

A shirtless man with a beard and chest hair is shown from the chest up. A raven is perched on his chest, its head facing left. The man's skin is tanned and has a slight sheen. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey. The text 'LIZZIE LYNN LEE' is at the top, and 'RAVEN BRIDE' is at the bottom in a large, white, serif font.

LIZZIE LYNN LEE

**RAVEN
BRIDE**

RAVEN'S BRIDE (Mates of the Sky Raiders, BOOK 1) by Lizzie Lynn Lee

Blurb:

Pressured by her parents for a grandchild, successful attorney Jolene Richardson has the birthday blues. She always had bad luck in the romance department, so finding Mr. Right seems like a tall order. But her fate changes when she's kidnapped by a tall, dark and handsome stranger who turns out to be her long-forgotten childhood friend.

Jolene thinks Micah Raven had gone off his rocker when he tells her that she is his bride, and he has come to claim her. It doesn't matter that Micah had grown up to be a sinfully hot, irresistible man. A girl has her pride too.

But things go way over her head when Micah takes her into another realm, home of the black-winged avian shifters. There's no way she'd let herself become a trophy in a world ruled by male chauvinism. If a guy wants to get his hand in the cookie jar, he has to work for it first, right?

Suddenly, romantic warfare never seemed so enthralling...

Raven's Bride, a Mates of the Sky Raiders novel

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Dedication

To James Deen, my muse, keep those beautiful movies comin'.

Chapter One

I can't deny that I'm hopelessly romantic at heart.

Ever since I was a little girl, I knew that someday I'd marry my own Prince Charming. He'd come rushing to rescue me riding a snowy white steed, and we'd fall in love at first sight as he swept me off my feet into his warm embrace. We'd pledge our eternal love, then we'd marry in a fairytale wedding and live happily ever after.

However, the reality was the exact opposite of my dream. By the time I was a teenager, puberty had played a cruel joke on me in such a cosmic way that I was one of the outcasts in the school caste system. When my breasts filled out to a C-cup, and my skin cleared from stubborn acne, I was already at the tender age of nineteen and in college. I was pretty enough that I could get a date with any guy I had crush on, but I was too busy worrying about my future, job and student loan, so I breezed through college without enjoying the spring of my life.

I went to Harvard Law. It was an expensive school, and with its competitive atmosphere, an ordinary student like me had to work twice as hard so as not to be left behind. When I graduated and landed a job at a prestigious firm in my hometown of Chicago, I had to fight tooth and nail to secure my position as an associate attorney in the first few years. It was a classic dog-eat-dog world. By the time I established my career and finances, I found myself turning thirty.

The big three-O. Jolene Marie Richardson, Attorney at Law. No husband, fiancé or even a boyfriend at the moment.

Pathetic.

Looking back, I often wondered what ever happened to my Prince Charming and finding my one true love?

I couldn't say that I was lonely, but each time I found myself without someone to share my life with, I got a little frustrated. Okay, a lot. Would I be happier if I got hitched right after high school with the plain but nice boy from my mom's church, having a litter of brats, a messy house and a stack of bills to worry about every month? Would my life

be more meaningful that way?

My bachelorette pad on Walker Drive cost me a few hundred grand. I drove the latest model Audi, and if I put in enormous billing hours this year, I could expect a nice year-end bonus.

Yet, somehow, I was feeling like a zombie.

As I exited through the Starbucks door, I was overwhelmed with blues that not even the anti-anxiety pills my therapist had prescribed could shake off.

With a latte in my hand, I trudged from the parking building onto the busy street on this gloomy Monday morning in April, along with thousands of other commuters in the Loop like ants marching into the field.

Wake up, work, eat, sleep. Repeat and repeat and one day, you die.

I sighed inwardly.

Is there more to life than this? Have I made the wrong choices?

I grumbled in silence and decided that I just had another case of the birthday blues. I was a single woman with no romantic prospects in sight and aging parents who demanded grandchildren while constantly reminding me that I couldn't be picky anymore now that my biological clock was ticking.

And that was when somebody knocked the coffee cup from my grip.

Before I could scold the idiot who did it, a pair of strong hands covered my mouth and pulled me into a van.

I was too dazed to resist or even scream for help. I was too deep in my zombie mode to react. I was thrown onto the floor of the van, and the vehicle sped up. It took me long seconds to break myself from my paralysis.

I coughed and lifted up my hand. "Excuse me. I think you got the wrong person. I don't handle criminal cases, and I don't work for the district attorney's office. I'm from Sheldon and Banks, and my specialty is Intellectual Property Law. Unless you're being sued by a famous artist or a big record company, kidnapping me is a waste of time."

Yes, I'm a successful woman, but not *that* successful someone would want a ransom from me. My parents were no millionaires, and I'm not the star attorney in the firm who handled super important cases that warranted kidnapping.

A second after I said that, I was impressed by how calm I was. A normal woman would scream, kick, or plea to her kidnappers. But again, even though I'm a woman, my

brain was wired like a man. I secretly enjoyed immature toilet jokes, and I thought diamonds were the biggest consumer rip-off ever. Kicking and screaming wouldn't get me anywhere. I'm a petite gal, five-two and a hundred five pounds. I couldn't whack this guy with my purse since I'd dropped it on the sidewalk. The only defensive move I could think of was to poke my assailant in the eye a la Three Stooges.

Lame!

But wait, I had my phone in my coat pocket. Maybe I could secretly call for help. Out of nowhere, I thought of tweeting: *"Holy crap, I'm being kidnapped!"*

The man who'd yanked me from the street had an accomplice driving the car. The driver wore no mask. I couldn't see the accomplice's face from behind, but he was sort of a beefy guy wearing some kind of factory uniform. Long black hair tied into ponytail. No distinct ethnicity. Perhaps Caucasian. I put his age around twenty to thirty. He looked like a seasoned criminal. Boy, I couldn't wait to see his rap sheet once the police nabbed him.

The yanker lifted his ski mask and turned to me.

Suddenly I was imagining tweeting: *"Holy crap, my kidnapper is hot!"*

I became depressed seconds later.

Was I really that desperate for a man to father my future child that any good-looking guy would do? I imagined bringing the kidnapper to my parents' house for dinner and introducing him. "Mom, Dad, meet Mr. Mysterious Guy. He'll be going away for ten to fifteen years on a first-degree felony charge. But don't worry; I can raise the child myself."

Yep, it was official. I was freaking pathetic.

The handsome kidnapper spoke. His voice was surprisingly deep, with a velvety bass tone that tickled the base of my spine. "No. We have the correct person, Ms. Richardson."

Somehow I couldn't place his accent. Not a Midwesterner. Or New Yorker. Or Southerner. It was definitely foreign. Not British. Or Australian. Or Russian. Or South African. Damn it. Where was he from?

I narrowed my eyes, suspicious. Just what kind of trouble I was in for? "You know me."

He gave a little bow with a theatrical twirl of his hand.

I blinked.

My God. He was *very* good-looking. Kind of surreal almost. He had large, dark, hypnotizing eyes. Dark lush brows. High cheeks. Perfectly-proportioned nose. Manly jaw. He wore his raven-dark hair down to his shoulders in a silky curtain. The only flaw in his features was a two-inch scar that marred the bridge of his nose down to below his eye. Scar or not, he was *still* very hot.

He wore a worker's coverall with thick-soled boots that they used in factories. I could attest to you the quality of that footwear because they were only a foot away from my head. I was still on the floor of a speeding van. I didn't dare make a stupid move that would prompt him to use his feet on my face. I'm not fond of plastic surgery, you see—or any surgery. The thought of scalpels and blood gives me a serious case of the heebie-jeebies.

My kidnapper demanded my cell phone. And when I hesitated, he bent down to give me a pat down.

“Don't touch me!” I barked. A Chihuahua bark. Loud, annoying and no bite. “I don't know where your hands have been.”

He seemed amused that I wasn't frazzled at all. “Empty your pockets,” he demanded. “Or I will.”

I swallowed hard. Here was my chance to call for help. I held my hand up again and used the opportunity to hoist myself into a sitting position. I stole a cursory glance at my surroundings. The van was definitely owned by a commercial company. I wondered if these two men had hijacked it from the unfortunate workers by force, or had they simply swiped it?

Did these guys hurt them or...?

I stopped myself from further speculation. Usually I had a good sense of judgment about people that I'd just met. In my line of work, I'd been around unscrupulous people. Despicable people. But I didn't sense an ounce of malignancy with these kidnappers.

Strange.

I propped myself against a stack of industrial cans of paint. I fixed my skirt modestly and fished my iPhone from my coat pocket. With a pout, I shoved it into his large hand. “Happy?”

He didn't answer, but his lips curved into a smirk. I hated to admit it, but he was one

of the few guys who could pull a nice, arrogant smirk without looking like an SOB. He played with the device for a few seconds then casually threw it out of the crack of the window.

“Hey!” I was enraged. “You could have just removed the SIM card if you don’t want anyone tracking me. That phone has my photos and contact information. It’s a hassle to replace all that, you know?” I took it back about him not being an SOB. He was an SOB, and I had this uncontrollable urge to smack him with my five-inch, high-heeled shoe.

“Don’t worry. You won’t need it to where we’re going,” he replied.

“And where are we going exactly?”

A long minute of awkward silence stretched between us as he regarded me with a look of longing.

Wait, was it longing? Or constipation? Nah, definitely longing. Oh My God! Did he... want me?

Out of nowhere, I blushed like a schoolgirl with a crush. My mind played a scene of him and me in a compromising position where I shyly begged him, “Please be gentle.”

I closed my eyes and mentally smacked my forehead.

I’m ashamed. I’m a closeted pervert, you know. My man-brain was programmed so that I couldn’t last thirty seconds without thinking something dirty.

“Joie,” he said, almost whispering. “Don’t you remember me?”

My eyes snapped open. Huh? I knew this guy? And he used my childhood name. Nobody had called me ‘Joie’ in ages. Not since kindergarten.

He leaned forward. “I’m Micah. I’ve come to get you.”

“Me? Why?”

“You’re my bride.”

Chapter Two

I felt like I'd been hit on the head with a frying pan. The words he said just didn't make sense. "Your bride? What are you talking about?"

"We were betrothed when we were little."

I snorted. *Betrothed*. Who used the word betrothed in this day and age? My folks are third-generation Irish, Croatian, British and German. We don't do betrothal anymore. What did he think it was, Victorian times? "We're betrothed? As in engaged?"

Micah tipped his head at my direction. "I'm your fiancé."

My fiancé? If the situation wasn't this absurd, that would have sounded wonderful. My mom and dad would be thrilled. It occurred to me that this could be a joke—someone playing a prank on me, as in a birthday prank. The problem was I didn't have any close friends who'd pull such elaborate prank like this. I'm the only child in the family. My cousins and I spoke only on Thanksgiving and Christmas. Of course, I had a lot of enemies. Who doesn't? I'm an attorney. But those people wouldn't pull something this idiotic.

Kidnapping me on a busy street early in the morning could turn into an expensive lawsuit. Besides felony charges, I could demand monetary compensation in civil court. All lawyers knew basic tort law. If there was a bruise on my body from him throwing me onto the floor, there was an injury claim right there. Plus I could add pain and suffering, intentional infliction of emotional distress or negligent infliction of emotional distress or whatever claims the State of Illinois allowed me to sue for. We lawyers are crafty.

I eyed Micah suspiciously. "*We were betrothed when we were little.*" He called me Joie. I stopped using that nickname when I was in first grade. He could be a childhood friend.

Thinking further, now I kind of remembered when I was in pre-K, I used to play with the boys from the big mansion across the street. I was a tomboy and always getting into mischief. Climbing trees or sneaking into my neighbors' yards hunting for that one obese squirrel that only liked people's food. I thought that squirrel was the most wondrous thing in the world. While other squirrels could leap from tree to tree or

ropewalk on electrical cables, that obese squirrel brazenly walked on people's property to steal food, unafraid of cats or dogs or even people. I wanted it as a pet, but still that squirrel was impossible for me to catch.

One day, my squirrel-hunting adventure led me into the mansion across the street. Somehow, I fell and scraped my knee. One of the boys who lived there found me crying and gave me a lollipop. He was a tad older than me. I called him Mika or something, and we became good friends. When I was at his house, we played GI Joe or raided his garden with a stick pretending we were the Vikings. When he came to my house, we played in my Victorian playhouse, pretending we were newlyweds. He'd go to work and I'd wait at home for him, cooking dinner. We were such good buddies that at one point we might have promised each other something about getting married when we grew up.

I massaged my temple. A sudden headache had slammed my skull. "Please don't tell me you're that Micah from the crow mansion."

"Raven House."

"Yeah, now I remember. Your place was the only one that had its own name besides the address. Blackbirds always flocked on your property. It was kind of creepy."

"As memory serves me, you were never afraid of us when you were little."

"Really? So let me get this straight, you're *that* Micah who used to live across the street?"

"Micah Raven, in the flesh."

"Didn't you have a brother too, but he was kind of a dick?"

"Sigrid Raven. You disliked him immensely."

"Yeah, yeah. You two moved out when I went to elementary school."

"We studied abroad."

The headache turned into a full-blown rage. I jabbed him in the chest. "What the hell? We haven't seen each other in twenty-five years, and out of the blue, you kidnapped me from the street because we played house when we were little?"

He smiled. An angelic smile. It pissed me off even more.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? Is this your idea of a joke? Have you ever heard of the telephone? You could have called me! Or email. Or Facebook friend me. Or LinkedIn. But nooo, you had to throw out my phone. I lost my purse. It's a vintage Chanel and rare as hell, you know? And my wallet with my credit cards and checking

book and my driver's license are in there. I can cancel the credit cards and the checking account, but I hate going to the DMV with those brain-dead idiots in there. And why are we speeding? Tell your friend he can't speed on Broadway. You have a death wish or something?"

"Calm down, Joie. We're only taking you home. To our *real* home."

Real home? As in the afterlife? I mean, what else it could be? Micah's friend wound through the busy traffic at sixty miles per hour, racing faster. A real panic started in.

"You're a suicidal maniac!"

Dear Jesus, why is it the handsome ones are always either taken, gay or psychopaths? Is there really a decent good-looking man for me out there? What kind of mortal sin must I have committed in the past that I deserve such punishment?

After we blew a red light through an intersection and nearly missed slamming onto the rear of a black Saab coupe by a few inches, our lunatic driver put the pedal to the metal into a congested street.

I couldn't look.

We were going to die.

Horribly.

I screamed. "Micah, you're an asshole!"

At that very moment, the only regret I had in life was that I was going to die a virgin.

Chapter Three

I waited for the crash. *Please God, let my death be painless.* But the collision never came. As the van lurched faster and faster, I felt a strange sensation enveloping my being. Like a vibration, a strong shocking vibration that briefly electrocuted every nerve in my body. And as fast as it came, it vanished. The van slowed until it came to a complete halt. I still sat petrified in fear.

Micah gently shook me. "Joie, don't be scared. We're fine."

"Are we dead yet?"

"Silly girl. We've arrived."

"In the afterlife?"

"Open your eyes."

I took a peek. We hadn't crashed. How could it be? We were plowing through the traffic at more than ninety miles per hour. With a one-ton commercial vehicle speeding like a bullet into a road packed with cars and trucks, I expected the collision impact would be of an epic magnitude. There could be a fire or explosion with many people getting hurt. I craned my neck, looking out of the window. The silence was the first thing to hit me before I realized I could no longer see the cars, or people or buildings. Shoving Micah out of my way, I pressed my face against the glass, blinking several times. I rubbed my eyes too to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

"What the ..." The words evaporated in my mouth. My tongue suddenly dried. I looked back and forth between the view and Micah.

"Welcome to *Yggdrassil*, Joie," he said.

He might as well have said "*Welcome to Narnia.*"

A minute ago we were in Chicago, and now we were in some fantasyland. Instead of arriving from the back of a cupboard, we rode a magical painting truck. I didn't see any goat-man with a harp greeting us, but with crazy Micah and his friend, the effect remained the same. Absurd. Unbelievable. No, I didn't want to believe. This kind of thing didn't happen in real life.

"Hit me," I said to Micah.

He gave me a perplexed look.

“Slap me so I know I’m not dreaming.”

“I will do no such thing.”

I slapped myself hard. *Damn*. It hurt.

“Joie!” Micah caught my hand, restraining me. “Stop it. I won’t allow you harm yourself.”

“This isn’t real, is it?”

“It’s real, Joie. As real as my flesh and blood. You’re not dreaming or imagining things.”

“How?”

“As I told you, we have taken you to our real home. You can call it a different realm from Earth. There are plenty of alternate realms to the world you live in, and most humans don’t know it.”

I heard him loud and clear, yet somehow my brain refused to accept it. “But... how?”

“How have we taken you here?” he asked.

I nodded eagerly.

“Spatial magic. My friend Alciel is a full-pledged mage.” Micah pointed at the longhaired driver.

“Greetings,” the man said.

“He can open a portal from Yggdrasil to your world any time he wishes,” said Micah.

“Like a wormhole? Quantum physics? Warp speed?”

“Warp speed is a pseudo-science.”

“So what is this ‘spatial magic’?”

“Do you really wish to hear the science behind spatial magic at this very moment?”

“Yes. No. Yes. Who are you? What are you? What is this place?”

“It’s Ygg—”

“What is Yggdrasil? You said it’s an alternate realm. Does that mean it’s in a parallel universe?”

Micah exchanged an exasperated look with his kidnapping conspirator.

Feeling too fidgety, I didn’t wait for an explanation. I slid the door open and climbed past Micah’s large body. As soon as my feet touched the ground, a visceral vertigo seized me and paralyzed me for a second.

I was breathless.

We were in a clearing as large as a soccer field. The ground was covered with green grass and wild flowers. There were no trees or bushes around, only a deep chasm around us, creating a strong sense of illusion that we were on a floating island.

Surrounding us three hundred sixty degrees were gigantic columns of sandstone peaks. I saw buildings and guard towers on some of the landings, dappled with lush green vegetation and trees. At a group of columns on the far right someone had built winding stone bridges that interconnected one building with another, creating an image that looked like a giant spider had spun her silk on the magnificent rock formations. Now and then, I spied oversized blackbirds weaving above in the clouds. The faint caws of the birds lingered.

I shivered. Not because I was cold. I was awed beyond my wildest imagination.

Micah exited the van, followed by his friend. They let me wander the perimeter as I took in the view.

“This is amazing,” I said to Micah. “I’ve never seen anything like it. I mean I’ve got so many questions I don’t know where to start.”

“Can you wait? We should get ready.” He turned to his friend. “Alciel.”

The man bowed his head. “Milord.”

I cut my gaze to Micah. “Lord?” At this point, nothing could surprise me. If someone told me his cat had just laid an egg, I’d have believe it. “You’re a blue blood? Well this is just great. Childhood friend. Kidnapper. Aristocrat. Weirdo. Anything else I should know about?”

Micah seemed uncomfortable. “Listen, Joie. I didn’t expect our reunion would be as easy as I originally imagined, but please give me a chance. I can explain everything.”

“I expect nothing less. Just who are you, Micah Raven? What are you? You’re not an ordinary man. I don’t think you’re even human.”

The wind caused his hair to dance wildly as he zeroed his gaze straight at me. “No, we aren’t. We’re *Hrafn*. I guess you can call us the indigenous people of Yggdrassil, the Nine-Worlds.”

“Yggdrassil also means Nine-Worlds?”

He gave a firm nod. “Our people called your world *Midgard*. The Land of the Humans.”

“And you took me here because of the promise we made when we were little?”

Another nod.

“Great. I’m screwed.”

Alciel snorted.

Micah frowned at his friend. “Listen, Joie—”

“Why did you kidnap me?” I pressed.

“Time was of the essence. Someone else is after you too.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Who?”

“My brother.”

“Sigrid? What does he want with me?”

“To claim you as his bride.”

“Over my dead body. I hate that dick. I don’t know why I forgot about you, but I could never forget Sigrid. He was my first archenemy.”

“You hate him that much?”

“Sigrid didn’t even like me. He constantly bullied me every time I was over at your house. Why does he want me now?”

“Because you’re a *Skjálf*. The blood of our last living god runs in your veins. It makes you rare and extremely valuable to our people. Every archpriest in Nine-Worlds wants to install you in their temples to be worshipped. Every noble house wants to marry you to their heir.”

“It doesn’t make sense to me at all, but for now, I’ll play along. I assume you’re the heir to the House of Raven?”

“At present, yes. It belonged to Sigrid until I took it by force. Only the heir of the house is allowed to claim a *skjálf*.”

“Again, you did all this because we made a promise when we were kids?”

His expression became stern. “A betrothal promise is sacred for a *Hrafn*, Joie.”

What Micah said made me speechless. I couldn’t decide whether he was the most romantic guy I’d ever met or the dumbest of them all. I’m not a *skjálf*, or whatever he called me. I’m a garden-variety fourth-generation white American. I’m not special. I don’t have a special power. I couldn’t picture myself donned in robes and a pointy hat, waving a wand and chanting Latin-like spells: “*Commencia anal insertium!*”

I entertained myself with some random dirty thoughts until I caught Micah’s eyes. Oh

yeah, time to get serious.

“Can I go home?” I asked. “All of this is too crazy for me. I’m not that adventurous.”

Micah and Alciel exchanged glances.

“Eh? Don’t tell me that wasn’t on the menu. I’m not allowed to go home?”

“Until our affair is straightened, I’m afraid I can’t grant you a passage home.”

I should have seen this coming. Micah wouldn’t grant what I demanded willy-nilly, not with the amount of effort he’d spent to get me here. I guessed that I had no other choice.

“Fine. I’ll play along. But I’m not happy about this. *This* better be worth it.”

He inclined his head. “I can promise you that.”

Alciel took a green tarp from the van and began covering the vehicle with it.

I turned to Micah. “By the way, why did we land here? I mean, how are we supposed to get out? Is there some kind of secret elevator or something?”

“You watch too many movies, Joie.”

Alciel began changing clothes. I looked away.

“Where are we going?” I asked Micah.

He pointed to the spider web city. “Lockesund. My demesne.”

“You’re kidding, right? How do we get there? A helicopter?”

“Even better. You’ll see.” Micah also started to undress.

Eh? What was going on here? Not that I minded, though. Alciel shoved his painter’s disguise under the tarp. He wore some kind of leather pants that fit snugly on his impressive physique. He also had matching boots. His ensemble looked worn and definitely wasn’t something that came out of a mass-produced factory. Alciel was bare-chested. Hanging around his neck were several necklaces where he tied a number of odd-looking amulets and tiny pouches. I shouldn’t have been surprised. Micah said he was a mage. Well, a very hunky and delicious mage. I wondered if Alciel could turn a person into frog.

Micah was doing the same thing. He’d ditched his coverall and boots. Underneath it, he only wore a pair of leather pants. I could see scars on his muscled body. Just how many knife fights had he been involved in?

“What happen to you, Micah Raven?” I said to him. “I grew up to become an attorney, and you turned out to be a delinquent. Do you have a criminal record?”

He gave me a sidelong glance. “In what realm?”

Aww, he’s a thug!

Damn, how did he turn out this way?

Micah also stowed his coverall underneath the tarp. He offered his hand to me. “Are you ready?”

Huh? “Where’s the chopper?”

“We don’t need a chopper.”

“And how do we get there?” I flapped my hands up and down, mocking. “Flying?”

“Exactly.”

All of a sudden, a pair of black wings spread behind his back. Each wing was three feet taller than me, strong and majestic. The feathers were black, but under the full sun, they reflected a rainbow hue. Very, very pretty.

It brought back an old memory—a childhood memory I used to dismiss as fantasy.

“Joie?” Micah called.

I looked at Alciel. He too had black wings behind his back. Now I understood why they preferred being shirtless. I pinched my arm to make sure I *really* wasn’t dreaming. I said before that nothing would surprise me at this point. I was wrong.

“When we were kids...” I swallowed hard. “Did you often take me flying at night?”

Micah nodded. “You used to love it.”

So it wasn’t a dream at all. After Micah and Sigrid moved away, I often told my mother about my flying experience. Of course, she didn’t believe me. Who would?

I stared at Micah. He wanted to take me to the spider web city by flying. Another bout of vertigo seized me. Flying in a plane was one thing, but flying bareback like this was another. I wasn’t as adventurous as when I was a kid.

I shook my head. “I... I don’t know. I’m scared. What if I fall?”

Micah closed the distance between us and took my hand. “Don’t worry. I won’t let that happen.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think my health insurance covers ‘falling from the sky’ claims.”

Micah swept me off my feet and carried me in his arms. “Close your eyes if you’re scared.”

“Put me down!” I jabbed my finger into Micah’s pectoral. “Wow, you’re really firm.” I felt him. All glorious toned muscles beneath his tan skin. “But seriously, put me down.”

“Trust me, Joie.”

“Micah! I really don’t want—”

I screamed like a little girl when Micah leapt up and we were airborne. I grabbed his shoulders and hid my face on in chest. I was lightheaded and felt a bit sick, maybe from the sudden change of altitude and the strong wind coming at us. Micah wasn’t just flying; he lurched into the sky like a rocket. I closed my eyes. I wrapped my arms around and shoved my face beside his neck, clinging on for dear life. If I fell, I’d take him with me.

As we soared through cold air, I became dizzy, my chest constricted and my stomach churned. A normal human being had no business flying like this. It was like piloting an airplane without a windshield. I tightened my grip on Micah, fighting the growing nausea. I prayed I wouldn’t get sick. It would be quite disgusting to barf in midair.

Just when I thought I couldn’t take it anymore, Micah slowed down and landed on solid ground. I shivered, still too afraid to open my eyes.

Micah sensed that I wasn’t feeling well. He put me down and had me in a sitting position, urging me to place my head between knees. “Take a deep breath. Slowly. Release. Good. Take another deep breath,” he said as he massaged the nape of my neck.

Alciel kneeled in front of me and tugged my chin up. “Open your mouth.”

“Whaf if dat—”

He shoved something into my mouth that tasted like candy. It melted with lemony freshness. The nausea rapidly left, and I felt much better. “Wow. What was that?”

Alciel lifted a finger. “A little mage trick. I usually gave it to expectant mothers for morning sickness.”

“Or some *Thanes* who had too much drink the night before a battle,” said Micah. “I guess it was too much for her to handle spatial crossing and flying in one day.”

I glanced over my shoulder and gave him a dirty look. “You called that flying? I thought I’d been strapped onto a missile.”

“Sorry.” Micah stroked my hair, almost absentmindedly. “We have to fly fast to avoid strong wind currents. Otherwise we’d be dragged to Nilfeheim.” He pointed down to the base of the stone columns.

I craned my neck and peered into the abyss. I only saw a dark, endless chasm. No trees, vegetation, or visible ground whatsoever. Creepy. “Please tell me there’s no monster living there.”

“I wouldn’t say monster,” said Micah. “But a few of Nilfeheim’s populace are quite grotesque, incredibly violent, flesh-eating creatures.”

That’s what a monster is!

I mentally slapped my forehead again. An old memory loomed in the back of my mind. The young Micah I used to know had never been afraid of anything. Be that the meanest dog in the neighborhood, or his dickish brother Sigrid, or surviving the wrath of Raven House’s cranky caretaker, Micah faced anything that came his way head-on.

The Micah I remembered was also overly protective of me. The brothers were homeschooled by a tutor, but every day he’d sneak out from his lessons and come to my house, and off we went to have an adventure of our own. If we were harassed by the neighborhood bullies, Micah would fight them without a second thought, even though those kids were older and bigger than us.

Looking back, it was such sweet memory. And then he vanished from my life as if his existence had been erased from my mind. But twenty-five years was a long time. It seemed to me like an eternity.

Alciel got up and disappeared somewhere while Micah still crouched next to me with a worried expression.

Déjà vu.

Little by little, some more old memories returned. He used to wear the same face when I scraped or hurt myself. He always fussed over my clumsiness, but his eyes were always kind.

Why did I ever forget about you, Micah?

His wings were folded behind his back, and I touched one of his feathers. Despite its massive size, it was smooth like silk gloves. The midnight plumes reminded me of something. I fished a necklace from under my blouse. It was my good luck charm, and I’d had it since forever. The pendant was simply a black feather tied to a long leather string. I rarely took it off my person. It was unsightly, but no one would see when I kept it under my clothes. If I didn’t have it with me, I was plagued with inexplicable anxiety.

“You gave me this, didn’t you? This was your feather when you were a kid,” I said to

him.

Micah smiled. “It was one of my primary feathers back then. I gave it to you so we wouldn’t break our bond.”

“I see.”

Micah’s gaze softened. He seemed to be at ease. I touched the scar on his face. It was a shame such a beautiful face was marred with a wound like that.

“Who gave you this?” I asked.

He reflected for a moment. “Do you really want to know?”

I quieted. “Maybe not. They say ignorance is bliss.”

Micah brushed his thumb on my jaw line. “You grew up to be a pretty woman, Joie. Though you have always been pretty since you were a little girl. When you sat still and quiet, you looked like a doll.”

I cringed. My parents had said the same thing when I was growing up. I was an angel when I smiled and didn’t utter a word. But once I opened my mouth, wrong things came out and made people around me feel awkward.

Throughout my adult years, I’d learned to restrain myself from being too chatty. I kept my game face on and wore a well-schooled professional demeanor most of the time. Because of that, people perceived me as unapproachable. Few men had the balls to ask me out, and they always ended up being the ones who dumped me. My love life sucked. My sex life was disastrous. Each time I was ready to get hot and heavy, misfortune hammered down on my partner. After I broke up with my last boyfriend, I was convinced I was cursed.

As I stared into Micah’s eyes, I wondered if I was going to jinx him like my past lovers. I kind of liked this man. Okay, I liked him a lot. Kidnapped by a childhood crush. An old promise. Be together forever and ever. It was freaking romantic. Like the fairytale romance I’d always yearned to experience.

His gaze zeroed on my lips. I just knew he was going to kiss me.

“Hey, what’s over there?” I pointed behind Micah’s shoulder, distracting him. The perverted part of me hadn’t recovered from the impromptu zero-G flight. I wasn’t ready for a romantic interlude.

Micah followed my finger. “That’s Lockesund market. People go there to trade or shop for goods.”

“I’d like to check it out sometime.”

“It can be arranged.” Micah went back to eyeing me.

“And what’s that tall tower over there?” I distracted him again.

Micah wasn’t fooled this time. “Joie, are you nervous?”

“Nervous?” I laughed. “Why would I be? Don’t be silly.”

“Well then.” Micah lowered his head and kissed me.

My heart nearly stopped beating for long seconds. The kiss was light—feathery light. A kiss of greeting. Nothing sexual about it. As his lips pressed to mine, his warmth emanated to my very soul, leaving me wide-eyed as the effervescent sensation enveloped my being. It was so exquisite and pure.

I blinked and found myself slightly shaking.

Good Lord. What had just happened? I’d kissed men in the past, but none of them made me feel this way. I felt like I was filled with helium and floating to cloud nine. Now I wanted to throw myself at him and cling to him like a koala on a tree.

Never let him go.

Ever.

Micah smiled. Almost a shy kind of smile.

“Were you my first kiss?” I whispered.

A faint nod. “Mine too.”

Wow. Just wow! Wait. I kissed a boy when I was five years old? No wonder I turned out epically messed up as an adult.

Micah gently took my hand. “Come.” He rose.

I followed suit.

“I’ll show you your new home,” he said.

“That’s very presumptuous of you, assuming I want to live here.”

A smirk. “Do you think I’d let you go, Joie?”

The female part of me secretly swooned, while the man-brain part was frisky to challenge his claim. I decided, for the time being, to embrace my feminine side.

We walked hand-in-hand, descending the long windy stairs towards the gated city. Lockesund perched on a flat, vast precarious peak of a gigantic stone column. It was surrounded by six smaller columns that were all interconnected with stone bridges. From afar, the complex looked like a tiny, itty-bitty thing in the sea of monstrous rock

formations. In person, Lockesund itself was a magnificent architectural titan. Nothing on Earth could come close to what I was witnessing.

As we drew nearer to the bridge, I was awed by the sight and thought on how they'd built this place. The entrance of the bridge was flanked by two highly ornate pillars that stood as tall as forty-story buildings. The structural wonder continued throughout with its deck, support towers, hangers and cables. All were carved from stone. I noticed that this suspension bridge didn't have support foundations and yet, despite its mind-numbing length, the whole construction looked more than solid against the elements. I guess when a civilization had evolved so that a person could sprout wings and do spatial crossing between worlds, everything fell into the realm of possibility.

The bridge's approaches were secured with two guard posts. Seeing us coming, several fine male specimens clad in warrior-like attire came out from their stations. Each of them was way more than six feet tall, muscular and very good-looking. It made me wonder whether ugly people were allowed to live in this place. From what I'd seen so far, the men were stunning. I assumed the women were the same too. I bet Hitler would jack himself silly if he saw that his perverted illusion of a master race had come true.

The guards bowed their heads at Micah when we arrived. One of them, who looked to be their leader, greeted Micah with a harsh, grating speech that contained no vowels. It seemed to me he was either trying to viciously murder somebody or clear his throat after gargling with a bowl of pebbles.

Micah replied in the same harsh language.

It was amusing.

Then it hit me. Micah and Alciel had been speaking in English, but while Micah retained his undetectable inflection, Alciel had been talking in a Midwestern accent.

Strange.

Micah gestured, and all the guards stared at me with wide eyes. Suddenly, they all dropped onto their knees in obeisance.

Whoa! What is going on? I took a step back.

"Joie," said Micah, "they're only paying their respect to the long-lost descendant of Goddess Frejya."

"*Tch!* My great great grandmamma came from Bavaria. She used to run a biergarten. It's not right to fib to your people like that."

“Look, just wave your hand and say ‘*hefja*’.”

“Bless you.”

Micah gave me a stern look. “They will remain kneeling until you dismiss them.”

“You serious?”

“In Lockesund, the punishment for disrespecting a skjálf is death.”

Harsh! I gestured and said, “*Hefja*.”

The guards slowly rose, and Micah barked more commands. One of them bowed and opened the bridge gate.

Another surprise awaited beyond the twenty-foot-tall wood and steel panels. Alciel and a battalion of men had come for us. Several buff guys hoisted a fancily ornate palanquin on transverse poles onto their shoulders.

I cringed. *What are these people doing to me? This is terminally embarrassing.*

At that moment, I really wanted to hide under the rocks and die. Micah seized my arm before I could squeak a word and steered me towards the circus. Alciel and his merry company dropped on their knees, prostrating.

Oh geez. “*Hefja*,” I said.

Alciel quickly rose, followed by his men. He had a neatly folded fabric in his hands that turned out to be a long white cloak. He insisted that I wear it.

“Why?” I asked.

Micah answered, “It’s a customary for an unmarried woman in Lockesund to cover her entire body.”

“What are you? Taliban?”

“It’s only proper, Joie.”

“Fine, I’ll wear the cloak, but I won’t get into that thing.” I pointed out to the palanquin. “I can walk.”

“Forgive me, but I must insist upon it. You’re a skjálf. No holy person is allowed to wander in public without guards and a formal procession.”

“I don’t care.”

“Look, as soon as we enter the city, we’ll face thousands of people who are eager to see you. Unless you want to be trampled to death, I suggest you climb into the palanquin.”

I sighed deeply, giving up. “You people are a pain in the ass.”

“Forgive me; our customs demand them.”

I donned the cloak. It was made from exquisite material that felt cool to the skin. Under a full sun, it shimmered beautifully. I’m sure people could spot me from miles away in this getup, like those orange neon jackets that people wear while hunting in the woods. I climbed into the palanquin and pulled the sheer curtain closed. I didn’t want people to see me this way.

Micah walked next to the palanquin. After only ten minutes, I was already bored. I poked my head between the curtains. “Hey, Micah. Why didn’t you just fly straight into the city instead of using the bridge?”

“I can’t. The perimeter of Lockesund is reinforced with a magical barrier to protect the city against aerial invasion. Flying through it is simply not possible. However, if one is skilled enough, he could sneak in with spatial magic.”

“What happens if you try to fly through it anyway?”

“I’ll die. Shredded to pieces by the spell.”

“That’s barbaric.” I withdrew from the curtains. I only lasted two minutes before another question nagged the hell out of me. I poked my head out again. “Quick question, are you people born or hatched? I mean, with this bride thing, if I have to lay an egg and sit on it for weeks, you can just forget this whole thing and send me back home this instant.”

Alciel snorted a laugh while Micah looked at me with a smile on his face.

“Born,” he said.

“Oh.” That was surprisingly normal.

“Have you been thinking about our future, Joie?” he teased.

My face heated. “I was curious. That was a legitimate question.”

“Naturally.”

The rest of the walk felt like it took hours before we finally reached the entrance of the city of Lockesund. The inner gate was opened, and we were greeted by an explosion of loud cheers. I sat quietly inside the palanquin. I made sure the curtains covered me from the view, sheer though they were. Men, women and children lined up on the side of the street, waving their hands and throwing flower petals at our procession while chanting, “Skjálf! Skjálf! Skjálf!”

Honestly, I wasn’t happy with this over-the-top welcoming party. I felt like I was the

biggest fraud in the world. I was no goddess. Why did I let myself get sucked into this ridiculous scheme?

Oh yeah. Micah. Hot guy.

Damn, I'm a sucker for a good-looking man.

Our procession took a while until we stopped at a mansion that stood grandiosely at a steep uphill location. The estate itself was sprawling, and was enclosed with tall palisades and more guards. The style of the building resembled the Raven House in my neighborhood, with black-colored iron railings, monochromatic exterior tones and a distinct shape of the roof tiles.

The bearers put the palanquin on the ground. Micah opened the curtain and offered me a hand. I stepped out and was welcomed by the grand sight of Raven Manor. People bowed with such obedience that guilt drove me into exasperation. All I wanted right now was to find a place where I could be myself.

I ordered those people to stand up. I leaned towards Micah. "I hope you don't have any weird ceremony in mind. I can't take this fake goddess thing anymore."

Micah looked at me with sympathy. "You're not fake, but I do understand your discomfort. You must be tired as well. Our overseer, Lady Dyrhild, will see to that. But I must caution you, don't stare at her mole."

I arched an eyebrow. "Mole?"

Alciel made a gesture at his face.

"Oh. Mole. On her face?"

Micah nodded.

"What do you think I am? A kid? I know how to behave like an adult."

Micah and Alciel exchanged an unsure smile.

But some stuff was easier said than done. When I met Lady Dyrhild, I couldn't help being captivated by her mole. The Raven Manor overseer was by any standard a handsome middle-aged woman. She stood tall and solid like an oak tree. Clad in a turquoise high-necked gown with a sweeping skirt and hair pulled into a tight bun on top of her head, she exuded an aura of regality. But once you got to see the mole on her cheek, that demure illusion shattered away in an instant. I mean, that thing was huge. I was petrified for a moment. Fascinated. Agog, even. Her mole was as big as a raisin, perched on her pale skin like nobody's business. On top of that, a single strand of fat,

black hair came out of it that was long enough to be braided. I could have never imagined such an oddity existed in this world... Uhm... realm... universe.

Lady Dyrhild gave me an elegant curtsy. “*Góðan dag! Hvé gengr þér?*”

I nodded in return. “It’s a very mole to meet you. I mean, it’s very nice to meet your mole.” *Ah, crap. Why did I suddenly have verbal diarrhea?* Mortified, I turned to Micah and whispered, “How do you say I’m sorry in your language?”

Micah only cringed.

“I can speak English quite well,” said Lady Dyrhild, unfazed. “It is my pleasure to welcome you into our humble home, *Hailaga*. My name is Adeliz Dyrhild, and I’ll be attending your every need from now on.”

Please God, kill me now. She spoke like the Queen of England with that eloquent accent and soft, maternal voice. I cleared my throat, embarrassed beyond anything. “I’m sorry. I was very rude. That was uncalled for.”

Dyrhild only smiled like this happened quite often. She turned to Micah. “Lord Raven, if I may, I’d like to show Hailaga her quarters. She must be fatigued from the long journey. I imagine it must have been quite eventful.”

Hailaga? I leaned towards Micah and whispered, “Why did she call me that?”

“‘Hailaga’ is an honorific title for descendants of Frejya,” he whispered back. “It means ‘holy one.’”

I see.

Micah nodded to Dyrhild. “Please do so.”

I raised my hand. “Actually, I’m not tired. I still have many questions for this guy.”

“And I shall answer them in due time,” said Micah, suddenly sounding formal. “You must excuse me, Milady. I have pressing matters that require my attention.”

“But—”

“Didn’t you say you’re tired?”

“Yeah, but—”

“We shall see each other again at dinner time.”

Chapter Four

To my surprise, I wasn't going to be accommodated in the Raven Manor. Lady Dyrhild escorted me to the Frejya Temple instead. Approximately one block from the estate grounds stood a three-story building with arched roofs and cathedral windows—the temple of the Goddess Frejya. The entrances of the temple were each flanked with thirteen anthropomorphic cat statues. Instead of a cat's head, the statues were carved with human-like faces. They were called *hulderekat* or forest spirits, explained Dyrhild. These *hulderekat* were Frejya's companion animals. Apparently, when Frejya took a journey across realms, she rode a chariot pulled by these cat-beasts. If I indeed shared a bloodline with Frejya, it didn't explain my aversion to feline creatures. Cats hated me for some reason. Whenever I neared one, it always hissed and snarled as if we were engaged in a turf war.

We walked down the path until we came to a garden shielded by a cluster of bushes with white-silver leaves. A group of women dressed in wispy white dresses greeted us with deep obeisance. The asshole part of me was tempted to act oblivious to see how long they'd prostate with their foreheads pressed to the ground, but I just couldn't. I waved my hand and said, "Hefja."

Dyrhild informed me that they were the servants of the Goddess Frejya. The young ones were the acolytes; often they were sent off by their families as soon as they could take care of themselves. The ones with the red armbands were the pledges. The priestesses had black armbands. And the wilting old crone by the foot of the temple was their Divine Superior.

Everybody stared at me with an expression of pure joy and awe, as if they were witnessing the second coming of Jesus.

I became uneasy again.

The head priestess uttered an emotional-sounding speech. Lady Dyrhild translated it for me. "Divine Superior is overcome with joy and gratitude that she and her convent were given a chance to serve you in person. They will serve you loyally and faithfully. Your wish is their command, and your words are their law."

To me it was overkill. “You’re saying if I want them to jump off the cliff, they’ll do it?”

Dyrhild didn’t even bat an eye. “They will cut open their own chests if you ask them for their hearts.”

“That is so wrong.”

“A Hrafn vow is sacred. To betray one’s word is dishonorable conduct. A Hrafn prefers death to living in disgrace.”

That sounded familiar. Micah had said the same thing earlier. I couldn’t help but admire these proud people. If a person never broke his promise, like they did on Earth, we wouldn’t need lawyers in the first place.

I learned more interesting information from Dyrhild. The Hrafn society employed a strict patriarchal caste system. Each Hrafn demesne, like Lockesund, was governed by a *jarl* or lord, like Micah, whose position was inherited or gained by force by a male member of the dominant house. A jarl acted as regent of the land on behalf of the king. Then there were *karl*, or freemen, which made up about sixty percent of the Hrafn population. They were farmers, merchants, scholars, and other trades that didn’t require swords as tools. At the lowest rung of the society ladder were *trell* or slaves. Trell were usually owned by noblemen or royals. They didn’t have any rights until they had been granted freedom from their owners. A freed slave was called *loysing*, and from what I had observed from Dyrhild, the loysing didn’t fare much better than the trell.

The thought of this place still embracing slavery didn’t sit well with me. As an outsider, I couldn’t do much. What could I do? I was in a strange land that wasn’t even populated with humans.

To my relief, Dyrhild told me all the servants in the Raven Estate were loysing. Having been educated on Earth, the Raven brothers were influenced by modern progressive thinking, unlike most orthodox jarls in Yggdrassil. This delighted me. I’m not keen on being served by attendants who didn’t own their freedom.

Another fact that I found interesting was that only male Hrafn possessed wings and could shape-shift. The winged males were called *drengar* or warrior. In ancient times, the trait was only passed down through old noblemen’s families. Through mixed marriage, these days a drengar could also come from karl family. To keep the bloodline untainted, there was a law implemented that a drengar couldn’t marry someone from the trell caste. If a drengar wanted to marry a slave or a loysing, he had to surrender his

status as warrior and have his wings cut in a banishing ritual.

As I settled into my new accommodations, my curiosity to find out more about the Hrafn intensified. Lady Dyrhild and I ended up chatting for a long time. From her I got the information about me being a skjálf.

The lore said that when the sky raiders first came to Nine-Worlds, they were subjected to a harsh life. These sky-raiders divided into two factions, fighting over a chunk of land that could be tilled for farming. For twelve days and nights, they fought fiercely, and both parties suffered great casualties. On the thirteen day, the chieftain's daughters prayed to the *Vanir*, old gods, to help them bring peace into the land and bless them with prosperity.

Goddess Frejya answered her prayer. Frejya said that she'd bless the land with peace, love, a bountiful harvest and fertility as long as her descendants walked among them under the great blue sky. Frejya then ordered her daughters, Hnoss and Gersemi, to take the two fighting chieftains as husbands. Their children were called skjálf or "the giver." Throughout the ages, marriage between the original Hnoss and Gersemi offspring was mandated to keep the skjálf bloodline pure because only skjálf wielded the pure power of Goddess Frejya.

Skjálf became a new race of sky-raider in Nine-Worlds. It was nicknamed *Gullveig* or Phoenix. Unlike other avian shifters, both male and female phoenix possessed wings. It was said that phoenix had the ability of resurrection. When a phoenix burned in the fire, he or she would be reborn from the ashes. But this was an extremely tricky situation. If he couldn't remember his past life after resurrection, he would lose his power and grace as skjálf. If a male skjálf sired a son with another race, the half-blooded son would retain some characteristics and power of the phoenix, but he couldn't resurrect. However, if a female skjálf mated with others, her children would be solely of the father's race.

Of course, I didn't believe I was a skjálf.

Hell, I don't have super powers, nor do I have wings. Micah's claim that I was a skjálf was totally wrong.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" I ventured into the forbidden zone.

"Naturally, as long it's not about my mole."

Drat.

"Is it about my mole?" she asked.

I laughed nervously. “Sorry.”

“Well, it can’t be helped.” Lady Dyrhild touched the little abomination that marred her natural beauty. “This was my lord husband’s doing. I was Einarr Raven’s consort. I was young and naïve, and he disliked the attention men bestowed upon me. Lord Einarr put this on me as a reminder for me to stay humble.”

“That’s so cruel. Why didn’t you have it removed? If you come to Earth, we have the technology to fix it.”

“I cannot deny such a thought had been in my mind, but in the end, I’ve decided against it. I lost my husband in a sudden incident, and this chastisement is my last bond to him. I don’t wish to sever it.”

Ah. In some way, I kind of got it. What devotion.

The head priestess put me in a lavish room on the third floor. From my huge, arched window, I could see a supernatural phenomenon I’d never witnessed in my life. Situated between two stone columns near the horizon, a shimmering body of water shone in the morning sun. The locals named it the Hovering Lake. The area around the lake possessed an abnormal magnetic field that reversed the law of gravity. The Hovering Lake pulled any source of water from the depths of Nilfeheim upward. If one poured a glass of water near the area, instead of falling down, the water would climb up vertically. I made a mental note to make an excursion to that place while I was here.

With Lady Dyrhild translating, I asked the head priestess for a nice hot bath. The weariness in me wound down a notch. I thought of my work and office and family, and I was quite surprised that at the moment, I had no desire to go back anytime soon. My caseload and my parents seemed miles away—unimportant. I liked this weird place. It felt like I belonged here. And I loved the sense that I was near Micah.

I couldn’t wait to catch up with him; there were so many things I’d wanted to ask him in the twenty-five years we’d been apart.

Micah came for me late in the evening when I heard the acolytes announce something noisily from downstairs. A few minutes later, Micah breezed through the door with a dozen warriors in tow. He gave me a warrior bow while the others knelt in obeisance.

“Hefja,” I said. I couldn’t deny the sick pleasure of ordering people around like this.

Micah himself seemed refreshed. He'd changed into different clothes, donning a lambskin jerkin, a long duster and trousers. His dark hair was gathered at the nape of his neck and tied with a leather tie. A dagger-like earring adorned his right earlobe, which I thought was kind of badass. We stood a few feet apart, but I could still smell his refreshing bath soap. Whatever it was, I dug the scent very much. Elegant and masculine.

Micah eyed me and smiled. "You look wonderful, Joie."

My heart fluttered. "You like it?" I'd spent the whole afternoon being pampered by my own handmaidens. Seven of them. All acolytes of the temple. Massage, milk bath, foot rub and facial. I even had my own "glamour team" that was in charge of sewing my gown, doing my hair, and such. When they were done, I felt like a million bucks.

"I do," Micah said. "That attire becomes you."

"Thank you." I tucked some stray hair behind my ear and flirted. I was excited by the prospect of spending time with Micah. Now, if only I could get rid of these people so Micah and I could be in private.

But Micah had a different idea. "Tonight we're having a feast to celebrate your arrival. Many guests from my demesne have arrived and are waiting for you in the great hall."

"A feast? I do like feasts. What are we having? Iced monkey brains? Eyeball soup?"

"Lamb. We're having lamb."

"That's surprisingly normal."

"We are not much different than humans."

Right. Humans don't grow wings.

Micah gestured with his hand and Alciel stepped forward. "As a skjálf, you need protection at all times," Micah said to me. "I appoint Alciel and Jórge as your *thanes*, retainers, since they both speak English. You shan't go anywhere without them." Micah looked around then asked Alciel, "Where the bloody hell is Jórge?"

"He was just behind me, Milord," said Alciel. "I'll fetch him."

Someone entered the room, and people parted in the middle to make way for the newcomer. He was a young man, barely out of his teenage years. Slender as knife and very, very pretty. He had vivid blue eyes, high cheekbones and long glossy black hair that draped below his shoulders. Like the rest of them, he was clad in black.

The young man was panting. He bowed to Micah and said something that sounded

like an apology. Micah took one good look and whacked him so fast, I barely saw his fist flying. The young man, who I assumed was Jórgeen, hit the floor on his back.

Whoa! I'd never have guessed Micah was so violent. I was shocked to see this side of him.

"Kinda excessive, don't you think?" I chided Micah. "I noticed him stepping out for air just for a bit."

"Unacceptable." Micah's voice sounded stern. "That ingrate needs to learn to execute a simple command."

"Hailaga," Alciel interrupted. "That lad is fine. Jórgeen is a masochist. He did that on purpose so Lord Raven would hit him. It happens all the time."

Huh? "A masochist?"

"Jórgeen is addicted to pain—"

"I know what a masochist is."

Alciel bowed his head. "He has a quirky personality, but he's the fastest flyer in Yggdrassil. At times, his skills are invaluable."

Well, I'll be damned.

Jórgeen scrambled up to his feet and rubbed the side of jaw where Micah had hit him. The guy was actually blushing. "Mistress." He bowed to me. "It is the greatest honor to be your personal thane." He took my hand and brought it to his lips. "I will dedicate my heart and my soul to you—"

Micah whacked him again.

"What's that for? He didn't do anything," I protested.

"He needs to learn his place. A mere thane does not touch a skjálfr casually."

"Jesus Christ." I put my hands on my waist. "Micah, if you don't like him, why did you pick him as my guard?"

"It can't be helped. Jórgeen is the fastest flyer in Yggdrassil," said Micah, deadpan.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Alciel smiling. I rolled my eyes. Whatever. "What's the deal for being the fastest flyer in Yggdrassil? What does it have to do with me?"

"You're a skjálfr, which makes you a very desirable bride. I do not want any man to steal you from me."

Says the man who kidnapped me this morning, I thought.

Jórgeen stood up. For someone who'd just been whacked twice in less than five

minutes, he didn't look in pain at all. In fact, he looked as happy as a puppy. "Master Raven is so good to me ..."

Okay then. If Jórgeen was a pain Slut, then was Micah his dom? I had no idea Micah was kinky. Suddenly, I was completely turned on. I whispered to Alciel, "Are Micah and Jórgeen—"

"No," Alciel cut me off abruptly. "Jórgeen is Lord Raven's cousin. Such a relationship is frowned upon by Hrafn."

"Why did he call him 'Master'?"

"Jórgeen calls anyone who hits him 'Master'."

"Ah." I don't know why, but I was a bit disappointed. My attendants hurriedly fetched my cloak and a pair of sandals. I donned them.

Micah cleared his throat then offered his hand to me. "If there's no more delay, we shall get going. Our guests await."

"Okay." I took his hand. We exited the temple with the thanes and my attendants in tow. I wondered if I'd make such a scene any time I ventured outside from now on. Even though I secretly enjoyed ordering people like a queen, I wasn't sure if I liked the extra attention. But for now, I kept it to myself, as I was immersed into the Hrafn culture.

I'd never been into a great hall before, and it seemed Raven Manor's great hall fit the name. High ceilings. Enormous wood beams. Oil-lit sconces brightened the place. Long tables with benches lined in rows accommodated hundreds of guests at once. A dais with a large table and chairs was the focal point of the room. I sat there next to Micah. My new retainers stood behind us. I saw Lady Dyrhild again. She was the hostess of the feast, serving us food and commanding a garrison of maids.

The great hall was alive with chattering and eye-goggling. Only men were seated at the tables, while the maids served them ale and hard liquors. I was told that the maids were Micah's loysing—freed slaves. Not all of them were Hrafn. Slaves were acquired when a clan from another race was defeated and plundered. Hrafn traits were easy to recognize: the females were willowy and slender black-haired beauties with olive skin, quite a contrast to their male counterparts. Male Hrafn were tall and buff as if they were all blessed with body-builder genetics.

I also found out that the guests weren't all raven shifters. The *Assa* or eagles were copper-haired and golden-eyed hunks. The *Falka* or falcons possessed moderately tan skin, blond hair with brown and blue eyes. The *Fiskiorn* or osprey had light blond hair, fair skin and green eyes. The *Fiskiorn* were a bunch of pretty men. But not all avian shifters were good-looking. Seated near the great hall door were five astonishingly large men. They were tall as trees and solid as mountains. They were dressed in black with long leather coats. Their heads were shaved on the side and braided on the top Mohawk style. They were called *Fulmar* or condor. The *Fulmar* usually made enemies with races other than themselves, but a clan had sought refuge in Lockesund. I could tell right away the *fulmar* weren't popular with others. While the rest of Micah's guests were raucous and enjoyed the meal, the *fulmar* drank and ate their meals quietly and were reserved.

Curiosity got the best of me. "How many bird species out there should I know about?" I asked Micah. "Do you have chicken shifters living in here? Oh, better yet, turkey shifters?"

Micah dismissed me as joking. "You're having too much fun at our expense."

I laughed and quickly sobered when the guests stared at me. I pulled the hood of my cloak forward to shield my face. Since I'd been seated at the dais, people had been rubbernecking at me as if I were the freak show's newest attraction. Maybe they'd expected me to have two heads or something. I could imagine their disappointment when I looked ordinary, just like the rest of them. Minus wings, of course.

The roast lamb was served on fancy plates with blue potatoes and a blanched vegetable that I couldn't identify. Burgundy-colored wine was poured into sparkling crystal goblets. I was half-expecting the animal to be cooked whole with an apple stuck in its mouth. I guessed the people weren't as medieval as I originally thought.

Halfway through the feast, a bard with a lyre sang a few songs. More booze flowed among the guests, making them rowdier. One of them, a guy who looked to be in his twenties with corn yellow hair and built like a Mac truck, hopped on the table and sang a serenade to me. He looked half-drunk and flushed. Micah didn't look happy at all, and he refused to translate the song for me. As soon as the drunken guy finished, another guy jumped on the table, and they bantered against each other. Some of the guests hoisted their battle shields above their heads and the two men hopped from shield to shield, engaging in very weird race game. The drunken guy fell while the newcomer was

hailed by every person in the hall with loud cheers. *What a bunch of idiots*, I thought in amusement. In the end, men were nothing but boys with bigger shoes and mustaches.

After the guests finished the meals, the maids cleared the tables and served them glasses of clear liquid that apparently sobered them immediately. All the females in the hall withdrew themselves except for me and Lady Dyrhild. Micah made a speech. The guests raised their fists and yelled, “*Já!*” each time he finished a sentence.

I wondered what was going on until Alciel stepped in as my translator.

“Lord Raven has officially opened the *Thing*. It’s a meeting that is usually held once a year where disputes between the clans are settled. And His Lordship, as the ruler of Lockesund, acts as a judge, dispensing punishments and solutions to maintain order in the land,” whispered Alciel.

Interesting. I became excited to see how the justice system in this world was executed. My brain switched into lawyer mode instantly. I wished I had pen and paper at hand to take notes.

A man from the falcon clan stood up. He looked like he had some years under his belt. He had an attractive patrician face that was complemented with a toned physique. His voice sounded mellifluous as he stated his case to Micah.

Alciel translated it for me in a low voice. “Leifr of the Fryod clan bears a grievance against Thorolf of the Hulm clan since last spring. The Hulm and the Fryod have been in dispute over their border for decades. The elders of both clans decided to forge peace. Leifr’s only daughter was married to Thorolf’s first son. Two months later, Thorolf’s son killed his wife, who was allegedly caught sleeping with the stable boy...”

Oh boy.

“Since Thorolf paid a handsome amount of dowry to Leifr, he demanded that the dowry to be returned. Leifr conceded at first, but then he discovered that his daughter wasn’t at fault. Thorolf’s son was ... ah ... unmanly in bed, leaving the daughter unsatisfied, which is the reason why she dallied with someone else.”

Another man interrupted Leifr Fryod before he even finished. His face was pale as a ghost and his hair resembled Einstein’s on bad day. The man was madly furious.

“That’s Thorolf Hulm. He accused Leifr of besmirching his name. He puts the blame solely on Leifr’s promiscuous daughter.”

A heated argument drawled on and on before Micah barked loudly. I startled in my

seat. Apparently, Micah could be really scary.

Micah pointed to Leifr and gave orders in rapid sentences.

“Lord Raven grants the floor for Leifr to continue,” said Alciel.

The falcon chieftain continued.

Alciel spoke. “Leifr felt the killing was unjust. He wanted Thorolf to repay the dowry, plus *mulcts*, compensation, for the loss of a daughter.”

A thousand questions popped into my mind about criminal conviction and jail time, but I kept it to myself for now so I wouldn’t miss anything.

Micah signaled Thorolf Hulm to speak. The man ranted heatedly. I waited for Alciel to translate it, but the mage didn’t seem incline to do so.

“Well?” I prodded Alciel.

“You don’t need to know what he just said.”

What? “Why is that?” I hissed. I didn’t want to miss any juicy stuff.

Alciel kept his silence.

Micah spoke again and Leifr defended his statement. Thorolf interjected. A shouting match filled the hall that ended up with a bunch of men from the two clans drawing their swords.

I held my breath. I’d never see people brawl with weapons so sharp they could cut flesh to ribbons except in the movies. This was freaking real. Slowly, I chickened out on the prospect of seeing people hacking one another to shreds. How could this happen? Just fifteen minutes ago, they were all eating, drinking, and dancing merrily like drunken sailors. These people really were grade-A nutjobs.

Something black flashed. The sound of steel cut through the air. I didn’t even see him leave his spot. Micah had lurched from his seat and sailed to the commotion to break up the fight. He stood tall on the table with his black duster billowing behind him, sword drawn and a lock of stray hair swaying over his handsome face amidst the solemn yet dangerous stare of his eyes.

I thought my heart stopped beating for a second.

I didn’t remember if I’d ever fallen for him when we were kids, but at this moment, I fell in love with Micah.

My chest felt constricted, as if my heart had swelled. Warmth crept into my cheeks, burning me from the inside out. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I just couldn’t. I was

frozenly enchanted, as if I had stared directly into the forbidden Medusa's eyes.

With a swift move, Micah parried Leifr's and Thorolf's swords out of the men's grips. The weapons flew through the air and fell hard on the stone floor with loud clanks. Everyone in the hall was stunned. Then, great respect painted their faces.

Micah was destined to lead men. He was a born ruler.

Micah then spoke something that made everyone gasped. The feuding clansmen quickly sheathed in their weapons, and murmurs broke all over.

"What just happened?" I whispered to Alciel.

"The feud between Leifr of Fryod and Thorolf of Hulm will be settled in *holmgang*."

"What's that?"

"A duel to reclaim one's honor."

Chapter Five

The holmgang took place at the temple's hallowed grounds the next day at noon. I don't know why I had to attend the duel. I didn't want to see real-life violence. The thought of seeing dead men gave me the creeps.

But here I was, sitting next to Micah, decked lavishly from head to toe under my shimmering robes, only to see men hack each other to pieces. These people seriously needed to find another form of entertainment—like TV or video games. When men with swords got too much time on their hands, this kind of activity was bound to be unavoidable.

“Does this level of violence ever solve anything? I don't see the point of it. Leifr should have sued in civil court, and Thorolf's son should already have been criminally prosecuted,” I said to Micah.

Today, he also dressed in black. He'd ditched his long duster in favor of a dyed linen shirt. His hair was let free. His dagger earring played peek-a-boo with his silky strands as a soft breeze danced around us. God, he was so hot, my mouth watered. I'd rather sit on his lap and make out with him than watch a duel. Was there a way to avoid this holmgang taking place? I wasn't really in the mood to see blood right now.

Micah took my hand and covered it with his. A dorky thrill erupted from the pit of my heart.

“A man must fight for his honor, Joie,” he said. “Without it, Leifr would lose face with his clansmen. If that happens, he's as good as dead. Another man will take his place by force. Yggdrassil is different from Earth. To survive, a man must be strong. He must break any wall that stands between him and his goal. Only then will others rely on him. A chieftain is the pillar of his society.”

I frowned. From afar, I saw Thorolf's son, the wife murderer, conversing deeply with his old man. From Alciel, I dug a lot of information about the clans in dispute. Leifr was a likeable man. His folks respected him because he always fair and generous. Unfortunately, he only had a daughter. Without a male heir, Leifr's position was unstable among his clansmen. By marrying his daughter to Thorolf's son, Leifr hoped

that his family's stance would be preserved, and the peace between the feuding clans resolved.

Thorolf, on the other hand, was the exact opposite of Leifr. He usurped the position as the chief by killing his own brother, and then eliminated his brother's heir by beheaded his young nephew. The boy was only two years old.

Since he reigned over the clan, a few households had defected to Leifr's side, making the long feud even rawer. His son Erick, according to Alciel, had a sadistic streak. Thorolf's clan was one of few that still practiced raiding. Each time they came back with plunder, often girls and unmarried women, the son would treat them like disposable toys. He tortured them to death, and Thorolf himself enabled his son's sick fetish. In his eyes, his son couldn't do anything wrong.

Fidgety, I asked Micah, "What are the rules of this fight?"

"You see the circle that is being drawn?" Micah pointed at the middle of the arena. A man painted the stone-paved ground with thick red liquid from a bucket.

I suspected it was some kind of blood. I shivered inwardly. Uneasiness settled in my stomach. "Yes."

"Holmgang combatants have to fight within the circle. The first man to step outside the circle loses the duel. Each combatant is given three shields; the first one to break all three of the other's wins."

"That sounds simple enough."

"Indeed."

"So Leifr and Thorolf are going to face off in that circle?"

"Correct."

I chewed the inside of my lip. "It doesn't sound like a fair fight. Thorolf outweighs Leifr by two hundred pounds. He seems like a man who eats nails and shits bricks while Leifr is ... how do I say it, delicate ..."

"Leifr was the royal scholar. He retired after the war and settled to start a family."

"Then Leifr doesn't stand a chance at all. He lost a daughter and Erick should be in jail for murdering his wife."

"Sadly, in Yggdrassil, women are men's property—"

"What?" I was outraged.

"Calm down. A woman belongs to the head of her family, be it her father or her oldest

brother. Once a woman is married off, she belongs to her husband, and the husband can legally dispense punishment when he sees the wife at fault.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. You people are backwards.”

“It’s our custom, Joie, whether you like it or not.”

“Why did you tell them to settle their dispute with a holmgang, knowing Leifr is going to lose? Do you always make decision like this?”

Micah shook his head. “Normally, I’d make an amicable decision. It won’t be the justice that Leifr desperately deserves, but it’s enough to appease everyone.”

“Then, why are you doing this?”

Micah turned at me and smiled. “I said earlier women are men’s property. Women have few rights in Yggdrassil, depending on their caste. Many are voiceless, bound by the law of the land and their owner. However, there are a few exceptions in the history, such as skjálfr like yourself. As a direct descendant of a goddess, you are granted rights as much as a free man, and sometimes more.”

“You treat this like a game,” I chided him. “That poor man could lose his life.”

Micah shifted his attention to the arena. “Didn’t I tell you in Yggdrassil, a man must be strong in order to lead his family? As a chieftain, he must be even stronger. If he is weak, then he has no business leading anyone. Leifr knows the risks.”

“Why are you telling me this? Why did you tell them to settle in holmgang?”

“I thought it would be interesting to see what you would do. After all, these are all your people as well. Young and old. Good and evil.”

“You want me to meddle?”

“You could. Or you can just sit and see how it plays out.”

I balled my fist. “I can’t do that.”

His smile returned. “The Joie I remember wouldn’t do such a thing either. The Joie I remembered hated injustice.”

I racked my brain out for a few minutes. “As a skjálfr, what kind of ‘few rights’ I do have? Can I order them to stop this duel?”

“You certainly can, but it won’t solve the problem. You will only delay it. And delayed grudge is like festering wound. The longer you wait, the longer it goes beyond salvation.”

I couldn’t believe Micah was testing me. I quieted, thinking hard. “I assume holmgang happens often in here, right? What happens if the defendant is outclassed by

the challenger?”

“He has a right to appoint a champion to represent him in the duel.”

“Can I see the official rule about holmgang? The original document would be best.”

“Ask away.” Micah looked bemused. “I can recite it to you by heart.”

“Okay. When and how can a combatant request a champion?”

Micah drawled a long, cryptic and boring-sounding rule that seemed to have been drafted by some self-important asshole who loved the sound of his own voice.

I asked Micah to repeat it three times before committing it into my memory. I deconstructed it and analyzed it over and over. “You said a capable man who is willing to be the combatant’s defender. I don’t know anything about Leifr’s clan. Is there any warrior in Fryod clan who good enough to defeat Thorolf?”

“No. Thorolf is a great fighter. He’s fast and strong. He’s also merciless against his enemies. Once he draws his sword in a battle, he’ll keep going until his opponent dies.”

“Who can defeat Thorolf?” I looked around me. Alciel and Jórge both stared at me with cat-like curiosity. “Can either of these two yahoos be chosen as champion?”

“You can, but if you do that, you’ll create friction between me and my subjects. Alciel and Jórge are my best fighters. If you choose them, it will show everyone I favor the defendant. It will undo my efforts to unite all the clans in my demesne, as I’ve striven hard to dispense fair judgment and treatment to all my people.”

I quieted again. *A warrior who is willing to be the combatant’s defender, you say?* It could be anyone I chose, but I had to be wise about it. I had an idea. It might be a long shot, but I had to give it a try.

“Say, Micah, what is it you’re after with this duel?”

He cut his gaze to me sharply. “Isn’t that obvious? I want justice.”

“Justice,” I echoed. “How exactly do you feel about Thorolf?”

“My personal feeling is irrelevant. After all, justice is blind.”

What a romantic notion. If justice was really blind, most of us lawyers would be out of work. I focused my attention on the arena. The preparation for the holmgang was finished. Thorolf and Leifr entered the circle. Each one of them held a wooden shield and a weapon of choice. Leifr carried a long rapier while Thorolf favored a broadsword. Even a village idiot could see this duel was lopsided. I was told that magic wasn’t permitted in holmgang. Shifting into one’s true form would also result in instant

disqualification.

I cranked my brain in full force. Micah wanted justice. Leifr wanted justice. Even if by some miracle Leifr won, money wouldn't bring his daughter back. No father should ever bury his own child. I couldn't imagine how devastated Leifr must feel. If I were capable of divine power, I'd make Thorolf taste his own medicine.

I froze. *That's it.* The light bulb in my head suddenly went bright.

I quickly stood up. "Halt!"

Everyone turned their attention to the dais where we were sitting, even the combatants in the circle.

I took a sidelong glance at Micah. His face was stoic, but a faint smile at the corner of his lips betrayed his true feelings.

"I am not pleased with these participants of this duel," I said loudly.

Alciel stepped up beside me and translated what I said even louder. Murmurs broke out among the audience.

I put my game face on and schooled my posture as if I were in the courtroom, presenting my case to the jury. "I can already see the winner should this duel be allowed to continue. In pursuit of justice, I firmly believe that each man who enters the arena should be evenly matched, and only then, their sin and guilt will be judged by the ever-watchful eyes of the gods."

I waited until Alciel finished translating before I delivered the game-changing verdict. "Therefore, Leifr of Fryod, I will choose a champion to represent you on the sacred circle."

Alciel spoke with more dramatic tone. The men from Fryod clan jumped from their seat and conversed among themselves in a panic. All of a sudden, Alciel shouted something.

I guessed the mage told them to shut up or something because everyone stopped talking. I pulled down my hood with theatrical flair, held up my chin high and with my glimmering fan, I pointed to the arena as if I were Caesar. "I chose Erick Hulm as the champion."

Alciel stared at me. Micah stared at me but didn't comment. People who didn't understand English watched me with puzzled-looking anticipation. I turned to Alciel. "You heard me right, man. Translate away..."

Alciel bowed his head and told them what I'd ordered. As I expected, a chaotic response exploded all around. People finger-pointed and argued with one another. The tension jolted a dozen notches. Both feuding clans seemed ready to tear out each other's throats.

I tried to talk a couple times, but my efforts were drowned by the noise. It went on and on for several minutes and made me irritated. Finally, I shouted from the top of my lungs, telling them to shut the hell up. People clammed up at once, as out of nowhere an unexpected earthquake shook the ground with frightening intensity.

What the hell...

The quake stopped as fast as it came. People stared wide-eyed at me then submissively dropped on to their knees.

Eh?

I didn't cause that earthquake. It was purely coincidental. Many started bowing at me in prostration. I waved my hand, telling them to get up. While everyone paid attention to me, I used the momentum to explain my controversial decision in choosing Erick. It was because there was no other fighter that matched Thorolf's prowess in the arena. Alciel translated my words. This time they accepted them as if everything I said were holy sutras. I smiled and sat down haughtily like I'd just won a huge settlement on a hopeless case. I spread my fan open with pinky up. Fancy. Without looking, I just knew that Micah was staring at me.

"What do you think?" I asked him while keeping my gaze on the sacred circle. Thorolf and his son Erick seemed to be arguing.

"You surprised me. However, I expect nothing less from you."

"Ah."

"But why Erick?"

"Conscience test. I'd like to know how far Erick would go to defend his former father-in-law. If he goes easily against his own father, everybody knows he's a true jackass."

"And if he defeats Thorolf?"

"Then it will create a friction between father and son. Thorolf will learn what it feels like to be humiliated in front of his clansmen."

Micah laughed. "Very clever."

Somehow, his praise didn't make me happy. If I could order Thorolf to pay restitution

to Leifr and send Erick to prison, I'd be a happy woman.

Leifr withdrew from the circle, and Erick entered with a new shield in his hand. Like his father, his weapon of choice was a broadsword.

Erick was a head taller than his father and just as muscular. He was actually quite a looker, but there was something off with his eyes. They were dead eyes—cold and unemotional. It seemed that he had more than just a loose screw in his head. Erick tapped his sword against the shield twice.

Thorolf did the same thing.

The two met in the middle of circle. Erick made the first move. He swung with all his might. Thorolf dodged. Erick attacked left and right and slammed his heavy blade straight into Thorolf defense. Thorolf blocked it with his shield.

The shield shattered spectacularly.

Silence descended among the spectators.

Thorolf threw the shield to the side. His expression was something between livid and disbelief. He received a new shield from his kinsman and tapped it twice. The sound of his blade and the metal edge of the shield collided like a death chime.

Ting, ting. Come and get me.

Erick wasted no time going on the offensive. He whacked and swung and jabbed and parried like his life depended on it. Thorolf seemed to anticipate Erick's movements because he probably was the one who'd taught Erick to fight. Soon, Thorolf was driven to the edge of the circle. Then he started his own offensive. Thorolf might have been experienced, but Erick compensated with youth and better stamina. With a shout, Erick hurled a herculean swing at Thorolf's head. Thorolf avoided the incoming blade with the shield. It broke in the middle. Erick's sword would have severed Thorolf arm's as well if it hadn't been for the shield's steel brace that ran down the middle. The impact of the swing was powerful enough to break Thorolf's stance. The chief of Hulm lost his balance and fell on his ass.

I unconsciously gripped the edge of my seat.

Erick didn't stop attacking. He hammered blow after blow until Thorolf had no choice but to attack back just to hold him off.

"What is he doing?" I hissed.

"You hadn't expect this?" asked Micah.

“No. Maybe. I didn’t think Erick would go this far. He’s supposed to stop to let Thorolf gets the third shield.”

Micah didn’t comment.

In the arena, Erick kept pushing his father until the old man became desperate. As an experienced fighter driven to the edge, Thorolf acted on his instincts and delivered a deadly blow. He swiped left, and his mighty sword connected with Erick’s neck.

I looked away in horror.

Crap, crap, crap ...

Why did he do that? Why did Erick keep pushing his father? I asked the question over and over, even though deep inside I knew the answer. Erick must have craved his father’s power and thought this was a great opportunity to finally get rid of him.

Thorolf’s haunting cries echoed throughout the sacred ground.

I turned my eyes to the arena. This time, the sight of gore and blood that usually would make me faint didn’t bother me at all. My attention was solely focused on Leifr. The man sat unmoving while his kinsmen looked upset because Erick had lost. The Fryod clan wouldn’t get any reparation from the Hulm clan. I suspected that for Leifr, compensation wasn’t the only way to get some form of justice for his daughter. Watching Thorolf mourning the death of his heir was far more satisfying. Leifr had lost his only daughter, and now Thorolf was experiencing what Leifr had suffered.

I tore my gaze away from the arena and studied the hem of my gown.

“Joie, are you all right?”

I swallowed hard. “Would you excuse me? I’ve got headache. I want to lie down for a while,” I said.

“Are you all right? I’ll take you back to your quarters.” Micah got up from his seat.

“You don’t have to. I’ll be fine. I have Alciel and Jórge with me.”

“Nonsense. You don’t look fine to me.”

Micah escorted me back to my room and fussed about me. For a macho guy, he was quite a mother hen. After a while, I got tired with his antics. I wanted to be alone after a taxing day, so I kicked everybody out of my room, including my own attendants. As I lay in my bed, the scene of the fight kept replaying in my head, despite how hard I tried to forget it. Greed. Hunger for power. I knew that much; still, I was astounded by the reality that some men would stop at nothing to obtain it. They lusted over it and clung to

it as hard as they could, even though they knew that only utter destruction awaited at the end of that rope...

Later that evening, I received some unexpected visitors. Leifr Fryod and his clansmen came to see me. Micah had borrowed Alciel for the evening, so Jórger was left in charge as my translator. I don't know what possessed him to show up cross-dressing as my handmaid. He was beautiful as a man, and he was totally gorgeous dressed up like a girl. The priestesses and acolytes gave him stern scowls, which seemed no bother to him at all. I was totally amused. Jórger was even prettier than me.

Leifr and his clansmen bowed, and they remained on their knees even when I told them to stand up. Leifr spoke. He was emotional and wasn't a bit shy when he broke down in tears.

"Goddess," Jórger translated. "He's very humbled that you gave him your blessing throughout the difficult journey in obtaining justice for his daughter. Sheila was the pride and the delight of their house. She had always been a good daughter to them and their people. Now that she is avenged, they can finally put her to rest. On behalf of his clansman, he thanks you from the bottom of his heart."

To this, I didn't really know what to say. I'm not really good at comforting people, so I settled with a simple condolences for his lost.

I knew it wouldn't do any good now, but curiosity got the best of me. "With all that has been said, I still have to ask," I said. "Was Erick's accusation true? Did Sheila have an affair with the other man?"

I half-expected Leifr to be insulted with the candid question. As an attorney, I needed to know the reason why Erick had done the unthinkable to punish his wife. To my surprise, Leifr showed no anger. He answered.

"No. It wasn't true," Jórger translated. "Sheila loved her husband very much. Erick was my daughter's love of her life."

Eh. Seriously?

Seeing me look surprised, Leifr continued.

"My daughter and Erick grew up together and they were very close," said Jórger. "When Erick was young, he was a very nice boy, and he also loved Sheila so much."

They'd promised that one day they would get married. Shortly after Erick celebrated his coming of age, he participated in his first raid. He came back terribly wounded. Sheila devoted herself to nursing him back to health. But Erick was never the same man anymore. He became temperamental and irritable at all times. We don't know why. Our elders suspected that Erick had been possessed by an evil spirit."

I scratched my jaw, which was probably unladylike. Somehow, Erick's personality change sounded familiar. "Did Erick injure his head during the raid?" I asked.

As a historical aficionado, Erick's story reminded me of Henry the VIII, the king of England, who underwent drastic personality changes after he survived a jousting incident in 1536. Historians speculated that Henry suffered a serious brain injury when he was thrown off his horse and squashed under it with full armor. After that, Henry became a paranoid tyrant who went totally medieval on his second queen, Anne Boleyn, beheading her on suspicion of cheating and high treason.

Leifr's eyes widened and answered.

"Yes, Goddess. How did you know?" Jórgeen translated automatically. He turned sharply at Leifr and chided. "She's a skjálf, isn't she? Why do you even ask that?" Jórgeen railed against him until Leifr and his men were all ashen-faced.

I smacked Jórgeen's head with my fan. "Enough. One thing I don't understand. If Sheila was fully aware that Erick had become such a monster, why did you let your daughter marry him?"

Leifr cast his gaze down, speaking in hushed tones.

"Sheila loved Erick," said Jórgeen. "Loved him unconditionally. She wanted to be by his side. She wanted to help him so that one day Erick would return to his old self."

Loved him unconditionally. How romantic. However, love alone couldn't possibly help a man with a serious brain trauma. Erick needed to be treated with modern medicine and advanced neurological technology. It was rather ironic that people in Yggdrassil had the ability to cross realms, and yet they were still stuck in the medieval era.

Uneasiness returned. I regretted the gamble I took about pitting Erick against his father. I wished that I could have made a better decision. At that time, it seemed like a good idea. I dismissed Leifr and his clansmen and sulked by the open window.

Seeing me quiet, Jórgeen flounced with his swiping skirt and his braided hair and

settled by my side.

“Hailaga,” he said, batting his long eyelashes, “what do you think of my translation? I am better than that stuffy Alciel, yes?”

My worries were forgotten momentarily. “You did a great job. Thank you.”

“Then, perhaps I can get a reward?” he ventured.

“Oh? Is there something you want?”

Jórgen blushed shyly.

He looked so damn cute.

“I was thinking, uhm, maybe a kiss?”

I chuckled. “Is that so? You want me to kiss you as a reward?”

He nodded vigorously.

Something flashed behind me and entered from the open window. Then I saw a boot kicking Jórgen away—hard. I jumped from my seat. Alciel was perched on the windowsill.

“Hailaga,” he said to me icily, “Jórgen might be your personal thane, but you must not let your guard down. He’s a pervert.” Alciel barked at him, “Shame on you. Manipulating her like that.”

“That hurts.” Jórgen was sprawled on the floor. Alciel hadn’t held back. He’d kicked Jórgen in the face. A maroon-colored bruise marred Jórgen’s creamy cheek. “But that hurts so good. One more! One more time!”

“See what I mean?” Alciel said. “He’s a kinky bastard.”

Chapter Six

When I was finally able to shake off the blues, a week had passed by. Leifr and his clan returned home. The day after the duel, Thorolf abdicated his position as a chief to his second-in-command, Ingvar, and also headed home to bury his son. The rest of the Hulm clan stayed for the *Thing*. From Alciel, I learned that since Thorolf wasn't in power, the Hulm clan would be unlikely to do any more raiding. Ingvar was close with Micah, and the man shared much of Micah's vision. The Hulm was the last clan in Lockesund that had still practiced raiding, and naturally, it had a bad reputation with the other clans in the empire. Raiding practice hadn't just looted a territory of its resources; raiding cost the lives of men, women and children. For years, the king had urged Micah to ban the raiding practice, but Micah couldn't really implement it. If he did, he'd lose the sizeable chunk of his outer territory that was inhabited by the Hulm.

It had me wondering if Micah had predicted this outcome when he egged me on to meddle in the duel. If so, I had to applaud his shrewdness. I started to see him in a new light. He wasn't only brawny but also extremely clever. If Micah ever dipped his toes in the law industry, he'd be a formidable opponent. Every attorney loved a good bout every now and then. Be that in a courtroom or in litigation, being able to walk all over the defeated party brought tremendous inner satisfaction.

Speaking of Micah, I hadn't seen much of him since the holmgang. As the *Thing* was still in session, he'd been extremely busy. We saw each other perhaps once or twice a day during lunch or dinner. When we were together, we didn't discuss much of our private stuff, let alone intimate matters. We talked about politics, economy and laws in Yggdrassil that I found interesting. We never had the chance to be alone. There were always thanes surrounding us night and day, elders of the clan and court officials, then the priestesses and my attendants. Sometimes I wanted to be alone. Trying to sneak out to wander on my own was impossible. My two thanes always had to be able to find me wherever I went.

After three days straight without seeing Micah at all, I became antsy. My girly mind won out over my manly logic. *What's the deal?* He went to all that trouble crossing over

to the Earth to kidnap me then ignored me with his work. *Like seriously? What gives?*

I retired to my room and dismissed everybody. When everything was quiet, I sneaked out through the balcony. But I wasn't fooling my thanes. Alciel idly lounged on the stone railing, chewing a stalk of grass.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"Do you ever sleep?" I snapped.

"Hrafn males don't require much sleep. We could be up for days without being tired."

"I like to sleep," said a voice behind me.

I yelped. "Don't sneak up behind me like that, Jórge! You'll give me a heart attack."

Jórge grinned. "Forgive me, but take a look at this. I made you a pair of new panties." He brandished a white cotton bikini in front of me. "I don't think the under clothes our seamstress made for you are quite a fit for your body type. You always secretly pause to adjust the annoying hitch—"

"You what?"

"Therefore," Jórge ignored me, "I had the master weaver make me a special fabric that stretches and is comfortable. We don't have nylon in Yggdrasil. I sewed this myself and did the embroidery. What do you think?"

"You're unbelievable!" With a pout, I snatched the panties out of his hands. I meant to throw the thing out, but the sight of his craftsmanship distracted me completely. "Wow! You did these embroideries by yourself? They're beautiful." The elaborate stitches were expertly done with special thread that stretched when you pulled it, and the whole thing looked as if came out of a famous designer house.

Jórge beamed. "Well, I did work in the fashion industry for three years."

I couldn't believe it. "You've lived on Earth before?"

"Of course. That's where I learned English. I went to Beverly Hills High, and then Stanford, but unfortunately, I dropped out. Then I enrolled in Parson in Paris, but that didn't work out and I went to Brunel in London, and that didn't work out either..."

"Why did you keep dropping out from college?" I asked.

"He's a troublemaker, that's why," Alciel interjected. "He molested too many sex offenders and traumatized them for life. I heard a couple of them committed suicide because of him."

Jórge rolled his eyes. "Har-har-de-har-har. Very funny."

Alciel snatched the panties out of my hand and stuffed them inside Jørgen's vest. "Shame on you. What will Lord Micah think if he finds out about this? He'll kick your arse for sure."

"Ah, Master Micah. His punches always pack so much power. I love them," Jørgen said.

Alciel sighed. "You're hopeless."

"I think you're neat, Jørgen," I said. Jørgen might be perverted, a weirdo and unpredictable, but he was nice to have around. He was entertaining to watch. Beat cable television any time.

"Ooh, you think so, Hailaga?" Jørgen preened for more compliments.

I patted his head. "You're a good boy."

"Please don't encourage him," said Alciel icily. "This degenerate idiot will get weirder."

I smiled.

"Now, would you please return to your room? It's getting cold out here." Alciel pushed the door wide. "Your dress is too thin for the weather; you'll get sick."

"No," I refused petulantly. "I want to see Micah."

"You can see him tomorrow. It's too late now."

I wagged my finger in front of his face. "No, no, no, we're not going to have this kind of conversation."

"What kind of conversation?"

"Like you're my mother. I'm going to see him and there's nothing you can do to stop me. Move aside." I pushed Alciel out of the way and started climbing on the railing.

Alciel grabbed the back of my nightdress and casually lifted me off the ground as if I weighed nothing.

"Alciel." My tone was icy. "Put me down!"

He obliged.

I glowered at him. "Thank you."

"Do you really want to see him that much?" Alciel wanted to know.

"Is the Pope a Catholic?"

Alciel exhaled a long breath. "All right, I'll take you to him. But if he gets mad at us—"

"Don't worry, I'll take full responsibility."

Alciel and Jórger exchanged glances.

“Fine, but you can’t dress like that. You’ll get cold.” Alciel disapproved of my attire.
“Jórger, get her a robe and shoes.”

“Ja.” Jórger vanished and returned with my things.

I donned them, as the night temperature was colder than I expected. The weather in Yggdrassil was basically the same as on Earth, but spring time in Lockesund felt much colder.

“Ready?” Alciel asked me.

“I guess.”

He swept me off my feet then jumped from the balcony. I could feel the air shift when his wings spread in midair. We descended slowly against gravity. Alciel’s unbound hair whipped in the wind. The hem of my nightgown billowed wispily. I bet if someone filmed us, it would look pretty cool, like in those Hollywood movies. We touched the ground, and Alciel helped me stand on my feet.

I dusted my robe and started walking, Jórger trailing after me.

“Do you even know where Micah is?” asked Alciel.

“One of my maids said that his room is right by the courtyard. I’ve passed it by on my way to the great hall. It has a wind chime by the window. I just need to take the stairs on the left and go to the second floor.”

“You plan on sneaking into his room?” Alciel sounded incredulous.

I grinned. “I heard he doesn’t sleep until pass midnight. I thought I’d wait for him in his room and...uhm, give him a sexy surprise.”

“A tryst? How romantic,” Jórger cooed. “I wish I had someone who’d give me a sexy surprise.”

Alciel shuddered. “Knowing you, I feel sorry for that person, Jórger.”

I snorted.

Jórger pouted.

We left the temple grounds and entered the mansion garden. “By the way, Alciel, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you. Why do you talk with *that* accent when Micah isn’t around?”

“My accent?” he asked.

“Yeah. You sounded like a Chicagoan.”

“Well, I practically grew up in Skokie. My father was Sigrid and Micah’s tutor. I saw you quite often when you were little, but you probably don’t remember. I usually hung out with Sigrid, and you were always clinging onto Micah’s shirt. The two of you were basically inseparable.”

“We were?” I tried to recall the memory of my childhood. Sigrid had his own gang while Micah was a lone wolf. I’m pretty sure that I was Micah’s only friend back then. “Did you go back here when Sigrid and Micah moved out?”

“No. Sigrid was called home when the war broke out. He’s the heir of the clan. Micah had wanted to continue his education despite the late Lord Raven’s order. He went to Europe. Because my father was in charge of his studies, I had to move with them.”

“You two have been bosom buddies since way back then,” I concluded.

“We’re more than bosom buddies. I’ll follow him to hell and back if I have to,” Alciel crowed proudly. “That’s how deep our bond is.”

“Bromance,” Jórgeen whispered derisively in my ear

I laughed.

Alciel gave Jórgeen a dirty look.

We entered the manor courtyard, and I pulled my hood deeper to obscure my face as we passed by a few guards on patrol. They bowed at Alciel and continued walking in silence. We headed toward the stone fountain and went to the left, stopping before the big rose bush. On the second floor, a wind chime sang softly in front of a big window. Micah’s room.

The light looked bright. Somebody was in it.

“Well, seems like Micah hasn’t gone to sleep yet. I’m going to knock on his door and say hi,” I said to my bodyguards.

“Wait,” Alciel said, halting me. “You can’t go onto the second floor at this time of the night.”

“Why not?”

“It’s improper. Lady Dyrhild forbids any female from entering this wing after sundown.”

“Why?”

“To prevent dalliances, rumors and such. This wing housed the young masters of the Raven clan. These days, only Micah takes residence in this wing, but the rules still

stand.”

“That’s ridiculous. Micah is a grown man; he can do whatever he wants. And besides, don’t I get special privileges? You people said I’m the freaking skjálf.”

“Because you’re the skjálf is the problem. People scrutinize your every move. What would people think of their unwed holy goddess sneaking into a man’s room after dark?”

“I actually don’t care,” I said, deadpan. “I mean, what gives? I’m not getting any younger. I’m thirty years old. My mom said I can’t be picky anymore.”

Alciel looked defeated. Jórgeen giggled quietly.

“Just trust me on this one, will you?” Alciel massaged his temples.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. Then I’ll call him from right here. Hey, Micah!”

Alciel quickly muffled me with his large hand. “You want to wake up the entire wing, including Lady Dyrhild?” he hissed.

I pushed his hand away. “Alciel, you’re a pain in the ass.” I bent down to pick up a pebble and flung it at Micah’s window. It hit the glass then fell into the tile pergola with loud clunk.

Huh. No reaction whatsoever. “Is Micah in the room?”

“He must be. This is the window of his study room. He likes to work until dawn,” said Jórgeen.

I picked up another pebble and flung it. Still no answer. “Is he deaf or something?”

“Here, try this one.” Jórgeen shoved something into my hand.

I threw it at the window without thinking. It was a medium-sized rock that broke the glass spectacularly. I took a few steps back to avoid the debris. “Oh, crap!”

The window opened, and Micah peered down. “Who’s there?” His gaze zeroed in on me, and he frowned. “Joie?”

“She did it!” Jórgeen squeaked from behind me.

When I looked back, both my bodyguards had disappeared.

Balls.

I waved at Micah, acting innocent. “Oh, hi there. What’s going on? Nice weather we’re having.”

Micah seemed lost for words for a moment. He pushed the window wide open then jumped down. “What’s the matter?” He held both my shoulders. “Are you all right? Did something happen?”

“I’m fine; nothing happened. I just want to see you. I haven’t seen you in three days.”

“Oh.” Micah looked relieved. “I thought something was wrong.”

“No, nothing’s wrong, but dude, did you not hear me? I pelted your window twice.”

“I heard it. I thought it was one of Jørgen’s shenanigans, so I ignored it.”

“Ah, is that so?” That made sense. Having Jørgen as a cousin must be a handful.

Micah pushed down my hood and stroked my hair fondly. At that very moment, I was having déjà vu. He’d done this often when we were little. Micah had always looked after me. He put me before everything else, even his own interests. And there was nothing new about me sneaking out after bedtime and pelting a boy’s window either. I’d done that often in the past.

Micah paused, listening. He grabbed my hand and took me across the courtyard, deep into the back garden. Another déjà vu moment enveloped me as an old memory loomed before me. The two of us, running like this. He’d held my hand tightly, never letting go. I’d struggled to keep up with his long stride, but I never worried because I knew Micah would never leave me behind.

He’d always been tall, even back then. His shoulders had become solid and broad. The arm and hand that used to hold and comfort me had become strong and muscled. His unruly black hair had become long. Despite the physical changes, he remained the same. He was my first best friend. My first kiss.

My first love.

To think that I’d forgotten you...

Micah slowed down. We’d meandered quite far from the mansion. He guided me through a path that led us to a pond. Under the moonlight, I could make out that a few streaks under the water were vivid-colored fishes, congregating around the water lily leaves.

He stopped and turned to me. “You all right?”

I nodded.

We picked a grassy spot near the pond and sat, relaxing. Another sense of déjà vu blanketed me. Here we were, just the two of us under the vast starry sky. I couldn’t recall what we’d talk about back then, but I imagined we must have shared the same interests since we often sneaked out past our bedtime just to be together.

“Say, Micah,” I began. “Why did you never tell me that you moved? I just remember

one day you were gone. I think that was around the time I started first grade. I went to your house, and I rang your bell over and over and nobody came. I think I pelted the window of your room until it broke. Nobody in the house.”

Micah looked amused. “Ah, so you’re the one who vandalized the window. The mystery is solved.”

I punched his shoulder. “You were suddenly gone without saying goodbye or anything. What was I supposed to do?” A tinge of bitterness crept into my voice. Back then, I’d become so upset that I got sick.

That early fall, the weather in Chicago had dipped in record time. Despite the dangerous chill, I kept the window in my room open at night in hopes that Micah would show up.

He never did.

I’d come down with pneumonia and had to be hospitalized for several days.

Something clicked in my mind all of a sudden.

Was that the reason I’d totally forgotten about Micah? I was so mad at him that I decided to erase him from my memory?

Micah wrapped his arm around me. I snuggled closer.

“Forgive me,” he said. “The war broke out in Yggdrassil. My father summoned us home. We left in a hurry in the middle of the night. If I could, I would have told you, but I couldn’t. The situation at home was so dire that we couldn’t risk endangering your well-being.”

“War?”

“My father was the Regent of the Eastern Territory and the right hand of the previous king. Naturally, he had many enemies. He went to war while we were sent to live in hiding because we were too young to fight. My brother had to live with my uncle while I was entrusted with Master Sigmundr.”

“That name sounds familiar.”

“He was our head tutor, remember? Alciel’s father. He was the one who chased me around when I skipped lessons.”

I thought hard. “Now that you said it, I do remember.” Being a privileged bunch, the Raven brothers didn’t attend any school. Instead, various tutors were brought to the mansion to tutor them. Micah’s wild antics had often vexed the hell out of the head

tutor—a grumpy old dude with long white hair who dressed like a hippy. Master Sigmundr didn't like me. He called me "little princess" and told me I was a nuisance. Each time he saw me wander into the mansion, he yelled at me to go home and help my mom do laundry. I'd never understood his obsession with laundry.

"That man is Alciel's father?" I laughed. "Now I know where Alciel's grumpiness came from."

We laughed together.

"Alciel said you went back to Earth to study," I said.

"I did when the war ended. Father allowed me to return, since I wasn't the heir of the clan."

"If you were able to come back, why didn't you come to see me?"

Micah sighed. His gaze was far away. "I wasn't allowed to see you. My father had a plan for you. You were to be groomed as Sigrid's bride."

"What?" I harrumphed. "Because I'm a skjálf? Give me a break. Who the hell does he think he is? Where did he get that ludicrous idea?"

Micah grabbed my hand. "I never forgot about our promise, Joie. You belonged to me, not Sigrid. Since then, I've worked as hard as I could. I did everything in my power to gain control of the clan so we could be together. And now you're here; it's all I've ever wanted."

Something in his voice went deep inside me. Never in my life had I met a man who'd gone to such lengths to win my heart. "I never thought you'd feel so strongly about me. Wouldn't it have been easier if you'd never left? I mean, if you'd stayed, we'd have probably gotten married and had a litter of brats about now."

"Don't you understand? Neither my father nor Sigrid would let that happen. Only the head of the clan or his heir is allowed to have you. My father would prevent our union from happening. Had I pursued you openly, he'd remove you from your home and hide you somewhere I couldn't reach. The only way for us to be together was for me to take control of the clan."

"How did you do that?" I narrowed my eyes. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

"I challenged my father in holmgang. Before it happened, my father was assassinated in the capital. It was a chaotic time in the kingdom. Freemen uprising. Out of control raiding practice. The newly crowned king, Angnar, asked for my help to restore power.

Before I knew it, years had passed.”

“How did you take the clan from Sigrid?”

“Holmgang. He lost.”

Wow! I didn’t know Micah had gone through so much. “You did all that for me? You must really like me.”

“I love you. I bear no regret for everything that I’ve done. Many disapproved of the reason I usurped power. But I’d do it again if I had to.”

“How do you know you love me? We were only kids when you left.”

Micah kissed me. My objection melted instantly.

He stared right into my eyes. “Do you not remember? It was on your sixth birthday when you said you wanted to be my wife when we grew up, and then you kissed me.”

“I did that when I was that age?” *Whoa*. I was quite frisky back then.

“Yes. Then I told you that wasn’t possible because you were supposed to be Sigrid’s bride. You told me to get stronger so I could beat my brother.”

“I said all that?”

“Yes.”

“When I was six years old?”

“Yes. I became stronger for us to be together.”

“So you did all this because I told you to?”

“Well, you kissed me.”

“Wait, you did all this because I kissed you when we were kids?”

“I loved you too. But that kiss sealed my conviction. I wanted to protect you, given how poorly Sigrid treated you. When you cried because Sigrid pulled your hair or pushed you onto the ground, I said to myself that if you were mine, I’d always treasure you.”

“You thought that kind of thing when you were six?”

“I’m a year older than you, don’t you remember? But yes, I thought of that back then. You were so cute with your wavy blond hair and big innocent eyes. You have the sweetest smile I’ve ever seen. I loved you from the very first time we met.”

I was speechless. Our romance sounded like a fairy tale.

Micah stroked my cheek. “My feelings for you have never changed, Joie.”

I nearly swooned. The man-brain part of me argued that if a guy sweet-talked a

woman like this, it would only mean he had one thing on his mind: he just wanted to get into the woman's panties. My train of thought abruptly jumbled when Micah gently tilted my chin upward and kissed me on the lips.

I melted again for the second time. Blood rushed through my veins, and exuberant giddiness made me feel as if I was floating into the clouds. My heart pounded harder and harder as Micah kissed me. He tasted of spice and orange blossom and something tart that was probably the wine he drank with his dinner.

A faint moan slipped out of my lips. He slid his hand onto the nape of my neck so I'd have nowhere to go but to surrender as he deepened his kiss. So I kissed him back. It was sweet. It was fiery. It brought back old memories of our childhood; the sheer loss when he suddenly left, and my desperation. Now he filled me with apology and hope and bubble-filled dreams that couldn't be described with words.

I don't think either of us could express our feeling through mere words.

We kissed.

We touched.

We looked into each other eyes, and I couldn't breathe for a second. Was this true love? Was this only lust? I could no longer differentiate. I became drunk with the heady concoction as the chemicals between us raged like a wildfire.

He fisted my hair and kissed my neck, arousal rising in a fever pitch. When he nipped my skin, I trembled all over.

"Joie," he whispered in my ear.

I wanted to answer, but the word evaporated on the back of my tongue. I touched his face. I pressed my lips against his and murmured a silent, "Yes."

I heard him make a deep growl in his throat before he held my shoulders and pinned me onto the ground. He studied me as he caressed my lips, my chin, my neck and down to the swell of my breasts.

My heart beat faster. *Is it finally going to happen?*

Micah lowered his head and kissed me with such passion, I thought the world around us started spinning. He felt me all over. I touched his belly and his straining erection. Whoa, he was huge. I burned with fire.

Then, someone cleared her throat.

I almost jumped out of my skin. Micah let me go. I sat up and fixed my clothes

decently. Lady Dyrhild and the Divine Superior stood solemnly. The two of them bowed graciously.

Micah spoke to them, and Lady Dyrhild answered. There seemed to be back and forth conversation that I couldn't follow that ended when Micah chuckled quietly.

"What's going on?" I asked Micah.

"It's late. It's not proper for someone like you to wander at night. We better go back," said Micah.

Huh?

Lady Dyrhild bowed. "Hailaga, would you please return to your quarters? It would be scandalous if people learned that a maiden such as yourself was found with a man after dark."

What? "I'm not a maiden. I'm thirty-years old." I scowled. I flicked the collar of Micah shirt. "Aren't you my fiancé anyway? What's the big deal if I'm sneaking around with you?"

He took my hand and kissed it. "Three days—"

"Excuse me?"

"The *Thing* will end in three days. After that, I promise I'll devote all my time to you."

Oh brother. First he kidnapped me because time was of the essence, and now he put his work before me. He was lucky that he was fucking hot. "Fine. But I want a tour of Nine-Worlds."

"It can be arranged."

"I want to visit the Hovering Lake."

"Of course."

"And I want you to meet my parents."

"Naturally."

I thought for a second. The bar association gala was soon. It would be nice if I could take Micah and parade him around to my colleagues. Especially since my exes would also be attending the party. It was petty, I know, but damn it, can't a girl show off a hot boyfriend once in a while? "I also want you to be my date for the next bar association gala."

"Anything your heart desires, Joie."

Micah helped me stand up. The Divine Superior and Lady Dyrhild bowed low.

I dusted my robe and leaned to him, whispering to his ear, “How did she find us?”
“You didn’t know? Lady Dyrhild isn’t called the Bloodhound Matron for nothing.”

Chapter Seven

Over the next three days, the estate bustled with festivity. Everybody seemed to be in a jolly good mood. Many strangers dropped by at the temple and brought many kinds of gifts. After the holmgang, I made a policy that I'd accept neither visitors nor gifts. I don't like being curried for favors. I realized that people in here took a blind faith in me as an important religious figure, so I should remain neutral. I didn't want to repeat the holmgang fiasco; one dead man was way too much for me.

Despite my rules, gifts still overflowed into the temple. Bolts of fine fabrics, exotic goods, and later I saw gold bars, frankincense and myrrh. Like, seriously? My Creep-O-Meter hit an all-time high. Did they expect me to give birth to baby Jesus or something?

When I asked Lady Dyrhild what was up with all the gifts, she said people in Lockesund were excited about mine and their lord's union. Okay then. That was a WTF moment for me, but I didn't think of it any further. I found many of these people's customs weird. But hey, when in Rome...

By the end of the week, the *Thing* had officially ended and would be closed with a grand feast. Micah sent me an awesome red gown with a long train and floor-sweeping sleeves. I was seriously thinking that Micah had wanted to see me trip and fall with this kind of outfit. But what the hell. The gown was so pretty. I felt like a princess when I tried it. I'd just pretend I was going to a Renaissance festival.

The morning before the grand banquet, Lady Dyrhild spoiled me with a sauna treatment. I didn't know the estate boasted a bathhouse with a natural spring pool. I had a full body massage and thorough exfoliation with rare mineral salts. After that, Lady Dyrhild and I lounged in a sauna, sitting around a grate of heated stones. Lady Dyrhild produced the steam by dunking a fine branch twig in water and sprinkling it over the stones. We drank sweet mead and ate honey oatcakes. For some reason, Lady Dyrhild started talking about a wife's duty and pleasing her man and promptly stopped when I gave her a weird look. We finished our day spa experience with a quick plunge in a pool of ice-cold water. Dolled and glammed, I felt like a million bucks when I headed into the great hall with my entourage.

Micah was waiting for me in there. I was pleasantly surprised with his attire tonight. He usually dressed in all black, but tonight he'd added a little color into his garb—a red shirt that was the same shade as my gown. The shirt was paired with a fancy long jacket and sleek cut pants. He sported a pair of swords—a long and a short saber—on his waist sash. The scabbards and hilts of the swords were decorated with precious stones.

He beamed, looking smashingly radiant and fresh. His usual unbound, shoulder-length hair was intricately braided on the sides and tied at the back. The dagger earring was replaced with a simple loop.

"You're a sight to behold, Joie," Micah said, taking my hand. "Simply breathtaking."

"Thank you." I flashed my million-watt smile. "You look handsome yourself."

He let me onto the dais, and I was seated at the long table with the clan's VIP men and their spouses.

Unlike the last time I attended a banquet in the great hall, I saw plenty of women among the guests. They dressed gaudily and were bedecked with jewelry according to their husband's wealth. Unmarried ones were devoid of any adornment as a symbol of their pureness, or so I'd been told. Parents of marriageable-aged girls brought their daughters at the end of the *Thing* to show them off to prospective suitors.

The guests had already been drinking freely since the banquet started. They were ruddy-faced and boisterous. And unlike the last time, the guest tables were arranged to surround a large altar in the center of the hall. If it wasn't weird enough, I saw two sheep confined in a steel cage next to the altar. A man dressed in a white robe busied himself giving his assistants orders.

I wondered what the hell was going on. Judging from the robe and the insignia the man wore, I suspected him to be the priest from the *Hele* temple. The majority of the Hrafn worshipped the god of death, Hele; Frejya was the second most popular deity after Hele. According to the Yggdrassil folklore, ravens were sent by Hele to battlefields to scavenge the dead and collect their souls into Nilfeheim to be judged. And so having the raven as a patron animal, most Hrafn became the scions of Hele.

The Hele priest started a ceremony. He prayed, then ordered his acolytes to hold the larger sheep above the altar. The priest then proceeded to slash the sheep's throat with a sharp blade and collect its blood in a silver bowl.

I was horrified and looked away. What the hell, man? What the hell? The servants of

Frejya's temple never sacrificed live animals in any ritual I'd observed. Frejya was the goddess of fertility of the land. Her offerings consisted of flowers, fruits and grains. If it wasn't for Micah's cheery face, I'd have excused myself from the banquet.

I avoided staring directly at the Hele priest, but I could make out what he was doing. The old geezer had a branch of fine Birchwood twigs in his hand, the same as Lady Dyrhild had in the sauna. The priest dipped a branch into the bowl of blood and flicked it in the direction of the guests. The spectators cheered by lifting their drinks and shouting, "*Heill!*"

The dead sheep was hauled outside by the acolytes, while the little lamb remained. I wondered if they were going to kill the lamb as well. I ground my teeth. Note to self: consider becoming a vegetarian! The guests clamored as the priest finished the sacrifice ritual. More ale and mead was served by the servants, and plate upon plate of steaming roasted meat fresh from the pit flowed into the great hall.

The priest approached our table and said something to Micah. Micah stood and made a speech. No one translated it for me this time. Lady Dyrhild was busy among the servants, while Alciel and Jórgeen were nowhere to be seen. Micah's personal thanes had been the ones who guarded me since yesterday.

People clapped their hands and shouted, "*Ja!*" when Micah finished his speech. He turned to me and unsheathed his short sword. I instinctively edged away. He offered his sword to me in one smooth sweeping motion. Eh? I was perplexed. I supposed he wanted me to take it. I rose from my seat and accepted it. Why did he want me to take his sword, I wondered. It wasn't like I was going to need one.

Next, Micah filled a cup with sweet mead and offered it to me. Judging from everybody's expression, I deducted that they expected me to drink it. People cheered when I emptied my cup. The Hele priest's acolytes came to me and handed me an empty cup. One then poured sweet mead into it. Again, I supposed they wanted me to reciprocate Micah's gesture. So I did. Everybody exploded in cheers and claps when Micah downed the cup. He then unsheathed his long sword and threw it to the ceiling. It sailed and plunged into the rafter. More jubilant cheers shook the hall. Everybody offered toasts and gulped down their booze as if it was water. Man, people in here partied harder than the most obnoxious frat boys.

The Hele priest brought over the bleating little lamb and gave it to me with a

flourishing gesture. I held the lamb in my arms and sat him on my lap. I was happy that the little guy was spared. He was very tame and adorable. Okay, he was cuteness overload.

“Baa...” he said to me.

I patted his head. “Don’t worry, I’ll never eat you, but I’m going to call you Lamb Chop.”

“Baa,” he replied.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “Just don’t poop on my dress, okay?”

The feast seemed to be in full swing afterward. Food and booze flowed more freely among the guests. I, however, had lost my appetite. Watching an animal get slaughtered before my eyes was a major turn off. I only nibbled on buttered bread and felt full. I fed some to Lamb Chop, but the little guy seemed more interested in the grilled meat on my plate.

“What are you, a cannibal?” I chided him. “It’s your friend on that plate, you know that?” I pushed the plate away so Lamb Chop would stop lunging around.

I noticed Micah hadn’t eat much either. In fact, he looked rather restless. He often stole a glance at me and smiled a secret smile. Strange. This guy was usually as cool as a cucumber.

“Are you okay?” I asked him. I was worried.

“I’m a little excited. Aren’t you?”

“Huh? I guess I am.” I couldn’t wait for the banquet to be over and the guests to return home so Micah had all the time in the world for me.

I half-expected some bawdy display from the guests like at the previous banquet, but so far, they were quite well behaved. The man who serenaded me the last time lifted his goblet at us and chanted something. Immediately, the rest of the men did the same thing.

“What’s going on?” I asked Micah.

“It appears it’s time for us to retire to our chamber and enjoy our wedded bliss.”

“Ah.” *Our chamber? Wedded bliss? Wait—*

I shot up from my seat. Lamb Chop jumped off from my lap. I shrieked, “This is a wedding?”

“How could you do this without telling me?” I smacked Micah with the short sword

he'd given me earlier.

We'd hurriedly excused ourselves from the guests and retreated into the manor. Micah dismissed my attendants, the thanes, even Lady Dyrhild from the room. Alciel bowed his head and closed the door quietly, leaving us in private.

Micah didn't try to avoid my smack. The tip of the short sword hit his shoulder squarely. Being a brawny man as he was, he didn't look the least bit affected. "Had Lady Dyrhild not told you?"

"She said the feast was to celebrate our union."

Our union.

I froze. *Fuck!* I gave myself a mental slap. *God, I'm a fucking idiot.* How could I be this thick? The gifts. The beauty treatment. The gown. "The gown!" I exclaimed. "It's red. My wedding gown isn't supposed to be red."

"Red is the official color of the Raven clan. The brides of Ravens have worn red for generations. Joie, for us red symbolizes fertility and happiness." Micah pulled a chair by the table and beckoned me to sit down.

I flatly refused. "Anyway, color isn't relevant. I never said I was going to marry you."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? You belong to me. You said you couldn't wait for us to be together."

"I mean, I never said I'm going to marry you *now*. You never even proposed to me."

"We've been engaged for twenty-four years. We've sworn an oath."

"I barely remember that. I was six years old." I got frustrated. For once, my flair for words had been reduced into jumbled mess. I took a deep breath. "What I mean is, I was expecting that you'd propose to me again, and then set up a date and plan our wedding together. I want to experience the engagement period. Damn it, I want the romance. The romance! Why is it so hard for you to understand that?"

Micah folded his arms across his chest. He looked troubled. "Clearly, this has been a misunderstanding."

"You think, Sherlock?"

"Would you calm down? We should discuss this like adults. I'll have the servants fetch you some warm tea."

"I don't want tea! I want to beat someone up. I want to beat up... you!" I hit Micah with the sword again. I'd never been so pissed at someone in my life.

“This is very juvenile of you.” Micah grabbed the sword from my hand and placed it on the table.

“Who cares? I’m so angry right now I can’t think straight.”

“Joie—”

“Don’t ‘Joie’ me! This isn’t the wedding I had imagined. I want my dad to walk me down the aisle. I want a Vera Wang wedding dress. I want a wild bachelorette party in Vegas with Chippendale dancers, and I want to trick my mom into getting a nipple ring.”

“I don’t understand why your mother would want a nipple ring,” said Micah dryly, “but we can still have your dream wedding on Earth.”

My shoulders sagged. “It won’t be the same,” I said quietly. Suddenly, I wanted to cry. I don’t know why I was so emotional. Despite the fact my brain was wired like a man most of the time, deep inside I’m still a girl, and I’m hopelessly romantic at heart.

“Why won’t it be the same?” Micah pressed.

I glared at him. “It’s a girl thing. A guy like you wouldn’t understand.”

“Then help me understand. It pains me to see you upset like this.”

“How could I not be upset? I had no idea I was going to get married today, and there’s a guy slaughtering a live animal in the party. That’s not a memory I want to have in my wedding. Ugh. I won’t be able to forget it. It’s a nightmare.”

Micah reached for me, but I swatted away his hand. “It’s a custom for a priest to seek blessing with the life force of the groom dowry.”

I turned sharply. “What dowry?”

“Your *brudkaup*, bride-price. The sheep are part of the dowry.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “I’m worth a sheep to you?”

“Not just a sheep. Your bride-price is one million sheep.”

“I don’t care how many sheep there are. You can’t buy me with sheep.”

“But, Joie, sheep are valuable goods; it’s the formal currency of Nine-Worlds.”

“You lived on Earth for years! Didn’t you learn anything? You can’t be that oblivious. Do you think it’s okay to buy a wife with sheep?”

Micah was perplexed. “Do you think I should have converted the sheep into dollars?”

“Argh!” I wrung out my hands. This was hopeless. “I can’t believe you Micah Raven! That’s it. I’m out of here. Screw you!”

“Joie!”

“Don’t talk to me right now.”

I kicked the door open. Alciel, Jórgeen and Lady Dyrhild looked flustered. Apparently, they’d been eavesdropping.

“Hailaga,” Alciel called.

I ignored them and stormed out from the manor. My thanes followed me in tow. Micah came after me, but I made it clear that I didn’t want to talk, so he backed out. I went straight into my room. Without taking off my clothes or my shoes, I dove into the bed and cried until I fell asleep.

I woke up the next day with puffy eyes and sticky cheeks. Apparently, no one had dared to disturb me. My attendants usually woke me up early every morning. I swallowed hard—my throat was parched. I felt like I had a hangover, as if I’d partied all night and woken up in a ditch. Just swell...

Seeing that I was up, the handmaidens helped me undress then drew a hot bath for me. After I finished, I was served morning tea and breakfast. My appetite hadn’t returned, so I only drank the tea. I actually felt so much better after the bath and warm tea, but the rage from last night remained. I couldn’t remember when the last time was that I’d been this angry. I usually was able to find my composure pretty quickly. However, this time I wasn’t able to make peace with last night’s incident, no matter how hard I tried to reason with my man-brain logic. I was so pissed with the fact that I was valued in sheep.

Sheep! For fuck’s sake.

I gritted my teeth. I very much wanted to march down to the manor and kick Micah’s macho ass until I knocked a sense of equality into him. Alciel hovered over me, trying to talk me into forgiving Micah. I wasn’t interested in talking to that bastard anytime soon. Jórgeen suggested that we take a walk to the garden to lift my mood. It wasn’t a bad idea.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in the temple garden. It was a beautiful day. The weather was perfect at seventy degrees. The wind breezed gently, and the sky was clear and so blue. Too bad my mood was shitty. I sat on a boulder and analyzed my relationship with Micah.

Did I act rashly? I couldn’t put the blame solely on Micah. I, too, was at fault. My

shoulders slumped. Geez, I guessed I was a fucking idiot. How thick could I be for not recognizing my own wedding? If my female instincts hadn't dominated my man-brain part right now, I'd have found this whole situation hilarious. But no, I was still royally pissed.

Do you think I should have converted the sheep into dollars?

Gah! Stupid, stupid, Micah!

I felt like punching someone right now.

"You're grinding your teeth," said Alciel. He stood next to me, watching me like a mother hen.

"Let's go back. I want to take a nap," I said.

On our way to the temple, we passed by a group of Lockesund Elders. We exchanged the necessary greetings and pleasantries.

"Hailaga!" called one older gentleman in white robe. "I heard Lord Raven was very generous with your bride-price. What was it?" he asked his fellow old geezer.

"One million sheep."

"One million sheep. That is simply unheard of. Congratulations. You must be extremely pleased."

One minute later, Alciel and Jórge had a hard time stopping me from planting my foot into that old coot's ass.

Chapter Eight

I continued sulking for the next three days, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized I was behaving childishly. Jesus! What had gotten into me? I alienated Lady Dyrhild. I kicked an elderly man's ass. I banned Micah from entering the temple grounds. If my parents saw me like this, they'd scold me harshly.

"I've been acting like a jerk. Do you think Micah will forgive me?" I asked Alciel.

"Why wouldn't he? He's obsessed with you."

"I embarrassed him in front of his guests. And I attacked one of the Elders. I'm so ashamed."

Alciel patted my shoulder. "I'm glad you've come to your senses. Micah is a simple man. He's good at everything but interacting with women. Just tell him you're sorry. He'll understand."

"Ugh."

"If you want, you can go all out lovey-dovey with him the next time you're ready to see him." Alciel clamped his hands in front of his chest and spoke in theatrical falsetto tone. "Micah, darling. Please forgive me. I realized I couldn't live without you. I don't know what I'm going to do if I lose you forever. I love you so much. So much, baby, I love you more than the life itself. If that makes me wrong, then I don't want to be right."

"I want to vomit."

Alciel laughed his head off. "Shall I tell him that you're ready to make peace?"

"Ugh."

The thought of admitting to Micah that I was overreacting bothered the hell out of me. I apologized to Lady Dyrhild about my shortcomings. She was extremely happy that we'd cleared the misunderstanding between us. I apologized to Herra Georg, the elderly gentleman whose derriere became the subject of my rage. I was lucky he was willing to overlook my childish rudeness.

As for Micah ...

I remained wishy-washy about apologizing to him. I procrastinated for two more days, and that was when Micah decided he'd had enough. With his entourage in tow, he

barged into the temple, immobilized the acolytes that stood guard and forcefully removed me from my room. Without a word, Micah scooped me from my bed, flung me onto his shoulder and proceeded to take me outside. I yelled and hit him, but that didn't make any difference. Micah was over six feet tall with a body like Thor. I looked like a twig compared to him. There was no way I could fight him with muscles. Maybe if I had a frying pan I could level the playing field.

Once outside, he put me back on my feet and showed me something.

I shouted in surprise to see a giant black bird before me. Seriously, that thing was the size of a small elephant. The bird cawed as it examined me with interest. Its red eyes somehow looked intelligent. The bird wore a metal noseband with headstall, throatlatch and rein. On its back was mounted a double leather saddle complete with stirrups.

I hid behind Micah. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a *kráka*, crow, albeit a big one," said Micah. He adjusted the height on the stirrups. "His name is Chinko. Pet him. He's very tame."

I snorted. "Chinko' means dick in Japanese. I definitely don't want to touch that giant dick."

Micah smiled. "Is riding a giant dick out of the question?"

"Hell yes."

"Too bad." Micah grabbed my waist and hoisted me into the saddle. "Today is perfect for flying."

I was semi-freaked out sitting on the giant bird. "Eeep! Put me down! Put me down, damn it!"

"Calm down, Joie." Micah put a foot on the stirrup and climbed up. He mounted behind me.

Alciel, who'd been following us, gave Micah the rein.

Jórgen grinned widely.

Micah wrapped one arm around my waist while the other controlled the bird. He yanked the rein twice and tapped the stirrups against the bird's body. It cawed and spread its wings. The animal's wingspan was comparable to a small plane. The bird tilted his head and lurched into the air.

I covered my mouth with my hand so I wouldn't scream. Dizzying vertigo hit me as we took off. It felt like riding in the front row of a roller coaster.

Micah tightened his grip on me. “Don’t worry, you’re safe. I won’t let you fall.”

His words of assurance put me at ease.

“Where are we going?” I asked him. *Wait, didn’t I say I wasn’t going to talk to him?*

“There’s a place I wanted to show you.”

We flew over the city of Lockesund and stopped at the gated border. The guards let us out, and we took off flying over a great gorge, then pastures speared between tall columns. The landscape was amazing. The giant crow soared leisurely. Unlike the last time I flew with Micah, I was able to enjoy the flight this time. My aversion to heights vanished.

We landed on an island of forest in the middle of a vast lake. Micah helped me dismount from the giant dick—the bird not Micah. To think if I weren’t flipped out that night, I would have already experienced riding a giant dick—Micah not the bird.

Micah took my hand, and we strolled into the wooded area. The ground was covered with lovely yellow flowers that exuded a heady scent. The place that Micah wanted to show me was near a freshwater spring. There was a small clearing blanketed with mossy grass.

And there stood a wooden playhouse.

“Isn’t that my old playhouse?”

“Close. This one is only a replica of your playhouse,” said Micah.

“Replica?”

I took a closer look. Right. This one was only a copy. My old one was made from plywood, while this one seemed to be very well constructed using expensive timber. If I wasn’t mistaken, that Victorian playhouse rotted in the backyard, and Dad had gotten rid of it ages ago. I lost interest in it once I entered elementary school. I might have actually stopped playing with it when Micah left. I remembered Micah and I had spent the better part of our childhood pretending that we were newlyweds.

“Why did you make this?” I asked without thinking. Then it dawned on me that Micah still clung to old memories of us.

He sat on the grass and fiddled with some tools that were lying around. “I think the happiest time of my life was when I spent time with you. This place had been my sanctuary since Father called us home. He wasn’t like your father, you know? He was difficult and demanding. I came here to escape when things became unbearable.”

Ooh. My heart melted instantly.

I opened the playhouse door and stuck my head in. “You built this by yourself?”

“Naturally.”

“You constructed this from memory?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, you even copied the Easy Bake oven.”

“It can’t bake like your old one though. This one’s only a shell.”

I sat next to him. “Remember that I served you the same dinner each time you came home from pretend-work?”

“Spaghetti made from Play-doh. Sometimes plastic toast.”

I laughed. “Those were fun times.”

“Indeed.”

“Micah—”

He pulled the sleeve of my gown, and suddenly I found him kissing me. My mind went blank. What was I mad about again?

Micah kissed me again and stared at me wide-eyed. “Forgive me for cheating you out of your dream wedding. I didn’t want to wait. I couldn’t wait. You’re so close, and all I could think of was for us to be together.”

Just like that, all my anger was gone.

Hell. What just happened?

“I’m sorry too,” I said. “I overreacted. God, I did some embarrassing stuff. You won’t believe it.”

“Like attacking Herra Georg.”

“That. I can’t believe I did that.”

Micah laughed softly. “You disliked sheep that much?”

I joined the laugh. “Don’t remind me. It’s embarrassing.” I punched his shoulder playfully. He caught my hand and wouldn’t let me go.

We kissed, and before long, we were in the process of tearing each other’s clothes.

“Wait, wait, are we going to do it here?” I asked.

“I guess. We don’t have that playhouse anymore.”

I laughed. “Let’s go back.”

“Right now?”

“I don’t want bug bites on my ass.”

Micah seemed reluctant. “All right. Let’s go back.”

We fixed our clothes decently and rode the crow back to Lockesund. I was positively bubbly as we walked hand in hand into my room. Micah banished my attendants and closed the door. He grabbed me and carried me to the bed. We kissed as he unlaced the back of my gown. I tumbled onto the mattress when he yanked the gown down. The feather charm he gave to me popped up. He paused and fingered it. I stopped him when he about to take it off.

“Don’t. I really like this thing.”

“It’s all right, Joie. This charm has already served its purpose.”

“What do you mean?”

“I gave you my primary feather to keep the bond between us alive.” Micah opened the clasp and took it off my neck. “This charm also kept you pure.”

The alarm inside my head suddenly blared off. “What do you mean by that?”

“Hmm? You’re my bride. Naturally, I don’t want other men to have you.”

“Define ‘other men having me.’ What do you mean?”

“It means what I said. No other man can have you besides me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Like making a man impotent before we fuck?”

“I imagined that must one of the properties so... yes.”

“I can’t believe you did that, Micah Raven!” I pushed him off me. Rage tore through me like a tornado. I was so angry, I couldn’t see straight. “Do you have any idea what you did to me? Do you have any idea what kind of misery you subjected me to? For years, I thought I was cursed. Do you know what people called me behind my back? ‘Frigid bitch.’ For some reason, men suddenly became impotent when we were being intimate. You caused this. I can’t believe you. I. Can’t. Believe. You! You ruined my life!”

Micah drew his posture up to his full height. He looked indignant. “I don’t know what you want me to say, but I won’t say sorry. Had I not given you my charm, you’d belong to another man. You and I are meant to be together, Joie. You’re my bride.”

“I don’t remember you!” I brandished my hands in desperation. “Twenty-four years was a long time, Micah. And you never tried to contact me at all. If you didn’t kidnap me, I wouldn’t have remembered you at all.”

Micah sat on the edge of the bed. “That part was my fault. I was so consumed in my

quest to be jarl, I lost sight of my goal. I should have written to you.”

I fixed my gown. I had a hard time containing my emotions and not going berserk. All of the unfortunate memories about my love life flashed in my mind. One particular one was about my ex fiancé, John.

Three and half years ago, I was engaged to him. We were matched in every way and at the same age. He graduated from Yale and worked for Google as a manager in the finance department. I was looking forward to settling down, and he wanted to start a family. When we began our intimate relationship, he started having ED. It got so bad that he simply couldn't get it up at all in any situation. We went to countless specialists and had many therapy sessions as a couple, but nothing helped.

I assured John that sex wasn't important. I wanted to be with him. I still wanted to marry him no matter what. However, John couldn't go through with it. He couldn't marry me if he were half a man. He broke up with me.

And that wasn't the worst part.

Two months after he dumped me, he married his assistant in Vegas. Nine months later, they had a son.

The news had crushed me completely.

I could point fingers, but it all went back to me. What was wrong with me? Obviously, John was fine. He just couldn't command his dick when he was with me.

John wasn't the only one I dated who had such misfortune; the chief reason why, technically, I stayed a virgin.

Before John, I dated an attorney from the DA's office name Thomas. He was a debonair kind of guy, and I liked him very much. I thought we'd be getting engaged at one point had we not encountered the bedroom trouble.

And before Thomas, there was Cameron. Disastrous sex-related accident. I'd just started my employment back then and wasn't thinking much about a serious relationship. After our third date, we tried to have sex. He'd been so excited that he accidentally hurt his cock with his zipper. He cried like a little baby as the 911 team trundled him to the ER.

This was so unfair. Because of Micah's charm, I became a curse to my past lovers. I always kept Micah's charm on me because I'd go crazy if I didn't have it with me. Now, I knew the reason why.

“Well.” I cleared my throat. “At least you got it easy. I’m the one who ended up being cursed while you had a normal sex life.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I never dallied with anyone.”

I blinked. “Don’t tell me you’re a virgin too?”

“I’ve never slept with any woman. We made a sacred oath. I preserved myself for you.”

“That’s even worse! A hot guy like you should have been laid a thousand times over.”

Micah got up from the bed and strode to me. His eyes flashed dangerously. “You’re telling me, you’d prefer that I slept with countless women rather than saving myself for you?”

Well, if he put it in that context, I don’t really like a player. But the thought of him and me both as first-timer virgins sounded even worse. We weren’t teenagers anymore. We were in our thirties. That was so fucking pathetic, especially considering that I’m a closeted pervert.

So I lied. Right in front of his face, with a refined lawyer panache. “Yes. I like an experience man. Or do you expect me to teach that stuff to you?”

I’d never seen Micah looked so pissed. He didn’t say anything back. He wheeled around and stormed out of my bedroom.

I dragged myself to a chair and banged my head onto the desk over and over, hoping it would give me a serious concussion. That way I wouldn’t have to face Micah and be reminded of all this unpleasantness ever again.

Ever.

I avoided Micah for the next couple of days to clear my head. Jórgeen begged me to make up with his cousin. Alciel hinted he might well drug me to render me more amiable. Lady Dyrhild flat out asked me to sleep with Micah. She said once the marriage was consummated, it was okay for me to get mad at him again for as long as I wanted.

Like hell.

Even with my man-brain in charge, my pride had suffered so much all these years from the disastrous memories of my sex life.

I knew exactly how one felt when her past lovers talked behind her back about how

they couldn't get it up when they were with her, but they were totally okay with someone else. I dreaded seeing my ex fiancé John after our breakup. After his first son was born, my firm was hired as the legal representative of his company, and I was chosen to work with him in a libel case. The agony of facing him every day was unbearable, wondering every minute what the hell was wrong with me.

Over the years, I'd seen many psychiatrists and sex therapists for help. None of them could solve my problem. Of course they couldn't. Modern science still had a long way to go before it could remedy supernatural maladies. When my thirtieth birthday loomed near, I became desperate. I decided I'd take any man who would have me because I couldn't stand being alone anymore. Then, Micah kidnapped me.

During the two days, I secluded myself from Micah, I gave a lot of consideration to our relationship. I knew I didn't want to give us up, but I also wasn't ready to be with him.

Alciel came to me that morning looking utterly disturbed. "Jolene, if you value our friendship, please, please make up with Micah right now. I beg of you."

"Did Micah put you up to this?" I was intrigued.

"Of course not. I asked you because this matter has become the concern of many people."

"Is it because we haven't fucked? Jesus Christ! Just tell them we did it. Our marriage has been consummated. Problem solved."

Alciel's face steeled. "We can't do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Our honor won't allow it."

"For Pete's sake. You people are unbelievably tight-assed. A little fib like this won't hurt."

Alciel placed his hands on my shoulders and shook me. "Honor is a warrior's pride. If you take that away from us, we're nothing. Please try to understand. We're different from humans. We're Hrafn. Oath is sacred. Honor is our pride."

"Fine, fine, fine. I'll talk to him, but I won't promise you anything."

Alciel looked relieved. "Thank you. I owe you one. I won't forget this."

"Yeah, sure."

I invited Micah for a talk in the afternoon. Well, there wasn't much talk going on

anyway. We mostly sat awkwardly, waiting for the other one to initiate the conversation. I wanted him to apologize for making my adult love life miserable, but he didn't seem inclined to do so. I knew his reasoning. It involved "you-belong-to-me" and "it-is-my-right-doing-so," the whole macho thingy, which was what royally pissed me off.

I knew I had to compromise if I wanted us to be together. After all, love needed some sacrifice. I swallowed my pride and got on with it.

"Listen, can we forget the whole thing and start from the beginning?" I stuck out my hand at him. "Hi, I'm Jolene."

Micah took it. He pulled me to him, trying to kiss me.

I flinched and unconsciously avoided him.

"You hate me that much?" he asked.

I yanked my hand off him. "Maybe I need some time. Give me a week. A month would be better." At this point, I no longer cared about my job and my career. I was sure my parents were worried, but once I explained the situation, they'd understand. After all, they were the ones who pushed me for a grandchild.

"One month?" Micah looked so disappointed, and I could hear it in his tone.

"I need to be sure that this is what I want, Micah, because this decision will affect my entire life. I don't want to live with regrets."

Micah digested my words, and he slowly nodded. "I understand."

I got more time to think, but why did I feel so fucking awful?

Chapter Nine

I couldn't sleep that night. I spent the entire evening writing a long essay about my goals in life. I usually did that when I felt like I'd lost my perspective. It had helped me focus on my career. However, my career and life goals turned out to be different once Micah came into the picture. I wasted countless sheets of paper and stained my fingers with ink. I decided to rest for the night and start fresh in the morning.

Before dawn, someone woke me up. I startled when Alciel shook my shoulder and whispered my name.

"W-what? Alciel? I'm sleeping. Leave me alone."

"Can't do. Are you decent?"

"Why? Uhm. No. Why?" I liked to sleep in my underthings.

"Get dressed. We have to go."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later."

I squinted. My room was dark. All the curtains had been shut, and a single candle by the dresser had been extinguished. Alciel stood by the side of my bed with a worried face. He was clad in a black cloak, standing tall, eerie and menacing like the Grim Reaper. I was alarmed.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is this a trick? Did Micah put you up to this?"

He tutted impatiently. "For fuck's sake, woman. There's no trick. Sigrid is taking over Lockesund, and he's looking for you at the moment. Unless you want to have a little reunion with your bully, we must leave this place now."

Hearing the name of Micah's older brother, I sat straight up. I jumped from the bed and put on my day gown. As I slipped on my shoes, Alciel held my white cloak and helped me with it.

"Where's Micah?"

"In the great hall."

"Surely he won't let Sigrid take over Lockesund, will he?"

Alciel quieted. I'd never seen him look that grim. I then realized the gravity of the

situation.

“Are we in trouble?” I asked.

He nodded faintly.

“How? Why?”

“I’ll explain later. We have to get out of Lockesund right now.” He sketched a circle in the air with his finger and murmured in a low voice. Suddenly, the circle he drew brimmed with a bright, white light that gradually spread to an enormous size. In the eye of the circle, white smoke whirled violently like a wind tunnel.

I took a step back, awed. Was he opening a portal for spatial crossing?

We were both alarmed when we heard hard footsteps echoing on the stone floor in the hallway. Judging from the sound, many men were headed for us. Alciel grabbed my hand, and we both stepped into the vortex of light.

I closed my eyes and shivered. The familiar feeling returned. Eerie vibrations that shocked my being cocooned me for a long second. I opened my eyes and found we were no longer in the temple.

“Where are we?” I asked him.

“It’s still Lockesund. I can’t open a spatial vortex to cross the city border. We have to get out on foot.”

Alciel took my hand and led me through a maze of ruins to get past Lockesund’s gated border. Once we slipped past the border, Alciel opened another spatial vortex that transported us to another place.

I saw grass on the ground, and cold wind breezed on my face. I looked around at my surroundings. We stood on the peak of a stone column, far away from the spider city. The sky was dark, but scarlet hues peeked at the horizon as the sun started to rise. I’d been in Nine-Worlds for more than two weeks, and still the beauty of the landscape stole my breath away.

“Where are we?” I asked Alciel.

“My batcave.”

“Seriously? I don’t see any cave.”

Alciel tugged my hand. He was still wearing his grave expression as I trudged through rocks and low vegetation trying to match his pace. We entered a dense forest and walked for ten minutes. It was a difficult feat for me because of my cloak and gown. The huge

tree roots gnarled against one another acted as a deterrent for outsiders like me to travel further.

My gown snagged a branch, and I stumbled.

Alciel paused and sighed. "For the love of God, Jolene. You really are a city girl."

I staggered and dusted the dirt from my cloak. "Well excuse me. The last time I went hiking, I wore shorts, not a Renaissance costume. Give me appropriate clothes, and we'll talk."

Alciel rolled his eyes and seized my waist. Unceremoniously, he hoisted me on his shoulder and carried me like a sack of potatoes.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing? Put me down."

He kept walking. "Quiet, or I'll spank you."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would."

"You kinky bastard."

"Look who's talking."

"Alciel!"

"Shush! You don't want to wake up the monsters."

Monsters? "Are there monsters around here?" I whispered. I started to get a headache from being upside down. I tried to look around, but all I could see was Alciel's back. The deeper we walked into the forest, the darker it became. Tree branches intertwined, blocking any light to the forest ground. Uneasiness crept into the nape of my neck. Who knew what kind of monsters lurked around us, unseen.

Ugh.

"Alciel," I whispered again.

"We're almost there."

'Almost' in Alciel's book was another twenty minutes spent upside down. I got nauseated when he finally stopped and put me on my feet.

He took one look at me and cringed. "You don't look so good. Are you okay?"

"Peachy."

"No, seriously."

I patted my chest. "Nauseous. I think all my blood has gone into in my head."

"Let me see."

With his fingers, Alciel massaged my temples and the nape of my neck. A minute later, I felt so much better. The mage had a magic touch.

“How about now?” he asked.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

“What kind of monsters live around here?”

“I made that one up so you’d keep quiet.”

I kicked his shin.

Alciel winced. “Violent, are we?”

“Jerk.”

He stared down at me.

“What happened to Micah? What’s Sigrid doing in Lockesund?”

“I’ll explain everything. My place is just around the corner.”

I looked at the direction he pointed. “There’s no corner around here. It’s trees everywhere.”

Alciel sighed deeply. He grabbed my hand and steered me onto a small path. Behind the lush silver-leaved bushes stood a charming little cabin. The mage’s mancave. He traced the door with his forefinger, and it opened by itself. “Come in,” he said to me.

“You know, why couldn’t you just zip us here instead of walking through that rough path?”

“Can’t. I put barrier spells around the perimeter. The only way to get here is by walking.”

“Do you keep valuable items in here?”

“My spell books. Rare ingredients for potion making... They’re irreplaceable.”

“I see.”

The cabin looked inviting and comfortable. It only consisted of one room with sparse furniture: a plush chair, a cupboard with open shelves that was lined with all kinds of glass jars filled with herbs and unidentified substances. In the corner, books were piled to the ceiling. There was a cauldron that looked big enough to cook a person in it, and a large table with roll upon roll of parchments stacked high. With a flick of his finger, the fire in the hearth flickered to life and burned the wood logs. Soon, the temperature inside the cabin warmed. I huddled near the fire to thaw myself.

Alciel shoved a kettle inside the hearth then bustled around the table. When the water boiled, he prepared two mugs. Soon the aroma of roasted beans filled the air.

“Coffee!” I exclaimed. It had been forever since I’d had a cup. Coffee plants didn’t grow in Nine-Worlds. My mouth watered. I accepted the mug with glee and sipped it even though it was scalding hot. Heaven. The Joe woke me up and melted my grumpiness away.

Alciel hunched next to me while he fed the fire with more logs.

“Well?” I prodded him.

He turned to me. Dread filled his eyes. “I was afraid this day would come. If you had just consummated your marriage bed, none of this would have happened.”

I frowned. “I don’t follow you.”

“You know that Micah is the second son, and as the second son, he doesn’t inherit the position as the Jarl of Lockesund.”

“He told me that. And because he wanted to fulfill our childhood promise, he took it by force from Sigrid.”

Alciel nodded. “Fifteen years ago, the Nine-Worlds were in turmoil. A great war broke out and chaos ensued. King Salamon was assassinated, and the late Lord Einarr Raven followed, leaving Aesir and the northern territory in limbo. Micah was only fourteen at the time. He challenged Sigrid to a holmgang on the eve of Sigrid’s coronation.”

“Micah didn’t tell me that part.”

“I can imagine. What Micah did caused an uproar. Our people divided into two factions: conservatives that supported the old way, as the position of jarl was supposed to be passed to the oldest son, and the progressives, who despised Sigrid as their new lord.”

I blinked. I guessed I wasn’t the only one who thought Sigrid was a complete ass.

“If Micah won, he would become the new Jarl of Lockesund. But if Sigrid won, Micah’s fate would be in Sigrid’s hands. You know how it was ended.”

“Yeah.”

“But you don’t know that there was another term attached to the agreement. The Elders sanctioned that once Micah was able to retrieve you from Midgard, he had to wed you and claim your virginity. You’re a pureblood skjálf, and it is believed that any man who deflowers you will gain incredible power. The Elders needed assurance that if

Micah became a jarl, he would have the means to protect Lockesund.”

“What? That is ridiculous. I’m not a virgin. I’ve been with men before.”

Alciel waved dismissively. “Technically you’re still a virgin, since every single sexscapade you’ve had always ended in disaster, am I right? My father was the one who made that charm.”

That stupid feather charm. I gave Alciel a death glare. “Virginity shouldn’t be measured by a woman’s hymen. It should be about the state of her emotional and mental being.”

“Anyhow, Micah was given a fortnight to make you his woman, and the two of you haven’t consummate your wedding. That means Micah has to forfeit his claim over you and over Lockesund.”

“Tch! What’s going to happen to Micah?”

“Sigrid will decide it.”

“That can’t be good. He hates Micah.”

“Who knows what Sigrid would do?” Alciel cast me a worried look. “Who knows what Sigrid would do to *you*?”

The weight of a thousand bricks suddenly came down on me. “Why didn’t Micah tell me about this?”

“Can’t you see? His pride won’t allow it. There’s nothing more pathetic for a man than asking for pity sex. Besides, he became a jarl so he could be with you. And when you rejected him, it was all over for him. He took it harder than you think.”

“I wasn’t rejecting him. I just need some space and me-time to clear my head.”

“You said you didn’t want to see him anymore.”

“It was the heat of the moment. I didn’t mean it.”

Alciel sighed. “I don’t understand women.”

“Right back at ya.”

“Touché.”

“I just wanted a little payback for what he’d put me through. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal. What’s going to happen now?”

He gazed into the fire. “He has given me some instructions. I’m supposed to bring you back to Earth and hide you from Sigrid. This means you have to leave everything behind: your job, your home, family and friends. It sounds harsh, and we would live on

the run, but it's the only way to keep you safe from Sigrid."

"I'm not going to run away."

He turned to me. "You're going to confront Sigrid?"

"Get me to Micah and once—"

"It won't work. A Hrafn never backs out from a deal he made."

Ugh. Not this stupid honor again. "So Micah is going to take all of this lying down? That doesn't sound like him at all. What about his supporters? Are they okay with having Sigrid as their leader even though they despise him?"

"Sigrid came with the King's Army. Any attempt to fight the King's men would be considered as an act of treason against the Crown. The punishment for treason is death." Alciel stood up. "I was actually surprised when I saw King Agnar's banners earlier. That's shrewd. Sigrid must have anticipated some resistance from Micah's followers and enlisted the Crown's help to ensure victory."

"Does the Crown always meddle in their sovereign principalities' business?"

"No. They must have made an exception. I bet it's because of you."

"Me?" I rose and scooted over to the only chair in the room. "The fake goddess? When are these people going to realize that I'm not the person they think I am?"

Alciel's gaze lingered on me briefly. He looked troubled. "There's something else I need to tell you, but you're not going to like it."

"Spit it out. One more bit of bad news isn't going to change everything."

"It will." He paused, seeming to choose his words carefully. "People from this world can't procreate with humans. If we could, many of us would have taken human mates. Humans are desirable in Nine-Worlds, but having an heir is important for a man, especially men like us."

"Then why did Micah—" I narrowed my eyes, suspicious. Micah had hinted he wanted to have children with me. So did I. "What are you saying? Are you implying I'm not human?"

Alciel stared at me, deadpan. "You're not a human, Jolene," he parroted. "You're a skjálf. A pureblooded skjálf. Naturally, you're blessed with wings and you have the ability to resurrect. Your power is inconceivable, the true power of the old gods."

"That's ridiculous."

"It's true. Your biological mother is Soenne-Valdja. She was the last descendant of

House Frárra. At that time, Hauk, your grandfather, was pressured by Broinn Daeger—the king of the condors—to give up your mother. Broinn had recently usurped his brother’s throne. He thought if he could take a skjálf as wife, he would gain divine status that secured his position among his people.

“However, your mother had fallen in love with her first cousin from Audune House. Edvin, your biological father, was also a pureblooded skjálf. They’d been betrothed since they were infants. Story was, Broinn raided Vængr and killed everyone else but your mother and took her back home in Skodborg, not knowing that she was already with child. When Broinn found out, he locked your mother in a tower until she gave birth. Broinn then ordered his knights to kill you. Do you remember the condor clan from the *Thing*?”

My brain scrambled immediately. I recalled the gloomy-looking tall sky-raiders at the welcoming feast. I nodded.

“Rasmus was the one entrusted to carry out the mission. Instead of killing you, he took you to the late Lord Einarr and asked for him and his people to be granted asylum. Lord Einarr agreed. Then, to erase any trace of you from Nine-Worlds, Lord Raven smuggled you into Midgard.”

Even though the story was plausible, I refused to take everything at face value. I shook my head. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t blame you. It is said that Lord Raven had switched the baby from a woman who delivered a stillborn. Your parents were in St. Emilion when you were prematurely born, weren’t they?”

I’d heard the story a thousand times. Mom was visiting her friend’s vineyard when she suddenly went into labor. Dad was working with the American Embassy at the time, and he wasn’t able to leave Paris until a week later. They said I was born in the stable, since they were in a remote area and couldn’t get my mom into the hospital in time. My mom was said to be very weak from blood loss, and she’d been in and out consciousness most of the time.

My parents often joked that I was a changeling kid whenever I asked why I looked nothing like them. Both my parents had ruddy-colored skin, brown eyes and dark-colored hair. I have fair skin, ice-blue eyes and platinum blonde hair.

A silvery chill sliced through me. I couldn’t believe this revelation.

I didn't want to believe it.

"You okay?" asked Alciel. He saw me shiver.

"No. The world I know just fell apart."

"Knowing the parents who raised you all these years aren't your birth parents won't change anything. They are still your parents. They love you for who you are."

"I know that. I just ... It's too much to take this in right now."

Silence stretched between us before Alciel spoke again. "If it makes you feel better, you could always take a paternity test. It won't make any difference. You're still who you are."

Paternity test. That made sense. As much as I'd like to debunk the truth of my origin, there were many issues that needed my attention first. Like Micah and Sigrid. "Whether I'm a skjálf or not, that can wait. I have to see Micah first."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I'm not going to run away. I'll face Sigrid head on."

"Your intent is admirable, but I must warn you that this place isn't Earth. Whatever you're trying to pull might not work. You could end being used by Sigrid as his toy. Do you really want to take that risk?"

"Absolutely." I put my game face on. "I'm not afraid. I've been playing in the big boys' club for more than a decade. I know a trick or two."

"Such as?"

"Grab the man by his balls, and he'll follow you anywhere."

Alciel gave me a wan smile. "I like your guts. What if that doesn't work?"

"Go to plan B."

"What's plan B?"

"Don't know yet. I'll wing it."

"Oh boy."

I got up from the chair. "Are you with me, Alciel?"

"To the hells and back. I've sworn my life to protect you."

"I'll take your word on that."

When we walked to the temple ground, I saw the Divine Superior and her disciples

were being rounded up by men in white cloaks. The women were bound, manhandled, and forced to divulge something. I might not fully understand what they were saying, but I knew what they wanted.

Me.

Bound by their oath, the servants of Frejya had refused to talk even when their very lives were threatened under the gleaming of sharp blades.

A commotion on the second floor caught my attention. There was a loud crash, and two white-cloaked men sailed through the window, hitting the ground hard. I saw a glimpse of Jørgen behind the temple's high arched windows. Apparently, he was the one fighting the King's guards.

"Jørgen!" I barked.

All eyes were on me in an instant. The guards abandoned their prey and shouted cries. They charged at me. Alciel stepped in front of me and faced them head on. There was a flash of black feathers, and Jørgen materialized next to Alciel with his double swords drawn in a defensive stance.

"Stop fighting!" I commanded. I wanted the violence to stop. I didn't want any blood spilled on my behalf. Alciel looked over his shoulder, distracted, while Jørgen completely blew me off. He charged into the oncoming guards with a shout and blasted them with his weapons. It happened so fast, all I could see was the silvery glint of Jørgen's swords and the sound of steel clashing. Alciel seemed eager to join the brawl, but I got him first. I yanked his hair backward.

"Stay put," I said to him, giving him my death glare.

Jørgen continued to fight the guards, and he was clearly enjoying himself. He even laughed while a storm of swords hurled at his direction. Jørgen was a great fighter, no doubt, very proficient with his double swords. He fended off an incoming attack with his right hand while he launched a sneaky assault with his left hand. His movement was fluid. His blade-work was beautiful and deadly. I flinched each time a sword struck home and someone got hurt. The body count rose quickly. Watching a fight on TV was different to seeing it in the flesh. I'm sure Jørgen hadn't killed those men because all of them were still moving. However, the sight of moaning, bloody men gave me the creeps.

In the end, only one guard was still standing. He looked like a seasoned fighter. Jørgen said something to him, and the man shrieked furiously, charging like a rhino.

Jórgen fainted, dodging the blade by a hairsbreadth. He launched a counter attack with his left hand, ramming the hilt of his blade into the guard's diaphragm, causing the man to double over. Jórgen finished it with a blow to the head. I couldn't watch, so I looked away.

"Jórgen!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. That got his attention. When I opened my eyes, he was marching toward me. "Don't kill any more people!" I said. "I've seen enough blood."

Jórgen arched one brow. "Why not?"

I shoved Alciel out of my way. The last guard was still conscious, howling. He clutched one bloodied hand. All his fingers were missing.

"You cut off his fingers?" I pulled my hair in a panic. "He needs medical attention. Doctor! He needs a doctor!"

It then occurred to me that Alciel was also a healer.

"Help him!" I pointed to the bawling man.

"Please, don't ask me to do that, Hailaga," said Alciel.

"Why not?"

"Athane who lives by a sword does not cry when a sword bites him back."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Athane who can't take pain doesn't deserve to be a thane."

I jabbed my finger into Alciel's chest. "How could you be so cruel? You're a healer. Don't you take the Hippocratic oath or something when you become a healer?"

Alciel didn't answer me. His face was a mask of impassiveness. Even Jórgen wore the same face. He'd become a completely different person. I was taken aback, honestly, seeing the real them: battle-hardened warriors who thrived on violence and the blood of their enemies. I had to remind myself again that they weren't human, and they lived by their own moral codes that were sometimes hard for my senses to comprehend.

I took a deep breath as I tried to shut those horrible screams away from my mind.

Alciel and Jórgen slipped into defensive mode. I looked around. We found ourselves in another pinch. More white-cloaked guards were closing in on us.

Among them was a guy dressed flamboyantly. He was a dead ringer for Micah—the height, the build and the face. He wore his hair long and meticulously braided. I didn't need to guess who he was. He was Sigrid, judging from his resemblance to his younger

brother and his obnoxious swagger. As he strutted toward us, he unsheathed his sword and struck the bawling guard in the head.

I clamped my hand on my mouth. My stomach roiled. Sigrid was as heartless as I remembered.

“Jolene,” he said in an annoying singsong voice. “Fancy seeing you at last.”

I fought the urge to hurl as the image of brain matter dripping from the tip of Sigrid’s sword burned forever in my mind. I stared straight into his eyes, showing a blank face. I didn’t want to fall apart in front of my first bully.

Sigrid pulled a white kerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood from his blade. He then sheathed his sword back into the scabbard. “I must say,” he eyed me from head to toe, “you’ve grown into a lovely lady.”

“Too bad I can’t say the same about you,” I retorted. “Your aesthetic deficiency makes me doubt whether you actually share the same blood with Micah. You sure you’re not adopted?”

His grin turned into a hard line. He raised his hand to strike me, but Alciel caught his wrist midway and somehow Jørgen had managed to slip behind Sigrid with a knife poised on Sigrid’s throat.

Sigrid was unfazed. “You dare wield a blade against your own master?”

“Forgive us, but we cannot allow you to lay a hand on her. We have been chosen as servants of Frejya. Our loyalty belongs to the skjálf and her alone,” said Alciel coolly.

Sigrid yanked his arm. “Call off your dog,” he ordered me.

Jørgen still had his blade against Sigrid’s throat. He didn’t seem particularly concerned that he was outnumbered by Sigrid’s lackeys.

I nodded to Jørgen. He slunk off like a ghost and reappeared next to me.

Sigrid flicked off his collar. “You’re to follow me to the capital. You and your dogs.”

“Why?”

“I was ordered to bring you before the king.”

“Why?”

Irritation darkened Sigrid expression. “King Angnar would like to meet the goddess.”

“That’s it?”

“His Majesty will grant your divorce and my petition for our nuptials.”

“What nuptials?” I was alarmed.

“You and I. As the Jarl of Lockesund, it is within my right to take any woman under my territory for a wife.”

“What?” I crossed my arms in front of my chest, defiant. “I don’t agree to this. I’d never marry you even if you were the last man in the universe.”

“Sadly, your agreement isn’t required. I’m sure you realized you aren’t in position to bargain.”

I sniffed. “Oh? What’s your leverage?”

“My beloved little brother. He’s my prisoner in the East Tower. I only need give my men a sign, and he’ll be burned along with the other dogs that are loyal to him.”

A surge of anger rose into my throat. Were Lady Dyrhild, Micah’s thanes and my attendants among them? Damn. I had to play my cards right. One wrong move, and people would die. “You’d kill your own brother? Your own flesh and blood?”

“I should have killed him a long time ago. He’s nothing but a thorn in my side.”

“You really *are* evil. Did your mother accidentally drop you on the head when you were little so you grew up messed up like this?”

“Enough of this nonsense!” Sigrid gestured at his men. “Take them.”

Alciel stepped in front of me. The king’s guards seemed to be hesitant to apprehend us by force, seeing the high body count that Jórgeen had left behind. We were herded into the front of the manor. I didn’t see any familiar thanes around. Only soldiers with the king’s colors guarded the perimeter.

I also saw giant crows. Their eyes were covered in blinders, and leather saddles were mounted on their backs. I bit back my groan when I realized they were a means of conveyance for people without wings.

“I suppose we’re flying then? No spatial crossing?” I whispered to Alciel.

“I’m afraid not. Only a few individuals in Nine-Worlds are capable of spatial crossing. Sigrid doesn’t have a mage to perform it, and he simply wouldn’t ask me to do it. He doesn’t trust me.”

That sucks. I grabbed Alciel’s hand and squeezed it. “This is too much.”

There was a steely glint in his eyes. “Don’t worry. You know we’ll protect you.”

Jórgeen patted my shoulder and nodded. He was almost too solemn. There was not a shred of his usual goofiness in him. I didn’t expect to see this side of Jórgeen. Beneath his cheery façade, Jórgeen Raven was a dangerous man.

Anxiety ambushed me out of nowhere. “If only I went along with Micah’s plan, all this wouldn’t have happened. I’m so stupid. My female instincts have given me nothing but grief.”

“You don’t know that. It’s not anybody’s fault.”

“Are you trying to cheer me up?”

“Yes. You do have a plan, don’t you?”

“Tentatively, but yeah.”

“Good. That’s all I need to know,” said Alciel.

Jørgen nodded. “And I’m with you, Hailaga. To hell and back.”

Chapter Ten

We spent the next thirty-six hours flying to the southern hemisphere to reach Asgard, the capital of the Kingdom of Aesir. I clung to Alciel's back the entire ride. Alciel and I were the ones who rode the giant bird; everyone else flew with their own wings. I couldn't sleep at all during the journey, even though Alciel had encouraged me to do so. I know he wouldn't let me fall, but the fear of heights wound my nerves tight. By the time we finally touched down at our destination, I collapsed from exhaustion.

I woke up and found myself in a fluffy bed covered in a thick white blanket. For a moment, I thought I was still in my bed in Lockesund. Then I saw Alciel sitting at the foot of the bed, spacing out. His usual aloofness was replaced by brooding.

Alciel noticed me stir. "Jolene. I was starting get worried."

"How long did I sleep?" I yawned.

"About eighteen hours."

"What?" I sat up straight. "Why did you let me sleep that long?"

"You needed it." He got up and placed his hand on my forehead, checking my temperature. "You had a fever, but now it has gone down."

"It's the flying. I don't fancy the Nine-Worlds' airline at all. There's no refreshment, I can't stretch my legs, the cabin is way too drafty, and the seat has giant feathers. I'll definitely only give a one-star rating on my Yelp review later."

The side of his jaw twitched. "I'm glad you're back to your old self."

I looked around me. "Where are we?"

"Asgard Palace. We are King Angnar's honored guests."

"Where's Jórge?"

"Outside. There are plenty of people who want to meet you. High priests, nobles, ambassadors and some royal families. Movers and shakers. Jórge is fending them off."

"Yikes. What about Sigrid? When is he going to file that petition with King Angnar?"

"Sigrid and his entourage are housed in the suite next to us, and King Angnar plans to hear him by the end of the week."

I pushed the blanket off me and hopped down from the bed. "Then I have to see the

king before then. I need to take a bath now.”

“Oh, there’s someone you should see first before you go to see King Angnar.”

“Who?”

“Leifr Fryod. He flew here as soon as he heard that Sigrid had taken over Lockesund.”

I paused. “Leifr? I see. He’s the former royal scholar, right?”

Alciel nodded.

“I probably could use his help.”

After I refreshed, changed into clean clothes and ate a square meal, I was ready to receive visitors. Three men waited for me. They were dressed in formal Aesir regalia: ankle-length tunics with dark pants and a color-coded waist sash and tassel according to their ranks. One of the men was Leifr Fryod, and he wore a white sash. The other men were much younger, taller and very stunning.

One had waist-length, white-blond hair and his sash was silver. His vivid green eyes caught my attention immediately. Judging from his traits, I could tell he was an osprey shifter.

The other was a man about my age, a head taller than the osprey. He wore his hair just below his ears and in the shade of gleaming copper. His eyes were sharp and intelligent. They were golden in color. He must be an eagle shifter. The man wore a gold-colored sash. I was told that gold was reserved for the royal family members.

We exchanged greetings and headed to the guests’ receiving room.

“Leifr Fryod,” I began. “I’m surprised to see you here. It’s a pleasant surprise nevertheless. In times like this, I need as many supporters as I can get.”

Alciel translated my words. Leifr looked touched that I appreciated his helping hand.

“He is thankful. Because of your blessing, he is alive today. He and his clan are indebted in your service forever. It is only natural that he offers his service as your trusted ally,” said Alciel, rendering Leifr’s reply word for word.

The other gentleman inclined his head.

He spoke perfect English with an elegant accent like Lady Dyrhild’s. “My name is Harald Fáinn. I’m a good friend of Micah Raven. We studied together in Europe in our teens, and later we were brothers-in-arms during the war. I’ve heard so much about you

from Micah over the years. Naturally, when I learned that Micah had wedded you, I simply had to come to offer congratulations.”

Jórgen came with a tray of refreshments. He leaned to Harald and whispered audibly, “Ask her about the sheep.”

“Don’t ask her about the sheep,” Alciel cut in immediately. He shot a glare at the troublemaker. “Jórgen, scram and be stupid somewhere else.”

Jórgen grinned.

Harald looked confused. “What about sheep?”

“It’s nothing.” I laughed dryly. “It was a big misunderstanding.” Right. The last person who suggested how lucky I was with one million sheep as a dowry had suffered serious butt trauma.

The eagle introduced himself. “Greetings, Hailaga. I’m also Micah’s close friend. My name is Greinn Magnbjorn. Micah and I shared the same tutor when we were growing up. We compete over everything, but so far, I haven’t been able to defeat him. Naturally, I can’t let him rot in prison before I have the chance to earn my victory.”

“*Gaman at hitta þik. Pleased to meet you,*” I said with the limited vocabulary that Alciel had taught me.

The three of them looked pleased at my attempt to immerse myself in their culture. Leifr spoke.

Alciel translated. “When he heard rumor that Lord Sigrid Raven is going to petition King Angnar for your divorce, he rushed here as quickly as he could. He’s thoroughly knowledgeable in Aesir law should you wish to hear some sound counsel.”

Leifr paused briefly and then spoke again.

“Pardon his bold assumption, but is it true that you wish an annulment from Lord Micah?” added Alciel.

“No. It was all a big misunderstanding. I’m deeply regretting it,” I said. “And now I’m trying to find a way to prevent Sigrid from filing that petition.”

Harald, Greinn, and Leifr looked relieved.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Harald. “I have always disliked that brother of his. Cunning and arrogant. Sigrid has always been like that ever since he was very young. I’d say the late Lord Raven’s indulgence was part of the problem. Sigrid felt entitled to his father’s achievements.”

“I’m quite familiar with that,” I said.

“Which brings to my next point: are you aware of your true lineage? I believe Micah had chosen not to disclose this secret until you were well settled in Nine-Worlds.”

“I just found out about it recently.” I glanced at Alciel. The mage looked solemn. “Quite shocking.”

“Lord Sigrid must have thought that once he stripped his brother of title and land, he’d be entitled to you as well. Sadly, Lord Sigrid is grossly mistaken,” Harald said.

I widened my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“When Rasmus the condor fled and sought protection with the late Lord Raven, Rasmus also carried your mother’s last wish: when you’ve come of age, you are to be made the bride of a man who also carries the skjálf bloodline in him. In Aesir, there are only two men known as skjálf: Sigdur Welheim and Andres Angnar. Sigdur is a monk that has withdrawn from the affairs of the world. He’s over a hundred years old and has no need for a wife.”

I slowly made the connection. “And Andres Angnar—”

“—is the King of Aesir. The former Aesir King—Salamon—had asked Lord Einarr to raise you to be groomed as Andres’ bride. But Lord Einarr secretly wanted to give you to Sigrid. We all know that men choose their own destiny. You and Micah had fallen in love at a fairly young age and pledged a sacred oath, and since then, Micah sought power to make you his. Shortly after King Andres Angnar was crowned as king, His Majesty asked Micah for help eliminating his enemies. In return, Micah asked that Angnar relinquish his claim over you. His Majesty agreed, on one condition: he only let you go if you marry Micah. In other words—”

“If Micah and I don’t get married, I belong to Angnar again,” I finished. Damn. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

Harald nodded. “Exactly.”

“That idiot Sigrid has no business to file petition for my divorce in the first place.”

“No, he does not,” Harald affirmed.

“Then I just need to make my marriage with Micah valid, right? Problem solved,” I said. A new hope blossomed. All I needed to do was to see Micah and consummate our wedding and tah-dah... husband and wife.

Harald, Greinn, Alciel and Jórgeen looked at one another.

“I’m afraid this part is rather tricky,” said Harald.

My new hope was quickly crushed.

“Since Micah is no longer the Jarl of Lockesund, he can’t claim you as wife. According to our law, only the head of the clan is allowed to marry a skjálf.”

“Your law is fucking stupid!” I burst out. “Let’s kill Sigrid then. I’ll even strangle him myself. Jórge here would be happy to do the job, right, Jórge?”

Jórge yelped theatrically. “It’d be a dream come true.”

I sighed. “I was just kidding.”

“Ah? Why not? Let me do it-let me do it-let me do—” Jórge bounced on his heels.

“No! No one deserves to die, no matter how evil he is. I don’t want any more blood on my hands. End of the discussion,” I said firmly.

Jórge looked disappointed.

Harald nodded with approval. “As expected of the descendant of Frejya.”

I turned to Harald and Leifr. “Originally, I had planned to see the king before Sigrid filed his petition. I thought about using my special perks to convince the king in my favor. But after learning this ...” I spread my hands. “Honestly, I’m at a loss. I suppose even if I beg the king to let go his claim over me now, it won’t do me any good, will it?”

Harald shook his head. “The original condition has not been met, and so the agreement is forfeited. Forgive me; our people take our oaths mighty seriously.”

My shoulders tensed as I racked my brain. “Is there any loophole I can exploit? There’s no such thing as a perfect law. Not here, not on Earth. I’m sure of it.”

Suddenly, Harald offered a thousand-megawatt smile. “This is where Master Leifr can be of assistance.” Harald and Leifr conversed briefly. “His Majesty is planning to hear Lord Sigrid at the end of the week, which gives us exactly seventy-two hours to execute our plan. He had confided in me that he’ll reject Lord Sigrid’s petition then move you into the inner court until the day he makes you his queen.”

“Inner court?”

“Ah, the inner court is where His Majesty’s concubines are residing.”

“You mean his harem?”

“Crudely put, but yes.”

“Tch.” I frowned. “Freaking unbelievable.”

“But there’s a way for you to plead your case before His Majesty, and he is obligated

to grant you an audience and a fair judgment. However, this method is very risky, and no one has done it in the past one hundred and fifty years. If you fail to convince His Majesty, you'll be beheaded."

"Even though I'm the last freaking female skjálf?"

"I can't be too sure. I believe Aesir law is quite strict."

"Tch. Seems like I don't have many options, do I? All right. Let's hear it."

Exactly one hour and twenty-two minutes later according to Alciel, I strode across the town square and into the Hall of Justice. The place was equal to any courthouse on Earth. In here, the fates of the criminals in the empire were decided. Civil cases rarely made into the court, as they were mostly settled in the *Thing* or holmgang. If one ever landed with the Justice Council, the equivalent to the US Supreme Court, the process itself would take months or even years before the case would even be considered, and a longer time for judgment because the outcome of the case was decided by the king himself. And the king was a busy man.

Today was going to be different. For the first time in one and a half centuries, I was about to invoke the rite of the Drum of Justice.

In front of the grand building of the Hall of Justice, there was a giant leather skin drum as big as a small house that was propped on top of a six-legged wooden support. The perimeter of the drum was fenced with chain links, discouraging people from playing touchy-feely.

In the past, anybody who had a grievance and wanted the king to hear his plight came here and struck the drum until his case was acknowledged. The king must drop whatever he was doing and grant the plaintiff audience. The plaintiff must make his case and convince the king in his favor. In the old days, the rite was made available as a last resort to combat corruption of the government officials and made the common citizen's voice heard. The plaintiff must also be responsible for presenting the court with corroborating evidence. If the king found out that the plaintiff's accusation had no merit, the plaintiff would be given a death sentence for wasting the king's valuable time.

I'd decided to take this big gamble after carefully reviewing my options. Since we were pressed for time and allies, I felt this was the best choice. I was fully aware of the

risk, but I intended to win. After all, this was the arena where I played best.

Aesir judicial system—here I come!

Sigrid kept a close watch on us, but we were able to fool him with a decoy. I had Jórgeen wear my clothes pretending to be me strolling in the garden while I slipped out with Alciel, Harald, Greinn and Leifr. I wore men's clothes to sneak past the royal guards in order to escape the palace. Once we were outside, we headed into the Hall of Justice.

The perimeter of the building was heavily guarded, but Harald gained entrance without being questioned because of his rank. Once we reached where the drum sat, I was on my own. According to the rules, only the justice seeker was allowed to hit the drum. A guard nearby yelled at us. Greinn moved quickly and knocked the guard down with a swift punch.

I ripped the stick from its cradle and hit drum as hard as I could. The loudness was unexpected. The drum sounded like a behemoth beast fell from the sky and crashed into the ground. My ear rang and all the hairs on my neck stood up. After the initial shock passed, I hit the drum again and again.

Commotion ensued.

More guards swarmed out from the hive. One tackled me onto the ground and wrestled me for the stick I held. Fists flew. Men shouted. Alciel yanked me up and shielded me from the people who wanted my blood because I'd just committed a cardinal sin. Greinn and Harald stepped in. They argued with a man who looked like the guards' commander. The argument was short-lived, leaving the commander brandishing his hands while shouting something that sounded suspiciously like it meant "Why? Whyyyyyy ...?"

Harald turned to me. "It's started."

"What now?" I asked.

"We wait."

The courthouse people didn't seem happy with my stunt. From my understanding, they were in a state of shock that someone had dared to pull one out right under their noses. For one and a half centuries, the power of the court had been revered as the

ultimate justice dispenser that none of the common folks had the guts to question. To have someone challenge that authority was the same as a slap in their faces. I was detained in a small room while we waited for the king and officers of the court to assemble. I sat quietly with my hands on my lap.

Greinn studied me. “Are you nervous?”

“A little. I’m just preparing my opening speech.”

“Harald told me you’re a barista in Midgard, yes?”

“You mean barrister?” I smiled. I don’t serve coffee, but I do dabble in law. “You can call it so. I make my living representing my clients in legal disputes.”

Greinn looked impressed. “How admirable. Here, women aren’t allowed to hold position as court officers or any civil servant. People in Midgard must have embraced an enterprising way of thinking. No wonder they have evolved in advance compared to us.”

“Have you ever been to Earth?” I asked. “Your English is pretty good.”

“A few times. Nothing but leisure travels. My tutor was always adamant that I learn foreign languages. ‘All knowledge is good to have,’ he said. I chose English because I’d love to have a human mate someday.”

“Is that so? You don’t have to worry about that. I have a feeling you’d be popular with our ladies.”

“You think so?”

The commander returned with a sour face and escorted us into the main courtroom. As I expected from these over-the-top people, the courtroom was named the ‘Chamber of Divine Justice.’ Only high-profile cases were tried in here. The king acted as a judge. There was no jury bench, so I assumed everything was decided by the king. The king would be seated in a grand chair, the center point of the room. There were two podiums facing the king that I assumed belonged to a plaintiff and defendant. As I entered the chamber, a grumpy-looking old man swathed in official regalia took his position on the right podium.

He gave me an intimidating glare.

I put my game face on and cast him my infamous sneer.

It was a mixture between utter contempt and an I-know-your-secret kind of sneer. Before every trial, I’d always imagined that my opponent had a limp minuscule dick, and I couldn’t wait to tell how embarrassing he was to everybody. The result was often in my

favor. My opponent couldn't read past my expression and often blundered his way throughout the trial second-guessing my moves.

I took my place at the other podium with my own dream team in tow.

People streamed into the chamber and packed behind the barrier. I guessed the rite had attracted many people who wanted to witness the once-in-a-lifetime proceeding. While waiting for the king to arrive, I consulted with Leifr about Aesir's law while Harald and Greinn helped me with the translation.

The bell rang, announcing the arrival of the king. He arrived from the reserve entrance of the chamber and took his seat in the judge's chair.

I was surprised to see the King of Aesir was so young. I'd imagined he was somewhat of a lecherous old man who liked to collect beautiful women in his harem. I guess I wasn't paying attention when Micah said he and the king were the same age. Andres Angnar, Harald Fáinn, Greinn Magnbjorn and Micah Raven were old battle buddies.

The king was a tall man with a fit physique dressed in a fancy ensemble and silver-colored cape. His skin was almost bronze in color, and his short hair was silvery-white. His face was strikingly beautiful and he knew it—the type of man I disliked the most. They were the worst in my opinion. They were aware that they were all that, and they used it to their advantage.

Angnar's eyes were as pale as his hair; they were glittering like diamonds as he took in the sight of the courtroom. Our gazes clashed. He held on for a few seconds before looking away. His expression was as hard as stone. Those cold eyes of his betrayed nothing.

King Angnar waved his hand, signaling the proceedings to begin. The room became more silent than a crypt.

A middle-aged man dressed in a ridiculous headdress and flowing robe sashayed next to the king. He bowed, then unrolled a large scroll, reading from it with a loud voice. Harald informed me that he was the Master of the Rites.

This supposed hearing wasn't a trial, but it sure felt like one. The official on the right podium was given the floor first. I was told his name was Olafer Porsi, and he was the Speaker of the Justices. The Aesir judicial system was quite strange in my opinion, but I was able to grasp the gist of it quite fast thanks to Master Leifr.

Olafr Porsi spoke. I was surprised it was in English.

“Your Majesty, I find this hearing utterly disagreeable. Considering how well we enforce law and order for our citizens, calling the rite through the Drum of Justice is a blatant contempt to Your Majesty’s ruling. As a citizen, one should be content to live his life as His Majesty had dictated.”

“Why, you fascist,” I muttered under my breath.

“Furthermore, I cannot fathom how a mere woman could muster the courage to plea before His Majesty. Her audacity is intolerable.”

“Sexist.”

“Women have never been allowed to enter the Hall of Justice before, so why should we make an exception now? Women should know their place and leave the important matters to their lords and masters.”

“Chauvinist.”

“Yet, the most important fact that deeply troubles me is that this woman is a mere human. Pardon my bluntness, but a human does not possess the same rights as the citizens of the Great Kingdom of Aesir.”

“Tch. Speciesist.”

The king turned to me. “Speciesist?” His voice was as sharp as steel.

Eep! The king heard me? He must have super-sharp hearing. But, whatever. “This man discriminates and bears prejudice against other species, Your Majesty. I ask that the court notes such bias,” I said with fire. My words were being translated among the audience in hushed tones.

The king looked as if he wanted to smile but covered it with frown instead. “I’ll allow it. The court duly notes it.”

A small triumph for me. As a result, I received death glares from Porsi and his band of old geezers.

Bring it on, bitches...

The Master of the Rite gave the floor to me.

I took a deep breath and gave an elegant curtsy to the king. “Your Majesty, my name is Jolene Marie Richardson, and recently I found out about my true origin. I was raised by human parents in Midgard, but my biological mother is none other than Soenne-Valdja Frárra, and my father is Edvin Audune. I inherit untainted Frejya’s divine bloodline, which makes me the last living female skjálf in Nine-Worlds.”

The court imploded with a dead silence at first, then the audience clamored among themselves. Porsi was taken aback. He stared at me as if I'd suddenly grown a second head.

The Master of the Rites hammered his staff on to the floor and shouted something like 'silence.' Everybody quieted at once.

I cleared my throat as all eyes were on me. At this crucial moment, I had to gain all sympathy from everybody in order to win my case.

"Approximately three weeks ago, a childhood friend of mine, Lord Micah Raven of Lockesund, took me to Nine-Worlds to fulfill a sacred oath that we'd made twenty-five years before while I was fostered with the humans. He promised me that someday, he would make me his wife."

I paused to let the words sink in. The impact was immediate. The murmurs among the audience intensified.

"And he did," I continued. "Unfortunately, at that time, I misunderstood. After twenty-five years apart, Your Majesty, our spiritual bond had weakened, and our marriage had not been consummated. Then, all of a sudden, Lord Sigrid Raven invaded Lockesund, imprisoned my husband and declared that Lockesund was under his command, and I belonged to him. I stand here before you, Your Majesty, I humbly plea that I be allowed to reunite with my husband—Micah Raven."

And the Oscar should go to ... me!

The audience behind me buzzed. I deliberately used the word 'husband' repeatedly to solicit sympathy and paint Sigrid's image as a villain who wanted to tear a pair of lovebirds apart.

Leifr had told me that the chance of my petition being granted based on marriage alone was quite slim since the law dictated that a woman was the property of a man, and should the man lose his wealth, it could be interpreted as well that the man's wife belonged to the new victor. In all of my years practicing law, this was the most outrageous and stupidest one that I'd ever encountered.

Porsi and his team old farts conversed among themselves while the king simply listened to the Master of the Rites with an impassive face.

With a feeble voice, Porsi asked for the floor. He was granted it. "Your Majesty, the principality law within our vast and diverse territory dictates that the central

government does not interfere with the clan's civil matter. It is most advisable that Your Majesty hastily deny this request."

King Angnar considered. "It's true. However, I'd still like to question the accused party in this case. Bring forth Lord Sigrid Raven."

The Master of Rites repeated Angnar's order in *Granech*.

The crowd clamored, and the livid-faced Sigrid emerged from behind the barrier. Sigrid threw a venomous glare at me before he walked next to the right podium and gave an official bow to the king.

Angnar ordered him to stand.

"Is it true that you overthrew your brother as the Jarl of Lockesund and forced his wife to be your woman?" asked Angnar.

Sigrid puffed his chest pompously. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, as the firstborn of the Raven House, I am the rightful heir of Lockesund. But my brother, with malice and cunning in his heart, wasn't content with the privilege and power as a respectable member of the Raven clan. He desires what belonged to me and it included—"

"Objection, Your Majesty! This man slanders my husband's character and defames his reputation." I pointed at Sigrid with unabashed hostility.

The courtroom became silent. Everybody stared at me with an incredulous expression. Leifr's jaw dropped. Harald and Greinn looked pale.

Oops. Is American-style courtroom routine not allowed in here? Gah. It's too late now. I kept my stance and held my head high.

Porsi recovered first. "Your Majesty, please allow me to remind Hailaga that such an outburst isn't only rude, but also discourage in this courtroom."

I interjected quickly. "Your Majesty, I believe blatantly lying isn't only rude, but also discourage from any courtroom, whether in Nine-Worlds or Midgard. Where I come from, a person who is called to give testimony in court is sworn to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. If a person can lie as he pleases, then he's not only defiling the sanctity of this legal proceeding, he also disrespects you, Your Majesty, as the ultimate embodiment of justice in the land."

Angnar studied me for quite a long time under his sharp gaze. Everybody waited with bated breath. I heard Leifr muttering something that sounded like a prayer.

Then, Angnar suddenly laughed.

“Hailaga, you certainly are an interesting woman.” He turned to Porsi. “I’ll allow it. Lord Raven, please state your case and omit any embellishment.”

Sigrid threw a black, venomous glare at me. If looks could kill, I’d probably have keeled over and died about now. But I only returned his glare with sweet, friendly, innocent smile. I knew that my opponent would get a thousand times more pissed if I acted that way.

Under the scrutiny of every person in the courtroom, Sigrid collected himself and spoke calmly. “Your Majesty, I’ve taken over Lockesund because my brother Micah has failed to fulfill the terms of our duel. By the law of our clan, I have the right to claim what used to belong to my brother, including his woman.”

“I see. What were the terms of the duel?” asked the king nonchalantly.

I was sure Angnar knew what it was, but he was just being a troll at the moment.

“As soon as Hailaga returned to Nine-Worlds, my brother had a fortnight to wed and bed her.”

Now all eyes were directed me. Jesus Christ, I might as well wear a sign that said “Pathetic Virgin Here!”

King Angnar looked at me again. This time, he wasn’t trying hiding his amusement. “Hailaga, earlier you said that your marriage to Micah Raven hasn’t yet been consummated, yes? And you remained ... untouched?”

For a second, I almost lost myself and replied to him with a snarky comeback. Luckily, I was able to control my emotions. “Your Majesty, I have not seen Micah for twenty-five years. I had completely forgotten about him until he took me into Nine-Worlds. He became somewhat of a stranger to me. What kind of woman would I be if I were to quickly surrender myself to a man who had only been briefly reunited with me after more than two decades?”

King Angnar steepled his fingers, considering. He turned to Sigrid. “I find Hailaga’s answer is reasonable. Virgins are rather shy to strangers, even though the men are their lawfully wedded husbands.”

Sigrid looked panicked. “But, Your Majesty—”

Angnar held out his hand. “I understand your concern, Lord Raven. However, Hailaga, I deem this matter is out of the High Court’s hand. According to the Sif Treaty

that united our entire territories, succession within the clan is the clan's own internal affair."

The audience buzzed again.

Damn. I'd expected this blow, but I hadn't given up yet. I still had a secret weapon up my sleeve. "Your Majesty, I must object!"

Angnar's eyebrow arched. "What now, Hailaga?"

"Lord Sigrid Raven can't claim what isn't his to begin with."

Sigrid bristled. "Micah failed. Whatever belonged to him now be—"

"I don't belong to Micah either!" I raised my voice sternly. "I chose to be with Micah. Belonging and choosing to be with are two different things." I cleared my throat and continued. "Your Majesty, I wish to invoke my right as a skjálf."

"Oh?" Angnar seemed intrigued.

"Your Majesty, according to the lore, Frejya's daughters Hnoss and Gersemi were promised to the first sky-raiders as mates so Nine-Worlds could flourish. As long as the descendants of Frejya walked under the blue sky, the lands will give the people bounties, springs and rivers will warrant the people to never experience thirst. However, not every sky-raider will be able to wed a skjálf. And thus, in the olden times, a tournament of Malm-Hrið was executed. Suitors of a female skjálf battle against one another in a sacred ring until the strongest one wins the ultimate prize.

"And, Your Majesty, I beg of you to grant me a Malm-Hrið so only the strongest warrior can win my hand in marriage."

Another cryptic silence blanketed the courtroom as soon as I finished delivering my most compelling argument.

King Angnar spoke first. "Olafr Porsi, what say you?"

Porsi and his team of geezers huddled and argued back and forth before answering the king. "Your Majesty, we feel that Hailaga's claim has merit."

"Very well." Angnar smiled broadly. "This turn of events certainly has piqued my interest. Every clan shall send a suitor to fight in order to win the hand of Hailaga. The Malm-Hrið tournament shall commence in three days."

Everybody started to talk at the same time. Sigrid objected to the king's decision, but I drowned him with my own voice. "Your Majesty, I humbly beg you to grant my petition."

“What now, Hailaga?”

“I ask that Micah Raven is allowed to enter the tournament.”

Angnar cocked his head slightly. “Is Micah Raven currently the head of the clan?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Then, your petition is denied.”

Crap! It was so close. “Then, I’d like to appeal your decision, Your Majesty.” I was stubborn.

Everyone looked at me as if I’d lost my mind. I didn’t care. This whole thing was useless unless Micah could enter the tournament.

Angnar’s lips turned into a hard line. “Your appeal is denied.”

“I’d like to re-appeal my petition.”

“Denied.”

“Then, I’d like to re-re-appeal my petition.”

“Denied.”

“Then, I’d like to re-re-re-appeal my petition, Your Majesty.”

“Hailaga, you can ask me a thousand times and my answer remains the same. Denied.”

“I object, Your Majesty!” I shouted without thinking.

“What is your objection this time?”

“You totally devastated my case.” My shoulders sagged. I’d never felt so disappointed about losing an appeal in my adult life. I might have won the battle, but I’d lost the war. Suddenly, my eyes blurred as my tears threatened to spill. *Don’t cry, Jolene, don’t cry*, I told myself. *You can’t be seen if you’ve totally fallen apart.*

As I fought the urge to cry, I failed to realize sooner that every single soul in the courtroom looked petrified.

Oh, crap. Did I make Angnar mad? Am I going to lose my head?

“Hailaga, please come forward,” King Angnar ordered.

Sniffling back my cry, I shuffled slowly onto the dais. I didn’t dare make eye contact with Angnar. I kept my gaze watching his gleaming boots as I bowed on my knees.

Angnar grabbed my head. His large hand and long fingers covered my entire scalp and touched my cheeks. I thought he was going to crack my head open or something. No. He was petting my head.

“Hailaga,” he called.

I dared myself to meet his eyes. I was surprised that he wasn’t angry at all. Those silvery eyes of him actually looked kind.

“The requirement to claim a skjálf is that one must be the head of the clan. Do you understand? The head of the clan. Do you understand?”

Was Angnar trying to help me? He kept saying the same thing over and over.

“I ... understand.”

“Good.” With his thumb, Angnar unexpectedly wiped the tear on my cheek. “And please don’t cry, fair one. They said when the Goddess Frejya feels sad, the sky mourns her sorrow with rain.”

Angnar gestured with the tip of his chin toward the window. That was when I realized there was a heavy downpour outside the windows.

Chapter Eleven

My victory was bittersweet. By the time it was over, I was distraught with what one called “lawyer’s remorse.” I couldn’t get Micah to compete in the tournament, and my brain was stuck in loop mode, replaying which argument I should have used to win this case. At any rate, it was useless now. Still, the fighting spirit in me didn’t want to give up. No matter how tightly woven the law was, there was bound to be a loophole somewhere, and I just needed to find it.

Alciel caught me when I stumbled on the step as we prepared to exit the courthouse building. Because of the curious mass, we were directed through a private hallway.

“Watch it.” Alciel steadied me. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m just thinking.”

Leifr said something to me.

“You’re doing well. It went better than he expected,” translated Harald.

“I thought so too,” chipped in Greinn. “I admire your bravery. I’ve never met someone who dares oppose the king so openly.”

I sighed. “Too bad. It didn’t solve our problem, did it? I can’t get Micah out of jail. We’re back to square one.”

Harald seemed to disagree. “Did you not see that Angnar tried to help you?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you were summoned by him. He told you that only the head of the clan can claim a skjálfr.”

I paused briefly, thinking. “Is he trying to tell me to get rid of Sigrid? How am I going to do that?”

Harald and Greinn traded a glance.

“The old-fashioned way?” Greinn offered.

My morale diminished. “I told you before, as much as I hate him, I can’t do that. I can’t wish for someone to kick the bucket. Despicable as he is, no one deserves to die. But, maybe, if we can knock him down a few notches, I can agree to that.”

At that moment, our path was blocked by a garrison of the king’s guards. They were

led by none other than Sigrid Raven.

“Speak of the devil,” I said. “What do you want?”

“Arrest him!” Sigrid pointed at Alciel.

Some of the guards rushed to immobilize Alciel. The mage offered no resistance, though he looked furious.

I immediately switched into my lawyer mode. “I demand to know what offense my thane has been charged with.”

“Treason. He’ll be beheaded by sundown. And that imbecile cousin of mine will also meet the same fate as well.”

“Jórgen? And you base this allegation on what? Something you pulled out of your ass?”

A malicious sneer was on his face. “As the Jarl of Lockesund, I don’t need to tell you anything, woman. Why don’t you just sit and pretty yourself up while waiting for the victor of Malm-Hrið to sweep you off your feet? Fear not, whoever he might be, he won’t be my beloved little brother.” Sigrid ordered the guards to strip Alciel of his weapons and personal belongings.

I stepped forward. “As the legal counsel of this thane, I have the right to know the basis for your accusation.”

Harald placed his hand on my shoulder. “Hailaga, please.”

“Hailaga is a skjálf. A lady of her status cannot be without personal guards, Lord Raven. You know that as a matter of fact,” Greinn admonished Sigrid like a teacher to a bad student.

Sigrid inclined his head in mock respect. “I’m painfully aware of the situation, Prince Magnbjorn. King Angnar has sent the Knights of Inner Court as Hailaga’s personal thanes. You should not have any worries. The lady is in good hands. We wouldn’t want the grand prize of the tournament spoiled before its time, would we?”

I narrowed my eyes. Had Sigrid become so desperate that he would take a counter-measure by removing my closest allies first? Did he feel threatened? Was he scared?

Good.

I needed to figure out more ways to keep Sigrid on edge and delay Alciel and Jórgen’s execution until I figured something out.

“Where are you taking Alciel?” I asked Sigrid. “As his legal counsel, I need to see that

he's treated well. I also demand that you hold a fair trial before you send people to the guillotine."

"Hailaga." Greinn halted me. "You can't do that."

"Why not? I'm Alciel's lawyer."

"The Knights are here. It means you have to go to the Inner Court with due haste."

Among the king's guards, there were a few young men who wore fancier livery. A young man with sapphire eyes and golden hair bowed and kneeled in front of me.

"Greeting, Hailaga. I'm Rikard from House Erickson and the Commander of the Inner Court Guards. We shall escort you to your new accommodation."

Leifr, Harald and Greinn also bowed their heads.

"Forgive us; since you are going to stay in the Inner Court, we can't accompany you any longer. Besides the Knights, men cannot enter the Inner Court leisurely. We must have the king's permission first," said Harald.

Oh, I get it. It became clear now. "Hah. Is this your plan too, Sigrid? Isolating me from my friends? Let me tell you something, this kind of intimidation doesn't scare me. I will get you, so you better watch your back."

Sigrid let out a derisive laugh. "I'd like to see you try."

Ugh. I wanted to claw that bastard to wipe that annoying smirk off of his face. "Bitch, you're going down," I vowed.

The Knights led me into the deepest part of the palace, rumored to be where the king stashed his love interests. Alciel had told me earlier that the Inner Court was dubbed "No Man's Land," as only ladies-in-waiting and the maids were allowed to enter. I guessed the king wanted to keep the flowers in his harem to himself. Made sense to me. He wouldn't want any competition, would he?

When I entered the gate of the Inner Court, I was expecting the Arabian harem scene that I often saw in the movies with half-naked beautiful women lounging everywhere as servants fanned them with palm fronds and pampered their every little whim. I was disappointed to find that the Inner Court was quite normal. There were noble women, and servants dressed normally—nothing exotic or out of the ordinary. I was welcomed like royalty and was shown into my new apartment.

“Hailaga, we have also moved your belongings from the south wing. Should you need anything, please do not hesitate to let me know,” said the commander with refined politeness.

I just realized that the man was very young. He looked as if he'd barely left his teenage years. In fact, all the Knight members were strapping young lads. “Rikard... yes?”

He bowed his head.

“I'm curious. They said men aren't allowed in the Inner Court. Does that rule not apply to you?”

“No, since we're virtuous.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

“We were handpicked for training when we were eight years old. We were taught the way of the sword, literature and learned to speak several languages. We also followed a strict regimen of meditation and practiced celibacy of mind, body and soul since we entered the service. To keep temptation at bay, we were castrated to keep us pure.”

Castration? They were eunuchs?

“Ah.” I didn't know what to say to that.

“We're also oath-bound to keep the virtuosity of the Inner Court. When we reach the age of twenty, we have the option to become the king's elite thanes or join our brothers as warrior-priests.”

“Such dedication at such a young age. I'm impressed,” I said.

The twelve young men before me beamed with apparent pride.

“We are not worthy of such praise,” said Rikard humbly.

“Hailaga, is it true that you can summon earthquakes?”

“I heard that in Midgard people can be put in a little box and can be carried anywhere. Is that true, Hailaga?”

The Knights flooded me with questions and curiosity.

Rikard silenced them. “Forgive us, Hailaga. The Inner Court has never had a mistress since King Angnar was crowned. We are all a little excited.”

Huh? The king is single? “Those women in fancy dress I met earlier, they're not the king's concubines?”

“No, no.” Rikard laughed. “They are the ladies-in-waiting. They are to serve the queen

should King Angnar be inclined to take one. Maybe one day. We hope.”

“We really hope,” echoed the Knight with short sandy hair.

“*Ja*. We really, really hope,” added the Knight with violet eyes.

I politely laughed with them. “Is that so? Is Angnar gay?”

They all sobered all of a sudden.

“Look at the time. I just remember that I have to report to General Grimmkell at once,” said the Knight with the dark eyes.

“I forgot the tea kettle on the stove.”

“I think I left my baby brother at the store.”

Others made ridiculous excuses. They were so bad at lying.

“Please, excuse us, Hailaga. If you need us, just ring the bell. We are near, but won’t be bothersome. I imagine you would like to rest after a long tiring day,” said Rikard.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Oh, your personal attendant is waiting in your room. She insisted earlier that we furnish your accommodations to your liking,” added Rikard.

Personal attendant? I didn’t bring any of my handmaidens from Lockesund.

Wait ...

I excused the Knights from my apartment then ran into my room. Except I didn’t know which room was my room since my private accommodations were pretty huge. I went from door to door frantically before I found Jórgeen in the fourth room. He was still dressed in drag, unpacking clothes upon clothes from a large wooden box. Gifts wrapped in fancy packages were sprawled on the bed.

“Jórgeen!” I ran and hugged him. “Thank God you’re okay.”

He was perplexed. “Hailaga?”

“Sigrid arrested Alciel and he’s looking for you too. Alciel has been charged with treason. He’s going to be killed by sundown. You have to help him!”

“Hailaga, calm down. Tell me what happened.” Jórgeen went all serious.

I gave him the abridged version. “I have an order for you, Jórgeen. Find Alciel and teleport together to Lockesund. Free Micah from the tower and bring him here. Tell him I’m in trouble and he needs to save me. I don’t care if he’s oath-bound to honor his agreement to Sigrid or anything, just make sure Micah will be here before the tournament ends. He needs to win. He needs to win me.”

Jórgen nodded. “Understood. What was your order again?”

Eh? “Alciel. Lockesund. Get Micah here. Do you get it, or do you want me to repeat it for you?”

“Ah. Perhaps, you can say your order a bit ... meaner?”

I wanted to punch him, but that probably was what he wanted. Instead, I smiled sweetly and spoke in a singsong voice. “Why, Jórgen darling, if you don’t go now and do exactly as I ordered you, I’m going to be very, *vevy* nice to you from now on. Maybe I’ll take you on a picnic tomorrow where we can frolic happily under the blue sky and dance with the unicorns that shoot rainbows from their asses and live happily ever after.”

Jórgen watched me in horror. “No.”

“Yeees. And it won’t be just me; I’m going ask everybody to treat you the same way too. After all, you’re such a sweet, sweet boy, Jórgen, and you deserve only the best of—”

“Forgive me, Goddess!” Jórgen instantaneously dropped on his knees and bowed repeatedly. “I’m out of line. I will depart at once.”

The grin on my face hadn’t completely faded when he bowed one more time and dashed out of the door. Well, what do you know? I accidentally discovered Jórgen’s weakness. This would be useful the next time Jórgen wanted to pull one of his shenanigans.

The next morning, my breakfast was interrupted by a raucous commotion. My new attendants had just served me tea when I heard Sigrid’s angry voice behind the thick, heavily paneled doors. Rikard’s voice interjected in the shouting match. I listened in with great interest since I still don’t understand Granech, the common language spoken throughout the territory. I’d slept poorly last night. I wondered if Alciel and Jórgen were able to escape the prison. Just after sundown, the carillon in the highest tower in the capital rang like crazy. Then I heard footsteps and hushed voice of the guards in front of my doors. I thought maybe Jórgen had successfully spirited Alciel away. And now, Sigrid had found out and demanded an explanation from me. However, the Commander of the Knights wasn’t letting Sigrid bully me.

I commended Rikard’s guts. He might be young, but he wasn’t easily intimidated. After a while, the shouting died down and peace returned to the Inner Court.

When the attendants cleaned the plates away, Rikard stepped in to report.

“Forgive me for the earlier disturbance, Hailaga. Last evening, it seems your thanes somehow escaped execution. Lord Raven wanted to search your apartment, but I forbade him from entering. Since you were installed here by the king, you have the right to refuse unwanted visitors. This I tell you for your consideration in the future,” said Rikard.

“Thank you,” I said. It appeared that staying in the Inner Court had given me some kind of diplomatic immunity. Not bad. I should explore this more. “Say, do you know what happened to those fugitives by any chance?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. The city has been swarmed with visitors since the tournament was announced. I guess the gatekeepers have been so inundated with the influx of people entering the city that they probably had not been watching those who wanted to get out as keenly.”

“Ah, too bad. Just Sigrid’s luck, don’t you think?”

Rikard let out a sympathetic smile. “Lord Raven must have been stressed dearly. He should have wound down with a bottle of good liquor.”

“Or ten.”

“Or ten,” Rikard agreed.

The heavy burden on my shoulders lifted slightly now that I knew Alciel and Jørgen had escaped the guillotine. I hoped our plan went well. Otherwise... Well, I had to keep improvising.

Around noon, King Angnar summoned me into the throne room. My new translator and all around butler, a eunuch named Finni, informed me that this was official business, so I was expected to dress formally.

Aesir fashion was more controversial than Lockesund’s. Whereas the ladies in Lockesund favored high-necked long gowns with floor-sweeping sleeves, Aesir high socialites preferred outfits that showcased their belly buttons. A Midi wrap top paired with a flowing skirt. Instead of robes, unmarried women displayed their status with half-face veils called yasmaq, a sheer and highly ornate face covering that obscured everything below the eyes.

As I walked to the throne room, flanked by priestesses from a local Frejya temple, I longed to be back in the real world where people didn’t go cos-playing 24/7.

Angnar welcomed me with delight.

He complimented my attire and was genuinely interested in the small Denver Broncos tattoo near my navel. I got it when I was in college after three beers and an experimental smoke of joint. Besides having impaired mental capacity, I might have had a crush on a guy who was a diehard Bronco's fan at that time. It was a stupid story anyway.

The throne room was filled with men clad in battle regalia. Young. Old. Handsome. Downright scary. I guessed immediately that these men had come here for the tournament.

"Are they all heads of the clans?" I asked Angnar.

"Naturally. All these gentlemen are in competition for your hand in marriage. How do you feel, Hailaga?"

"Awful. If you'd just granted my request in the first place, I wouldn't have to resort to this game and play with these men's hopes and dreams."

Angnar studied me for a long time. "You surprise me. That isn't the answer I expected to hear."

"What? You think I like being a skjálfr? These men only like me because of my status and my pedigree. While Micah likes me for who I am."

Angnar smiled mysteriously. His silvery eyes glittered as he gently stroked my veil. "As much as I'd like to help you, my hands are tied. Although, I do have some special privileges to circumvent the law."

"Like?"

"I could assign Micah as my champion in the tournament. If he wins, I could surrender my prize to him."

"You could do that?" I became excited.

"Absolutely."

I waited. "Well?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Would you do it?"

"No."

"What? I thought Micah was your friend?"

"Micah is more than my friend; he's my blood-sworn brother. But if this is about you,

I won't surrender my claim. You're simply too precious to give up."

"You don't even love me. You just want me because of this freaking skjálf thing. And why do you want me anyway? I thought you were gay."

"Gay? How did you come to such a conclusion?"

"I have my sources, but I don't kiss and tell if that's what you meant."

Angnar gestured for me to take a seat next to him. "You're a fascinating woman, Hailaga. I'm sure it won't be hard for a man to fall in love with you."

"You like women too?"

"I do, but finding the right one who isn't motivated by my wealth and status is nearly impossible."

"Oh. So you go both ways?"

"Do you find my sexual orientation amusing?"

"I'm curious. Anyway, I don't understand how you could be so cold if Micah is really your best friend. Don't you want to help him?"

"I'm cold?" Angnar's lush eyebrow curved. "I think I'm a most tolerant person. You were promised to me since you were a mere infant. When Lord Raven brought you to be reared in Midgard, you were supposed to be groomed as my queen, as my King Father had ordered it. I don't know why Lord Raven felt entitled to wed you to Sigrid when you were not his to begin with. As for my cold-heartedness, how would you feel if your best friend asked you to let go the person who had been promised to you since you were a babe?"

I couldn't answer. "Tch." I sat grumpily. I hated the way the truths unraveled one by one like decades-old paint on the wall. Just when you thought you got to the bottom of it, new revelations emerged and shattered your perspective. I thought Micah's father intended to groom me for his son Sigrid. I'd never thought Lord Raven himself had his own agenda.

Politics.

Court intrigue.

Power struggles.

Treachery.

Betrayal.

I began to see the deadly games these people played. It was like "*Game of Thrones*,

you either win or die kind of thing. I never guessed some people played this for real. I absolutely wanted no part in this, but perhaps it was already too late.

I shuddered inwardly.

Angnar conversed with his ministers. They handed him a scroll, handwritten with unreadable glyphs. “Would you care to take a look at this?” he asked me.

“Yeah sure. Let’s see ... stick, stick, triangle, stick, arrow, dot, dot, stick, stick. Wow. You people really like sticks, huh?”

The king softly laughed. “These are the names of the tournament participants, their clans, affiliations, holdings of wealth and family registers. You have the right to choose and reject participants based on reasonable preferences.”

“Reasonable preferences?” I scanned the men in the throne room. “I don’t like them all. Send them home.”

“Excellent. Then I could just go ahead and make you my queen.”

“Wait—I changed my mind.” I thought hard for several seconds. “To enter this tournament, he must be single. I don’t want a previously engaged man, or those who have been promised for marriage before.”

“Very well thought out,” said Angnar. He repeated my words in Granech to his scribe. “Anything else?” he asked me.

“He must be over twenty-five years old and no more than thirty-five years old.”

Angnar nodded. The royal scribe furiously jolted down what Angnar dictated.

“Have a stable job, and good health insurance, and a 401K. He must have a good sense of humor, love animals, and enjoy a long walk on the beach.”

“Hailaga,” Angnar reprimanded me, “be reasonable.”

“How’s he going to support me if he doesn’t have a stable job? I’m planning to be a housewife once I get married,” I retorted stubbornly.

“All men in here are financially well off, you see.”

Like I actually care about that. The one I want the most is Micah, and he’s not here. “Who’s the strongest fighter among them?” I asked out of curiosity.

“I can’t really say, but each head of the clan is an accomplished swordsman,” Angnar answered. “Like my champion over there, Prince Ragna Angnar. He’s what you would call a prodigy. He beat our instructor at swordplay by the age of ten, and led a battalion of soldiers in Hvergelmir at the age of sixteen. His first war campaign was a huge

success. To date, Ragna is our youngest general in history.”

The man he pointed to bore a strong resemblance to Angnar himself. Silvery-white hair, glittering eyes, bronze skin, all the way down to the pouty, dead serious expression.

“Is he your brother?” I asked.

“Half-brother. Ragna was born from a consort mother. He carries the title ‘Prince,’ but he can’t be my successor or be eligible to rule the throne.”

“I see. In that case, who is the champion for the Raven clan? Don’t tell me Sigrid entered the tournament himself.”

“As a matter of fact, he did.” Angnar traced a row of glyphs on the scroll. “However, we don’t see him here at present. He must be occupied.”

“Is Sigrid a good fighter?”

“Very. I’d say he’s a smart fighter. He knows how to utilize his brain to his advantage.”

“Compared to Micah?”

“Micah is a madman. He’s not just strong and highly skilled, he’s also fearless as well. He often took crazy risks and survived through it. Do you know his nickname in the battlefield? ‘Rampaging Ogre.’”

“Rampaging Ogre. Say, hypothetically, if your brother faces Micah in the arena, who is likely to win?”

Angnar smiled broadly. “A genius versus a madman. That would be an interesting match to see. Hypothetically, assuming your beloved Micah is eligible to enter the tournament. Or shall I assume you have some kind of plan in mind?”

“I’m not telling you.”

Angnar laughed heartily. “You’re truly an interesting woman, Jolene. I’m starting to see why Micah wants you so badly.”

Somehow, I felt uneasy with the way Angnar called me by my first name. It also felt too familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger to it. I turned to Angnar and eyed him suspiciously. Our gazes collided. I held on. Angnar was the one who looked away first as my friends Harald and Greinn entered the throne room.

A dozen questions popped into my mind. My curiosity was fickle like a pickled cat. The bubbling speculations were getting more ridiculous by the second. I pushed the thoughts away, because I needed to concentrate on the tournament. Assuming that my

plan would work, I also needed to find a way for Micah to win as well.

I focused on Ragna with fervent intensity. The young man with shoulder-length hair stood calmly while staring at the hilt of his sword. As if he knew he was being watched, he turned to me. A little smile spread on his face as he gave me a quick salute.

I blew him a raspberry. Not that he could see through my veil.

Between a genius and a madman, who was likely to win?

The tournament started the next morning. From one hundred fifty-three participants, only twenty-four met my qualifications. The remaining candidates were divided into two groups. Those who won the elimination round would advance to semi-finals, and then the sole victors of that group would fight an ultimate battle.

As I sat beside Angnar, a strong sense of déjà vu overcame me once again. It was holmgang all over, and I was jarringly reminded of how much I hated it.

This tournament was nothing but a glorified testosterone du jour of stupid men stupidly whacking each other with stupid sharp objects. Even though my brain was mostly wired like them, sometimes I had a hard time understanding the creature called “man.” As Ovid once said, “*Nec possum tecum vivere, nec sine te.*” I can’t live with you or without you. Men might say the same thing about us, but go figure.

The elimination round took a whole day to complete. Out of twenty-four candidates, twelve were cleared to advance to the next round. I wasn’t surprised that Sigrid and Ragna were among them. I hated to admit it, but Sigrid was a very good swordsman. Ragna was even better. He made swordplay look ... beautiful.

I could see Ragna entering the final. I didn’t want to cheer for Sigrid, but I kind of needed him to win. When Micah got here, I had to do something about Sigrid so Micah could take his place in the tournament. In the meantime, I still had no idea on how to get rid of Sigrid. Should I drug him? Beat him up? Or order Alciel and Jørgen to give Sigrid the ultimate atomic wedgie so he couldn’t walk for weeks?

Damn, why was it so hard to think up an evil plan? I guess I’m not cut out to be an evil villain.

Angnar nudged me. “You’re thinking so hard, I can hear your brain creaking. What are you scheming?”

“I’m not talking to you, you big jerk.”

He let out an amused sound. “Is that so? Indulge my curiosity if you don’t mind. Why didn’t you bed Micah when you had the chance?”

I turned to him. I could tell him a thousand excuses, but the truth lay within me. “It was my mistake. I was playing hard to get. I was expecting romance, and when I didn’t get it, I punished Micah for it.”

“Ah? So you’re feeling guilty. You asked for this tournament so you can ease your guilt, or do you really love that man so much you’re willing to do anything for a chance to catch a glimpse of him again?”

I didn’t expect to hear that. “I guess both. But I love Micah. I know it.”

“Hmm? Do you love him so much that you don’t care how many people you sacrifice as pawns, as long as you get what you want?”

“Oh that’s nice, kick me while I’m down, why don’t you?”

“Do my words not ring true?”

“Your Majesty, are you trying to make me feel bad?”

He waved uncaringly. “No, not at all. It’s only a friendly reminder from yours truly. For those who rule others, one must take a wise consideration each time he tries to venture into the unknown. Be careless, and innocent lives will be destroyed. You’re not who you were anymore, Jolene. You are a person many people idolize. Take a little care the next time you want to do something this outlandish.”

I hung my head. If there was a desk in front of me, I’d have banged my head repeatedly. “What do you want me to do? I was desperate,” I said in a small voice. “It’s not like I signed up for this.”

“Grow up.” Angnar’s tone was rather cruel. “Do you think I wanted to be a king? If I could choose my own destiny, I’d prefer a simple, quiet life in a remote village somewhere, teaching children the way of the sword. If I were to abandon the throne and my people, the idyllic life I wanted might not even exist in the first place. We all have roles to fulfill in this lifetime whether we like it or not. Complaining about it is nothing but an act of cowardice.”

His words felt like a bucket of ice water dumped onto me. God, was I that whiny? I’m an American—we complain a lot. Then again, I’ve never experience true hardship in my life that really defines my character. What Angnar said was an eye opener. Instead of

wallowing in self-pity, I should become a better person for myself and for the people around me.

“What do you think I should do now?” I asked him. My usual strong self-confidence wavered.

He sighed heavily. “It’s too late to do anything at this stage. You’ve made the bed, and now you must lay in it.”

Balls.

I had no desire for dinner, so I skipped it and sent the servants away for the night. I’d asked Finni earlier if he was willing to relay my message to Harald or Greinn and ask them for a meeting outside the Inner Court. Only two days left, and I hadn’t yet received any news from Alciel or Jórge. I repeatedly calculated my plan. I was hoping Alciel would use his spatial magic to get into Lockesund, free Micah and return here. With magic, it all could be done in one night. Without magic, my plan would be completely ruined. It took us two days to get from Lockesund to Aesir flying. A round-trip would take four days. By then it would already be too late. Some Genghis Khan-wannabe might have won me and spirited me away to his far, faraway land.

I had to explore other options. Options that wouldn’t get people hurt, killed or maimed.

Ugh. The pressure!

I searched my room to find my anti-anxiety prescription and found it the pocket of my YSL coat. As I opened the lid, I remembered that the damn things didn’t really work on me the last time. I abandoned my attempt for an easy fix and settled down with a cup of tea instead. That was when Sigrid flounced smugly through the front door. Rikard and the Knights were at Sigrid’s heel, looking unhappy.

“What? You again?” I sneered. “The last time I checked, you’re not a woman. You’re not welcome in here.”

Sigrid whipped out a piece of parchment with a flourish. “I have the king’s permission. I have official business to conduct.”

Rikard’s gaze met mine. “Forgive us, Hailaga.”

I waved my hand. “That’s all right.”

“I have a matter of importance to discuss with Hailaga. I’d like you to remove your presence from this room,” said Sigrid to Rikard.

Rikard looked at me.

“That’s fine,” I said.

Rikard and the Knights bowed and withdrew silently.

“Where are Jórgen and that mage?” Sigrid asked me.

“I can’t tell you that. That information is strictly protected by attorney and client privilege.”

Sigrid ground his teeth. He walked past me and started to investigate from room to room.

“Excuse me, do you have a search warrant?” I said that just to annoy him.

He ignored my dig and thoroughly inspected every nook and cranny. Of course, he found nothing. Sigrid opened the big trunk where I stored my clothes and gifts. He started yanked the contents and made a big mess out of it.

“Seriously, do you think I hid them under my skirts?” I said.

“Where are they?”

I gave him the “duh” look.

“Very well. I see you are not inclined to cooperate, so I should warn you not to involve yourself in this matter any further. If you don’t heed my warning, I could very well send you to the executioner along with them.”

“Oh no, I’m so scared I’m trembling.”

Sigrid leaned closer. “Don’t think that you’re invincible. It’s only a matter of time before you become mine. Once that happens, your fate rests in my hand. I will decide whether you’re good enough to give me an heir, or if I should give you death instead.”

Give him heir? Is that what I think it is? Eeeew. Gross!

“Think you can win against Prince Ragna?” I refused to be intimidated. “He’s a prodigy, you know? He’s younger than you, and he’s easy on the eyes too. I bet he’s going to kick your ass so bad he tears you a new one. Bitch.”

He seized my neck and squeezed my throat. I clawed his hand with my nails, trying to pry his fingers off me. It was no use. Sigrid was too strong. Panic overcame me the same as any living being who was suddenly cut off from oxygen. I tried to shout, but nothing came out of my mouth.

He dragged me to a nearby room and threw me onto the bed. I sprawled on my back, coughing like crazy. I tried shouting again to warn the Knights. My voice disappeared as if someone had stolen it.

“Can’t scream?” Sigrid leered. “I can’t stand a woman like you. Always have to open your big mouth and argue about everything. I like you better like this—mute.”

Damn. Did he steal my voice with magic?

I regained my composure. I still refused to be intimidated by him. Jackasses like him thrive on power. I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

I flipped him the bird—the universal language of “fuck you.”

Sigrid backhanded me.

I gasped. The entire right side of my face hurt like hell. My ear rang from the pain. Still I refused to show him that I was weak. I gave him double birds.

Sigrid ripped the front of my gown then held me down. His eyes no longer looked human. His entire pupil and sclera had turned black. “I should take you right here and right now. The hell with the tournament. You’re mine to begin with.”

Another panic rose inside me. Sigrid was going to violate me, and I was powerless. My first instinct was to fight him off with all the strength I had. I suppressed that urge; kicking and screaming only served as fuel to a rapist. I took self-defense lessons a few years back, and the instructor advised us that, if it was possible, it would be better to wait for an opportunity to launch an attack. So I did. I lay docilely and looked away.

I heard him unfasten his breeches. Sigrid kept ranting about stuff, mostly in Granech, that I didn’t understand. He pushed my gown up. I pretended to play along. Then I grabbed his cock and squeezed it with all my strength. Squeezed and pulled without mercy.

Sigrid howled in pain.

I used the opportunity to get away from him. I rolled over the bed and grabbed a vase by the nightstand, smashing it against his head. It turned out it was quite hard to make people unconscious that way. Unlike on TV or the movies. So I grabbed a pitcher of water and bashed it on his skull. No. Sigrid still bawled like a baby. He tried to grab me from the bed and only caught my sleeves. He fell from the mattress. I grabbed a chair and whacked it against his head.

This time Sigrid lay still.

I kicked him several times for a good measure. “Take that, and that, fucker!”

My voice returned. It seemed that what I did cancelled Sigrid’s magic.

After the endorphins from the survival instinct dissipated, I puffed out my breath. I poked Sigrid with the tip of my shoes. He moaned deliriously.

Crap.

I didn’t want him to wake up too soon. My eyes caught the anti-anxiety pill bottle that rolled off from my jacket when Sigrid messed up my clothes. I grabbed it and tore off the lid.

I cautiously approached him again. I forced open his mouth and dumped the entire contents in. I squeezed his nose so he’d swallow it. He coughed, but most of the pills went into his throat. A few minutes later, he became very still.

Good lord. Did I accidentally kill him?

I read the label on the bottle. It was ninety days supply of 2mg Xanax. That was about one hundred eighty milligrams of drug.

Oh, double crap.

The front door suddenly slammed open, and people rushed in. I couldn’t believe what I saw. Alciel, Jørgen, Harald, Greinn, Rikard and the Knights dashed into the room.

“We heard noises. We were at the gate, and we couldn’t get to you fast enough,” Alciel began. He took at the situation. The others did the same thing.

I didn’t need to explain it. It was very clear what had happened. My torn clothes. Sigrid lying unconscious with his fly open.

Jørgen hugged me. “Mistress, are you all right?” He let me go. “Your face ...” His eyes narrowed at Sigrid. He quickly pulled out his knife and went after Sigrid.

“No!” I halted him. “I think I already killed him.”

“That’s okay. This is just to be sure,” Jørgen argued.

“Don’t! I hate blood. I don’t want to see more blood.”

“I’ll clean it up. Alciel will bury his body.”

“Jørgen!”

Rikard stopped Jørgen, and Alciel checked on Sigrid.

“Unfortunately, he’s still alive,” announced Alciel.

Jørgen started at him again. It took Harald and Greinn to restrain him.

“Everybody calm down,” I said loudly. “Everything is under control.”

Alciel picked up a spilled pill from the floor. "What is this?" he asked me.

"Xanax. He wouldn't go down, so I did what I had to do. I think he's overdosed."

"Xanax is a benzodiazepine class of drug. With his weight and height, I highly doubt it will do him significant harm, but just in case, I'll see to it," said Alciel.

He slapped Sigrid a few times and did his magic thing. Sigrid suddenly doubled over and vomited the pills. He started to come around, moaning. Alciel sucker-punched him in the face. Sigrid's head whipped backwards and fell motionless.

"Now that's how you render someone unconscious properly," said Alciel lightly. "I'll deal with him. What don't you all take Hailaga out and tend to her?. This must have been a horrible ordeal for her."

Rikard turned abruptly and knelt in front of me, followed by the rest of the Knights. "Hailaga, this unspeakable horror was allowed to happen because of our fault. Please let us regain our honor by executing the divine judgment to this offender of the Inner Court."

"Bastard needs to die!" Jrgen yelled.

"Sigrid is a jarl. What can you do about him?" I asked. "Doesn't a man in his position have some kind of immunity?"

"That's true," said Harald, who was well versed on the legal proceedings in the government. "If we were to hand him to be tried in the Hall of Justice, Lord Sigrid Raven would get off with a slap on the wrist."

"Outrageous. What about the divine judgment you propose, Commander?" I asked Rikard.

"We are the servants of Vidar, God of Divine Judgment. Our precepts demand equal punishment for each offense committed. Lord Sigrid committed one of the worst offenses a man can do to a woman; therefore, his punishment must fit his crime. He must experience the hardship and sorrow of his victim because only then will he be able to atone for all of his wrongdoings," said Rikard.

"What do you mean by that?"

Rikard traded glances with his team. "In layman's terms, we are going to deprive Lord Sigrid of his manhood."

I flinched inwardly as I imagined it was snip-snip time for Sigrid. The punishment was rather harsh, but I didn't dislike it. It might be better than a death sentence. "I

agree,” I said. “Do as you will.”

Rikard bowed low. “With all my gratitude, Hailaga, I thank you.”

Chapter Twelve

With Sigrid in the Knights' custody pending their punishment, the crux of my problem had resolved itself. As Harald put it, only a man was eligible to be the head of the clan, not a eunuch, so Sigrid's claim as a jarl was no longer valid.

Before taking Sigrid away, Rikard informed me that the warrior-monks from the Order of Vidar would commence the punishment at midnight. After that, Sigrid would be moved into their main monastery in Icari for a life of repentance and salvation.

I also found out that if a crime was committed under the authority of a church or religious order, the king had no right to intervene according to the law in Aesir. Since the Knights had become the watchdogs in the Inner Court, any offense would be dealt with and punished according to their precepts.

King Angnar quickly learned what had happened and came to the Inner Court with his entourage and Micah. Angnar didn't say much, but he looked pissed. Micah was tight-lipped too and thoroughly formal. He seemed angry, but I didn't know whether his anger was directed towards me or because of what Sigrid had done.

As I stood before him, uneasiness overwhelmed me. I wanted to touch him, but the distance between us felt like an ocean apart.

I could usually get a pretty good reading of what a person was thinking, but this time I got nothing. It felt awful. Freaking awful. Man, I wanted to disappear from his view and hide under a rock until the day I died. If there weren't so many people in the room, I'd asked him straight on. Unfortunately, the opportunity never presented itself. Our meeting was brief and cold. I was stressed out even more than before the Sigrid incident.

No, I'd rather face ten Sigrids than see Micah like this.

No, scratch that. I'd rather faced Hitler with an army of zombies and the devil himself as his wingman than see Micah like this.

With Sigrid being disgraced, Micah took over the position as jarl. His first order of business was freeing those who'd been imprisoned by Sigrid and banishing those who'd allied with his brother. Messengers and reinforcement thanes were sent to Lockesund to deal with Sigrid's remaining force. Angnar approved his nomination into the

tournament, and he was allowed to fight tomorrow against Prince Ragna.

My plan fell into place like I'd hoped. But why didn't I feel a bit happy?

Late that night, when everybody had retired to rest, I forced Alciel to accompany me to see Micah. I used Jrgen as a decoy again so the Knights wouldn't get suspicious that I had sneaked out of the Inner Court.

I couldn't let things end this way. I had stirred up a hornets' nest and raised hell along the way just for us to be together. If Micah didn't want to go back to the way it was before, then at the least I needed to hear it from his own mouth.

With his spatial magic, Alciel took me to the palatial wing where the honored guests were housed. We looked all over for him, but we couldn't find him anywhere. Just when I was about to give up, we saw Micah walking silently in the palace grounds.

I called to him.

He looked stunned.

I sprinted to him. "Why won't you talk to me? Even if you hate me, won't you listen to what I have to say?"

His dark eyes narrowed. "I don't hate you. I never did. Never will."

"Then why are you avoiding me?"

"Joie." His gaze met mine. "You have been assaulted by my brother. I figure you don't want have anything to do with his kin at present. If I talk to you, I'm afraid I won't be able to refrain myself from touching you. I know just how revolting unwanted touch is for a woman."

I was momentarily speechless. "Is that why you avoided me? You're unbelievable."

Micah blinked.

"I love you, stupid!" I hugged him tightly. My chest became tight. My face was hot. I didn't want to cry, but renegade tears streamed down my cheeks despite my effort to stave them off. I buried my face in his hair. I inhaled his scent—the scent I dearly missed. I could moan and bitch about what had gone wrong between us, but I couldn't deny my feelings for him.

To think how absurd it had been for us. How juvenile. Being oblivious on my own wedding day. Chasing after him as if I wanted to nab a criminal. Maybe one day I could look back at these memories and have a good laugh at it. But for now, I just wanted to hold him and never let go.

Micah whispered my name. He slowly wrapped his arms around me and told me how much he loved me. I closed my eyes. That moment, the burden was lifted off my shoulders. He loved me. Never hated me.

We embraced for quite some times before we remembered where we were. I let him go first. We looked into each other eyes. Micah smiled first. I giggled. The giggle was so infectious that we soon laughed together like a pair of loonies.

Micah stroked my cheek. “Are you mine, Joie?”

“Why, yes, Mr. Raven. All yours.”

“May I kiss you then?”

“You’re welcome to do more than that.”

Just as he about to kiss me, we heard someone loudly clear his throat.

Fucking unbelievable. It seemed like the divine cosmic had a bone to pick against us.

I turned my head to the source of the interruption and found Prince Ragna standing behind us. His eyes looked bright, and the moonlight illuminated his silvery-blond hair, making his presence even more dismal.

“Hailaga, you bestow more attention to other candidates just before the duel. It is not fair,” he said.

That was the first time I’d heard him talk. His voice was a straight-on basso profundo—deep and sonorous with a very low register. If he ever gave up his sword one day, he could be well off as an octavist for the St. Petersburg Chamber Choir.

Micah slowly rose from the ground. He stood about two inches taller than Ragna. “What I do with my wife is none of your concern.”

“Your wife.” Ragna glanced at me. “Then what were we doing for the last two days in tournament if she’s truly your wife? To think a man would let his woman roam about for others to prey on.”

“Whoa, gentlemen. Cool down. This isn’t the right time to be having an argument.” I came between them. The last thing I wanted to happen was for them to have a brawl.

The Knights of the Inner Court chose a bad time to join us. Rikard didn’t look pleased at all. He chastised me with his disapproving glare.

“Hailaga, just how much trouble do you plan to impose on us?” he said.

“Commander, I’m just about to leave. Why don’t you see the Prince back to his quarters?” I suggested.

Ragna narrowed his eyes at me.

Rikard wasn't impressed either. "We're here to escort you back to the Inner Court."

"Alciel!" I waved at the mage, who stood silently observing us. "Why don't you take Lord Raven back to his room?"

"I don't need to go my room," said Micah, unhappy.

Rikard inclined his head. "After you, Hailaga."

I squeezed Micah's hand. I had no choice but to leave now. "Win me tomorrow, damn it."

Watching a duel was a nerve-wracking experience if someone you loved was in it. The sun was at its zenith when King Angnar officially opened the final match. Ragna and Micah, both dressed in white, stood in the arena, swords in their hands and no shields. The rules were simple: the match consisted of three *firk* or sets. Whoever scored two out of three would be declared as winner. A killing blow wasn't allowed. Magic wasn't permitted. Shifting was strictly prohibited.

It would be a short match, but that match would decide my future. As I sat rooted to my usual seat next to the king, I lamented on how stupid this whole thing was. And I was definitely stupider than I thought to agree to this in the first place. It seemed it like a good idea to stop Sigrid at the time, but now I was having buyer's remorse.

"I bet my money on my brother," said Angnar. "Which champion do you bet on, Hailaga?"

"Your Majesty certainly likes his jest," I answered grumpily. Translation: would you kindly shut the hell up, mofo.

"Are you unwell?"

"No. I'm just thinking why this duel has to be with swords. Why can't they have a cooking duel or something? Or chess. Basketball. Spelling bee. Something safe that doesn't include sharp objects."

"Don't tell me you have no confidence in Micah. He wasn't dubbed 'Madman' for nothing. His two-handed sword style 'Ripper' is famous throughout Nine-Worlds."

"Ripper?"

"Micah's specialty is double swords. It's a rather unusual choice of weapon for a

warrior. His defense is impenetrable. It's nicknamed 'Ripper' because anyone who foolishly charges head on will usually be ripped to pieces."

"What about your brother?"

"Ragna is a genius."

"I've heard that before."

"That's all you need to know for now."

Ugh. I wondered if Angnar was a teaser or truly a jackass. Sometime I got the feeling he cared about my plight, but he sure had a cynical way of expressing it. Maybe Angnar didn't care about this match at all. He just wanted to see his brother and his best friend whacking each other in combat.

The referee in the match was a priest from the temple of Tyr, those people who worshipped the God of War. He was clothed in white linen trousers, baring his upper torso, which was intricately tattooed for everyone to see. His head was shaved clean except for a patch on the top that he kept long and tied into a ponytail. The referee gave his signal to commence.

Micah went on the offense. With his twin swords, he started a series of blade works that could be mistaken for dancing. But soon I discovered that the ingenious style was very effective in close combat. He simultaneously defended and attacked his opponent. Ragna seemed overwhelmed trying to match the speed of what seemed to be intertwining blades. Ragna was young, and his attacks packed a dangerous punch, but Micah clearly had more experience in battle. Ragna's feints and attacks didn't faze Micah. Micah pushed and confused Ragna with his own feint attack. The prince took the bait. Micah pounced at the chance, disarming Ragna.

I slowly released my frozen breath. *One more, Micah. One more round.*

Angnar was totally absorbed in the match. He smiled broadly when Ragna's blade was thrown out from his hand. "Interesting. Very interesting."

My suspicion was confirmed. This bastard just liked to see people fight. I wanted to smack Angnar in the head. If he just wanted to see entertainment, he should have subscribed to cable TV.

The second firk began.

Prince Ragna went on the offensive immediately. I could see he'd changed his tactic from the previous set. Instead of trying to break Micah's impenetrable defense, Ragna

cleverly attacked Micah's non-dominant side. Micah was left-handed. He wasn't ambidextrous, and soon the tightly woven double blades left an opening for Ragna to ambush. Each time the prince hefted a jabbing swing toward Micah, I could see just how powerful the wielder was by the fire sparks caused when the steel collided.

Micah responded to the assault with faster retaliation, but Ragna matched it seamlessly. Soon I could no longer follow it with naked eye. I saw steel to steel, more fire sparks and then something sharp and metallic reverberated through the cold air.

The two men were back-to-back in a ready stance.

Micah's left sword was broken in half.

"What does this mean? Who wins?" I asked Angnar.

"Prince Ragna. They will have a third firik," he said with delight.

Oh no, no, no.

Sensing my wits diminishing, Jórgeen crouched next to me and held my hand. "Don't worry, Mistress. My cousin will win."

King Angnar had an annoying smirk on his face. "Are you sure about that *Herra* Raven? Your cousin seems to have trouble fending off Ragna's famous 'Freezing Strikes.'"

"What freezing strikes?" I asked. I looked back and forth between Jórgeen and Angnar.

Jórgeen tsked in distaste and didn't try to be polite in front of the king. "It's a swordplay style taught by warrior-monks in Icari. When someone faces a warrior who has mastered the Freezing Strikes, each time his sword comes in contact with the Freezing Strikes wielder's blade, he'll experience enormous pain."

"Isn't that magic? I thought using magic was prohibited?."

"It's not magic. When someone masters a certain style of swordplay, he also learns how to power his combat style purely with his inner energy. This inner energy, *pneuma*, can be manipulated according to his liking. Icari monks spend countless hours honing their skills in below-freezing temperatures. The icy *pneuma* causes pain when it is directed at their opponents."

I know nothing about blade work, but I think I got the gist. I shifted my attention back to the arena. Micah discarded his broken sword and faced Ragna for the third set with only his remaining blade.

Ragna must have planned this tactic. He knew he couldn't defeat Micah's two-handed

sword style, so he eliminated the element that made Micah invincible.

Tch. I hated genius.

The third firk commenced.

It went so fast, it was a continuous blade dance in a dizzying blur. Then Micah started to get overwhelmed again, and suddenly, it stopped.

Ragna's sword pierced Micah's upper chest. Ragna staggered, clutching his throat. Blood dripped dangerously from his neck.

I tried to scream, but not a word came out of me. I squeezed Jórge's hand.

"Micah wins," said Jórge.

"But Ragna's sword—"

"Superficial wound. Ragna has received a 'taste of death' blow. Otherwise, he'd already be losing his head about now."

Beside me, Angnar clapped his hands with delight. "Well played. Micah knows he can't stop Ragna's fast attack, so he exposed his vulnerability to exploit. That was the highest sword technique I've heard of. When a warrior no longer fears for his own life, one step towards death's door might grant him the final victory. That's a madman for you. Only he could pull this kind of trick!"

I turned to Alciel. "Go to him and heal him."

"I was going to, Hailaga." Alciel slipped away to the arena.

Angnar studied my face. "So, he won. How do you feel?"

"I don't know," I said earnestly. "I really don't know." At that moment, tears streamed down my cheeks, and before long, I was crying like a baby.

Chapter Thirteen

The king delayed me from seeing Micah immediately because of the closing reception for the government officials, ambassadors and honored guests. I was anxious to see Micah, but knowing Alciel was with him, I was slightly at ease.

An hour passed before I was released from my duties and was allowed to return to the Inner Court. I headed straight into Micah's place.

Alciel opened the door for me.

I strode in. "How is he?"

"Micah is fine. Don't you want to hear my explanation?" asked Alciel.

Jórgen bowed to the king's guards who escorted us from the throne room and closed the door.

I didn't pay attention to the mage. I was looking from room to room for Micah. "Where is he?"

"He's refreshing himself," answered Alciel.

I was about to barge into the bathroom when Micah walked out. He was naked save for a towel wrapped around his waist. His upper chest was bandaged.

"How do you feel?" I bombarded him. "Are you in pain? How many stitches did you get? Did you lose a lot of blood?"

He smiled broadly. "I'm fine, Joie."

"I don't believe you." I cautiously touched his chest area. "I saw Ragna's sword go through here. You're not even supposed to be walking around. You're supposed to be in a hospital, having surgery and resting for weeks."

"You keep forgetting I'm not human. Secondly, Alciel is a great healer. Isn't that right, Alciel?"

Alciel inclined his head. "Milord is too kind."

Micah turned to Alciel and Jórgen. "I'd like to have a word with Hailaga. See that we aren't disturbed."

Alciel and Jórgen traded smiles. They bowed and withdrew in silence.

Micah suddenly swept me off my feet and carried me to the bed. He deposited me in

the middle of the mattress. He trapped me by placing his arms beside me. “I won you. Now, I will claim my prize.”

Oh? Ooooh ...

“But your wound ...”

“Are you going to stall again?”

“No, sir.” I smiled back. “You won me fair and square.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes. At that moment, I realized just how much I’d missed him, and I wanted to cry. How could I be so stupid? Because of silly things, I’d almost destroyed the one chance for us to be happy together. People say you never know how much you have until you lose it. I guess it was true then.

Micah leaned down to kiss me. I met him halfway.

Our lips brushed.

Our lips touched.

We kissed.

My heart had never beat so fast. I thought I was going to faint. I ran my hand across his chest, his neck and his cheek. I grabbed his hair and pulled him down. I wanted to feel him against my body. I wanted to know if his heart was beating as fast as mine. And maybe I could see if he missed me as much as I missed him. Wanted me as much as I wanted him.

He paused only to stroke my cheek. His dark eyes gazed deeply, straight into my soul. Could he feel what I was feeling?

Did he feel the same way I was feeling?

With a starving moan, Micah slid his tongue inside my mouth. Suddenly I found myself at his mercy. He pushed me onto the bed and kissed me until I was ready to pass out. He tasted of something masculine. Cinnamon and clove. Orange flower. Spicy. Addictive.

I thought I was a good kisser, but Micah was incredible. I don’t think it was because he’d had plenty of experience kissing women. I think it was because he was so into me. He was so aggressive, taking what was meant to be his. Like a man should be. Before long, I could only surrender to his whim, to his will, to his mastering.

His skin felt hot to the touch. B—burning like mine. And the deep rumble from his throat sounded very sexy. Fucking turned me on.

Very fucking much.

My body wantonly responded. My nipples ached. Hard. My pussy contracted. My juices dampened my panties. I had gone to the edge of the world for this man, and now I wanted him to fuck my brains out.

Micah licked the side of my jaw. My neck. He nipped on my skin and sucked my flesh. I trembled with pleasure.

I ran my hand along the side of his shoulder, his chest and down to his ripped belly. I found his cock and wrapped my fingers around his rock-hard erection. Micah paused. A shy, surprised look painted his face. I immediately realized that he might not be used being touched there. Not by a woman, anyway. I don't know if he'd been self-serving himself all these years. Brawny, fearless, tough as nails as he was, he was inexperienced in this department.

A naughty idea struck me like an epiphany.

"I have a present for you," I whispered.

"Present?"

I pushed him off me and had him sitting on the edge of the bed. I kneeled in front of him. I kissed his chest, his stomach and trailed down to his pelvis. Then I took his cock and stroked it gently.

Micah smiled at me. So sweetly.

Without breaking eye contact, I bestowed a small kiss on the crown of his cock. A kiss of greeting. *Hello, I love you. Will love you a lot from this moment on.*

He let out a little gasp.

I licked my lips slowly. I licked his dewy tip. Licked my lips again. Then his cock. I stroked him twice and focused my attention solely on him. Worshipping him. My love. The center of my universe. I opened my mouth and took him as if I were about to eat the top of my ice cream cone. I sucked him. Delicious. Like a whipped cream-decked sundae, the first taste was always special. He was too. I watched him, stunned by newfound pleasure. I sucked him deeper and released him with an echoing pop. His breath labored. His cock quivered.

"Joie ..." His whisper sounded hoarse.

I shushed him quiet. Grinning, I painted his cock with my saliva. *Monet*, small, thin strokes on the base of his shaft. *Rembrandt*, my tongue danced from balls to tip with

bold, vivid strokes that elicited a dramatic response from him. *Picasso*, I dotted his cock with the tip of my tongue in a square pattern until he had trouble separating reality from fantasy. And as the *pièce de résistance*, I topped the gallery of pleasure with a deep, powerful suck to blow his mind.

He cried my name and grabbed my hair, fisting it with his powerful hands as his hips arched with the rhythm of my sucking. Creamy, salty liquid burst across my palate as a sign that he was close to coming undone. I got even more excited. I sucked and sucked and all of a sudden, Micah stopped me.

My mouth was full of his cock when I mumbled, wondering why he'd stopped me.

Micah angled his erection out of my mouth. "I don't want to come. Not before I claim you."

Effortlessly, he lifted me and pinned me onto the bed. His mouth found mine. His hands touched me all over. He started undressing me. Rather impatiently. He ripped the body jewelries off me, making the pearls, chains and gold beads fall all over the sheets and floor. He unbound my hair and inhaled a lungful of my scent. I instinctively shivered when he marked my body with his teeth—small nibbles, love bites and longing suckles that I was sure would make my skin black and blue tomorrow. When he played with my breasts and sucked my nipples, I had a mini orgasm.

He noticed it and was fascinated. "You like it when I touch you there?"

My face heated. "Yes."

"Amazing. And you're so wet too."

He stroked my pussy and plucked my clit. It made me purr like a contented cat. My purr turned into a loud meow when he decided to inspect my sex up close and personal. He seemed to be fascinated with my hairless pussy. I didn't like to have hair down there, so I'd had permanent laser hair removal a couple years back. His hot breath seared that sensitive part of my body.

Then, he kissed me.

He kissed my pussy like he kissed my mouth.

I stifled my scream as I threw my head back. I thought I'd get whiplash. He licked and kissed and sucked and tongue-fucked me in such a way, I was delirious with pleasure overload. I clawed the bed sheet until my nails made holes in it. For a brief moment, I thought I couldn't take his delicious torture anymore. I thrashed to get away, only to be

pulled back by him and be penetrated deeper with his tongue.

I was torn between feeling ticklish and pleasure. Words jumbled in my throat and rendered me mumbling like a loon. *Micah, Micah, Micah ...* I chanted his name like a mantra in my head, unconsciously though I also said it out loud. Then, I found him staring at me wide-eyed. Micah placed my feet against his broad chest as he gripped my thighs. His cock rested on my pussy. I craned my neck to get a better view. The purplish crown of his cock leaked a pearly droplet of his pre-cum. My sex contracted in sympathy. For a long moment, he did nothing but rub his shaft on my wet fold. The friction sent a thrill straight into my heart.

He ran his hand from my belly up to my neck. He brushed his thumb on my lip. I stuck my tongue out and licked it. He groaned. His eyes burned with desire.

“I love you, Joie,” he said.

He covered my mouth with his large hand.

It was then when I realized he was about to penetrate me.

Does he think I'm going to scream? How silly, consi—

My scream was muffled.

God, Jesus, Buddha, it fucking hurt.

A feminine panic flashed across my mind. Micah was huge. His girth was alarming. I'd been too cheeky. Why did I think I could take him when the biggest thing that ever went inside me was a finger? He wouldn't fit. It would be impossible. His cock would never ...

Micah pushed and pushed and pushed despite my thrashing and screaming. Tears streamed down my cheeks. My pussy was on fire. My cunt contracted around his cock. I was stuffed to the limit. If he tried to push that thing further, I'd surely split in two.

God, damn. He proved me wrong again. Micah grabbed my hips and shoved his cock in to the hilt. I could feel his coarse pubic hair on my clit, rubbing. It was strangely pleasant. No, it was very pleasant. If he kept doing that, I might come.

He took his hand from my mouth. “I'm sorry. Are you all right?”

Of course I wasn't all right. It was easy for him to say. He wasn't the one being penetrated with a cock as big as nobody's business. I wanted to scold him, but I couldn't. Now that I was accustomed to his cock, this whole thing became ... good. The pain was gradually going, to be replaced with a strange pleasure. As if the aching need I felt all

these years had found its cure.

I don't know if I wanted to laugh or cry. *Holy crap, I'm not a virgin anymore. Operation Sex is a success. Hallelujah!* I wiped my tears with the back of my hand. "Kiss me," I begged him.

Micah was more than happy to oblige me.

He kissed me with unexpected gentleness. Our limbs intertwined. Skin on skin. Our flesh became one.

"Still hurt?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Still hurt?" I asked him back.

He laughed.

I laughed with him. At that moment, I felt that we were just a pair of kids who'd just discovered something really amazing for the first time. Cock + pussy = good stuff. We grinned like idiots and we loved.

With one hand, Micah held my hips and started fucking me. Slowly. Shallow thrusts. I was too stunned to even say a word. The sensation. The feeling. The euphoria. The way his veined shaft ground against the inner walls of my vagina. I loved it. I could definitely get used to this. The fullness. The way he stretched me. The way he made me feel.

Heaven.

Micah grabbed both my hands and pushed my arms above my head. He held them there as he fucked me in steady beats. The restrained position made me feel helpless and yet good at the same time. We looked into each other's eyes as he slammed his cock into me. He went faster. Harder. He fucked me so deep, I swear, I could feel his cock up to my belly. In my helplessness, all I could do was surrendered and ride the tide of ecstasy with him.

Sweat permeated his temples. His neck muscles corded with tension.

I bit my lip. Fuck, fuck me. Fuck me ...

He growled and hammered me with fast, rough strokes.

Oh God. It felt so good.

I squirmed. Pure pleasure shimmered all over. I wanted to touch him. Feel him. My heart beat faster and faster, cadenced with the rhythm of his fucks. My climax was around the corner. I desperately thrashed, but he pinned me even tighter.

Micah...

Bright butterflies swarmed across my vision.

Micah ...

My head felt light.

Micah ...

The world around me blackened.

I cried. I came hard. Violently.

He kept pounding and thrusting and slamming as my pussy gripped and contracted around his cock. One. Two fucks. Three. Four. I came again. My orgasm was so hard, I thought I was going to die.

Five. Six. Seven. Micah growled like a beast. Eight. Nine.

He came.

I wrapped my thighs around his waist, never wanting to let him go. His entire body tensed as he climaxed into me. He cried out too. Beautiful music to my ears.

He let go of my hands as my pussy milked him to the last drop. I quickly wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him hard. He kissed me with the same heat. We touched and kissed until the wave of pleasure dissipated, leaving us stranded on the beach of afterglow.

There were so much I wanted to say to him about what I felt, but I couldn't find the right words. I grabbed his hand and put his palm over my heart. I hoped he'd understand.

Micah smiled.

It was more than enough.

The bond that bound us together had been completed.

From this moment on, I would belong to him forever.

Chapter Fourteen

I couldn't sleep well that night despite being exhausted after a fiery love-making marathon. Micah spooned me, sleeping like a log. I heard him snoring softly a couple of times. He looked so peaceful and happy. This dangerous warrior who didn't even flinch when a sword pierced his body became tame in my arms. I dozed in and out until dawn blazed outside the window. I decided to get up. I'm an early riser habitually. As much as I wanted to cuddle up until the sun was high, I couldn't stand the stickiness and odd sensation throbbing between my thighs. So this was how it must have felt to be properly fucked.

The servants entered the room when they heard me awaken. They drew me a bath, helped me dress and served me a light breakfast. Alciel showed up with a bowl of freshly brewed medicine. Jórgeen gave me a camellia flower he'd picked from the garden and tucked it in my hair.

"It's Hrafn custom for a bride to wear this flower after her wedding night," Jórgeen explained. "It's a sign that you're a man's wife."

"Thank you, Jórgeen. The flower smells so nice."

Jórgeen beamed happily.

"And what is this stuff?" I asked Alciel.

"My special tonic to restore your energy. And this is an ointment for your soreness." Alciel put a small glass jar in front of me. "He didn't hurt you too bad, did he?"

"Do you expect me to answer that question?"

"I'm a mage and a healer. Your well-being is my primary concern. Think of me as your personal physician. It isn't like you can get human doctors in Nine-Worlds." Alciel poured the herbal brew into a cup. "Finish this cup now. I guarantee you'll feel much better afterward."

I sniffed it cautiously. "It smells like coffee. What's in it?"

"Herbs, berries, bark peels, stuff. Drink it."

"I don't know."

"You'll be sorry if you don't."

“Eh?”

Alciel leaned closer. “Hrafn males are ... amorous. This tonic will give you relief from discomfort.”

“Well, bottoms up.” I gulped the brew without pausing. It tasted freaking horrible, but the effect was immediately noticeable. I felt fresh and well rested.

Our breakfast was interrupted by the king’s messenger. It was Finni, the overseer of the Inner Court. The commander of the Knights was in tow.

“Good morning,” I said to them. “Am I in trouble for skipping the banquet last night?”

“Greetings, Hailaga,” said Finni. “His Majesty is requesting your audience. He is waiting in the South Pavilion. When you’re ready, I shall take you to him.”

I exchanged a glance with Alciel. I guessed Angnar wasn’t happy that I bailed out on the banquet last night, and now he was calling me to scold me.

“Is Lord Raven invited as well?” I asked.

Finni shook his golden head. “Forgive me. My order is to escort only you.”

“Can I bring my thanes with me?”

“Naturally.”

I rose from my seat. “Let’s see what he wants. Alciel comes with me. Jórge n, you stay here in case Micah wakes up.”

“Why do you take Alciel instead of me? I’m your thane too.” Jórge n gave Alciel the evil eye.

“Alciel looks scary while you’re pretty. Angnar might take a fancy to you and keep you in the Inner Court,” I fibbed like a diplomat.

“Nice try,” said Jórge n dryly.

“You be a good boy.” I patted Jórge n’s head and checked my clothes. “I’m ready,” I said to Finni and Rikard.

The South Pavilion turned out to be a beautiful garden. Blooming flowers perfumed the air with their redolent scent. The king and his entourage were waiting for us in a beautifully constructed gazebo. Seeing me come, Angnar walked down the steps and welcomed me.

“Hailaga, it is so nice of you to join me this morning,” he said.

I bowed. “The pleasure is mine, Your Majesty.” I lied of course.

Angnar looked especially dashing this morning. He sported a short haircut. He wore three-piece suit with a matching striped silk tie. Even his Oxford dress shoes complemented his attire nicely.

“Nice suit,” I said. “You raided Brooks Brothers recently?”

“Can you tell I’m trying to impress you?” He fiddled with his tie.

“I’m impressed. But I like *that* big guy with the sword wound on his chest better. He’s in our bed now, waiting for me.”

Angnar only smiled. “It’s a beautiful day for a walk, don’t you agree? Come with me.”

“Sure.”

“Are you okay to walk?” Angnar wanted to know.

I grimaced involuntarily. Why was everybody interested in *that* this morning? “I’m fine, Your Majesty.”

Angnar eyed me critically. “If I say so myself, you have a certain glow about you.”

“Yes, yes, I know. I’m a well-fucked woman, thank you very much.”

The king unexpectedly laughed. “Are you always this blunt?”

I shrugged. “Not really. Back on Earth, I was stiff, cold and haughty. I just don’t care here. What you see is the real me.”

“I like what I see.” Angnar offered his arm. “Shall we?”

I linked his arm with mine. “Where are we going, Your Majesty?”

“I think today is a good opportunity for a history lesson.”

We strolled through the path with our retainers in tow. We left the garden and entered a barren area that was gated with thick walls. Standing in the middle of it was a monument made from solid stone and covered with engraved glyphs.

“What is this?” I asked Angnar rather suspiciously. I hoped he didn’t have sinister intent or that sort of thing. Like stowing me in here so Micah couldn’t find me.

“This is a sacred tumulus for the descendants of Hnoss and Gersemi. Those who had skjálf bloodline were laid to rest in here, including your birth father. I thought this would be a good time for you to learn about your roots and pay respects to your ancestors.”

My birth father? My footing became uneven. Angnar quickly steadied me.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I... I’m fine. I wasn’t expecting this. I’m sorry.”

Angnar didn't seem convinced. His gaze was full of doubt.

"When Alciel told me about my biological parents, I didn't want to believe him. It's easier to accept if I think people made that all up. But I'm fine. I have to face this sooner or later, don't I? Lead away, please."

"Very well."

The tumulus keepers opened the heavy entrance doors. Our guards weren't allowed to enter, so they waited outside. One of the keepers gave Angnar a torch. The king held it high as we walked down winding stairs below the ground.

The passage was carved from gigantic stone slabs. Exotic glyphs were etched on the stones and throughout the wall of the hall. Angnar told me they were spells to ward off evil. And if unauthorized visitors dared to enter, they'd be cursed forever.

We arrived in a dome-ceilinged atrium with four arched doors that corresponded to the four directions of the wind: *Nordra, Ostara, Sudra and Westara. North, East, South and West*. Right underneath the ceiling stood a sick-looking tree with white bark and leaves.

Upon closer inspection, each of the leaves bore an inscription. Of course I couldn't read it, but I had a pretty good idea.

I turned to Angnar. "Don't tell me this is a family tree?"

"You are correct."

"Hah! Like literally. Neat though. Who made this?"

"This tree of life isn't made by someone. It grew when the first descendants of Hnoss and Gersemi were born."

"I don't believe you."

Angnar touched a leaf. It writhed and shivered when he brushed it with his thumb. Creepy.

"Every time a skjálf is born, this tree sprouts a new leaf. When a skjálf dies, the leaf turns white," Angnar explained.

My gaze strayed to the bottom of the tree. I saw four green leaves on the lower trunk. "What about living skjálf?"

"There are two more living skjálf in existence besides us. You see the shape of the leaf? Seven-pointed is male, five-pointed is female."

"Only one female lives," I hissed.

“That’s you. This leaf is representing you in this lifetime. If you don’t produce a child with another skjálf, that would be the end of us.”

“Extinction.”

“Exactly.”

I eyed my leaf critically. “What does it say on mine?”

“*Vón*. It means ‘hope.’”

Hope. “Where’s your leaf?”

Angnar touched one on the right. The leaf trembled then gave out a bright light.

It was beautiful.

“Do you know who the other two are?” I asked him.

“One of them belongs to a Harkan monk, and the other one is unknown.” Angnar didn’t look too thrilled about it. “He could be at the right age to claim you.”

“As if.”

“Does the word ‘extinction’ mean nothing to you?”

“So what? There are many species extinct on Earth too. It’s a part of evolution.”

“I wish I could say the same. The lore dictates that Nine-Worlds will plunge into chaos when the last of Frejya’s children no longer walks under the sky. The land will become barren and no longer sustain its people. Rivers and lakes become dry. Famine and pestilence will ensue, and then people will lose their ability to produce offspring. From Aesir to Vanaheim, and Muspellheim to Liossalheim, all of these will be reverted to its original state—nothing but stone, rock and dust. Eventually, people will have no choice but exodus to Svartalheim. Do you know why our race moved away from Svartalheim in the first place?”

“I was told our ancestors were enslaved by the stone spirits to run errands above the ground.”

“I see you have gained knowledge about our history.”

“That theory can’t be proved,” I refuted.

“It can’t be disproved either,” said Angnar. “However, I have no intention of gambling in this dire matter. Too many lives are at stake.”

“You’re overreacting. I don’t have superpowers to make the land fertile or such. In fact, I have black thumb. I tried gardening one time, and all my plants died. Shriveled up. I always forgot to water them.”

“You’ve always had the power within you, but you haven’t realized it.” Angnar put the torch on the stone floor then rolled up the sleeves of his jacket and shirt. His arm was strong and sinewy. His skin was beautifully dark, though his blond baby hair made him look very exotic. “Watch,” he said.

Angnar closed his eyes and concentrated. A few seconds later, strange glyphs surfaced on his skin, intertwined one upon another with a soft, white glow. And it wasn’t only on his arm. His face, neck... everywhere was covered with those holographic tattoos.

“Holy crap!.” I was stunned.

He opened up his eyes and grabbed my arm.

All of a sudden, I became hot—temperature-wise. Something shimmered under my skin, inside my flesh. My veins filled with a lava-like substance that seared my every nerve. Despite all of this, I felt no pain. Only unexplainable force, power, ran inside me, waiting to be released.

My skin was etched with the same holographic glyph tattoos.

And there was a strange pressure on my back. I could feel my skin stretching and moving as if something was trying to claw out of it.

I yanked my arm away from Angnar. The tattoos vanished. The strange sensation on my back diminished. “What the hell is that?”

Angnar went still for long seconds. He took a deep breath and released it. His holographic tattoos gradually disappeared. “It’s the power of skjálf. Don’t you want to see your wings?”

My mouth opened and closed. I didn’t know what to say. This was too freaky to me.

Angnar leaned closer. “Are you going to deny your origin, Jolene, or are you ready to embrace it?”

I crossed my arms on my chest. “I must see the science behind that magic trick you just performed.”

Angnar sighed. “I think you’re the biggest denier I’ve ever met.”

“I can’t possibly have wings.”

“You’re a skjálf, and it is in your blood. I understand the first-time transformation is terrifying for you. You need a capable mage to teach you to unleash and control your power. Your thane Alciel is more than qualified.”

“I’ll think about it.” Not. Definitely not. Unless by airplane, I hated flying.

He sighed again. "Shall we continue our tour then?"

"Do, please."

He picked up the torch from the floor. "Your father was laid to rest in the north wing. Follow me."

I shadowed his heels. "Are all skjálf buried here?"

"That would be impossible. But whenever we can, we always try to recover our kin to be brought here."

"What about Hnoss and Gersemi, the first children?" I asked. In the lore, Goddess Frejya ordered her daughters, Hnoss and Gersemi, to take the two sky-raiders as husbands. Their children were called skjálf, the ones who wielded Frejya's power. Hnoss gave birth to two daughters and three sons. Gersemi had three daughters and four sons.

"They were all laid to rest in this tumulus."

"Say, do you ever wonder that in order to keep the skjálf bloodline pure, Hnoss and Gersemi's children must have practiced inbreeding?"

Angnar glanced over his shoulder. "That is a known fact. If you look at the tree of life, you can trace our family ancestry from the very beginning. My mother was my father's first cousin. Your father and my father were second cousins once removed. If you look at all skjálf, we are all related by blood."

"That is so fucking wrong."

"By whose standard? We're not human, Jolene. The rules of humanity don't apply to us. Our children and our children's children won't suffer ailments that usually affect humans due to our practice of consanguineous marriage. How else are we supposed to keep our bloodline pure?"

He was right. I still didn't like the concept. I might be skjálf, but I felt more human than human.

We arrived at the entrance of a cavernous tomb. In there, row upon row of stone coffins were laid neatly. The place was lit with oil burning sconces. The air smelled of earth, dampness and incense.

Angnar motioned me to follow him closely. He stopped at the third coffin on the left row. "Your birth father, Prince Edvin Audune."

His coffin looked like the rest of them in this place, an oversized rectangular casket carved in stone. The only indication that this coffin was his was the engraved glyphs on

the side. I touched the surface of the stone, trying to feel any emotional connection with the person who was eternally laid to rest inside it.

Edvin Audune. *What would you look like? What kind of person are you? Did you know that you have a daughter?*

Alciel told me that my biological mother was Soenne-Valdja. She died in a faraway land while being imprisoned in a tower.

“Here, I’ll help you.” Angnar tapped the coffin twice and stepped back.

The lid moved to the left with a heavy grinding, revealing the gold-gilded surface where my father’s body was kept. I was expecting to see a dead body, but I was mistaken. Inside was another coffin that was made from platinum and lavishly decorated with diamonds and precious gems. Like the sarcophagus of the Egyptian kings. On the upper torso of the coffin, a death mask was carved with the likeness of the deceased.

I examined it. He somehow looked familiar. Well, of course, since he bore much resemblance to me. The high cheekbones and the shape of his lips. The distinct features of his nose bridge. It appeared he wore his hair long. I wondered what color his eyes, his skin and hair were. The way he spoke.

A sudden sadness speared my heart.

I really wanted to know what kind of person he was, and it wasn’t fair that he’d been taken away before he even had the chance to know me.

I stayed for almost half an hour, watching the coffin, touching and studying its nooks and crannies while a thousand questions popped in my mind. Angnar waited patiently. When I finished, I asked Angnar to put the lid back.

“Had enough?” he asked.

“I think so. If you don’t mind, I’d like to come again tomorrow with flowers. Is that allowed? I’d like to pay my respects.”

“I’d be happy to accommodate your wish.” Angnar fixed the lid in place. He then motioned to the next stone coffin. “This is Helenn Audune. Your grandmother. She was famous for her quick temperament. Rumor has it, when she was angry, the earth around her split and oozed hellfire.”

“No way!”

Angnar cocked his head aside. “I suppose we know where you got that attractive trait

of yours.”

“I beg to differ. I’m spunky, not scary.”

Angnar smiled. He pointed to the next coffin. “Here lies your grandfather from your mother’s side, Gauk Frárri. He was a statesman, tactician, scholar and a poet. It was said that he was the most beautiful man who ever lived. Every person who gazed upon his face was enchanted by him—captivated by his spell. Some of them were driven to madness. His face gave him more trouble than advantage, so he wore a mask during his adult life. Your grandmother was the only woman who wasn’t affected by his face, and that was why your grandfather chose her as wife.”

Whoa.! I didn’t know that my family history was so colorful. We spent another hour tracing my family tree. I felt that I’d lost my identity when Alciel revealed my true origin, but now I felt rich and accomplished. Those dead relatives of mine couldn’t spend their time with me, but the stories they left behind and the people they touched made an everlasting impression on me.

I thanked Angnar for taking me to see my family.

When we exited the crypt, I felt like a new person. I don’t know if I was ready to embrace my new identity yet, but I felt that I should try. I still liked the old me better. The stubborn, easily excited, reckless, hotheaded me. I knew I had to grow and be wise so that people could rely on me from now on. It wouldn’t be an easy feat.

I paused. “I have something to say to you.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“A couple days ago, you scolded me about me being thoughtless and using other people for my personal gain. I gave it long consideration and came to a conclusion: I don’t regret using people as my pawns. I realize that it is impossible to save everybody without having to sacrifice others, but I’ll tell you this much. I won’t stop doing what I think is best to save the people I love, even though I have to swim through a river of people’s tears and climb a mountain of corpses to do it. If what I did is a sin, it would be mine alone to bear. So be it,” I said, and added, “bitch.”

I’d never seen Angnar laugh so hard. Even his guards looked perplexed.

“You’re truly amusing,” he said after collecting himself. “That outlandish quality of yours makes me fall even harder for you.”

“I’m flattered, but I love Micah. I can’t be yours. I would never be yours.”

“I must disagree. It’s only a matter of time.”

I stopped walking. “What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Micah?”

Angnar smiled broadly. “I’m afraid this is the time we must part. I have another engagement to attend. Good day, Hailaga.” He motioned to my retainers to escort me back.

The bastard evaded my question. My heart demanded that I bamboozle Angnar until he coughed up the answer, while my head told me to let it go. I wouldn’t get lucky all the time. If I pushed too far, I might lose my head for real.

I curtsied and returned to Micah’s room.

Micah had already bathed and donned fresh new clothes when I came back. He was having breakfast with Jørgen.

“Greetings, wife,” said Micah while wagging a fork at me.

I grimaced. Maybe I should teach him to call me “honey” or something. I joined the table.

“Sweet mead?” Jørgen offered me.

“No, I don’t want booze in the morning.”

Micah tapped Jørgen’s shoulder. “Scram.”

Jørgen sniffed, acting up. “No. I want to have breakfast with sweet, sweet—”

Wham!

Jørgen landed on the floor. Micah whacked him so fast, it was a blur. The troublemaker groaned while nursing his cheek.

I craned my neck. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Totally,” Jørgen answered. “Thank you for the punishment, Master.”

Micah rolled his eyes.

“I’ll get him out of here,” said Alciel. The mage yanked Jørgen by his collar and dragged him out. Alciel then closed the door quietly.

“Angnar sent for me and he took me to the tumulus.”

“The sacred *Hügelgräb*?” asked Micah.

“Yeah. It’s weird to see all my dead relatives in one building. Oh, and I saw my father’s coffin too. My birth father. From his death mask, he looked just like me.” I told Micah the condensed version of my discovery. He listened attentively.

“Have you decided when you are going to tell your parents the truth?” he asked.

I thought for a moment. “I think it would be in their best interest if I keep this from them. My dad always said that the best day in his life was when I was born, when he held me for the first time in his arms. He said he fell in love with me at first sight. I can’t imagine how he’s going to feel if he finds out I’m not his real daughter. Mom and Dad would be crushed. Besides, Dad has heart problems. I’m afraid this news would send him to his early grave.”

Micah took my hand, comforting me. “Biological parents or not, they are your parents, and they’ll love you no matter what.”

“I know that. I was just thinking if they learn the truth, they’ll want to know where your father buried their stillborn baby. Do you know about this?”

“No. My father didn’t share that kind of information with his children. I can find out from the Elders.”

“That would be great.”

“Speaking of that, we should arrange our departure soon. Did Angnar say anything about when we can leave Asgard?”

I shook my head. “We need his permission about when we can leave?”

“He’s the king, and those are his rules.”

“Angnar is pain in the ass. By the way, he said something weird.”

Micah arched his eyebrows. I told him about Angnar’s subtle advances. To my surprise, Micah didn’t seem surprised.

I tapped my fingers on the shiny surface of the table. “Do you have any idea what he means? He told me to ask you.”

Micah contemplated. “Wife of mine, I’m not ready to answer that question. When the time is right, I shall divulge everything.”

The nosy part of me wasn’t satisfied. On second thought, I didn’t want to ruin everything, not after everything I’d done for our relationship. I let this one slide. “Okay.” Why spoil this moment with unnecessary fighting?

He looked pleased. “We should make plans for us. Your job, residence and such when

we return to Lockesund.”

“Sounds good to me.” I might not get the romantic interlude that I’d always dreamed of, but I had a lifetime to discover everything about Micah. The journey would be our adventure, where we’d etch our mark in a sheet of memory forever, for better or worse, in sickness or health, till death do us part.

Every fiber of my being bubbled with giddiness, and an overwhelming sensation enveloped me. I stared at him, wide-eyed. At this very moment, I’d never felt such strong feelings for a person in my life. The urge to protect him. To care for him. To make him happy. And I’d give everything that I had, including my own life, just to see him smile.

He was the cornerstone of my existence.

Was this true love I was experiencing?

If it was so, then I hoped I’d never get over it. I wanted to stay in love with him forever.

I blinked, sobering. Afraid that I might blurt out something girly and mushy, I kissed Micah and said, “If you want me to move here, I’ll quit my job and move. We’ll figure out how to break the news to my parents. I like it here. As long as we get to fuck each other’s brains out like we did last night, I’m a happy camper.”

Micah studied my face. “You know, for a pretty girl, you have the mind of a dirty old man.”

Busted! Embarrassed, I looked away. “You’ve just noticed, huh?”

Micah laughed. He wrapped his arms around me, so close I could feel his heart beat against my chest. “You’re mine. It’s all that matters.”

The End

Dramatis Personae

House Raven, the ruling clan of Lockesund and the northern territory:

Micah Raven, *Jarl of Lockesund.*

Sigrid Raven, *Micah's older brother, dethroned.*

Einarr Raven, *deceased, former Jarl, Sigrid and Micah's father.*

Konrad Raven, *deceased, younger brother of Einarr.*

Dagný Raven, *deceased, Einarr Raven's wife.*

Adeliz Dyrhilde, *Einarr Raven's consort. Childless.*

Jórgen Raven, *cousin, Konrad's son.*

Sigmundr Gylhassell, *deceased, head scholar and archmage for the Raven clan.*

Alciel Gylhassell, *mage*

House Angnar, the royal dynasty of the Kingdom of Aesir

Andres Angnar, *king of Aesir, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Rangna Angnar, *half-brother, halfblooded gullveig*

Salamon Angnar, *deceased, former king of Aesir, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Brigid Angnar, *deceased, former queen of Aesir, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Edda Isfågel, *deceased, Salamon's third consort*

House Fáinn, the ruling clan of Hjálmar of central Aesir

Gunnar Fáinn, *current Jarl of Hjálmar*

Harald Fáinn, *son of Gunnar and heir of Hjálmar, ambassador for Asgard*

Valka Fáinn, *deceased, wife of Gunnar*

Tola Fáinn, *second wife of Gunnar*

Ari Fáinn, *younger brother of Gunnar, overseer of Hjálmar*

Draupnir Fáinn, *son of Ari, political attaché for Asgard*

House Magnbjorn, the Principality of Ungrar of eastern Aesir

Fredikr Magnbjorn, *the duke of Ungrar*

Greinn Magnbjorn, *son of Fredikr and heir of Ungrar, ambassador for Asgard*

Ciel Magnbjorn, *half-brother, cultural attaché for Asgard*

Celest Magnbjorn, *deceased, wife of Fredikr*

Alana Magnbjorn, *deceased, consort of Fredikr and Ciel's mother*

House Frárra, now gone, noble family of skjálf in Vængr

Gauk Frárra, *deceased, nobleman, father of Soenne, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Brena Frárra, *deceased, wife of Gauk, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Soenne Frárra, *deceased, Jolene biological mother, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

House Audune, now gone, royal family of skjálf in Asgard

Aron Audune, *deceased, prince of Myrkr, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Helenn Audune, *deceased, wife of Aron, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Edvin Audune, *deceased, son of Aron, Jolene biological father, skjálf, pureblooded gullveig.*

Jolene Marie Richardson, *the last female skjálf, wife of Micah Raven.*

About the Author

Lizzie Lynn Lee was a guitarist, receptionist, executive assistant, tarot reader, boutique owner, and graphic artist before she discovered that writing is her dream job. The advantage is that she can do it in her pajamas and socks.

She's an incurable chatterbox, heavy metal aficionado, bookworm, digital enthusiast, and a night owl since most of her stories were done in the wee hours of the morning because of her caffeine-induced insomnia.

These days, she still plays her guitar whenever she gets bored staring at her computer screen or plotting the most elaborate scheme for world domination. Fortunately, she has a chronically short attention span.

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Lizzie loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at www.ilizzie.com

Coming Soon

Naughty Boys
Her Lion Billionaire
Yazmina's Lion
Secret of the Lions – Lions of Manhattan #3

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To Blackmail a Billionaire with Noelle Ashford
Her Dragon Billionaire
Kidnapped and Claimed
Her Tiger Billionaire
Raven's Bride

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