sex isn’t the answer to everything.”

Hevinda and Agneta looked astonished. Even Signy appeared vaguely bewildered. All three exchanged worried glances.

“I ought to be getting back to Viggo,” Signy rose. “I’ll look in on you soon, Grethe.”

“We’d best be off as well.” Agneta stood.

Hevinda drained down her mug before following the others out the door. “I’ll bring

that duckling on the morrow in exchange for the mead.”

Grethe nodded wearily. She couldn't be bothered to haggle anymore.

They were right about one thing. She wasn't satisfied. Not a bit of it. In truth, she was miserable, and not only because her bed was empty—though that was hardly helping. All this talk of throbbing and tingling had put her in mind of how she missed having Rutger at her side.

Not just because of his sex skills.

She missed him grabbing her about the waist unexpectedly, sending a bolt of excitement through her body. She missed how he pulled her close, even after they were both spent, wanting her to relax in the crook of his arm. She missed the way he kissed beneath her ear and breathed in deep to gain the scent of her hair.

She liked that he looked at her properly when she spoke, as if she was worth listening to, and she liked his low, rumbling laugh, even if his jokes were sometimes at her expense. She liked meeting his eyes and seeing how he gazed back at her.

She slumped onto the bed.

Rutger had protested he wanted her, had sworn that he'd had it in mind all along not to leave her behind. But, if that was the case, why hadn't he said something sooner?

She knew full well why .

I may be of value to him, but so are plenty of other things , and I want to be the most important of all—foremost in his mind from the moment he wakes right up until his eyes close in sleep.

Just as I think of...

Grethe shut off that thought.

She was being unrealistic. Men didn't think or behave the same as women. They used the word 'love', but it didn't have the same meaning for them. Not from her experience, at any rate.

She'd promised herself never to fall into this trap, yet here she was, pining over a man who didn't deserve it.

Worse still, she'd let other people see.

There would be no end now to their looks of pity.

Why does Rutger have to be so...

Annoying? Smug? Arrogant?

Grethe bit her lip. Sven had leveled the same insults at her long ago and worse besides. He'd said her menfolk had died because she hadn't done a good enough job looking after them, that she was selfish and only capable of loving herself.

She'd hated him for it, but she'd also known that the accusation was partly true. She had loved her brother and father, of course, but not enough. If she'd felt more tenderly, pouring her love into their care, mightn't they have recovered?

It was too late for them now.

Too late for myself?

She hoped not.

Signy believed in her. Perhaps Rutger did, too, even though he'd seen her at her worst.

She wasn't perfect, but neither was Rutger. He'd lied to her, stolen from her, and made plans to leave. The worst of it was that he hadn't wanted to bring her into his confidence. He hadn't trusted her.

Not that she could really blame him.

She hadn't trusted him either, had she?

'Twas all a horrible mess, and she could see no way to make reparation. She only knew that if he came to her door now, she would go to him—despite the betrayal and the hurt.

Because I love him.

### CHAPTER 13

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

Grethe was nigh atop the hill when the skies darkened, the clouds rolling over from the far side of the island. 'Twas no wonder the forest was so quiet. The birds and scurrying creatures had likely taken cover, for the wind was on the rise, foretelling some portentous storm blowing in; no refreshing breeze but gusts like hot breath sweeping her along. All was fiercely humid, as if the very ground radiated heat.

Stupidly, she'd set off unprepared, without even a pouch of water, so great had been her desire to put distance between herself and everyone else. As well-meaning as Signy was, Grethe couldn't face answering her questions. Nor did she wish Signy to receive the brunt of her troubled mood. Grethe appreciated her cousin's compassion, and she had need of it—just not today.

Grethe pushed on. The highest of the pools lay ahead, and she was more than ready to quench her thirst. At last she saw the place and wasted no time in cupping water into her mouth. She then shed her garments, laying them upon a rock before slipping in. The pool was a deal warmer than usual, and with a sigh, Grethe surrendered to the sensation of her nakedness, caressed by the light touch of water upon her skin.

She swam a little before kicking up her heels and diving downward. Holding her breath, she sat upon the bottom, looking up at the dappled light above where the surface rippled.

No matter her present unhappiness, she had a home to live in and the camaraderie of



the women. She had her animals and her mead-making. She would rely on those things to bring peace to her heart. Whatever lay ahead, she was responsible for her own contentment. With that thought, she pushed with her feet, propelling upwards to burst through into the air once more.

“There you are! Thank the gods!”

Grethe spun about to see none other than Rutger kneeling at the water’s edge.

“I thought ‘twas you I spied beneath the water. I was about to leap in and pull you out.” Rutger’s tone was one of obvious relief.

“Why? Is your longship ready at last? You’re planning to drag me back and bundle me in? Don’t forget to take the rest of the mead while you’re about it. Or perhaps you have already.” Grethe knew she must sound brittle and petty, but she couldn’t help herself.

Rutger had the decency to appear embarrassed. “I was following a little way behind, I admit, but only because I want to speak with you.”

“You’ve something to say before you disappear forever more?” Grethe flipped her feet, half-floating backward, until she realized she was giving him more of an eyeful than she was willing to share.

“You know it’s not like that. After all we’ve meant to each other, you must listen!” Anguish glinted in his eyes.

“Must I?” Grethe was half-tempted to disappear to the bottom again. If he was so desperate to converse, he could bloody well swim and find her or wait until she deigned to come up once more.

“You’ve every right to be angry.” He spoke quietly. “Odin’s Balls! I’m angry with myself. But that doesn’t change how I feel about you. Forgive me, I beg you, and let’s be as we were. I need you, Grethe!”

Something within her heart tugged. Did she believe him that he really wanted her? It would be so easy to pretend everything was alright again, but she didn’t know if she could go along with that, fooling herself. Looking into Rutger’s pleading eyes, she longed to go to him, but the distance across the pool suddenly seemed like an ocean.

Overhead, the sky was blacker than ever, and the air pressed from all sides, making it difficult to breathe.

Was this what it was like to be in love? Trapped by one’s feelings and afraid, knowing the other person could so easily crush you? Waiting for the storm to break ?

She didn’t know if she was strong enough to bear it.

She was filled with an abrupt urge to hurt him. He wasn’t responsible for all she’d suffered, but he’d done his part.

“Did you lie to Tyra as you have to me, making promises you couldn’t keep? Is that why she turned to your brother? I’m glad for her. I hope she finds the happiness with him that she couldn’t with you.”

She felt a moment of grim satisfaction as Rutger’s face fell, his expression stricken. Then, a wash of shame came over her. ‘Twas as if she’d punched him in the guts. Worse. As if she’d kicked him where he already bore a weeping wound, then stood over him, gleeful at his pain.

“You’re right. I probably didn’t deserve Tyra. Likely, I don’t deserve you, Grethe, but by Thor, it won’t stop me fighting for you. No matter what you say, it doesn’t

change how I feel. I'm not going anywhere... not unless you're with me all the way."

A lump grew in Grethe's throat and a burning in her eyes. She was cruel and wretched, and still, he professed to care for her. What a pair they were, tormenting each other from the first to the last.

Could they be any other way?

She wasn't sure.

Wiping away her tears, she began making toward him.

The storm clouds had rolled full above them, turning all as dark as twilight. A crack and rumble were heard overhead, quaking the water.

It took some moments to accept she was barely moving. 'Twas almost as if she was being pulled in another direction. Almost as if she was being dragged... downward!

Gasping, Grethe swam more fiercely.

"Rutger!" she cried out in panic, feeling herself being sucked under. She managed one great, heaving intake before the water closed over her head.

She kicked frantically. Where all had been calm, the pool was a swirling morass, pitching her in sweeping circles. Within moments, an ache was building in her chest. The water was frothing, making it difficult to see.

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, just to take a small breath .

There were so many bubbles! She could breathe those, couldn't she?

With her lungs bursting, she gave in, letting the water flow into her nostrils, warm and comforting.

“Grethe!” A voice came from some distant place.

Her head was light, as if she was floating. She wanted to open her eyes, but she was far too sleepy.

There was a clasp about her ribs and a pushing on her back. All at once, a nauseous feeling took hold and a rushing need in her body to expel everything inside. Coughing, she brought up water—through her mouth, through her nose.

“Grethe.” The voice again, close to her ear this time.

Rutger.

She knew it was him.

“Praise be to Odin!” He pulled her into his chest. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Opening her eyes, Grethe looked into his. He was soaked through, his hair plastered to his cheeks. His clothes were wet, his lashes, too.

They were at the very edge of the pool, upon the ground. She was astonished to see that the water level had dropped. Where had it gone?

She drew a faltering breath and began coughing again. “What... happened?”

Rutger rubbed her back for some time before answering in a leaden voice.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen the like. Even now, I can’t believe it. One moment,

you were there, then gone the next. I jumped in, but the current was so powerful, I thought ‘twould be my end as well as yours. Thank the gods, the water kept dropping. Only when my feet touched the bottom was I able to brace myself and grab hold of you as you swept past. It took all my strength to wade to the side and lift you out.”

“It was... terrifying!” Grethe clung to him. She remembered being pulled under, struggling to kick upward, feeling frantic. Nothing more.

If Rutger hadn’t acted quickly...

“Nothing but mud now and a split the whole length of the rock. No wider than my hand, but had your foot been dragged into it...” There was a tremble in Rutger’s voice. “The gods only know how it came about.”

A crack in the hillside?

She’d heard something but had thought it hailed from the sky—not from the ground below! The clouds were still ominous, so low that they seemed almost to brush the trees.

The fear crashed over her again, and she began shaking violently. Rutger rested his forehead on hers, rocking her gently.

“Hush, Sweetling. You’re safe. We’ll warn the others. Tell them no one should come up here.”

Grethe let him soothe her.

Bothild had to hear about this, but Grethe’s legs felt so heavy, she didn’t think she could stand.

In truth, she wanted only to stay where she was.

How had she managed, these past days, without Rutger's embraces? She'd been telling herself she was fine—that she was more than capable of living alone, just as she had before .

That seemed ridiculous.

How could a person be 'fine' when their whole being ached for someone who was absent?

Rutger had hurt her, but she hadn't the will to continue being angry with him. If only he would hold her like this, love her, and promise he'd never leave, she could bear anything. She needed only him and to believe he truly needed her.

"I'm sorry for what I said before... about Tyra. 'Twas horrible of me." Grethe swallowed against the pain in her throat. "I'm a terrible person. 'Tis no wonder, Sven..."

"None of that." Rutger wrapped his arms tighter about her. "We're human, Grethe. We say things we don't mean. We do things we regret. By Thor, I should know! Look at how I've bollocksed things up!"

"But... I want to be perfect for you." Grethe snuffled into his chest.

Rutger gave a gruff laugh. "I'm not interested in someone who thinks they're perfect. Better to accept that we've both made a mess of things."

"You don't... hate me?" Grethe had to ask. After the way she'd treated him, she'd understand if he did .

“Hate you ? How could I ever?” Rutger cupped her cheek, insisting she look at him.

His face was dear to her—every feature, from the way his brows slanted slightly differently on each side to the flecks of hazel in his eyes to the crooked curve of his smile.

“You don’t hate me , do you?” There was uncertainty in his voice.

“I thought I did for a while.” She wanted to be honest. “But I really don’t. Quite the opposite...”

His lips were close. If he’d only kiss her, everything would be alright; she knew it would.

“So, you love me then?” He grinned, looking stupidly happy.

“Of course I do, lout!” Grethe rolled her eyes.

“That’s just as well because you’re the woman of my heart, and I’m utterly, hopelessly, irrevocably in love. It delights me that you speak your mind and put me in my place, that you know what you deserve and expect me to come up to the mark. I love... Gah! I adore everything!”

“That will do nicely.” Tipping back her head, Grethe presented her mouth and was rewarded with the sort of kiss most women only dream about.

It began to rain, but neither of them took notice. Rutger was soon as naked as the woman he intended to spend the rest of his life worshipping—through word and thought and deed, but especially through deed.

He would never leave her wanting.

### EPILOGUE

The following evening

Lying upon her stomach, Grethe sighed with contentment. Everything felt strangely different—from how Rutger had made love to her while the rain lashed down upon them both to the way he'd rested his hand upon her waist as they'd explained to Bothild the strange occurrence within the pool.

Had she ever been so happy?

She'd thought she was, but the happiness simmering in her was different from any she'd known before. 'Twas as if a bank of embers glowed inside her, bringing a warmth that radiated through every part of her body .

Since they'd returned, they'd barely left her bed furs. Rutger insisted there was time to make up for, and she'd no objection.

She would never tire of receiving his kisses, tender and demanding, nor his caresses, which drew her body to join with his. She'd never cease in desiring his possessive, powerful thrusts. She reveled in his moans of desire.

All for me.

Grethe peeked over her shoulder.

Rutger had laid out the tools of bedsport and had both mead and honey close by.



She was still damp betwixt the thighs from their last bout of lovemaking, and an ache was rooted there, but she was eager for him to begin again.

Rutger nuzzled at her buttocks, teasing her with biting kisses.

“Did ever a woman have such a well-shaped arse? I’d wager yours is the finest on the island. I cannot behold it without needing to lay my hands upon its succulence. Now... shall you prefer this little toy in your nether-hole, my Sweetling, or the full length of my cock?”

“How you do woo me!” Suppressing her smile, Grethe turned onto her hip. “Some men bring love tokens, you know. There are plenty of flowers in bloom.”

“It’s daisies up the arse you’re wanting, is it?” Rutger rubbed thoughtfully at his beard.

“Loathsome clod!” Grethe swiped at him, but he was quick in grabbing her, guiding her fist to his phallus.

“There’s no hope for you!” Grethe bit her lip as she began stroking. ‘Twas always arousing, seeing how easily his manhood did grow when her hand was upon it.

“Come now, Grethe,” Rutger answered with a hitch in his breath. “There’s not one thing I do that doesn’t send you weak with yearning, and ‘tis just how I like it, knowing how I satisfy you. If you want to see how hard I can really get, lean over my girth and suck me. Brush your hair over my shaft. Mouth-fuck my briny head.”

“And when I’ve made your balls so tight that they’re throbbing with need, what will you give me?” Moving to her knees, Grethe licked her lips before applying them exactly as she knew he liked best.

“Ah, Heartling!” Rutger’s head dropped back. “Anything you desire. Anything at all.”

Soon enough, Rutger had no more words, which was sometimes the best way.

He’d won the woman of his heart, and she’d won him in return. They had a lifetime before them—of sweet bickering and teasing, of lovemaking and playfighting.

A life of adventure!

For what else could it be, with Grethe at his side?

Rutger could imagine no greater joy.

We hope you’ve enjoyed Grethe and Rutger’s tumultuous journey, but, of course, it’s only just beginning.

The island’s secrets are about to be revealed.

For each of our lovers, there are choices to be made and dangers to overcome.

Read the final volume, ‘ Mastered by the Viking ’, for Astrid and J?rgen’s story and the thrilling climax to the ‘Bound and Betrothed’ series.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:26 am*

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 penetrated 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 in 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 efforts to steady his breathing.

'Twas always the same: tossed upon the sea, an invidious mist, the splinter of wood, and soul-rending screams. Screams which carried him from the ship, through darkness, to visions which 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 very blood.

J?rgen clutched at his head.

Was this a form of 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 wished to soothe him.

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.

And even less of what I really want from her.

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 hardly

knew how to 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 like this, 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 have 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'd 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 blinded, he’d been told. Not with Rangvald either, though that was no loss in his mind. He never had liked him, for all that he’d worked alongside Rangvald these 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 cannot act as if I’m made of wood. Not anymore.

He turned to face her, resting his hand upon her waist.

Immediately, she stiffened.

“Don’t be afraid.” J?rgen was aware of his arousal—not fully hard, but sufficient so that she must have felt it. For all his promises, he sensed it was the time to broach the chasm between them. They could not continue as they were .

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

“I’d never cause you pain.” J?rgen moved his hand round, 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 to 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 that 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, I 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 extending 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?

Jorgen wasn’t sure.

Dropping his hand, he encircled his girth, rubbing back and forth as he 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 he’d 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, J?rgen fisted himself harder. He wished the room was lighter. He'd like to look upon Astrid's pretty cunt while he licked, watching her nub swell and darken, seeing the cream drip from her sheath, knowing he was responsible.

He wanted to watch her face when he pushed her over the brink.

Odin's fat bollocks! Just thinking about that was tipping him dangerously close.

He was going to...

Rising above her, he positioned his erection, parting 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 penetrated, but there was no more time. He needed to align with the entrance to her sheath.

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.