Summary

Act III of Hold Me Down. Sigrunn’s father, Harald Finehair, will allow Ivar to court his daughter so long as she entertains other suitors as well. Sigrunn is torn between acting the dutiful daughter and appeasing Ivar's many moods and appetites, hoping that he will prove himself in England and her father will give them his blessing to marry. Ivar finds it very hard to play nice.

Notes

Glossary (I use Icelandic as they say it is most similar to Old Norse)

Spilla börn: spoiled brat

Druslan: slut
Kattegat was full to bursting; the Great Army taking up every available space and swelling larger with new arrivals each day. My father’s initial estimate had been optimistic: almost a month had passed since his return and the army was still gathering, still preparing, still waiting for the arrival of the last of the kings and earls who had pledged themselves to the sons of Ragnar.

While the docks and the markets were a flurry of activity, boats being mended and supplies being gathered by the common men and the slaves, there was still plenty of time for leisure among the gathered nobility of Scandinavia. There were amusements, contests, and small feasts for the great kings and princes, and what women they had brought with them, on every day and every night until it was time to launch. The young men, especially the unmarried, had taken to making spectacles of themselves in endless contests of their physical and mental prowess. Mostly the physical.

Today they were out at the Ragnarssons’ training grounds, shooting arrows into painted targets under the shade of ancient trees. I and some of the other noble daughters attended most of these events; likely I would have even if I were not required by my father to be actively attracting the interest of the young men. What better entertainment is there than to watch virile stags locking horns? I chuckled again at the simile; my friend Finna had made the comparison under her breath to me when they were competing at wrestling yesterday, and it was just so apt. We smiled at each other now, seated together on a blanket off to the side of the action. She was the daughter of one of my father’s most loyal Earls and we had spent much time in each others’ company over the years. She had arrived a few days ago with her new husband, too in love with him to allow herself to be left behind, and she sought me out now whenever he was indisposed.

Dark Ivar, seated on his stump, sat in stark contrast to the swirling movement of the boisterous youths around him. I did not think it was only my attention that he continually commanded; all of the activity seemed to ebb and flow with him at its heart, his witty comments interjecting into every conversation, his scathing insults inspiring more laughter and more anger than anyone else’s. He was not making everyone like him, but his charisma demanded everyone take heed of him.

My lover looked over at me seated off to the side, spared me a slow smile. It was hard to adjust to our new dynamic. I could tell he still wanted to treat me like his pet, like he had at the beginning of our affair. If he had his way, I was sure he’d have me kneeling at his feet or feeding him berries by hand; something mildly offensive that showed everyone his dominion over me. It was not in his nature to pull back that oozing possessiveness and respect the autonomy I required.

Though my pulse raced at the fantasy of Ivar treating me that way, my better self was grateful for my father’s conditions on our relationship. I needed Ivar to pass this test; I needed him to prove to me that he could behave like a man and not the spoiled child I had always known. In public I was still Princess Sigrunn Haraldsdottir and not yet “Ivar’s woman.” We could make time together, but only as the favorite of my several suitors. Father had made it clear Ivar’s claim should not appear to be so solid it might be offputting to other men.

The milling warriors were all warming up, taking practice shots before the contest was to begin. A tall man named Thorstein loosed an arrow that went wide, barely catching the outer edge of the target.

“For your wife’s sake, I hope you aim better with your cock than you do with that bow,” Ivar called from his stump. “Otherwise I fear tonight you are going to blind her.”
Thorstein was the son of an Earl from Denmark, and newly married. He scowled as Ubbe clapped him on the back reassuringly. The elder Ragnarsson was doing his best to soften the blows of Ivar’s tongue where he could. “Do not worry, my brother does not like anyone.”

“Spilla börn…” the insulted man muttered under his breath.

Hvitserk was taking bets, threading himself between the men as they readied their arrows and formed a line. He flashed a bright smile toward our group, sitting off where we had a good vantage to see both the preening men and where their proud arrows were landing. “And what about the ladies, who do you favor to win?”

A few names were called out coyly from behind me, then all eyes were on me, the highest-ranking woman in attendance.

“We all know she is going to choose Prince Ivar,” my friend teased before I could open my mouth.

Ivar looked up at the sound of his name, his quick smile actually a touch embarrassed; I was sure my cheeks were flaming red. I kept my eyes locked on him and spoke boldly. “Yes, I have been at Kattegat for some time now, and there are none better with the bow than Prince Ivar, it is true.” I folded my hands in my lap and did my best to look like an authority. I was in an odd position: though due to my father’s power I held the highest status, I was still the youngest girl in the group. I was never sure what the other women thought of me and thus tried to stay exceptionally polite.

“Ah, but I have only just arrived, Princess,” a young man with a long braid named Siegfried said, giving his eye-catching red cloak a flourish as he stepped before me. “Watch closely and allow me to change your mind.” Siegfried and his brother Sven were wealthy princes from Denmark who had arrived two days ago; Father had introduced them to me just last night and they both seemed interested in my hand. Sven stepped up on the heels of his brother’s boast but said nothing, only cocked his head and gave me a wink that said everything about his intention to show up his brother.

“How could anyone look away from that eyesore of a blanket you are wearing?” Ivar called from behind him. “It looks like it was woven by a drunken imbecile. I think she threw up on it a few times, too.”

The complex pattern of it did have much too many colors. I tried to hide my sudden laughter behind my hand, but Siegfried was looking straight at my face and couldn’t have missed it. His cheeks flared red and he worked his jaw for a moment, then huffed away when he was unable to think of a response.

As the men took their positions and started to loose their first shots, Finna turned to me, speaking lowly into my ear. “I still do not understand what you see in Ivar. Especially when he has so many brothers to choose from.” Her eyes were on Hvitserk, watching the muscles in his forearms flex as he restrung his bow. “And each one fairer than the last.”

“Well by that logic you just admitted Ivar to be the fairest one,” I teased. My eyes swept over the dark brows of the man in question, artfully furrowed as he took his turn, lining up his shot. I could never decide which part of his face was the most handsome. Sigurd coughed and pretended to stumble at his elbow, but Ivar only smiled softly as he released his arrow, refusing to be distracted. The arrowhead sunk into the board, a hair away from dead-center.

Finna huffed as I let loose a little cheer. Ivar turned his head to the other men with a challenging smirk. “You oafs might all just as well go back to your beds now. None of you are going to beat that shot.”
“He is certainly not the one with the fairest temperament,” Finna muttered to me. “Braggart.”

“He has to fight hard for any respect that he gets,” I defended.

“Alright, but has he ever learned to respect anyone else?” she shot back. “He is a bully and I don’t know how you stand him.”

I straightened, suddenly feeling like she was too close to me. Ivar taunted something that I didn’t catch and Sigurd’s shot went wide.

Finna leaned in to keep my ear. “I hope he treats you better than he treats his brothers, at least.”

“Of course he does.”

“Passion fades, Sigrunn.” Her voice had started taking on that sighing, condescending tone I had always hated. “You have an important choice to make and I hope you are approaching it with a level head.”

The man called Siegfried threw back his gaudy cloak with a flourish and a glance in my direction as he stepped up to take his turn. I all but hissed at Finna. “All of these men are fools. Ivar is something different.”

I could feel her scoff at my shoulder, but I refused to look at her. She was a dear friend but when she played older sister I just couldn’t stand it.

True to Ivar’s boast, no one was able to match his shot, though Sven the quiet brother had come close. There were grumblings about another round, but Siegfried’s voice roared through the group. “Let us have a new contest. I tire of this sedentary activity. Let the next trial be a footrace.”

There were pleased cheers of agreement, but my eyes shot straight to Ivar. He was already turning red.

Ubbe had realized the problem instantly as well. He assumed a pacifying smile and put a hand on Siegfried’s shoulder. “An interesting suggestion, but let us choose a game that does not leave anyone out.” He inclined his head toward the youngest Ragnarsson, fuming on his stump.

Siegfried did not look chastised in the least. “Why should one cripple hold the rest of us back? Ivar can go sit with the women.”

A few ugly laughs were barked out of the group, and one of the girls behind me even tittered along. My heart broke for Ivar as I watched his scowl deepen.

Lightning-fast, the fuming prince shifted grip on his bow and swung it against the back of Siegfried’s head. There was a sharp *crack* as the wood splintered and the fool’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. We all watched him drop to the ground.

Some kind of screeching noise came out of my mouth. Siegfried’s brother was launching himself toward Ivar now, face twisted in outrage. Ubbe seemed to have anticipated that, however, and had found a good hold on the smaller man’s shoulders before he could get very far. “How dare you!” he howled at Ivar as he struggled against Ubbe’s grip.

“How dare he try and insult me,” Ivar whipped back. His voice was cool but I could see his fingers trembling around the haft of the broken bow as he struggled to control himself. “We are the leaders of this army, and you will speak to us with respect or face the consequences.”
That wasn’t right. This was not the way to win the true loyalty of men. “Ivar…” I called from my seat on the ground, my placating tone unable to hide the chastising note of my thoughts.

His head whipped over to glare at me. I heard my friend inhale sharply, pulling back at the heat in his gaze, but I was used to his moods by now.

“You cannot just kill every man who insults you,” I went on bravely. “His family is pledged to your cause, that means he is your guest here. Forgive him.”

Ubbe was saying something in Sven’s ear; I saw him sag and give up his struggle to reach Ivar. Ubbe clapped him on the shoulder. “Tend to your brother.”

Sven dropped to his knees; Siegfried hadn’t moved since Ivar dropped him. “He is still breathing,” Sven announced, relief evident in his voice.

“See, he is still breathing,” Ivar echoed, staring only at me. “That is forgiveness enough.”

I sucked in a shaky breath. The look in his eyes chilled me, and suddenly I had nothing more to say.

Sven and another man were gathering Siegfried’s limp frame up, declaring their intention to take him to their camp to rest.

Ubbe looked around at the unsettled faces of the remaining group. “Perhaps a calmer activity, next. Back to the Hall for a few rounds of hnefatafl?”

“Nonsense,” Ivar interrupted, giving a strange, ferocious look to each of the men on their feet around him. “If everyone wishes to race, then shoo, get on with it.” He flapped the back of his hand at them dismissively. His face broke into a smile, wide and wicked. “I hope that you all run far, far away. While you chase after each other I will have my hands full with all of these women here, just as Siegfried suggested.” He tipped his head to the side. “What is that saying about the fox in the henhouse?”

Most of the guests shifted about uncomfortably as Ivar dropped to the ground and started crawling toward us. A young woman called Siggy, seated to my right, annoyed me by cooing and giggling obnoxiously loud at his jest. Sigurd and Hvitserk both rolled their eyes and started heading further into the field, toward better ground for a race. They were only too accustomed to Ivar’s histrionics as well as his rapid shifts in mood. Ubbe watched his brother advancing upon us for a moment longer, still sporting his crooked grin, before turning to usher the rest of the group down the field. It was decided.

Ivar paused, turned over his shoulder to call one more time to the men. “I shall be your referee. Loop your run around the field, and let the finish line be right here at the stump.” Any pain or embarrassment at being left out was entirely undetectable now. Was he growing more mature, more in control of himself, or had his violent outburst simply sated his rage for the moment?

As Ivar continued to advance upon us, his smirking eyes fell first on me, then on Finna seated so close beside me. Our blanket was full. “Here, Prince Ivar, you can share my blanket,” Siggy said, rolling onto her hip closer to me, making room on her other side for our new companion.

I couldn’t stop myself from whipping my head and staring daggers at her, but the girl didn’t even twitch.

Ivar chuckled and I could swear he was laughing at me. “That is so kind of you,” he said, voice oozing with false warmth as he made his way to her side. He dropped himself quite close to her, propped his arm on the ground much too close to her body and gave me a mocking stare over her
shoulder. “What was your name again?” he asked, his eyes flicking to her face.

My blood boiled as Siggy simpered through her response, tipping her head so I knew she was making eyes at him.

What in the name of the gods was Ivar doing? He inclined toward her and she leaned forward eagerly. He looked over her shoulder at me through his heavy lashes and whispered something into the silly girl’s ear that made her whole body twitch. That mindless giggle erupted from her mouth a moment later and she swatted playfully at his shoulder, settling herself even closer to him.

“They are about to begin!” another one of the women called from behind us, drawing all attention down the field save for Ivar’s and mine. I gave him a questioning look; he rolled his tongue between his teeth at me with an impudent waggle of his head.

Refusing to give him any more satisfaction, I turned my eyes deliberately toward the runners taking their places.

*****

As soon as we were alone I tackled him. All of Ivar’s brothers were feasting at the great hall tonight, and so we had taken the opportunity to actually have the cabin to ourselves this evening. It was hard to keep my hands off of Ivar as it was, but adding the spice of my inflamed jealousy to that lust was just too much for me to control. It was hard to forget the image of Ivar’s lips at Siggy’s ear. My insecurities had left my hands itching to dive under his clothes, my lips burning to wipe that mocking smile off his face, to consume his body until nothing existed for him anymore but me.

I pushed him flat on the ground, covering him with my needy limbs and my soft, demanding moans. Ivar was making strange sounds too; I reared up above him when I realized he was laughing into my mouth. My eyes flashed. “What. What is so funny?” My fingers curled into his tunic, my hips still unconsciously grinding as I sat and waited for his answer.

“You looked like you needed a reminder.” Ivar’s words from my mouth. They felt good.

Ivar arched one eyebrow, hands switching from pulling at me to stroking up and down my torso. “And what do you think I have forgotten, Sigrunn?” That steel was creeping into his voice too. The tone that said he was laying one of those fearful and delicious traps; the one where I would be punished if I answered wrong and there was not actually even a right answer.

The thrill of fear he inspired only spurred me on. “You did not act as if you remembered who your woman is,” I said to him, tossing my hair for effect, “your first, and your only. Your beginning and your end.” My hand dug into his trousers, found the hardening length of him. “This is mine.”

“It is very cute, this jealousy,” Ivar replied, only a touch of strain in his voice indicating my grip around his cock was affecting him. He reached up and brushed my nose with his finger, like I was a child who had amused him.

With a frustrated moan I ripped my hands from his crotch to grab at his wrists and force them over
his head. I leaned on his arms and glared at him, my hair spilling over my shoulders around us.

“If you are going to reward me like this,” Ivar continued, voice still infuriatingly light, “then from now on I just might have to fondle every king’s daughter and shieldmaiden that so much as glances at me.”

I barked out an ugly sob as a too-vivid image flashed across my mind. “It is not funny, Ivar!”

“No! No it is not,” he responded, suddenly deadly serious. “And that is just an inkling of what you have been putting me through every day.” His sharp teeth flashed as he bit off each word. I backed off on instinct, releasing his hands and sitting back on my heels again.

I babbled my usual excuses. “Ivar, you know that we have to play this game, Father requires it. It is only--”

Ivar cut me off. “Yes, yes I understand perfectly. I do not need to hear it again.” His hand started idly balling up the fabric of my skirt on top of my straddling thighs as he continued. “But must you giggle so inanely at their sorry attempts at wit? Must you wiggle your head as you smile at these fools, and encourage their boldness?”

I felt something constrict around my heart. I knew I had been playing my role more enthusiastically that Ivar would like. He would rather I suffer through the introductions with stony face and icy smile, didn’t care how much more trouble with Father that would cause me. Although he had just asked me to explain myself, Ivar did not truly want to hear my excuses again, would not care for soft words or promises that had to feel increasingly empty to him with every day that passed.

Instead, I sank back over him, resting on my elbows on either side of his face. His attempt at ferocity could not hide the pain that was brimming underneath, the pain that he did not want to acknowledge. So I offered him the one comfort that I knew he would allow. “I want you to take it out on me, Ivar Lothbrok. Punish me. Remind me who I belong to, if you think I can forget so easily.” It went against everything my jealous heart had wanted after today, and so much of what I had been trying to teach him about feelings and sex and respect, but gods, it just felt so good.

I did feel guilty; and I wanted Ivar to drown everything else in my heart just as desperately, just as I knew he could.

His gauntleted hand came up to brush my hair away from my cheek, gripped me tenderly with his fingers behind my ear. His thumb brushed over my cheekbone as he tipped my eyes to more squarely meet his. “You want that.”

“Yes,” I breathed and nuzzled into his hand. I closed my eyes.

And so I did not see how his face must have changed. I felt him tuck my hair behind my ear, then his hand disappeared. It returned, lightning-quick, in a slap across my cheek.

I sucked in a breath as my head rung with the shock, a crisp sting blooming in my skin that was not entirely unpleasant. It hadn’t been hard; with my arms holding me up so close to his face he did not have the leverage for much of a crack. I opened my eyes slowly, looking at him from under heavy lashes, letting my arousal show. The insult was the perfect introduction to the game that I so eagerly wanted to play.

Ivar’s eyes were narrowed, his earlier anger seemingly amplified, but I could see how the pleasure of this, his opening move, was already softening the corners of his mouth.

I parted my lips to speak some words of encouragement but he cut me off with another lazy slap. This one stung a little harder, and as soon as I looked at him again he struck a third time, his face
curling up in a raw snarl.

I tried to sit up, pulling away on reflex but Ivar’s left hand swung up, grabbing me around the back of the head to keep me in place. He slapped my cheek again, and this one thudded with a deeper ache since his grip stopped my face from spinning away from the impact. “Changing your mind already, pet?” he asked, voice dripping with that haughty mockery that had always seduced me so. “It would not be a punishment if I did not make you regret coming to me just a little bit.”

It wouldn’t be sex with my Ivar at all if I didn’t regret it just a little bit, I thought, but I held my tongue lest I make things worse for myself. He raised his hand again and I flinched; he let it hover in the air as he studied my face, all but purring in satisfaction at what he saw there.

I wondered, not for the first time, how deep Ivar’s sadism went. How far he would continue to push things if I continued to let him. I doubt he would know if I tried to ask him; we were both so inexperienced. We would discover together: what I liked, what he liked, what I could tolerate and what he could invent.

Instead of striking again Ivar rubbed his palm over my face; his hand was soft but it was closer to how one would caress a dog than a lover. “I am not sure I will ever cease to be amazed at how well you trust me, Sigrunn,” he mused, voice gone low and gravelly. Some of his initial anger seemed to have bled off. He arched one gorgeous eyebrow. “Especially when I have never proven myself to be very trustworthy.”

“But you have, Ivar,” I replied breathily. For the entire length of our affair he had kissed me and hurt me in turns but… “You have never given me more than I can handle.”

Ivar’s smile was dark and deep. He tugged my head to the side, rolled our bodies over and settled his weight on top of me. He traced my brow with his fingertips, then the edges of my lips. “And what would you do if one day I did?”

I squirmed a little. “Then we would talk about it.”

His mind looked heavy with plans.

“You would stop if asked you,” I said in a small voice, before he could execute any of his thoughts, “would you not? Just as you always have?”

Ivar’s eyes snapped back to mine. “Of course, my love,” he said, voice heated and intent. Like he needed to make sure I believed he took this seriously. He pressed a warm kiss to my lips; I hadn’t realized how badly I needed that tenderness until he pulled back in order to speak again. “I want to take you to the very edge, but I never want to see you break.” He kissed my cheek, then the pulse point of my throat. “I want your tears, but never your sorrow.”

A sobbing sound came out of my throat, his words so relieving and so beautiful to me. No other lover could ever compare, I was sure of it. He pulled up to examine my face again, trying to scry the meaning of my cry.

I tried to show all these feelings in my answering smile, then curled my body under him, arching seductively. “Then do your worst, Ivar, Ragnar’s son. Try and make me regret choosing you. Because I do not believe I ever will.”

His eyes narrowed in appreciation and he ground his body down onto mine.

I decided to raise the stakes. I looked up at him through my lashes and spoke again. “Because I could have chosen anyone,” I added lowly, daring to scrape my fingers along the shorn sides of his head,
pull his ear to my lips with my fingertips buried in his thick hair. “Any one of those men would have
taken me back to his tent, to his bed. Any one of them could be trying his hardest to satisfy me, right
now.”

Ivar groaned and buried his fist in the fabric covering my shoulder. “Do not play with me, woman.”

“I am not, Ivar,” I said, feigning as much innocence as I could muster. “I am only speaking the
truth.”

His jaw clenched, the little muscle in his cheek straining as he stared me down. “You are trying to
provoke me, you wanton little thing.” He left my dress alone, slid his hand over to settle upon my
throat. “Are you certain you wish to torment me so? Let me remind you that when you lay
underneath me your put your very life in my hands.” His words were fierce but his eyes were
careful, watching to be sure I was still consenting as he let the weight of his arm threaten my breath.

He had not done this since the first night I gave myself to him; when he had gone probably too far.
My body went still as my *kunta* flooded with heat. I could breathe, but I doubted I could speak. I
managed to give him a mischievous little smile. I was afraid, but I liked it. He hadn’t killed me last
time, when he was at the height of his passion, and so I was sure he would only be able to be more
careful this time.

Ivar shook his head like I was really in trouble now, though an answering smile tugged at his lips.
His face loomed over mine, and he squeezed his hand more firmly until the air sucking into my lungs
made a small scraping sound. He turned his ear over my lips, eager to hear the rasping gasps that
came as I forced my breath past his grip.

We lay there like that for a while, both reveling in the feeling of his control. Then he pressed further,
closing the airway completely. Everything felt so silent, my world narrowing. When I started to
struggle a little, Ivar started to speak. “You need me to remind you who you belong to? Tell me, who
else would you allow to treat you this way?”

He released his pressure so I could answer. “No one,” I articulated through my desperate exhale. I
pulled in one fresh, full breath and then Ivar’s grip closed over me again. He did not press hard
enough to cause pain, only to block all possibility of air.

“That is right. You are my creature, my pet. This body is mine, to do with as I please. I will give you
pleasure or pain at my whim, and you will love it either way. Isn’t that right, pet?”

He let me gasp again, my lips forming a “yes” like a prayer. We were often tender with each other
like normal lovers, but this was still my favorite game.

Ivar relaxed his hand, fingertips stroking the column of my neck almost idly. “And yet, you continue
to vex me.” He rolled himself to one side, and I almost hissed in disappointment. I was burning to
feel him inside me already, did not want to lose contact with his hips. “You know that you are mine,
you accept and embrace it, and still I see you every day, tempting these other men.” His fingers
traced my lips. “You tempt them with your mouth, no matter how often I claim it.”

I sucked those fingers greedily. “It is only yours, Ivar,” I said when he pulled away.

He tugged at the neckline of my dress. “Take this off.”

I pulled quickly at the hidden ties and shimmied out of the garment. I hesitated only a moment when
I realized we were still in the center of the common area of the cabin; if Ivar wanted me spread out
naked where any of his brothers might walk in and see, then that was what he wanted and I would
not question him. In truth I thrilled at the thought. I left the dress crumpled by my feet and reclined just as I had been, laid out along Ivar’s side.

His thumb was on my lips again, then he caressed his way down to my bared breasts. “You tempt them with these too. I am not the only one to notice how your dresses show off your every curve.” Ivar had become an expert at torturing me here, pinching and flicking my nipples at just the right pressure to make me squirm and sigh. “Some nights it is all I can do not to cover them with my hands as I watch them all staring at you.” I groaned and tossed my head as he demonstrated, scooping one up in his palm and twisting. “The only thing that stops me is knowing that the look that comes over your lovely face when I do this would only seduce them further.”

He dropped his head to the other teat, swirling his tongue before sucking firmly while pinching the other side. I couldn’t stop my back from arching, wordless pleading sounds pouring from my lips. I knew from experience that he could happily play here for what felt like hours, but after today’s intensity I was aching for something more satisfying.

I sighed when his hand started sliding down over my belly. “How they must dream of what is here, between your legs,” he murmured into my ear, fingers sliding into the slickness between my folds. His fingertips curled up and down, only brushing against all of my favorite spots. His other hand was around my shoulders now, hugging me into his chest. I curled toward him, laying my leg over his hip to keep myself open to those questing fingers.

“Ivar…” I begged. I needed him to fill me; craved the overwhelming rush to burn out my more complicated feelings. I pressed myself into his hand but Ivar kept his fingers away from anything that might feel satisfying.

He buried his face into my neck, his teeth starting to nip at my flesh cruelly. “I think that you are enjoying this, you druslan,” he accused, biting me again. “Reveling in my jealousy. You are the one who is cruel now.” His teeth scraped along the column of my neck between his words. “You like to have them chasing after you, encouraging their dirty little thoughts. You are enjoying making me hurt in this way.”

“No, Ivar,” I protested, even as I reveled in the reminder of how sought-after I was becoming, how wanted I was.

He pushed his fingers into me suddenly and I sobbed in relief. “This is mine too, tell me this is mine.”

“My body is yours, Ivar,” I agreed eagerly, “my kunta, all of it. Any of it.”

Ivar responded with a low chuckle and fucked me harder with his fingers. I could feel his knuckles slamming into me with every thrust. I was clutching at him, moaning steadily. I felt his lips at my ear. “It is not enough, is it.”

“No,” I breathed, thinking he meant to use his cock next.

His hand slowed, and I felt one of the fingers not inside of me probe at my arsehole. “Just think how much more you would feel, this way,” he breathed. This was not the first time Ivar had suggested invading me there. “You want me to remind you that you are mine; I want you to give me a part of you these men have not even thought to lust after. Let me conquer you in every way we can think of, Sigrunn.”

I shuddered in Ivar’s arms. His words had me soaring but I was not sure that I was ready. “I am afraid of the pain,” I confessed. We had tried once, when we were both drunk and giggling, and I
had to stop him quickly, the pain sharp and alarming.

Ivar stroked my back with a soothing hand, fingers of the other still drawing lazy circles inside my body. “I have been thinking about that.” He withdrew slick fingers from me, began tracing the flesh around that other hole instead. “Perhaps we need to ease you here, just as I had to stretch you slowly to readiness the first few times I had you the normal way, too.”

His current attentions near the area in question did feel good. Sensitive and naughty, like I was letting him get away with something. “Perhaps you are right.”

“I thought also, we have the oil for my legs here, some of that might ease the passage as well.” Still wet with my arousal, his fingertip was flirting with the entrance to that tight little hole now. I was surprised by the amount of pleasure he was generating, the nagging feeling that this was dirty only enhancing my excitement.

“Yes,” I sighed.

Ivar made me look at him. “Yes, you want to try?”

I fell even more deeply in love with him in that moment, to see Ivar so carefully making sure of my agreement. How far we had come since the first time he had drawn his knife and started carving into my flesh.

He pressed a kiss into the top of my head when I nodded, then started lifting himself up on his arms. “Come to my bed, then. I want you comfortable for this.”
much more than a plaything

My legs were surprisingly shaky as I gathered my discarded dress and brought it over to Ivar’s little corner of the cabin. Being behind the privacy curtain did help me feel a touch more relaxed for what we were about to do. I realized I was almost as nervous as I had been on the first night I had come to his bed.

Ivar pulled himself onto the furs and started removing his gauntlets. I knelt next to him and clucked my tongue. “Let me.”

He kept one hand on me the entire time that I undressed him, solid and reassuring, and he stole kisses from every body part that came into range. When he was as naked as I, he pressed me back gently into his bed. His face was softer too, as it loomed over mine. He stroked me slowly, up and down over my entire body. “Are you ready to give yourself to me, in this new way?”

I took a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes, Ivar, I want to try. I think that I am ready.”

Ivar’s lips twisted in a lusty sort of mischief. “I will make certain.” He kissed his way down my stomach, separating my thighs and settling himself into the furs between them. He spread me with his fingers, then smothered his lips and tongue in my wetness.

I arced and cried for him. Ivar lapped at me like a beast, his little growling noises betraying his eagerness even more than the movements of his tongue. My submission to this was driving him wild; I had never felt him bury his face between my legs quite like this before.

He kept up a steady pace on my usual pleasure spots, but my focus was soon distracted by the finger he had returned to my arsehole. There was plenty of wetness running down that way, and the teasing glide of his finger around this undiscovered, sensitive flesh felt naughty and wonderful.

I was panting from his tongue on my clit by the time he switched from teasing to pressure. His finger entered my rear hole slowly but inexorably; the sensation was so strange but combining it with the more usual pleasures made it intensely erotic. He lifted his mouth just far enough to speak. “Ah, that’s it, love. Good girl.” I could hear Ivar’s own arousal dripping off of every word. He continued to press in. “How does it feel?” he asked, then lapped at my clit again.

I squirmed, and that was a mistake. Something in me clenched against his finger and shocked me with a dull pain. I took a deep breath, focused on staying still as Ivar started sliding back and forth. “Shhhh,” he soothed, “try to relax, and let me in. You are so tight.”

“It feels so strange,” I said, answering his earlier question. “A little wrong.”

“It is wrong, love,” Ivar replied immediately, settling the thumb of his other hand on my clit and drawing lazy circles there while he laid his head down to watch himself violate me. “And it is only the beginning of the unnatural things you are going to let me do to you. Such a good girl,” he cooed. “I must have you in every way.” His finger started pumping slowly, his knuckle dragging back and forth against the tight little opening. “Relax. Let me take everything from you.”

I did my best to breathe more evenly, stay still and unclench my every resistance. The fouler Ivar’s words grew, the more the discomfort melted into pleasure. I started moaning softly as his finger pumped faster and faster, his other hand working my clit in tandem until I thought I might burst. Then I felt a second finger probing at me and the orgasm receded until I grew used to the terrible increase in pressure that it caused, Ivar muttering encouragements and threats in turn as he watched...
my flesh yield to him.

His fingers slowed, though they stayed inside me. He reached up for the little bottle of oil. “I think you are almost ready, Sigrunn.” His face was flushed, eyes fascinated, frantic. He spilled the oil over his fingers, then pushed them back in and twisted. I moaned and tossed my head; the extra lubrication eased so much but only emboldened him to increase the intensity with which he handled me. Ivar’s groan was pure delight and he fucked me like that for a while, testing what he could do without making me scream and push him away. He put his mouth back on my clit and sucked me so eagerly I almost came right then.

I grit my teeth and held back my climax. Ivar wouldn’t stop until he put his cock in my arse and I was afraid that would feel much worse if my arousal was already fading.

He released his mouth from me and gasped. “I can no longer wait,” he groaned, and slowly, carefully withdrew his fingers from my body. Then he was pulling himself up over me, until his panting face hovered over mine and his cock bumped against my thigh. So hard. I was reminded of our first time together. How neither of us had known how firm and thick he could be, how he was truly only half-hard when we began so clumsily that time.

He rarely had that kind of trouble now. In this moment I almost wished he still did, the girth of him frightening me a little. Ivar put the oil bottle in my hand and then used both arms to lift himself high, so I had room to anoint his proud erection. A white little bead of moisture was already forming at his tip; he was straining for me. I poured the oil into my hand and rubbed it over him liberally as he rolled his head and groaned. I realized it was the first time his cock had been touched at all tonight.

“Gods, that oil feels so good,” he murmured. “We will have to play with that more, another time.” He dropped his forehead to mine and all I could see were those vivid blue eyes. “You are going to take me in now, Sigrunn. In your arse. If it hurts too much, you will tell me and I will slow down. But you are going to do your best for me, pet. You will moan and scream, bite your arm if you have to. Be a good girl and take all of me. Are you ready?”

My lower lip was between my teeth. I wasn’t sure when I had started worrying at it. When I released it with a whispered “yes” Ivar captured it between his own, kissing me as gently as he could manage in his current state.

Then I felt him drop his hips toward me. I lifted both knees toward my chest, trying to settle into what I thought would be the easiest position for this. I was the one to line him up at that sensitive entrance, ignoring the instinctive warning to squirm away from the push of his blunt head at my arsehole.

“Slowly, please,” I begged, one hand trying to hold his weight back while the other struggled to work his tip into me as carefully as possible.

Ivar groaned. “I am trying, but—” he cut himself off with a groan as he kept sliding, “—you feel so amazing.”

Terrible pressure crowded out almost every other sensation, but the ecstatic tone of Ivar’s voice kept me locked in. My heart felt like it was about to beat out of my chest as I forced myself to stop pushing in vain at his hip, to surrender just as he had asked me and just as I had promised to. I had chosen this little torture, of my own free will. I wanted to feel it, to overcome it. For him. For us. Anything that would bond us tighter; I wasn’t afraid of that anymore.

“Breathe,” came Ivar’s voice. I realized I had lost my sense of time and place, so intense was my focus. The pain was less, my body adjusting. I felt his fingers on my face. “Look at me.”
I opened my eyes as I let my chest expand, my greedy lungs confirming that I had indeed been holding my breath. I drowned immediately in Ivar’s face, so close to mine. “You stopped,” I said stupidly.

He smiled a touch, though the laughter was blunted by the pure passion suffusing him. “Because I am all the way inside.”

Victory lifted me. I had done as he had asked. I had pleased him; that was written all over his face.

“How do you feel?” he asked, brows creasing just a little. “Is the pain terrible?”

I tried to smooth my face. “Not too terrible,” I reassured, though he did not look guilty. Mostly… curious, covered over with only a thin veneer of compassion.

“That’s my good girl.” Ivar gave me the smile that always melted me, then started rocking his hips softly. It felt better, actually, to have a little motion to focus on, not just the static stretch of something that was probably too big to be in there. He moaned again. “Sigrunn, if only you could know how good this feels…”

“Is it better than the normal way?” I asked, suddenly apprehensive that he would ask me to do this often.

Ivar bent his head, his dark hair falling over my face as he pushed a little harder. “Not necessarily. It is almost too tight. But… just thinking about what you are letting me do to you right now… and how you are suffering for me…” he trailed off into a throaty sigh and rocked himself out a little farther, then back in a little faster.

I whimpered and he shuddered and he didn’t stop. He looked like a god above me and he felt like one too, piercing into the most vulnerable part of me. In control of everything. Owning everything. I could see how hard he was working to keep his movements gentle, the clench of his jaw betraying how hard he wished to drive his hips into me. But I was already making strange, animal-like noises as even this slow invasion overwhelmed me. He had delivered on his promise too; I wanted him to remind me that I was his, and I felt it. Perhaps more deeply than I ever had before. Ivar was in my guts and he was in my soul; he was panting above me and he was buried deep in my heart. My body was his, my life was his, and I would ride out whatever he wanted from me. “Ivar…” I sighed, tipping my hips up against him, offering myself further.

His smile was full of gratitude and darkness as he took that invitation to speed his pace, fucking me at closer to his usual intensity. I screamed and clung to him but did not ask him to stop. It hurt but I needed the pain somehow, needed to give this to him. Through eyes blurred with tears I watched his face go slack and overwhelmed, then screw up in pleasure as he neared his end. I was thankful he was coming so quickly, the soreness around my abused opening becoming harder and harder to bear. My name fell from his lips like rain and then he roared through his release, shuddering into my body as I held him close.

I wanted to hold him, to encompass him, forever, but I found myself pushing him out as soon as he stilled, sighing in relief to have the intrusion finally gone. I squeezed him tighter and pressed a kiss to his forehead in silent apology for the eviction. Ivar lifted his head from my chest, eyes sated and sleepy. “Did you…?”

I shook my head, shy apology on my face but feeling a bit annoyed underneath. Did he actually think that felt good enough for me to come? “It was… intense, overwhelming, but there wasn’t enough pleasure in it for that.”
Ivar’s brow creased in a tiny, disappointed frown. “Let me rectify this,” he said, running his hand down my body.

He looked so sated, and we were both so exhausted, I tried to protest. “You don’t need to--”

“You are going to come for me, Sigrunn,” Ivar cut me off, steel in his voice. “I won’t have you any less satisfied than I am, after such a wonderful thing you just gave me.”

I kissed him then, heart swelling. “Just let me clean myself first,” I whispered. I knew it was only his seed trickling from me, but such a sensation coming from that particular place was embarrassing and distracting. I was so grateful we were still alone in the cabin as I found a clean rag and brought it to the basin of water Margrethe always kept full on the table.

When I felt sufficiently cleansed, I made my way on shaky legs back to Ivar’s corner of the room. He lay peacefully on his side, looking happier than I had seen him in a long time. I handed him the cloth and his eyes roamed over my naked body as he wiped himself with it. “Come here, Sigrunn,” he beckoned when he was done. “Let me reward you for suffering so well for me.”

I lay on my back beside him and Ivar covered me with kisses. His insistent hand was between my legs in no time, reveling in my neglected wetness. He had had me on the brink of orgasm so many times tonight already that it was all too easy to get there again, the nagging soreness at my arsehole only reminding me in the most delicious way of what we had just done together. With his fingers buried in my kunta and his thumb on my clit he brought me over the edge mercilessly; I wailed and clung to his neck as all that built-up tension spilled through me until I was a sobbing mess.

I felt like I might never move again. We lay in a tangled pile in each other’s arms and I felt perfect, complete. I tried to remember why I used to resist him as Ivar nuzzled his face into the crook of my neck. Why had I been so afraid to love him? My home was right here.

If only Father could understand this. I had agreed to his plan in part because I had thought I might want another choice to consider. But there was no considering. I was falling more in love with Ivar with every passing day. I raked my fingers through his hair, pulled him tighter against my body with a contented sigh. We had to make Father see that we belonged together. Ivar was the only choice for me.

It was beginning already; I could see it, certainly father could see it too. Ivar truly had the potential to become a great leader of men, worthy of the hand of Sigrunn Haraldsdottir. He was strategic and charismatic, though his anger was a problem. More incidents like what happened at the training grounds would hinder his success, and his case with my family. “We need to talk about what happened today, with Siegfried,” I said softly.

“Do not speak another man’s name while you are in my bed,” Ivar growled, stirring against me irritably.

“It was foolish,” I continued.

“I know, I ruined a perfectly good bow.”

I sighed and pulled away from him, trying to get into a position where I could look him in the eye. “You need the loyalty of all these men. As many as you can get. And almost killing them for careless words is not the way to win anyone to your side. You cannot be so easily provoked.”

Ivar sat up too, though he kept one hand on my hip. “What I cannot be, is chastised in public by a woman.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Not by any woman, but certainly not by my woman.”
Suspicion crept up my throat. “Is that what the flirting with Siggy was about? Were you trying to punish me for embarrassing you? Don’t be a beast,” I spat. “Pettiness will never inspire anyone to pledge their loyalty, to kiss your ring.”

“You presume to advise me on the leading of men? What do you know?” He removed his hand from me, crossed his arms.

“Quite a bit, and very clearly more than you! You would be wise to heed my counsel.” I felt a flash of warning in my gut, but the rush of anger in my ears was louder. “Why do you think my father brings me everywhere with him? It is to train me in the delicate art of politics, the business of alliances and confidences and joint ventures. Impressing the right people, planting ideas so subtly that men come to think that they were their own, sowing seeds that will not bear fruit for years.” I was pulling away from Ivar as the words poured faster and faster from my mouth. “You, you seem to think you can throw a tantrum every time you do not immediately get your way. It may work to manipulate your family, but you will need to leave such childish tactics behind if you want to win the hearts of armies, the true respect of Viking men.” My indignance left me shaking as I stared my lover down.

“Are you quite finished?” was all he had to say. One straining muscle in his neck stood out in stark relief, his eyes darkening.

I extended my jaw, looked at him levelly. I hoped he didn’t notice my trembling.

Ivar’s voice was thick. “A child, a fool, a beast… what else do you wish to call me tonight?”

My instincts were screaming that being this direct with Ivar was not going to work. Could be dangerous, even. But I was so offended at his dismissal; I couldn’t stand to let him overlook my worth. I could too easily see a future where any good advice I had, my every thought, really, would have to be carefully slipped to him, implied and fed under cover of something else so that he always thought the ideas were his own, and I couldn’t stand that image. I wanted more for my life than that. I knew in my bones I had to take a stand soon or I would forever be just a plaything in his eyes. “If you choose to keep looking for insults instead of listening to my message, I cannot stop you.”

“Sigrunn, I am not sure what your message is supposed to be, other than you think that you are better than me.” He whipped a corner of the fur over his nakedness now that our bodies were separating. “You act like I did not spend my entire life seated beside my mother as she ran a kingdom in my father’s absence. I know about politics.”

“Did your mother command an army?” I respected Aslaug, but she had done nothing more than hold her corner of the world together in Ragnar’s absence. “Did your mother negotiate surrenders, vanquish other kingdoms and bring them to heel? I grew up at the knee of one of the most feared men in Norway. You many know some things about ruling, but I know how to conquer. You want to hear the things I have to say, Ivar Ragnarsson.”

“So now you are going to insult my mother as well as me?” The petulant set to his jaw showed me Ivar’s stubborn pride was not letting my words sink in.

I grabbed my dress in a crumpled ball and stood up, shaking my head. If he was going to be this way, I had no interest in remaining in his presence. “I have experience that you do not. My father has been training me for years for this sort of thing. To be wife to a king.” I unfurled the dress, finding the bottom of it with quick snaps of the fabric. “If you refuse to see my true value, then I am not sure what I am even doing here.”

I turned my back to him and threw the dress over my head; I didn’t want Ivar to see the tears that had
started forming at the corners of my eyes. I wasn’t sure what was happening. Just a few minutes ago I had felt like our souls were merging along with our bodies, and now it felt like we were speaking two completely different languages.

“Sigrunn.” Ivar’s voice was like a stone dropping into a pond. I couldn’t tell if he was about to admit defeat or just readying me for another round of argument. But it held me as surely as if he had wrapped his arm around my waist.

“Yes, Ivar,” I whispered, refusing to turn around. I twisted my hand in the hanging curtain, ready to throw it aside and storm out if he angered me again.

“Don’t you dare walk out on me.”

My fist tugged at the cloth involuntarily; the threat in his voice only made me want to leave more. I took a deep breath instead.

“Ivar.” I dropped the hanging tapestry and facing him squarely. “If I stay, will you listen?”

“No, you listen,” Ivar hurled back, fists balled up in the furs as he glared up at me. “You think I am an idiot? You are the one being naïve, and foolish here. Of course I know that acting out of anger is not always wise. But you do not seem to understand how hard it is to keep a man’s respect. You have to fight, constantly, to stay on top. I could not allow Siegfried to talk to me that way, or I would have lost everything I’ve already gained with these men.”

I struggled to stand tall, though some of my resolve was already bleeding away under the force of his words, the weight of his eyes under furrowed brows.

He continued. “And I cannot allow you to talk to me the way that you did, either.” I took a breath to argue but he cut me off. “You chastised me like I was a child. How did that look to the others? How did that help me win their respect?”

Part of me could see his point, and I felt the burn of shame creeping up my chest, draining strength from my limbs. But if I did not keep fighting him on this now, would I ever try again? “You made yourself look like a child all on your own,” I spat back.

“And what would you have done in my place?”

“I wouldn’t have almost killed him. You could have struck him somewhere else. Less lethal.”

“But now everyone knows that I do not play,” he gloated. “If I am going to hurt you, I will not hold back.”

I suppressed a chill at the weight he placed on those words. I had to remind myself they were not directed at me. “Tell me Ivar, did your father make a habit of hurting his own men? To make men fear you is a very different thing than making them love you.”

Something in my words sent a shudder through Ivar’s frame. He looked away from me. “I will take what of those options that I can get,” he said, his voice smaller. “I will do what I know how to do.”

I sank to my knees beside him. “Then use me,” I said, seeing my opening. “If I know things that you do not, then let me counsel you.” I put my hand on his shoulder, bidding him to look at me again. The uncertainty he was always trying to hide was evident now when he turned those brilliant eyes back up to me. “That is all that I am asking. That you see me for who I am, and that you use my counsel when you can. I only wish to help you to become the great man I see in you, the leader I
believe you are destined to be.” When I began this discussion I did not think I would end up on my knees begging for his respect. “I would be much more to you than a plaything and a mother to your children. But if you cannot see that, I am not sure I will keep coming to you like this.”

Pain bled into his eyes, surprising me. “You need me to say it?” He took my hand suddenly, but looked away. “You are really going to be this cruel, and make me think so hard about all of the ways in which you are a treasure, the most perfect woman I could imagine?” His eyes locked back onto mine. “Because you are, Sigrunn Haraldsdottir. I know the value of your mind and your position, as well as your beauty.” He bit the words like they were the meanest insults. “And still you must twist the knife. You want to make sure I am wounded as deeply as possible when your father does not choose me. That I know exactly what I am about to lose, hmm?”

I shrank back; though perhaps I should have embraced him. The uncertainty of our future would always be at the root of our problems, wouldn’t it. “Do not talk like that,” I rushed to say, though I felt the fear and rising pessimism too. “He will see you are the only one for me. I will make him. You have to trust me. It will just take time; everything works better with Father when he thinks a thing is his idea.”

“He does not seem to be giving me much of a chance,” he muttered.

“Prove yourself to him, Ivar. Lead this army to greatness and my hand will be yours.”

Ivar scowled up at me. “And what if he does not wait for that? I see him talking to your other suitors every night. They must be offering tempting deals, in exchange for your hand. What will we do if he decides not to wait for this campaign to be done before pledging you to someone else? Will you defy him? Will you marry me against his wishes?”

I lifted my hand to his cheek, shaking my head and attempting to soothe him. “It will not come to that. He promised to give you a chance in England. He is going to wait for me to choose.” I pulled myself closer to him, threw my legs over his lap and curled into his embrace. “And I am choosing you, Ivar. I will not accept anything else.”

Ivar worked his jaw as he pondered my words. He looked as if he was trying to find something to stay angry about. “This is very hard,” he finally said, voice soft and low.

“I know, my love.” I pulled his face down to my breast as his arms snaked tightly around me. “But is it worth it?”

Ivar pulled in a great breath against me, expelled it in a heavy sigh. “Everything about my life is hard. Why should love be any different?” He snuggled deeper into my chest. “Yes, Sigrunn, you are worth any amount of suffering. You suffer for me, keep being so good to me, and I will keep suffering for you.”

“Until all our foes are vanquished.”

“Until then.” I felt Ivar smile against me. “Though after that, my love, you will still suffer for me.”

I adjusted my sore arse, warmth spreading through my chest. “Yes,” I whispered into his hair. “Whenever you ask.”
Every Viking community is centered around a great hall, where the people gather and the men in power hold court. I had seen many halls, many courts, and many great men in my travels with Father, but I had never seen one so tense as the one at Kattegat as we all waited for the final boats of the Great Army to gather.

Perhaps this was because there were really two courts housed in this single space: one was that of the nominal Queen Lagertha, and the other of the usurped sons of Ragnar. Every night all the great men gathered there, men used to their own halls, who had brought their own loyal warriors and some even the women of their households. Every evening these proud men navigated the two courts, the one recognized and the other unspoken.

Lagertha sat on her throne most nights, trading pleasantries and receiving gifts from new arrivals. Bjorn, when he bothered to attend, stayed near her. The other sons of Ragnar had claimed a table near the door and received less official homage, as the leaders of the Great Army. It was a subtle plan of Ivar’s; he had boasted to me of it one night. They were to be in the hall whenever Lagertha was, never competing with her directly but always there, ready to toast louder and laugh harder, to pull all these important people closer to their cause. Only Ubbe was really any good at it, but I could see Ivar slowly learning to channel his wit, soften his tongue, and turn that force of will of his into something resembling charisma.

My father saw what was happening. It was a strategy he knew well, to try and steal loyalties from under another’s nose, and he probably would have tried it himself if the Ragnarssons were not already competing so fiercely. Instead Harald Finehair floated from one end of the hall to the other, the most powerful man in the room but not the one who was in charge, never making his own allegiances appear very settled. And he talked. Oh, how my father could talk. Always with a fresh drink and a ready smile for this king or that jarl, greeting old friends and introducing himself, and me, to new acquaintances. Potential allies and potential husbands.

I thought I performed my own duties well, those evenings, my lips ready to laugh and my knuckles ready to be kissed. Father wanted me to give these men ideas, without actually promising anything. And I didn’t want to hurt Ivar more than I had to. So I tried to be subtle. Finna had taught me that the most enticing smile a woman could give a man was one that implied that you were sharing a secret, and I tried to live up to her lessons. I think I was succeeding; she always gave me an encouraging grin when I glanced her way.

When Father let me slip away on this fateful night I came to sit beside her, at a table near the side of the room that gave us a good vantage point to watch the milling crowds in both courts. “He’s been staring at you again,” she said as I settled in. My eyes went to Ivar in his corner, speaking excitedly with an old warrior that I knew used to campaign often with his father. “Not him,” Finna tsked, “though his eyes have been following you all evening too. I was speaking of King Alfgeir.”

She motioned subtly with her shoulder and I turned my head toward a tall man with hair so blonde it was almost white, his broad shoulders bedecked with a fur just as pale. He gave me a wide smile when he saw me looking, showing crooked teeth that made him look playful. Father was casting my net wide in these weeks of waiting, but King Alfgeir seemed to be the man most firmly caught in it. He took my gaze as an invitation to approach us.

“Oops,” I said under my breath as we watched him pick his way through the crowd, “I looked at him
“Give him a chance, Sigrunn,” my friend replied just as lowly. “Not only is he rich and handsome, but I see kindness in those eyes. I think he would treat you very well. Unlike—” She cut herself off as Alfgeir got close enough to hear us, reaching out to take my hand.

“Princess Sigrunn. At last you sit still long enough for someone to catch you.”

I gave him the slightest of smiles. “You have been watching me.”

“How could I not? Your beauty shines like a beacon amongst all these dirty and grizzled warriors.” He shifted his kind eyes to my companion. “Finna, good to see you again. A pair of beauties here.”

She smiled back at him just as warmly. “Join us, King Alfgeir, won’t you?” she asked, sliding away from me on the bench. “Sigrunn, move down, give the man room to sit beside you.” It was crowded in here, seats few and far between. Squeezing onto the end of our bench was indeed his only choice. Finna was plucking at my skirt, urging me to scoot closer to her.

“Only if the Princess wishes it,” Alfgeir said smoothly, but he took a half step forward.

Over the young king’s shoulder, I saw my father happen to cast his gaze in our direction. His approving look was unmistakable and so I sighed only a little and made room for Alfgeir to sit beside me, hoping Ivar was still preoccupied in conversation and would not look over to see this.

I brushed a loose strand of hair over my shoulder and the young king caught my arm before I could return it to my lap. “Your father has been singing your praises to me,” he said in an intimate tone, “he says you are quite skilled at embroidery. Is this your handiwork?” He brushed his thumb across the ring of red and yellow flowers stitched around the cuff of my sleeve.

“Yes, it is,” I said, trying to sound humble and probably failing. I was quite proud of the work I had done on this dress.

“It is lovely,” he intoned, and did not let go of my arm. “Delicate and sweet. It suits you.”

I did not pull away from him but I did not respond, trying not to give him too much hope. Just as I should have done months ago when it was another man seeking my attention. My eyes swept surreptitiously to Ivar just as my current suitor hesitated, stopping himself from leaning in and bidding for a kiss. Poor thing. Finna was right, he seemed like a fine catch but it was too late; my heart already belonged to another.

I shouldn’t have looked. Ivar was glaring at us, eyes burning under furrowed brows. He was so obvious about it that his face only vexed me. He had agreed to let me play Father’s game; we had talked about it endlessly. When I said I wanted only him I meant it. Why could he not just sit back and trust me. I glared right back at him and then returned my attention to the young king with the hopeful eyes.

“You flatter me too much,” I dismissed his compliment politely.

Finna leapt in with a warm smile in her voice, leaning over my shoulder to stay in the conversation. “It is so nice to speak with a Viking man who can appreciate beauty when he sees it. Sigrunn has a gift, I agree, and she deserves someone who can recognize her strengths.”

“Who could not,” Alfgeir replied smoothly, “when it is so easy to see that she is a woman fit to make Frigg swell with pride and Frejya gnash her teeth with jealousy.”
I couldn’t help but put my own hand on his arm then. “Your flattery borders on blasphemy, please stop. Do not anger the gods on my account.” I reminded myself not to enjoy this attention.

“I can think of no reason more deserving than you,” he replied, and this time he was bold enough to bring my fingers to his lips. “But I will honor your wishes and refrain from risking their wrath any further.”

I shook my head slightly but couldn’t stop the smile twisting my lips as I pulled my hand away from him. I had to admit he was charming. And there was a measured sort of gravity about him; the kind of man that sits back and lets everyone else speak before taking any actions. He was older than me, probably older even than Finna, but still a young man in his prime. A warrior with a small kingdom behind him, poised to make his mark on the world.

“I hope you will allow me one more boldness,” Alfgeir continued, searching under his cloak for his pocket. “In my land, when a man wishes to court a woman, he must give her a gift. Is it the same in yours?” His hand came back into view, closed around something in a loose fist.

“I am aware of the custom,” I said, my mouth growing dry. I could feel Finna wiggle in excitement behind me. I did not dare to glance over at Ivar now.

King Alfgeir opened his palm. Resting inside was a ring twisted out of golden wires. An enormous red stone, clear and glinting, lay trapped in the gilt cage they formed around it. “Part of the treasure I won raiding the coast of Northumbria last summer.” When I did not immediately take it, he held it up between his fingers, allowing Finna and anyone else that might be looking a better view. “It is a rich land we are headed toward. I decided not to melt this piece down with the rest of the gold we won there. I was struck by a vision; that one day I would slip it upon the fine, smooth hand of my future wife. A hand just like yours.”

I tried to pull back; this was all too much, but Finna was at my shoulder pushing me forward.

Alfgeir did not miss my hesitation. His smile was kind and only a little sad. “You do not have to wear it. But will you take it, as a sign of my intention to win your favor? I would only hope that you put it somewhere that you can look at it, sometimes, and think of me.”

I wavered, still unsure of what I should do. I was supposed to indulge these courtships, but I did not want to lead this man on. He did not deserve to be tormented too terribly in this game I was playing with Father.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Harald Finehair was suddenly standing beside us, his eyes glowing down at the ring Alfgeir held in front of my face. “A fine gift for my daughter,” his rich voice rang out, only calling more attention to us. He clapped the young king on the back. “Of course she will accept it.”

“A fine gift for a whore, perhaps,” Ivar called from his table. He never seemed to fear making a spectacle of himself and right now I was cursing him for it. “That stone is too gaudy for a delicate creature like Sigrunn.” It seemed like every head in the room turned toward him now; Ivar just smirked under all those eyes. “And it is probably just a piece of glass.”

“And what have you ever given to my daughter?” Harald asked, voice cold as the north winds.

“Oh, she has never shown you the gifts that I gave her?” Ivar said cheekily, his eyes laughing with the mirth of a shared secret as he looked directly at me. “That is probably for the best.”

No one knew how to respond to that strange comment, though I felt a flush creeping up my neck.
thinking of the lines scarred into my thighs, the ones still healing on my back, and the set to Ivar’s jaw that told me he’d be giving me more “gifts” soon.

Father waved a dismissive hand like Ivar were just an irritating fly, and turned back to address my confused suitor. “I am overjoyed to hear of your interest in my daughter, King Alfgeir. It is a very fine courting gift. Go on, Sigrunn, take it,” he urged, his hand falling firmly onto my shoulder.

How could I not? I held the heavy ring in my palm as Father took over the conversation, eager to speculate on the political and military implications that a union between our houses could bring. Within moments, the young king was standing too, and soon Father was pulling him away promising to refill his drink somewhere on the other side of the crowd. My purpose had been served, for now.

I drew a heavy breath, afraid to look in Ivar’s direction. He probably felt slighted by my father again, though it was his own fault for sticking his opinion into our business on this side of the room. Finna interrupted my thoughts as her fingers darted between my own, plucking the jewel out of my hands. “I have never seen anything like this,” she cooed. “I see it is very different to be courted by kings rather than jarls. Einer wooed me with goats.”

I smiled. “A pair of snow-white kids,” I corrected. “They were delightful, and you loved feeding them with your own hands.” Finna was already engaged when I had last visited her, on our way to Kattegat where it turned out everything in my life was destined to change.

“Yes, and cleaning up their little shits with my own hands, too,” she laughed, feigning bitterness. “I doubt that ring is ever going to befoul your bed.”

“This ring is not going to be in my bed with me.” I’d tuck it away in my jewelry box, until it was time to politely return it.

Finna let out a heavy sigh. “It is a good match, Sigrunn. Don’t discount this one out of hand.”

“Ivar will be twice as rich as he, and ten times as famous.”

“And with ten times the temper. That one there,” she continued, lifting her chin at Alfgeir’s back, “I don’t think he would ever strike a woman. I cannot predict the same for your beloved Ivar.” I grit my teeth as she went on. “I hate to think of you weeping some day in a lonely hall, trapped in a marriage with a man who beats you, or worse.”

“All men beat their women,” I grumbled dismissively.

Finna sucked in her breath, looked me squarely in the eye.

“Ivar has never struck me,” I said quickly, before she could ask.

“And Einer never hit me either, but I know that he would never dare to… where did you get an opinion like that, that all men would do such a thing?”

My brows creased, and I looked away from her gaze. “Don’t be stupid. It is a woman’s lot. There will be days when any man will use his fist to get his way. Just because it hasn’t happened to you yet…” I couldn’t believe she could be so naïve; in that instant I even felt sorry for her. “It hurts more if you don’t expect it,” I warned her softly.

Finna laid a hand on my arm and tried to catch my eye, but I wouldn’t give it. I knew I was right but I suddenly felt shame so thick I could barely breathe.

We were interrupted by a chorus of deep voices stirring into a raucous drinking song. For a half-
second I assumed Father had started it, but the sound was coming from the Ragnarssons’ corner of the hall. Ubbe had his arms around Ivar and the old man he had been talking to, swaying and sloshing their ale to the rhythm of the words. Their companions had started beating their fists on the table to keep time, and soon the revelry overwhelmed anyone’s chances of completing a conversation.

I dove into the distraction, letting the joy around me seep into my heart. I thrilled in sympathy to see Ivar at the center of such mirth, wrapped up amongst smiling faces eager to be part of his company. His smile was bright, though the tightness around his eyes betrayed his insecurity with the unfamiliar experience. I could see the loyalties forming around him. Ivar’s ambitions were beginning to grow roots.

The song came to its climax with a shout, and everyone in the hall guzzled the rest of their drinks. When we came up for air, Ivar’s eyes were locked onto mine. Men stirred and passed between us, off to refill their cups, but nothing broke his gaze. He seemed to be trying to communicate something.

Then he smiled and there was mischief in his grin. He raised his hand and summoned me to his side with two quick flips of his fingers.

“I hate it when he does that,” Finna said, her voice more strained than I had heard it all night. I looked at her quizzically. “Calls you like a dog.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “No he doesn’t.”

“Einer would not dare to be so presumptuous with me, and he is already my husband! Ignore him. Trust me, it’s the only way to handle this.” She turned to Ivar and made a rude gesture, then pulled on my elbow to turn me away from the prince’s gaze.

“It is hard for him,” I said, “to love me so much and not make his claim in front of everyone. To have to wait for Father’s approval. I know that he will prove himself in England, and Father will let us wed. But Ivar is not very patient.” I told myself I did not have to defend my choices to Finna, but the words kept pouring out of my mouth. “This game is hard on him. So I do what I can to reassure him, to let him have what little control he can get right now.”

Finna only scoffed, her counterargument ready. “But you need to realize, Sigrunn, that this is not just a game. You let him treat you like this now, then it is how he is going to expect to get to treat you after you are married. When Einer started courting me, you had better believe I laid down the law right away. He tried to tell me how I should be spending my time, can you believe it? Asked me to focus more on weaving, these giant tapestries, because that is what his mother was famous for. You know I hate standing at a loom. Told me ‘any wife of his should make impressive things everyone could admire, not this tiny little embroidery.’” Finna cocked her head to the side as she fingered the pattern stitched down the front of her dress. “You cocked her head to the side as she fingered the pattern stitched down the front of her dress. “You had better believe I set him straight. A woman is in charge of her own domain, and she makes the decisions there. Especially a jarl’s wife. Or,” she paused, making sure to hold my eye, “a Queen.”

I smiled at her spirit, and her faith in my future role, but I was entirely tired of listening to her lecture me. “Speaking of your husband, where is he now?”

Finna scanned the room with furrowed brows. A frown settled across her face when she spotted him. “From the looks of it, about to start a drinking contest with your uncle.”

“You had better go and stop him then,” I urged her. “Halfdan can drink like a fish.”
Finna was already scrambling to her feet. She paused, looking down on me seriously before she walked away. “Think about what I said, Sigrunn. If you must choose that one, at least make him work for it. Do not let him treat you like a slave.”

“I have no intention of that,” I said through gritted teeth.

Finna nodded with her head bent to the side, like she didn’t really believe me, but smiled and took her leave. I was on my own feet an instant later, drawn like a magnet to Ivar’s smoldering eyes.

He was in the midst of some heavy strategic conversation when I reached him, but Ivar leaned back on the bench as I drew near, beckoning me close so he could speak softly into my ear. “Meet me at our secret place. Say your farewells and come. I cannot wait any longer to touch you.”

Chills went down my back; even after weeks of slipping away together he still had that intense of an effect upon me.

My lover caught my hand as I moved to comply, pulling me back down so he could murmur one last thing into my neck. “You must know that if you come with me, Sigrunn, I am going to hurt you. I can think of nothing else.”

There was no privacy anywhere, anymore. Kattegat was filled to the brim, every building taken and housing guests besides, a thousand people spilling over into army camps spreading in all directions. “Our place” was a patch of soft grass by a bend in the nearby river, which I always assumed at other times was being used by other desperate and secretive lovers, so beautiful and cozy as it was. But tonight it was empty, still and bathed in the soft light of the moon.

Ivar was not there yet. Someone else must have caught him in conversation. He was becoming a more important man every day. I stretched myself flat on my back and gazed up at the moon, content to wait for him.

I heard the distinctive rustling of my lover pulling himself through the underbrush soon enough. I loved that sound more than I would if he had footsteps; he had his own way of navigating this earth and to me it was only a sign of his strength, his perseverance and ingenuity. I stayed on my back and watched the edge of the clearing where he would soon appear.

Ivar’s face was pale in the moonlight and everything else about him was black. He settled on his elbows when he spotted me, just at the edge of the soft grass. His panting breath steamed in the crisp fall air.

“Why do you not come to me, my love?” I asked dreamily, so eager to watch him crawl up and overtake me. I loved to be on my back while he loomed over me.

“I am just enjoying this vision before me,” he responded, spreading his fingers to indicate me and my surroundings. “You are like a wild and magical creature I have stumbled upon out here, surrounded by the stirring leaves and bathed in moonlight.” A mischievous grin lit his features. “The only thing that would make for a better picture would be if you were naked.”

“Ivar,” I giggled at him.

All hesitation fell from his face, his playful smile filling with serious intent. He drew himself up a little more erect, bent his head toward me. “Take off your clothes, Sigrunn.”

I felt a little bashful about it, but that was just part of our game, wasn’t it? I could deny this man
nothing, especially when he took on that tone. Commanding, amused, pleased with himself and his
own ideas. The voice of the brat prince who was never denied anything. That tantalizing tone had
seduced me in the beginning, and even now got me weak in the knees and desperate to please him.

I wore a simple dress tonight; I lifted my hands and loosened the tie at my breast slowly, almost as if
Ivar were not there. Then I sat up and knelt on my heels, facing him. I slid the gown from my
shoulders. My nipples hardened almost painfully in the cold air. I resisted the urge to shiver as I
loosened my boots and kicked them off, then pushed the dress down after them.

Ivar’s eyes were lidded and his smile dark and private. I kept my gaze locked on his as I lay back
down in the position he had found me; arms loose at my sides and one knee slightly bent over the
other. My skin looked as white as bleached bone in this light, my whole body bare for Ivar and the
moon.

Ivar cocked his head to the side and continued to do nothing but gaze at me. I could no longer stop
my body from trembling, and I was not sure if it were due only to the cold. Ivar and I had made love
together in countless ways by now, but I still could never predict just what he might do next.

He finally stirred, ducking his face for a moment. When he looked back up his teeth flashed white in
the moonlight, then his blade flashed silver, a bigger smile even than the one on his face.

Only when the bleeding stopped and we were both sated did Ivar allow me to cover myself with any
stitch of clothing again. I was sure this time that I would have a few new scars, and equally certain
that I would savor every one. I was drugged by love and barely able to feel the pain, much less to
think very rationally about what he was doing to me; that perhaps one day I would not exactly
treasure reminders of these nights with him. This evening I could only think about them as secret
claims binding me to Ivar forever. Better than any piece of jewelry, and more beautiful to my eyes.

Ivar pulled me into his side as we reclined together, gazing up at the stars, savoring our final
moments together before we had to go sleep in our separate beds. His gentle palm lay over the
stinging ache of the last gift he had given me, now hidden under the bodice of my dress.

“I want you on my boat, for the crossing to England,” he said suddenly.

“Ivar—”

“Hush, listen to me. I need you with me, your soothing hands, your soft voice…” he trailed off but I
knew he was not done with his thought. “I get quite seasick,” he confessed. “And I almost died on
the last crossing. Rán almost took me.”

“The shipwreck that killed everyone but you and your father.”

“Yes,” Ivar said in a strange tone, his body going rigid. He was silent for a while. “The terror was
even worse on the way back. I hate the sea.”

“I remember what you looked like when your brothers carried you from the boat. I was watching
from atop the hill.”

Ivar pulled me in a little closer. “I do not want to do it alone again. I know that you can soothe me;
help me look strong in front of my men. Promise that you will make the crossing on my boat.”

I sucked in a deep breath, pressed a kiss against his shoulder. A pre-emptive apology. “I do not see
Father allowing it,” I said sadly. “How would it look? It sends a message about how close you and I
“And do we not want to send that message?” Ivar demanded, his hand leaving its soothing place on my side as he sat up on his elbow. “I want everyone to know that courting you is fruitless, I want to make them all fall back until your father gives up and realizes that this is inevitable, you and I.”

I sighed. “Ivar.” His words made my chest swell with a painful sort of hope and longing. I wished it could be as he said. “I want that too, but if Father feels we are forcing him into a decision before he is ready, this will all fall apart.” I sat up on my own elbows, to better look him in the eye. “I understand that you are in pain, that this is hard, but must we argue about it every time we are together? Can’t you ever meet me halfway? Have a little bit more grace about this? I do not like it any more than you do, and yet at every turn you punish me for it, make it even harder for me.”

Ivar’s face had been darkening with every word I spoke. “Harder for you. To be fawned over by every man that looks your way. To have me at your beck and call, to meet me in secret and ride my cock only when it is convenient for you.”

I had to interrupt him there. “You think I am the one giving orders here? You who embarrassed me in the hall with those ridiculous, envious comments, then called me over to your side like I was just some slave ready to fulfill your any whim? Who was it again that demanded that we leave the feast early and come down here?”

“Yes, the hall tonight,” Ivar exclaimed, rolling his head in frustration, “let us talk about what happened in the hall. You accepted another man’s courting gift.” His hand closed over my shoulder, his grip spasming. “What kind of message does that send? How am I supposed to feel about that?” He clamped his jaw shut and glared at me, his eyes glittering like hard jewels in the moonlight.

My heart fell to see him this way. It hurt me too, to have to watch exactly how much pain I was putting Ivar through. But we both knew the reasons for this suffering and I could not stop myself from another defensive answer. “You cannot think that I wanted to. I feel nothing for that man. It is just another move in Father’s game. He is setting all the pieces just where he wants them, that is all.”

“And is that all that you want for your life, Sigrunn? To be your father’s pawn? Are you content with that?”

“Of course not, but he is my father. I will fulfill my duties to him first, and then—”

Ivar did not appear to care about my response, barreling over me to finish the point he was trying to make. “You know, Bjorn thinks Harald is using you to sow dissent, to goad me into turning against the other men of the army. That he is making you a contest on purpose so that I will alienate the other kings and sabotage our chance to gather loyalty.”

“Is it working?” I said childishly.

“Are you agreeing?”

“No, that is nonsense.”

Ivar shook his head. “I am not so certain. Gods, Sigrunn, does this not ever make you angry, the way your father uses you for his own gain? How do you not get sick of yourself, of your own weakness as you blindly follow him. I know I do.”

I shrank away, the bite of his words drowning out my ability to reply.

“This is why I cannot have any grace about the situation, Sigrunn. Someone has to fight for us.
Someone has to remind your father, remind all these men that your heart is already taken, that none of them are good enough for you, save me. Because you, I do not see you doing that.”

“Behaving like a beast in the hall is not going to help your case with my father. It is not going to get us what we want.”

I flinched when Ivar reached up, but I let him cup my chin in his hand, pulling me toward him until our noses almost touched. “However I am behaving, Sigrunn, you are responsible.” He let his eyes burn into mine for a moment, making sure his point was sinking in. “Your love is too sweet, you love me too well, I cannot step back and pretend that you do not belong to me. I know it, I feel it, you pull on my bones.” His words were turning romantic but his grip was still fierce, his eyes like steel. “I will not let anyone else have you. Do you have any idea how it burns to see you smile and laugh with other men, to let them touch you?” Abruptly he pushed my jaw away. “I cannot be held responsible. Your love makes me sick, it makes me vengeful and cruel.”

My head was spinning. Ivar looked away, clenching and unclenching his hands. When I did not speak he turned back, glared at me with passion and disgust both fighting in his eyes.

“Would you like to hear what your love makes me want to do?” The hairs prickled on the back of my neck as his face fell into something creepy and feral.

“No,” I whispered.

He leaned toward me anyway, ignoring the way I recoiled. “Night after night, all I can think about is how I want to drag you out of that hall. By your hair. I want you smeared in dirt, I want to lock you in some secret place and tear up your fine clothes, keep you where only I can find you. I would come to you at my leisure, make you scream and cry and squirm and worship me until I was satisfied. Until I knew that I had not only your heart but also your loyalty. That you would do whatever I commanded. Then, you could be my wife.”

Is that what he was thinking about, when we were making love just now? When he was cutting into my flesh so deliciously? Something twisted in my chest. “That doesn’t sound like love.”

“What?” His eyes flashed, and I could suddenly see what a terror he was going to be on the battlefield.

“Ivar. You are talking about breaking me. And there is no love in that.”

There was a warning in his gaze, an unspoken threat. His voice was growling and deep. “Do not ever doubt my love for you, Sigrunn.” He reached up to take my face again.

I whipped myself out of range of his hand. “Don’t touch me,” I shouted, louder than I intended. “Not right now.” I had my feet under me now, crouched on my knees. My hands had started shaking, my instincts screaming at me that I was in danger here.

Ivar’s brows knitted together. “How can you look at me like that? I am telling you how deeply my feelings for you run, how I am willing to excuse and make up for all your faults, and you are looking at me like I am some sort of monster.” He rocked his body forward, his face livid with intent to use his strength to force a different reaction out of me.

What had I told Finna? Every man will some day use his fists to get what he wants from his woman. I wasn’t going to let it be today. I jumped to my feet before he could reach me. I saw a moment of pain flash through Ivar’s face as he realized how truly frightened I was of him, but once my legs
were moving they would not stop, carrying me out of the glade, spurred on by the crazed way that my lover howled my name after me.
i never expected to love

Ubbe was the one to seek me out after that argument. He found me at the edge of my father’s camp just after the midday meal. The clouds in the sky that day were as heavy as my heart, and just as caught between clearing up or storming. “Ivar wants you to meet him at our cabin.”

I did not smile as I met Ubbe’s eyes, pondering the unexpected request. I had assumed that the petulant boy was going to wait for me to seek him out, had probably convinced himself as usual that he was the wronged party.

“He knows that he needs to apologize.” Ubbe’s face twisted with a complex feeling.

I lifted my chin, knowing my eyes had to look even more tormented than his. “Did he say that, or is that just what you think?”

Ubbe smiled out of one corner of his mouth. “Something halfway between?” The warmth in his pale blue eyes showed me how much he wanted this fixed. I realized Ubbe might be the only person in Kattegat that wanted Ivar and I to end up together. And even he had tried to warn me off his brother once before. I was beginning finally to appreciate why; even love doesn’t save one from that boy’s wrath. It was another of the reasons I didn’t want to cut ties with my own family in order to be with Ivar; I needed my own allies, some strength behind me or I feared Ivar would rule me completely, as he had before my father returned.

I sighed, cursing my lot to be in love with such a complicated man. “I should wait until he has had time to be more sorry.”

Ubbe shifted on his feet, almost nervously. “I disagree. Ivar only grows more stubborn, the deeper you allow him to fall into his thoughts.”

I imagined him then, brooding alone in his bed, his face as twisted as it had been when I ran from him last night. My courage sank. “Will you be there?”

Ubbe cocked his head sharply, eyes burrowing into my face as he caught some of the meaning behind my tone. “Are you afraid of him?” His hand wrapped around my upper arm, soft and comforting.

I took a deep breath and lied to his face. “No.” There are some things one just cannot admit too freely, and I was sure my fear would pass once Ivar and I got over this hurdle. “It is just… that you are a good influence on him. Perhaps things will go more smoothly that way, whatever it is he wishes to tell me.”

Ubbe nodded slowly, still searching my face. “I will be there. Probably some of the others, too.”

I placed my hand on top of his. “I will come. Just let me get my other cloak, in case the weather changes.”

Ivar was sitting very still and straight in a chair by the hearth when Ubbe and I walked in. Hvitserk and Margrethe were off to the side, close together behind the table, seemingly deep in their own conversation. It struck me that Margrethe always positioned herself with one of the other brothers between her and Ivar. I wondered if there was a story there.
Ivar shocked me with a bright smile when he saw me enter the room. He looked nervous, like he had sent Ubbe to fetch me and then sat right down here and waited, hoping that I would come. “Sigrunn, join me,” he said, extending his arm to the chair beside him.

Ubbe took a seat on Margrethe’s other side, joining her quiet conversation with Hvitserk but keeping one eye on his youngest brother. I hesitated a moment longer, gauging Ivar’s mood, but I detected no trace of the previous night’s anger. He only seemed… uncertain, and trying to hide it. There was a small wooden chest in his lap, about the length of a forearm, and he was rubbing its brass corners with his fingertips, over and over. It seemed familiar but I couldn’t place it.

“Hello, Ivar,” I said, proud that my voice did not waver. His nervousness was making me nervous. At least it seemed he did not intend to continue our argument. I took the indicated chair, offset at an angle to his and just out of arm’s reach. One part of me was glad of that while another screamed at me to move closer, to sink into his arms and reassure us both that everything was perfectly fine between us. Not yet, I told that voice. Not until you’re certain that you’ve won another measure of respect from him.

Ivar’s gaze on me was warm and clear. “After last night I realized something.”

My breath caught in my throat. I should have expected Ivar to have been self-reflective by now, but it continued to surprise me.

“Your father was right, I never gave you a proper courting gift. I asked him for your hand but I have not been playing the game the way that you wish, since then.” Ivar looked down. “It irks me to pretend I am but one among many suitors, but I would never wish to insult you or show you less respect than you deserve.” He stroked his fingers down the side of the box that he held slowly, with reverence. “Perhaps I should be doing this in the hall, where my competition can watch, but… this gift is too personal.”

He was no longer looking at me, just staring at the object in his lap. His hands moved like he was loathe to let go of the aged wood, even though it seemed clear that what he held contained the gift that he was referring to. We should talk about what went wrong last night first, I thought. Instead I scooted my chair closer to his side until our knees were almost touching.

His hand moved to the latch, but he paused with his thumb resting upon it, looked up at me. “You still do not seem to understand what you mean to me, Sigrunn. How important you are. I am not playing any games.” His hands slid down the sides of the box and he lifted it, transferred it to my lap quickly like he was afraid he would lose his nerve if he hesitated any longer. “This was Mother’s.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the three faces at the table turn when they heard that, but my focus remained on the motion of Ivar’s hands as he opened the lid.

Small amulets carved from glossy, colored stones. A mirror of polished copper, an inlaid ritual dagger. These were Aslaug’s viðha tools, her most potent magical objects. Things used for both spæ-craft and seiðr. I could see why Ivar did not give me this gift in public; there were things in here that would add weight to Lagertha’s accusations that Aslaug had been practicing the wrong kind of magic.

“Ivar…” I breathed, reverence in my voice now too. The last time I had seen these objects, Aslaug and I hadn’t known whether Ivar was alive or dead. I remembered his mother’s tear-streaked face and the desperate hopes we had clung to as we used them to scry, the gods unwilling to show us a clear picture of his fate no matter how long we worked.

Ubbe exclaimed his brother’s name as well, though his tone was more concerned. “Are you certain
“I cannot use these things. It is women’s magic,” Ivar shooed him off. “None of you even wanted to save this box. Your bride doesn’t know what to do with them anyway,” he added, nodding his head at the blushing Margrethe, “but Mother had been teaching Sigrunn.”

“She had,” Ubbe agreed. His voice grew softer. “I think this would make her happy.”

My eyes burned as they flashed up to meet Ubbe’s in gratitude. “It is hard to accept such an important gift,” I said. But his words made it a little easier. I looked back to Ivar, whose face looked drawn and tense. “These things were her treasures.”

“Did you love my mother too, Sigrunn?” Ivar asked softly, taking my hand.

“Yes,” I said, and not only because I knew it would please him to hear it. Aslaug would always be a role model to me.

“Then they are yours now.” He pressed himself closer to me. “And after all, since you are going to be my wife, you are not really taking them away from me.”

I looked back into the box to hide my moment of flashing doubt from him. As much as I tried to stay firm and strong in front of him, I truly wasn’t certain how my father would decide, and what all of us would do next if his choice was not Ivar Ragnarsson. Taking this gift was a promise deeper than all of the words we had exchanged thus far. And certainly, Ivar knew that. Giving me something so sentimental, no mere bauble that could be tossed away or replaced… he was binding my heart to his ever tighter.

It was hard to hold on to last night’s unpleasantness in the face of this gesture. Likely that was part of his intent as well. Ivar’s thumb caressed the back of my hand as I closed the box and laid the other palm reverently upon its lid. “I am beyond honored by this, Ivar. I will treasure these things, and keep them safe always.”

His wide eyes searched mine, silently asking the rest of the question. *Does this mean you still want my love?*

I gave him a silent answer, pressing my mouth to his lips, which parted to welcome me. Our kiss was chaste but full of buzzing emotion, our bodies stuck in our chairs by the weight of worries still unresolved while our lips tried desperately to bridge the divide that had fallen between us. I was panting a little when I let my head drop away. “We still need to talk, Ivar. Let us go somewhere with a little more privacy.”

Uncertainty flashed in those bright blue eyes again, then he glanced around the tiny cabin. Hvitserk and Margrethe were clearly pretending not to look at us, while Ubbe preferred to make sure his brother realized he was keeping a watchful eye.

“The sun seems to be out now,” I observed through the open window, “perhaps it will not be too cold in the yard, if we bring out a blanket?”

We settled in the clearing behind the cabin, far enough out that our voices wouldn’t carry through the window. My apprehensions about being close to Ivar, or alone with him, had faded, especially as it seemed he was moving especially gently around me. There was not a trace of the brusque, demanding demeanor he often assumed as he helped to spread the blanket and settled down at my side.
The clouds were still thick but they were less grey now, with plenty of gaps for the afternoon sun to peek through. I studied them almost as intently as if I were scrying. I had told Ivar we needed to talk about last night but I had no idea how to begin.

Ivar spoke first, body stirring against mine. “Thank you for coming. I was not sure that you would.”

“Why did you think that?” I asked, then cursed myself. My insecurity had me lapsing into old habits, pretending for the moment that nothing was wrong.

“I made you run from me. Again.” His voice was hollow. I rolled against his shoulder to look at his face, but he continued to stare up at the clouds. “You were afraid of me. My mother looked at my father like that sometimes. I hated it. I do not ever want to see you look at me like that again, Sigrunn.”

I settled onto my back too, choosing my response as wisely as I could. I was grateful he wasn’t letting me hide from this, but it was still difficult to decide how to confront him. I tried to be both gentle and firm as I answered. “If you mean that, Ivar, then you have to know that it is your responsibility to make it so.” It helped not to be looking at him. “You cannot threaten me, you have to keep yourself in control.” I sighed. “You have to do better than you have been doing.”

He didn’t answer, just fiddled with something in his hand as he stared into the sky.

“If you can do that,” I added softly, “then my last hesitation about becoming your wife would be gone.”

The silence was terrible before he finally spoke. I was so nervous I had misspoken, to admit I still had reservations about him. “I never expected to love anyone.” Ivar’s voice was calm and flat, like he was speaking some truth he had long pondered to himself. “I never expected to have a wife who would love me.” He glanced over at me, just to make sure I was listening, then continued to speak to the sky as I watched his face. “My parents did not love each other; or if they did something ruined it by the time I came along. Perhaps it was me, coming along,” he added with a bitter twist to his lip. I ran my hand up his chest, and he captured it in his own.

“My father tried to kill me after he saw my legs, did you know that? My mother told me about it. And I can still remember the chill in her voice. I am not sure she was ever able to forgive him for that. For me.” He tipped his head, indicating his limp legs, tied together under the blanket. “It was his fault; Ubbe told me that. Said he overheard it when I was a babe. I am ‘boneless’ because my father could not control himself; he disobeyed my mother’s prophecy.” Ivar sighed, then continued before I could ask him what he meant by that last part. “What I mean to say is, I do not actually have any idea what I am doing, with you. No one ever taught me how to love. And I never thought that I would need to know.”

I laid my head upon his shoulder, responded in the same tone. “My mother died when I was so young I could barely remember her. For my whole life, my father only spoke of two kinds of love: the impeccable memory of my mother, and the new love he imagines he will receive when he meets his PrincessEllisef again. I know much about what love should be, and very little about what it actually turns out to look like.”

We were quiet for a while, pondering each others’ words. It felt good to discuss such heavy matters without dissolving into hurt feelings and harsh words.

“I think our love is strange,” Ivar said, voice still contemplative. “When I hurt you it means more to you than a kiss, and when you lie beneath me you like to feel afraid of me, don’t you.”
I curled my body closer to his. “Yes. I have never heard of a love like ours before either, but what you say is true.”

“But when I scare you at other times, you run.”

“When I fear that you really mean it, your threats.” I held myself up so my face hovered over his. “Our love games are one thing, but I hate when you are angry with me, as much as any woman would. And when you threaten violence the fear runs cold and deep and there is nothing fun about it. I want you to mark and violate my body only when it is for my pleasure. Not to slake your anger or ease your frustration. The difference is simple, if you take a moment to look at it from my side.”

Ivar just stared at me, biting his lip as he listened.

“Love is not just desire, it is not just possession. I believe that you feel those things for me, Ivor Lothbrok,” I said, remembering his shouted do not doubt my love from the night before. “But love is also respect, and it is wanting to make the other person happy, to make their life easier if you can.”

“And those things, you do not believe I feel for you.” I could see his hackles rising, but I forced myself to push through.

“Well, Ivar, you do not always act that way. You never used to. But I do think that you are starting to, now.”

Ivar closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I do know these things,” he said slowly. “Perhaps they do not come easily to me. But I do know them.” His lids remained closed; perhaps it was easier for him to humble himself while sightless. “There are parts of me that you accept better than I ever expected anyone to be capable of. And in other ways you challenge me more than any person ever has.” He opened those drowning eyes again, focused them on mine. “It will take time for me to sort out the difference, the ugliness in me that you will embrace and the ugliness that you find unacceptable. The two look the same to me.”

I forced a little smile, though his words were not exactly reassuring. “As long as you keep trying. And listen to me, when I tell you.”

Ivar’s eyes narrowed a little, like a contented cat, and I knew that was the most explicit agreement I was going to get out of him. His humble moment was over.

“How far we have come. When you first returned to Kattegat, you told me that you hated me.” He found my hand, laced my fingers between his own. “And yet that same night, you kissed me.” His eyes softened. “Did I really make you hate me, when we were children?”

It was hard to stay honest, staring into those beautiful eyes when he finally let his vulnerability shine through like this. “We were always friends, Ivar,” I reassured him. “You took advantage of that friendship, for your own cruel amusements. But you were a child. You were just trying to make yourself feel better. You took it out on me with cruelty at times, but I forgive you.”

Ivar cocked his head to the side, looking reassured, and curious. “What was the worst thing I ever did to you?” he demanded to know.

I sighed, rolled back and looked up at the sky. It wasn’t hard to find the answer to that question. “You made me eat a worm.”

He chased my eye contact, propping his elbow on the ground and hovering over my face, his expression too complex to make sense to me. “I did?”
I scrunched my face up at him. “You do not even remember? It still makes me shudder. I can still feel it wiggling in my throat if I think on it for too long.”

That half-mad look was creeping into Ivar’s eyes, the one I should be learning to fear, but after all the intimacy we has just shared it only excited me. “That is disgusting,” he said. “How did I make you do that?”

“I… don’t recall,” I confessed. Even as a child Ivar had some kind of way of simultaneously cajoling and intimidating me; manipulations that were never as obvious as simple violence or threats. “I only remember how vile the thing felt in my mouth.”

Ivar smiled and kissed my cheek. “Well I am sorry,” he said, not a trace of penitence in his voice. He bent again and kissed me on the lips. “I promise never to do it again.” Then his mouth twisted to one side. “From now on, there is only one kind of worm that I will ever make you put in your mouth,” he teased, bumping his hips against me suggestively.

“Ugh,” I spat, pretending to be just as disgusted at that idea. Then I broke into a giggle.

Ivar rolled himself on top of me, gathering up my hands as he did. His face loomed over mine and he looked terribly amused about something. “You know, I remember something else I used to do to you when we were children.”

I waited, a slight smile on my face in response to his playfulness. Those days were not all bad.

Ivar put both his hands on my arms just below the shoulders, rising up and pinning me down with his full weight. Then he rolled his jaw strangely and made a dreadful hocking noise, gathering up mucus from the back of his throat.

“Ivar, no!” I squealed, remembering this all in a flash now too. I tried desperately to push him off me but it was too late, he wouldn’t budge. I had let him get too centered over me. I had trusted him too much.

“Open your mouth, Sigrunn,” Ivar commanded, words coming out a little strange around the giant wad of saliva that he was holding in his mouth. I was completely pinned; my scrambling hands couldn’t even reach between our faces to try and block the inevitable.

He started to let a thick rope of spit slide out between his lips. It was a trick all the village boys had been perfecting that summer, seeing how long they could dangle the viscous fluid, occasionally using it to torment anyone smaller and weaker than they were. No one had dared to do it to Ivar of course, but he had just had to mimic them, and try it out on me.

The gross string bounced and hovered over my face; when I realized I could not get Ivar off of me I turned my head to the side and screwed my eyes shut. I heard him suck it back into his mouth with a disgusting slurp. “Sigrunn,” he chided. “Look at me.”

I took a deep breath and turned back to him; I had hoped he was about to say this was a joke but his eyes were blazing with that sadistic glee and I felt his erection growing against my thigh. I was horrified to realize my own body was tingling and readying itself for him as well. As disgusted as I felt I was somehow also enjoying this.

Ivar tipped his head down, searching my eyes. “This is one of the times that you like it,” he appraised.

I considered arguing with him, but my face was flushing. I knew he was right, and so did he. I basked for a moment in the knowledge that I could have stopped him if I needed to, and then smiled.
up at him. Through lips still tightly pressed together.

My lover looked sternly at me from under his heavy brows. “You are going to submit, like you always do,” he instructed me. “Open. Your. Mouth.”

I squirmed under him one last time, creased my brows and implored him. “Ivar, this is so gross.”

He only smirked at me. “Yes, it is, and you are going to do it for me anyway.”

My teeth were starting to ache from how tightly I held my jaw closed. I glared up at him stubbornly even as I knew I was going to cave, the heat in my belly exploding at the thought of debasing myself like this just to please him.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he promised, eyebrows jumping. “After I fuck you, I will let you sit on my face.”

He watched me crack, the tension in my brows softening as a soft moan escaped my throat and betrayed my own desire. His smile was broad and dark as night when I slowly licked my lips and parted them for him.

It was so hard to remain still. He made another foul noise in his throat as he gathered up a fresh wad, worked it around in his mouth for a moment and then began to let it descend. My stomach felt a little sick but his eyes sparkled as he watched me struggle to control myself. The bubbly line of spit dangled closer and closer to my face. The bastard was dripping it as slowly as he could, drawing out the suspense until I started to regret everything.

A slight breeze was catching the shimmering line, and as it stretched closer to my lips I realized it was likely to hit me in the cheek if I didn’t make an effort to catch it in my mouth. Was I really willing to help this happen, give up my last vestige of pride? If it didn’t land how he wanted, he might demand to do it again. Ivar was moving his head carefully, trying to line the thing up, and when that heavy glob of spit passed one more time over my lips I lifted my chin, extended the tip of my tongue to receive it.

I locked my eyes on Ivar’s as the string broke and I sucked that wad of his spit into my mouth. It was thick and cool but mostly tasteless; it just tasted like him. The feel of the foreign fluid sliding back over my tongue made me squirm, however, just as it made my cunt clench in some dreadful, deep arousal. My stomach sickened but I narrowed my eyes at Ivar and swallowed his gift deliberately, watched him moan with pleasure as he licked the remnant of the string off his own lips.

Then came a mad scramble to remove our clothing, as his tongue thrust into my mouth like he was looking for any trace of what he had just deposited there. I welcomed the heat of it, desperate to erase the sickly sensation still tingling on my tongue. Before I knew it Ivar was lining himself up and plunging his cock inside me, the ache of my desire being replaced by the deeper ache of him filling me up. He had pinned my arms over my head and started fucking me with abandon, glaring down at me like a conqueror claiming his prize.

I gasped and moaned under him for only a few moments before his face screwed up and his thrusts started staggering; he barely remembered to pull himself out in time and his warm seed spilled over my belly instead. Then he rubbed his hand over my face and collapsed on the ground beside me.

I didn’t feel entirely wonderful about what had just happened, but Ivar had promised me a reward. He was still catching his breath when I mounted him with a determined smirk, walking my knees on either side of his prone body closer and closer to his face. He looked like he was about to fend me off, but something in my eye caught him and he smiled instead. Fair was fair. I thought about paying...
him back by wiping some of the sticky seed off my belly and across his mouth, but I was afraid I’d forfeit the worship I was about to receive if I did so. I collected the trickling mess with my hands and rubbed onto the grass beside his head instead.

Ivar smiled. “Come here pet. You have been such a good girl. Let me take care of you now.” His hands crept behind my thighs and urged me forward until my sex hovered right over his mouth. I buried one hand in his hair and then brought myself down to his lips.

Ivar was so eager; clumsy at first but quickly discovering how to work me from this angle, fingers sneaking up to enter me from behind and tongue dancing in time with the writhing of my hips. I was still haunted by the sensation of Ivar’s thick wad of spit in my mouth, my stomach jumping each time I remembered it, but it only stoked the fire Ivar was blowing on beneath me. It was not long before I was all but grinding myself into his face and groaning out my own orgasm, this one shuddering and almost reluctant but so deep, so satisfying. I fell off him as soon as it was done, trying to come back to myself, to recover from this strange and sudden storm that had rolled over us both.

It was only when I was pushing my dress back down that I remembered the three people inside the cabin who might possibly have spied on some of that insanity. In fact, after what I had implied to Ubbe, it was quite likely he had been poking his head through the window intermittently to make sure that Ivar was still behaving. I concluded that he must not have looked at the wrong time, however, otherwise he would surely have misunderstood Ivar’s bullying, roared out here and put a stop to it. My shame lessened only a little. Had I really let Ivar do something so disgusting to me?

“I am… not sure if I ever want to do that again,” I said to the sky.

My lover rolled onto his side, resting his head on his hand. “That is alright,” he said with a cheeky grin. “I only wanted to see if you would let me do it.”

I gazed up at him, pondering his sparkling eyes, his cute little nose, the perfect, ever-pouting lips. I shook my head, more at myself than at him. “I do not think there is much I would ever deny you,” I said dreamily, and sincerely.

He smiled as he leaned in to kiss me, slow and deep, but when he pulled back I saw sorrow in his face.

I smoothed my hand over his cheek. “What is it, my love?”

Ivar heaved a heavy sigh. “You are so precious to me. But sometimes it is so hard to believe that this will all work out. I watch your father scheming every night in the great hall… he does not offer us the kinds of promises he is suggesting to some of the kings from outside of Norway.”

This again. I was so tired of discussing it. “It does not mean he will not let me choose you, Ivar. His relationship with your family is long-established. It is only that he does not need to work on your alliance the way that he labors at friendship with the others.”

Ivar smiled, but the bitterness was still there behind his eyes. “Your optimism is endearing, but you said it yourself, Sigrunn, that your father still speaks of his love for that princess. And what was the pledge that he made in exchange for her hand?”

I said it begrudgingly, hating when our conversations stepped in this direction. “That he will become king of all Norway.”

“And he needs Kattegat for that. He makes noises like he is giving up that goal when he speaks to us, but with Ragnar gone now… I think he and I are destined to be enemies.” He tilted his head.
“Tell me, Sigrunn, does he make plans to move against me and my brothers?”

Suddenly I questioned everything. The sex, demanding my submission…. Was all of that a tactic to draw out whatever secrets he thought I was holding? My face clouded. “Ivar, do you really think that I would be leading you on like this, promising that my father would give you my hand, and all the while be scheming with him about stealing your hall and your lands out from under you? How dare you. I cannot believe you would even ask me that.” I drew myself up, but only to push Ivar flat against the ground, to lean my body over his and fill his vision with my face. “I am loyal to my family, yes. But not at your expense. I am telling you that all I see are possibilities for our families to work together. I believe our marriage can forge an even stronger alliance, one that benefits my father’s legacy and yours, and that lets us be happy and strong for the rest of our lives. And I am working to make my father see it that way too.”

Ivar’s face did not move. “And what if you do not succeed in that?”

I frowned. I did not want to answer the question, did not want to imagine the terrible choice I would have to make if my father’s plans ever stopped aligning with Ivar’s.

“Sigrunn, I wish you would start thinking about your own best interest. What do you have to gain out of all this loyalty to Harald? Once you’re married off you will have a new family, a new loyalty, yes? On that day you won’t be beholden to him anymore, anyway. No matter who it is he wants to give you to. Why throw away your own happiness just to advance the goals of a man you will be leaving behind? Why not make your own choice, and tie yourself to someone that you love?”

It was a tempting argument, but I still believed Ivar was the one being naïve. “What are you saying Ivar, that we should run away together? We have nowhere to run. You can start a war with Harald Finehair and split your own army in half, or you can be patient as I am being patient and wait until you do not need him anymore. I think that day is coming sooner than anyone thinks.” I tossed my head in frustration. He thought me so weak, because still he could not see the length of my stratagem. “This is all that I have been trying to say. That you focus on consolidating your power, gain the loyalty of these men, and do not let me distract you. If that does not impress my father like I hope, then you will still have become strong enough to handle him as an enemy instead.”

Ivar glared back at me for a while, then broke into a smile. “Are you saying you will come to me on that day, even against your father’s wishes?”

I pressed my forehead to his. “Yes, my love. My counsel is still patience, for now. But later, if it comes to it, I understand that we may have to choose war.”

*****

The next morning my family and I received an invitation from Bjorn to take the evening meal with him at the great hall. I don’t know why I thought all of Ragnar’s sons might be there; when we entered only Bjorn was at the table, next to his mother, his woman Torvi, and their children. Bjorn was one of the sons of Ragnar and also he was not; his loyalties bridged both camps and I thought perhaps we were being shown tonight which one held the priority in his heart. Astrid was seated on Lagertha’s other side; the woman greeted me with another one of her insufferably sweet smiles. I was not any more interested in her condescending version of friendship now than I had been while I was their prisoner.
After the exchange of a few pleasantries as the meal was served, Bjorn turned the conversation to the reason for our invitation. “More warriors are arriving at Kattegat every day. More of your warriors.” Bjorn’s jaw clenched, and he forced himself to smile. “And we thank you.” He glanced at me, though he continued to address my father. “My mother and I were thinking Sigrunn might like to move back into the Hall now. We can get her settled in early while you break camp and load your boats for the voyage ahead.”

My eyes whipped to my father. He had said I could go with him to England, what was this? I thought Father looked as surprised as I did, though he managed to hide it better. “And I was thinking that the time for hostages is over,” he answered, his voice even as he set his knife down, rested both his empty hands on the table and stared Bjorn down.

“I disagree,” the younger man said, pushing back from the meal and crossing his arms. “This is the largest force you have ever had near our shores, so now more than ever, we need reassurances.”

I noticed that Uncle Halfdan had pushed his plate away as well, watching his brother and Bjorn carefully.

“Bjorn,” Harald said, face creasing into a wide smile, “I thought that I had proven my friendship by now. We have sailed together so often, and now I am risking the majority of my own men on this campaign to avenge your great father.”

“Risk, yes,” Lagertha cut in. “War is risky. Certainly you would feel better if your only child was far away from the conflict, safe within these walls.” She looked so smug, my hand itched to slap her.

“On the contrary, Lagertha,” my father replied, “I was thinking it was time that Sigrunn experience a taste of the true Viking life. So that she can better understand the ways of our people, and get to know some real Viking men.”

“I am sorry to disappoint your plans, Harald.” Lagertha paused, the unspoken accusation hanging between them. “I do still require reassurances.” She leaned back and looked at me warmly. “Besides, I think it will do your daughter more good to be in the company of women again. We will help her grow into a strong and centered young lady while all of the… distractions are gone.”

I could not hold my tongue any longer. “There was only one woman I desired to learn from, to become more like, Lagertha, and you killed her. Do not condescend to think that you know how to make better choices than I. There are many arenas in which you could not compete with Aslaug,” I spit, “and with me it will be no different.”

Lagertha glared at me, the battle to keep a cool head in the face of my insults evident in her features. “If you choose to make your next stay with me as unpleasant as the last, Sigrunn, that is entirely up to you.”

“Father,” I pleaded, turning my face back to him. “Do not leave me here.”

“You know there are several reasons that it is better for her to stay,” Lagertha spoke over me, invoking the ghost of my affair with Ivar. “This should be an easy choice for you, Harald. Unless,” she paused dramatically, “there is something that you are not telling us.”

Halfdan bared his teeth. Harald wiped his mouth, the picture of calm, and looked at me. “I had hoped to find her a husband during this campaign.”

“And we all understand the realities of a political marriage,” Lagertha replied just as smoothly. “They have all seen her, had a chance to meet her here. We both know you can do the rest of the work
without her.”

Father nodded and I could not contain my outrage. “You agree with that?” I choked. “So now we are not even pretending that I have any part in the choice?”

He laid a steadying hand on my arm. “We will talk about it later, Sigrunn.” His eyes urged me to shut up and let him handle the conversation.

“Yes, we will,” I said petulantly and sunk deeper into my seat.

Father only grunted at my tone before turning back to Bjorn and Lagertha. My uncle tried to pat my hand reassuringly, but I pushed him away. Father went on with that magnanimous tone that told me every word he was about to say was utter bullshit. “It saddens me to know that the trust between our families has not grown as far as I had hoped. Our alliance is very dear to me. If this is what it will continue to take to prove my friendship to you, of course I will honor our original agreement and leave my daughter as hostage during our joint campaign.”

“Not joint,” Bjorn growled. “I am the leader of this great army, I and my brothers. It is my father that we launch the ships to avenge. We are very grateful for the assistance of your men, King Finehair, but we are not sharing leadership.”

Father nodded again, conceding the point with that false grace that seemed to fool so many. I felt as if something heavy were settling over my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I would be left behind? How could I influence my father to choose Ivar over the other suitors if there were an entire sea between us? My hatred for Lagertha only grew, and now Bjorn had entered the circle of my scorn. How dare they do this to me. How dare Father agree so easily.

I was barely conscious of the rest of the meal. As soon as we were out of earshot of the great hall on our way back to camp, I stopped dead in my tracks. “Father, how could you,” I cried, feeling the heat in my face beginning to squeeze a few tears out of the corners of my eyes.

“Hush,” he said, motioning curtly for me to keep walking. “I am not leaving you here,” he added under his breath. He took my arm and dragged me along, continuing to speak in low tones. “Very soon, Kattegat is not going to be a safe place. It is already in motion.” He looked fierce and troubled.

“What are you planning?” I demanded through furrowed brows. And then the more important question struck me. “Why haven’t you told me?”

Uncle Halfdan butted in with a wry grin. “If he had, would you have kept it from Ivar?”

“Uncle!” I scoffed, turning all of my outrage onto him.

“It is a shame, really,” Father interrupted, continuing his own train of thought as we walked briskly along. “I had hoped I had gained enough trust that they would not have asked you to stay this time. Now Lagertha will suspect me, when I break the deal and take you away on my boat with me.”

On his boat. Now there were three competing agendas for where I ought to be when the great army launched.

Suddenly it all clicked into place, what I needed to do so that everyone could get what they wanted. Everyone except Lagertha, of course. “There is another way,” I said, laying both hands on Father’s arm, pride at my own cleverness swelling in my voice. “Go ahead and deliver me to Lagertha when it is time to depart, and make sure to launch your boats early in the morning. I will take care of the
rest. When you leave as normal you will not be suspected in what I do next.”

Father looked down at me, one eyebrow arched. “And what is that, Daughter?”

“I will go down to the water to bid farewell to Ivar, and I will jump into his boat just as they launch. I will look only like a lovesick girl and no one will think that you wanted it to happen.” And then I can comfort Ivar through the long voyage just as he needs me to.

Father’s jaw clenched, and his eyes left my face as he thought the idea over. “It will look like you two are madly in love,” he complained.

“Brother,” Uncle Halfdan said with a laugh in his voice, “have you not been paying attention? It already does. They are not being very subtle.”

Father glared down at me again, his little girl hanging off of his arm as we walked, and I had the grace to blush a little. “I have been doing everything you asked, Father. I am polite to everyone you wish me to speak with. But my heart… is my heart.”

“And Ivar has not managed to dislodge himself from it yet,” Father finished for me. He sighed. “You still think that you are in love with that boy? I must say I was hoping you would be turned off by his manners by now.”

“I do not know how you could think that,” I teased, “given all of the years that I have lived with you two animals.” Halfdan giggled behind us. “You have taught me everything I need to know about how rude and domineering men can be.”

Father chuckled softly and shrugged; I felt my chest loosen realizing that he was not going to try and dissuade me from Ivar any further. He was still giving us a chance.

“It is a good enough deception,” Father obliged. “It will serve our purposes. Hopefully there will not be too much gossip about it.”

“I will try to keep my head down as the fleet sails,” I said. “And when we arrive you will act as if you had no knowledge of this, of course.” I thought of another plan to offer. “Feel free to express your disapproval as publicly as you like when you see us together, to smooth things over for your other schemes. I will not hold anything you say against you.”

Harald gave me a strange look. “Such loyalty, Daughter, to embrace embarrassment on my behalf.”

“I am loyal to you, Father,” I replied, brow creasing in puzzlement. “Surely you know that.”

“Of course I do,” he said after a pause, his expression growing warmer. “I only forget, sometimes, how you are growing up, so smart. And mature. How much you are willing to sacrifice to help me achieve my aims. It surprises me sometimes.”

“Is that why you kept me out of your plans to move against Lagertha? Because you still think of me as a child? Because I am not, Father. If I am old enough to marry, and help you with your political schemes, then I am old enough to know the whole truth.”

“Perhaps,” said Father, but he said no more on the matter no matter how hard I pressed him.
“Sigrunn! You have been avoiding me,” Ivar snarled up at me as soon as he got close enough to be heard.

“Good day to you too, Ivar,” Finna huffed, peeking around my other side as we made our way through the streets of Kattegat.

Ivar didn’t even look at her, kept his ill-tempered eyes fixed on me as he hauled himself across the ground to keep up with us. “Why?”

“I am not avoiding you, Ivar,” I said, cold in response to his rudeness. Even though he was likely right. “There is simply more in my life than waiting around for you to have time for me.” There had been so many people to meet with, for both of us, in these final days of the army’s preparations. And I had a secret now, about Father’s plans, and I was terrified Ivar was going to be able to tell. Perhaps that fear had kept me away from the scant opportunities we might have had to be alone together.

My feet kept moving, carrying us along toward my and Finna’s original destination, regardless of Ivar’s attempted interruption.

The frustrated prince came close enough to reach up and catch at my hand. “We need to talk.”

I finally stopped walking, looked down at my pursuer. “About what.” I heard Finna huff behind me.

Ivar’s eyes were wide. “Bjorn says that you are not coming with us, that you are to stay in Kattegat as Lagertha’s hostage again. Is that true?”

I sighed. This wasn’t the way that I had wanted the topic brought up. Though it served me right for avoiding it, I supposed. “Yes, but--”

“And this was not something you thought you should come to me with?” He was trying to sound cold and disapproving, but the pain of my distance was brimming behind those expressive eyes.

I softened. “I do want to talk about it Ivar, but not here. And not now.” I tried to step back, indicating Finna with my shoulder.

Ivar refused to release my hand. “Why not now? I am upset.”

“I am going to Frigg’s grove, to scry with Finna.” Aslaug’s box was under my other arm and I hoisted it a little to call attention. “We have just learned she is with child, and we must ask about the babe’s health, whether it is wise for her to travel with the Army as she planned.”

“I need you now,” Ivar insisted.

“I am going with Finna,” I said just as firmly, “I will find you later.”

“My legs hurt,” he tried. “It is time for another treatment. Come back with me.” His lip curled in an arrogant smile. “The gods will still be there tomorrow.”

Finna made an outraged noise, embarrassing me and spurring on my rising frustration with the brat in front of me. “I am sorry, do you think you are speaking to one of the slaves? Commanding me to change my plans? If you really need help that badly, I am sure you can find Eyja and make her do it.”
Ivar grit his teeth. “She does not have your touch. It has to be you, Sigrunn. Especially if you are not coming to England with us, who will care for me then?”

He really was trying everything; and that line probably would have worked if I hadn’t already known we would not actually be separated. I pressed my lips together firmly before I spoke. “Later, Ivar. And then we can talk about everything.”

The seething mixture of frustration and pain in my lover’s eyes almost cracked my resolve, but Finna stepped before us and held out her hand to me. “Come on, Sigrunn,” she said with a haughty air, and I let her tug me away.

The message from Frigg was clearer than I expected. Finna’s babe would grow strong surrounded by clashing blades and the howls of men triumphant in war. The good omens left me feeling warm and cheerful as I returned Aslaug’s box to its home under my bed in my family’s tent. The afternoon sun pressed a long line through the parted door-flap as I sat down on the mattress, trying not to dream about my own belly swelling with a babe one day. Would Ivar’s child sit calmly, or would he twist and vex me as often as his father?

It hurt a little, to indulge such sweet thoughts. The future was so uncertain. I reminded myself that everything was yet aligned, my feet were still set on the path that would bring Ivar and I together forever. Father may be making plans against Kattegat, but the threat was only to Lagertha, who was after all Ivar’s most hated enemy. I told myself I wasn’t really betraying my lover by keeping Father’s confidence. I was only being an upright, honorable daughter to Harald Finehair. It was just… easier to feel confident in that when Ivar was not around.

The beam of golden sunlight widened suddenly and I looked up to see Ivar throwing aside the flap, poking his head into my tent. “There you are,” he said, voice gruff but mouth already twisting into a smile.

“You’ve cornered me at last,” I joked. “Though you are a bold man, doing so in my own father’s tent.”

“I would be no Viking if I were not bold,” Ivar responded, taking that as an invitation to haul himself inside. “I came for you in Lagertha’s hall, I am come now in the heart of your Father’s domain, and I will come for you anywhere that anyone decides to hide you, Sigrunn. I will let no one keep us apart.” He delivered this speech while crawling hand over hand to me. I marveled yet again at how powerful and menacing he always managed to make that look. Ivar pulled himself up onto the bed beside me, took both my hands and looked at me expectantly. “I hate that you are not coming with us,” he lamented, brows tightly furrowed. “What can we do to change their minds?”

“Ivar,” I said, unable to hide my smile at his stress, “I am not staying here.”

His eyes widened. “Your father negotiated your release?”

I shook my head. “He thinks that I am staying.” One lie, to appease my beloved. To keep my father’s secrets. “Lagertha thinks that I am staying.”

“But you are not?”

I smiled, lips rolling with pride at my own cleverness. The hope swelling in Ivar’s lost little face was worth a tiny bending of the truth. “I will not let anything keep us apart, my love. Keep your boat in the dock until almost everyone else has departed. Wait for me to come down and embrace you, to bid
you farewell. Only then should you give the order to launch, and I will jump onto the deck before Lagertha’s warriors can stop me.”

Ivar’s smile, which bloomed in response to the image of my rebellion, set off a fire in my chest. “You would risk everything for me.”

“Of course, my love,” I said fiercely, capturing his lips in a quick kiss. He tried to pull me into him but I withdrew after but a moment of indulgence. “Is it a good plan? I do not think Lagertha will pursue us just to get me back, not with an entire fleet loaded with warriors loyal to you just beyond our prow.”

“It is a good plan,” Ivar affirmed, arms winding around me. The thick lashes around his eyes fluttered. “Though your father is certain to be angry with you when he notices.” He chuckled, a little spitefully. “I can see his face now, when our boat pulls alongside his, your golden hair streaming beside the mast and my hand on your hip.” We both grinned at the image. Ivar’s fingers tickled at my waist. “Where is the loyal and obedient little Sigrunn Haraldsdottir now?” he teased. “You were the one going on about ‘gossip interfering with Father’s plots’ when I suggested this very thing to you last week.”

I snuggled my cheek against Ivar’s. “That was before, when I thought that we were both going to end up on the same shore, regardless.” I pressed another kiss into his neck. “Yes, Father will be annoyed, but I think he will be happier to have me out of Lagertha’s clutches, too.”

Ivar’s hands spasmed against me at the mention of her name. “He has no love for that bitch, either,” he mused, pausing his amorous intentions. “Your father makes a show of getting along with everyone, but I see him keeping her at arm’s length.”

“Something else you and he have in common,” I breathed. I would take any opportunity I could to fan the flames of a potential alliance between Ivar’s interests and Father’s. But it would take subtlety. Not all of their intentions converged. “Now, how are your legs feeling?” I changed the subject, pulling back from him a little. “I have time to tend to them now, if you would like.” Best to drop a few seeds and cover them quickly, let them germinate on their own.

Ivar’s deep sigh spoke volumes about the pain he had been ignoring. He pulled the vial of his ointment from a pocket, pressing it into my hand. “Yes,” was all he said, kissing my cheek before bending to remove the brace from his legs.

Ivar was naked from the waist down, spread across my bed on his belly, when my father walked into the tent. I was kneeling between his parted knees, running my elbow down the back of his oily thigh in deep, soothing passes, coaxing the spasming muscle beneath to release.

Harald Finehair made an exaggerated sound of disgust when he noticed us. “Do you have to be doing that in my tent? Have a little respect for your poor father.”

Ivar turned his head, looking up from the pillow he was clutching and smirking a rebuttal to my father before I could decide what to say. “I know that you are waiting for your Princess, and it has probably been a long time since you have been with a woman, King Harald, but I would think you’d remember the act well enough to know that I am not pointed in the right direction.”

Father laughed at the jab and I released a breath of relief. Still, I leaned away and drew a blanket over Ivar’s legs, knowing the joke had to be covering Ivar’s embarrassment at his infirmity being exposed like this.
“That is true,” Father chuckled. “I said it only because I was not sure you children really knew what you were doing in the first place.”

Embarrassment brought instant heat to my face. “Father, stop.”

“And just because my Princess is waiting for me, does not mean I have been waiting for her…”

“Father, stop!” I shrieked, “I do not want to hear about that!” I shook my head, showing him my hands. “It is just a healing salve, I am rubbing it into Ivar’s legs for him. So that they do not pain him as much.”

Father’s eyebrows jumped. “Well if you have any left, come here and rub my shoulders, then. It has been a long and taxing day.” Harald sat down in a chair with a huff, rubbing the back of his neck. When no one else moved, he glared at Ivar pointedly. “That means put your pants back on and get your bony little ass out of here, Ivar.”

I did rub Father’s neck after Ivar left, grateful to have something to do with my hands, and to have such an opportunity to put him into a better mood as we spoke. I had more seeds to plant today.

“What an impressive army Ivar and his brothers have gathered,” I remarked, as if I were just making conversation.

King Harald grunted. I could not tell if it was in response to my statement, or to the particularly nasty knot my thumb had just found.

“Ivar barely has any time to see me now, he is so busy making plans with all of these new warriors. He is doing just as I said he would, Father. He is making a true leader out of himself.”

“He tries,” Father said, more dismissively than I had hoped. “He has yet to face the true test of command, on the battlefield. All we know right now is how much he likes to talk.” He rolled his neck against my fist. “That’s the spot. How did I not know this earlier, how soothing your hands are, Daughter? You are quite good at this.”

I was glad I was standing behind him, so that he could not see the glowing, childish smile brought to my face by his praise. I was trying to get him to take me more seriously, see me as something more than just his blushing, pleasing baby girl. I forced my voice low, tried to sound as queenly as Aslaug used to. “Whoever keeps the loyalty of this army after Ragnar’s vengeance is meted out will have more power than our people have seen in a long time.”

I felt Father’s chuckle rumble in the flesh below my pressing knuckles. “And you are trying to remind me not to give your hand away until we see where all the loyalties fall, how this Great Army changes the fates of our peoples.”

“Something like that,” I agreed. I kneaded the thick muscles at the top of his shoulders for a while, wondering whether I should push any harder for Ivar today. I needed to be sure to avoid coming into open argument with Father. That was always dangerous. I decided to broach my next subject instead, the one that was weighing heavier on my mind. “It seems things will be changing here in Norway too, while we are all away. What are you planning for Kattegat? Why do you not want me under Lagertha’s roof?”

Father let out a heavy breath. “Not a word of this to Ivar,” he warned, and would not continue until I hummed out my agreement. “Ragnar’s young sons owe vengeance to Lagertha too, but they are too loyal to Bjorn to agree on any action. None of them will be happy with what I am doing, and
everything hinges on no one finding out until we get back.”

“You are sending someone to attack her,” I guessed.

Father reached up and patted my hand, which had gone still on his shoulder. “If all goes well, when we sail back into this harbor I will be walking right up into that throne.”


“It is probably best if I do not burden you with the details.”

I grunted in disappointment. “I am not a child any longer, Father,” I reminded him. Which got me precisely nowhere, as Father’s lips remained closed. “Will they be killing Lagertha?” I asked softly. Denying Ivar his personal vengeance might be the worst part of this plan, aside, of course, from stealing his childhood home.

“That depends on how hard she fights,” Father replied evenly. “I expect her in chains but that woman is always rushing to the front lines. She may fall in the battle.”

I felt my stomach flipping. I had wanted this knowledge but now I wished I didn’t have it. Ivar was right; he and Father were set to be enemies. “Shall I brush out your hair now?” I could not bear to ask any more questions, but didn’t want Father to see my face until I had better composed myself either. Better to just stay busy behind him a while longer.

“If you like,” he agreed, and I retrieved the brush, began undoing the long plait of his hair. He never took proper care of it when he was on campaigns without me, pulled the brush too roughly and tore the strands. I was still working on undoing the damage he had wreaked on it during his travels with Bjorn.

“I will be able to cut this soon,” Father said quietly as I teased apart locks longer than my own. “I saw her today.”

I almost dropped the brush. “Princess Ellisef?”

Father’s pleased growl was almost embarrassing to hear. “Looking even more beautiful than I remembered. She is here with the Great Army. She will be witness to all of my plans unfolding, will be able to see how truly important a man I have become. I think when we return, I will be giving her Kattegat as a wedding present.”

I would finally get to meet Father’s princess. I actually felt nervous; I had grown up hearing so much about the elegant creature that had captured my father’s heart that she was like an absent, faceless mother to me already. I wondered what she would think of me when Father introduced us. “Where did you see her?” I asked, excitement bubbling under my words. “What did she say to you?”

“I saw her in the market, this morning,” Father said. He stared off toward the tentflap as I worked the brush through his hair. “We did not speak. Not yet.”

“Did she see you?”

“I think… I think she smiled at me,” he said, voice going strange and dreamy. My poor lovesick father. “Or maybe she did not recognize me, it was such a brief glance. No, no I think that she knew me. She is just playing a game, pretending not to notice me. Pretending to be too good for me, as she always did.”
That was not the way he usually told the story about her. But I did not question it, and Father kept talking.

“I will go to her tonight. She has to have heard my name fall from a dozen mouths since she arrived here. She is just now getting a sense for what a great man I have become, how important. Just as she required before she would marry me. When she finds out how close I am to making myself King of all Norway, she will look at me differently.” He made that growl in the back of his throat again, and I hurried to finish with his hair, feeling awkward.

Still, here was another opportunity not to be wasted, emotions brewing inside of Father that I could likely harness in sympathy to my own cause. I put down the brush and began massaging his scalp with my fingertips. “I will do something special with your hair for this evening, then.” When he grunted his agreement, I started sectioning out the long strands at the crown of his head. I wondered if I should change my dress, put on something finer, myself. Ellisef and Ivar would both be seeing me tonight. I waited a beat before I dropped my next comment. “What a pair we make, both so helplessly lost in love.”

Father grunted. If he recognized my ploy, he ignored it. “I would not say that I am helpless. The tasks I need to win her hand are set out before me, and I am very close to achieving them now.”

“Love doesn’t make you feel helpless?” I asked softly. That question was not part of my stratagem; it just kind of came out. Uncertainty rearing up into my chest, suddenly I was just a girl seeking comfort from her father.

He caught my hand in his again, twisted in his seat to look up at me. “It is terrifying,” he said, though his look for me was confident and warm. The corner of his mouth twitched into a smile. “Though you can tell no one that I said that.”

I returned his smile, nodding obediently.

The mirth in his eyes flattened. “You really think that you love that boy.”

My response was just a little bit tart. “As much as you think that you love that girl.” I resisted the urge to add the full truth: probably much more, seeing as Ivar and I have actually embraced each other, and spoken for more than five minutes at a time. I would never question Father directly like that.

He sighed and smiled up at me, but I did not miss the sadness that tightened the corners of his eyes. “Contrary to what you may believe about me, I am only trying to make certain you end up with a happy life, Sigrunn. A marriage that will bring you more comfort than suffering. That is why I keep asking you to consider other options.”

The words started trickling out of me. “I will be happy with no man but Ivar.” It was all I could do to keep the petulant tone out of my voice. “I have met with everyone you want me to meet, Father, and my choice is still him.” Harald’s eyes hardened but I pushed on, a new angle occurring to me. “Was Ellisef the safest choice for you? The path of least suffering? I think not. Your love for her has led you into wars, has kept you lonely and striving for more than a decade. Tell me that was the safest choice for your heart.” Satisfaction stirred in my chest as I watched Father’s face turn thoughtful at my argument. I took a deep breath before continuing, deciding whether I should push this all the way. “We love whom we love. And I admire you for it, Father. I respect the depth of your love for your Princess, regardless of circumstance. All I am asking is for you to respect mine too.”

His eyes slid off me then, and I feared that I had lost him. “You are so young, Sigrunn.”
“And how young were you when you married Mother?” Part of me could feel that I was going too far now, but I did not have enough sense to hold my tongue.

“That was different.”

“How was it different? You loved her, did you not?” Father was still refusing to meet my eye, and I felt the frustration rising in my chest. “I wish she were here right now. She would take my side; she would want to make sure that I was happy.”

Father pressed his lips together tightly. “Your mother was a very practical woman, Sigrunn. I was the dreamer, the romantic. She would have wanted to find you a husband that could take care of you, first and foremost. A man who would keep you safe and yes, happy, for the rest of your days. Someone like King Alfgeir, for example. Who gave you such a fine ring the other evening. Where did you put it?”

I scowled, tying off his braid and stepping away from my father. “Ivar is the only one that is in my heart.” I bent under my bed to retrieve Aslaug’s box, bringing it over to my weary-faced father. “Who, by the way, did give me a courting gift. Much finer than Alfgeir’s. Take a look.” I opened the top, gave Father a moment to marvel at the priceless objects inside. “It was his Mother’s.”

Harald’s eyebrows climbed. “Queen Aslaug’s ritual tools? These must be very powerful indeed.” He wrapped his hands around the edge of the box, admiring them for a few more moments. “Do you know how to use them?”

My heart grew calmer, soothed by the change in subject and the little victory of Father’s impressed face. “What do you think your sister was teaching me all those summers you left me in her care?”

He smiled up at me then. “Would you use them to scry for me, Daughter? I find I have many questions to ask of the gods.”

I beamed, to be treated thusly as the woman of this house. “Of course. But not now, if that’s alright? I have already bothered the gods enough today.” I let the tides of the conversation turn away from my agenda. “Finna is with child, you know. Our scrying told us the babe will be born healthy and strong, despite the journey and hardships before us. Besides, Father, it is almost time to go to the hall.” I raised one eyebrow, “And face your Princess.”

I could see the nervous tension break over Father’s face then. “One of the things I would love to ask about.” He shrugged. “But I suppose there is nothing the gods could show you that would stop me from speaking with her tonight. She is my destiny, and I am ready to embrace it.”

****

“You flinched, that’s game,” I laughed.

“No, I did not.”

“I saw your lip twitch. That counts.”

“You are a harsh mistress, Sigrunn,” Ivar replied, mirth in his voice as he ceded the point. Then he turned his hand over, palm an open invitation to mine. “Your turn.”
“You are going to hold my hand through my turn? How sweet of you, my prince.”

“It is only to better feel if you squirm,” he replied through his shark’s smile, “if we are going to play that strictly from now on.”

Ivar and I were doing our best to amuse ourselves; this evening had actually turned out to be a fairly dull gathering, despite the crowd of guests in the great hall. Most of us had been waiting at Kattegat for so long that we did not have much that was new to say to each other. The only benefit of the boredom was that Ivar was not busy either, and was free to sit at a table near the wall and pass the time with me. He continued to observe everyone, of course, but he did not seem to be in a very gregarious mood.

He had proposed a few rounds of ‘Flinch,’ another one of our childhood games, possibly just to have an excuse to torment me. Though this was at least one where I had a chance to give the torture right back to him. It had been immensely satisfying to see the stoic wall of his face break, even if it was just a little crack. And the shiver that passed through me in anticipation of my own turn now was just as pleasant.

I placed my hand upon Ivar’s, palm up, wrist peeking out from my embroidered sleeve. Ivar’s fingers clamped down and he tugged my arm out harshly across the time-polished planks of the table. I pulled in a steady breath, refusing to react to the surprise. The game had begun.

Ivar locked his eyes onto mine, pupils dilating as he let quiet menace wash over his face. The crowded room, the overlapping voices and the bustle of bodies all around us, all of it fell away under the evil look my lover was giving me.

When we were alone together, Ivar quite enjoyed my every little fearful and excited response to him. It was thrilling in its own way to suppress all that now, to respond to him with nothing but a haughty, flat look as he prepared to do anything he could think of to make me flinch.

Without warning, Ivar jerked his body toward mine, thrusting his face within inches of my nose. I moved not a muscle in response to his aggressive gesture, then smiled into his bared teeth, relaxed and even.

Ivar glanced around the room without moving his head, so close to me that his warm breath intermingled with mine. He turned to my cheek and licked a long stripe up the side of my face.

It was a little difficult to suppress the urge to giggle.

“Watch those smiles, love,” he said against the shell of my ear, loud enough to irritate it with the vibrations of his voice. “Any genuine emotion, any moment’s reaction will lose you this game.” It was suddenly very hard not to squirm; the way his throat rumbled when he was speaking low and only for me never failed to flood my sex with heat.

“You have spent so much time trying to break me,” I teased back, careful to keep my voice level. “It has been like training. You are not going to find this an easy task.”

Ivar was still holding my arm outstretched on the table in his strong right hand. I felt him reaching for something on his belt with his left. He leaned back, waggling his head with a little smirk in his eyes. When he lifted his hand, it was wrapped around the hilt of his knife. Our knife. The big one that always seemed so thirsty to score my flesh, the one that couldn’t be sated until it had drawn at least a few drops of my blood.

“You think I am afraid of that?” I had to clear my throat; my voice sounded much less confident than
I had intended.

Ivar smiled at me and nodded slowly.

I sniffed, returning to my haughty shell, looking over Ivar’s head like I was suddenly very interested in the cobwebs at the corners of the rafters.

I saw the flash of the blade from the corner of my eyes just before I felt the cool metal tapping against my cheek. “Keep your eyes on me, Sigrunn.”

I had barely suppressed my startle at the touch; he was likely right. I needed to see what was about to happen or I did not stand a chance. Still, I could not give him the satisfaction of simply complying with that order. “That is not one of the rules,” I challenged, locking my gaze back onto his.

“It is now,” the prince smirked right back, sliding the flat of his blade down my cheekbone. “You may be holding down your natural urge to cringe, but your eyes show me everything.”

“Eyes are not part of the rules,” I insisted. “I have to move a muscle to lose the game.”

Ivar bobbed his head graciously. “Consider it my entertainment then. I just want to observe you as you try so hard not to break.”

I let my eyes show my excitement for only a moment. “Do your worst, then. I am not going to move.”

His blade slid down toward the corner of my mouth. “Would you really sit there and let me carve up that pretty face, I wonder?”

I knew he had to be bluffing but there was a ghost of something in his eye that made it very hard not to shiver, as he focused on that sharp point of metal so close to my full lips.

I licked them slowly, just to make his head spin.

“You are not as timid as you used to be, Sigrunn,” Ivar commented, tone patronizing as he drew that scratchy tip up my cheek. It left my skin before reaching the orbit of my eye, and Ivar drew up his arm, squinting like he was lining up for a precise little poke right into my pupil. “I think you need to ask yourself, ‘What is he capable of?’ ‘How far should I be tempting him to go?’”

He wouldn’t do it. I had to tell myself that over and over as that sharp piece of steel hovered so close to my eyeball that I was surprised my blinking lashes didn’t touch it.

“If you blink again, I win.”

“That would be a sad sort of victory,” I shot back, careful to keep my head perfectly still. “Everyone has to blink eventually; you wouldn’t have made me do anything.” I shifted my focus off the looming silver threat to glare at him defiantly, though my eyes burned in their sockets almost immediately at the thought of forcing my lids to stay open.

He raised his chin back at me, a stubborn little smile twisting his lips, before huffing and dropping the knife away. “Agreed.” His attention moved to my arm a split second before he slammed the point of the blade into the table beside my thumb. “Still no flinch?” he marveled, giving the hand he still held a quick squeeze of appreciation. “We shall have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

The fingers of Ivar’s left hand tickled inside my palm briefly, before he took hold of my sleeve and drew it sharply up my arm, exposing the pale flesh and blue veins underneath. I let my chest rise and
fall a little faster, allowing a small amount of stress to drain across my face while Ivar’s attention was
distracted.

He bent and kissed me suddenly, just below the hollow in the bend of my elbow. And just as fast, he
retrieved the knife.

“\textit{I know that you have survived this for me many times before, pet,}” Ivar said slowly, sliding the flat
of the blade up and down my arm at a pace that would have been soothing, comforting even if it had
been his palm rather than cold iron. “\textit{But I am usually holding you down, so that you can squirm and}
struggle against me as much as you need to, to handle the pain}.” He lifted the knife and stilled,
balanced it on its point at the widest part of my forearm. The sting was immediate but entirely
tolerable. We both admired the way that my soft flesh dimpled beneath the weight of the weapon.
Ivar released the grip of his right hand, so that the back of mine was only nestled upon his palm, no
longer held or braced. “\textit{I wonder how long you can manage to remain truly still while I cut into you}
without any of that support from me. Are you ready to find out?”

He gave the balanced knife a little spin, which intensified the sting into a crawling sort of irritation as
my reflexes began to beg me to stop this. My \textit{kunta} was already starting to beg for other things.

We both sensed a body approach at the same time, lifted our heads to see King Alfgeir stepping up to
our table from the other side, staring in outrage down at my outstretched arm and the knife balanced
on its tip against my skin. “\textit{What is going on back here?}” he demanded to know.

I looked up at him levelly, making sure to stay still, refusing to lose the game even on the technicality
of this interruption. “\textit{Just a game we used to play as children},” I said, forcing cheerfulness into my
voice, though I was annoyed at the disturbance. Alfgeir looked ready to deck Ivar for hurting me and
I needed him to believe that everything was fine. “\textit{We call it ‘Flinch.’}”

Alfgeir raised an eyebrow, crossing his arms and looking in no way reassured.

My eyes reflexively flicked over the crowd to see if Father was watching, to determine how much of
a performance I was going to have to put up. He and my uncle were still standing where I had left
them, hovering near Lagertha’s throne and watching the line of newcomers paying their respects.
Waiting for Princess Ellisef to arrive. I doubted Father would even remember I existed until that
reunion was accomplished.

Ivar settled his body a little closer to mine. He smirked up at Alfgeir and pointedly did not remove
the knife from my skin. “\textit{The game is simple, really. She just tries not to flinch for as long as she can}
hold out underneath this knife}.”

Something strange and sadistic welled up inside me at the disturbed look on my other suitor’s face.
The unwanted suitor. Who would probably be better off if I could manage to scare him away from
me. “\textit{Would you like to play, King Alfgeir?}” I gave him my sweetest smile.

He wavered, and Ivar could not resist the opportunity to taunt the man. “\textit{You could not be afraid of a}
little pain, could you?”

In a flash, the tall blonde was seated on the bench across from us, sweeping back his cloak and
rolling up his sleeve, “\textit{I’ll wager I can last longer than you, little prince,}” Alfger said, throwing his
bulk around in big movements as he settled in. I admired, just a little, the confident way in which he
rose to this unexpected challenge. “\textit{Surely I am a more appropriate match for you in this contest, than}
the Princess}.” \textit{Than a woman}, the sneer in his gaze implied.

“\textit{This is Sigrunn’s favorite game},” Ivar replied coolly. “She can take more than either of us. At least
against you I have a chance to win.” I was surprised at the humility in his response; I knew Ivar’s pain tolerance to be remarkable. But I supposed that the way he had earned it was not something to be bragged about. He finally lifted the knife from my flesh, set it down on the table. “What do you wish to wager?”

“What were you two playing for?” Alfgeir responded.

I answered before Ivar could think of something smart that made this worse. “Nothing but bragging rights,” I said smoothly. “I must confess, Alfgeir, I am curious to see if you can outlast me.”

He seemed puzzled by this aspect of me. But if he presumed to one day be my husband I felt that I had to show this to him, my little darkness. My lust for brutality. “A warrior must know how to ignore pain,” Alfgeir lectured in response to my bid, “if he is to conquer on the battlefield. I will show you my prowess, Princess,” he concluded, and laid his bared arm down across the table.

I lifted the knife, assuming that since I had invited Alfgeir to the game, I would be the one to challenge him.

“I will do it,” Ivar interrupted, fingers closing over mine on the handle. I was surprised, but I let him pluck it from me. I could see Alfgeir was less pleased with this turn of events, though he left his arm where it was. Ivar reached over and grasped the older man’s hand, tugging his arm a little closer. He lifted himself over the table, grinding the back of Alfgeir’s hand into the surface as he put most of his upper body’s weight on it. He held the knife in his other hand, point-down, and brought it to hover over his arm. Ivar narrowed his eyes as he captured Alfgeir’s gaze, held it like a snake waiting to strike.

The cruelty in Ivar’s eyes was soft and intimate, and I could not decide which of us he was making more uncomfortable, Alfgeir or me. He drew the point of the blade over Alfgeir’s skin, soft and slow like a lover. “I wonder how acquainted you really are with pain, King Alfgeir,” he said, voice crooning strangely. He gave a cruel twist to his grip on the king’s hand, then set the knife over the delicate tendons of his wrist like he was preparing to bear down. “Have you ever taken a serious wound? Do you know what it feels like to fear that you might be maimed?”

I started to worry. I could see the regret pooling behind Alfgeir’s eyes. Even the newcomers had heard all the rumors, that Ivar was crazy, capable of anything. I had grown so used to the idea that Ivar enjoyed hurting me, that it was a special act of intimacy between us, that I had forgotten how he was with others. It was a little disturbing to watch this scene and consider that perhaps Ivar just enjoyed hurting people.

“These little ropes under your skin right here,” Ivar said, almost conversationally, “they control your fingers. They make your grip strong. And once they are cut they do not heal back together well. Why did you give me your right hand, Alfgeir?”

The King’s eyes widened but he managed not to shudder. “You would not dare,” he said bravely, but we could all hear the fear underneath, the way the statement was a reminder to Ivar, not just a cool dismissal.

“You don’t know what I am capable of,” Ivar responded, shrugging his shoulders. “You have brought many good men to join my army, and for that I am grateful, but on the other hand…” he trailed off as he made a sudden sawing motion, a hair’s breadth above the man’s skin. Alfgeir did not flinch and I saw Ivar’s lip pout for a moment in disappointment.

He drew the tip of the knife up Alfgeir’s arm, dragging it hard enough to leave a long white line in its wake. “On the other hand, I see the covetous way that you look at my Sigrunn.”
Alfgeir’s jaw clenched, and he spoke through his teeth. “I was unaware that she was yours, little prince. Her father tells me different.”

“Oh, she is mine,” Ivar said, almost casually, pressed another white line down Alfgeir’s flesh as the first one began to bloom red, a raised wheal down his flesh. “And I know this hand has touched what is mine.” His face darkened by the end of that statement, the blade flashed in some quick move, and Alfgeir pulled himself violently away from the table.

He clutched at his wrist, glaring down at Ivar as his face flushed with emotion. “Alright,” he spat. “Now it is your turn.” The dark red creeping across his face contrasted with his pale blonde brows as they furrowed in anger. “Give me the knife.”

Ivar shook his head, his dead calm infuriating even me. “Uh-uh, there are three players in this game. Sigrunn will do me, and then you may do her.”

I could not read the look that passed through Alfgeir’s eyes then, but his gaze fell on me as he absorbed Ivar’s words, and he sat back down in silent acceptance.

I had no loyalty to King Alfgeir, but some small amount of sympathy for him did press my hand as I took my turn on Ivar. I did not drag out the suspense, brought the pain swiftly enough to make my lover crack before it became obvious that he had outlasted the foreign king. I knew I was going to be winning this game anyway, so I saw little need to make sure to stretch Ivar’s turn out.

By the time my arm was outstretched before Alfgeir, we had drawn the attention of a small crowd, and I heard hushed bets being placed on my performance. I was no warrior, and I knew my slight frame and soft eyes did not project the appearance of strength. The odds I was overhearing were not in my favor, but they would soon learn about the other kind of woman’s strength. The kind Aslaug had, the kind her son had been forging into me. The kind I had borne before I ever came to Kattegat.

There was an apology behind Alfgeir’s eyes as he took my outstretched hand, shifted his grip on the knife. “Are you certain, Princess?” he asked softly, and I all but rolled my eyes at him.

“Do not insult me by holding back, King Alfgeir.”

He rolled his neck, making a show of getting ready to begin. He was stalling. I realized he was reluctant even to try and scare me, much less hurt me. It was sweet and entirely disappointing. He met my eyes with an apologetic smile and laid the blade of the knife softly across my forearm. He slid it down slowly, only barely scraping the edge across my skin. If Ivar had been doing it I might have thrilled a little, but with Alfgeir I felt as safe as if he were rubbing me with a spoon.

Ivar yawned, audibly, and Alfgeir’s brows creased. He pressed a little harder on his next pass, the sensation more like an itch than a sting. I wanted to yawn too, couldn’t help but taunt him with all these eyes watching us. “Surely you can do better than that.”

Alfgeir’s mouth twitched. He wanted to be kind but I was bruising his pride. He pulled his hand back and slammed the tip of the knife into the table beside my wrist. I moved not a muscle, though I was starting to wish this could just be over, that Ivar could show him how to truly frighten me. The foreign king ripped the blade from the tabletop and I thought maybe he was getting frustrated enough to actually do this right.

He set the point of the blade to my forearm, just the way he had caught Ivar doing it to me earlier. He scored the sharp thing down toward my hand, making a nice white line that quickly swelled with redness just under the surface of my skin. Better. It didn’t feel as good as it did when Ivar held the blade but I felt the excitement swelling anyway, that rush that I had come to crave. When he reached
my wrist he picked the blade up and set it just below the elbow again, scoring a second line close to the first. His nostrils flared as I gave him no reaction other than a slight increase in my breathing, a relaxation around the edges of my eyes.

I saw Alfgeir’s brows jump as it occurred to him that not only could I tolerate this, I might actually be enjoying it.

The longer I lasted, the louder the voices around us buzzed. Alfgeir grit his teeth and pressed harder, his reluctance to hurt me warring with his masculine pride. When the blade parted my skin, a neat little line that slowly welled up with blood, my would-be suitor began to look truly unsettled, disturbed by the continued serenity in my face. When he dragged the blade back up for his next pass it left a smear of coppery red behind it, spreading the little beads he had already summoned forth.

A few of the watchers cheered.

He cut into my flesh until blood started to trickle onto the table, but there was more horror in his face than there was in mine. His lips pressed together and he dropped the knife. “Enough,” he barked. “The game is yours.”

The cheers of those I had impressed mingled with the disappointed groans of those that had wagered against me. I smiled and finally moved from my frozen posture, pressing my palm over the bright red lines to slow the bleeding. Ivar’s arm slid up my back as he murmured his congratulations into my ear, ran a finger through one crimson trail and brought it to his lips for a taste.

Alfgeir rose from the table. “I will find someone to bandage your wound,” he said, courtesy barely covering what looked like an urge to be sick. His fingers spasmed against the air like he still wasn’t quite believing it was his hand that drew my blood. Any attraction I might have felt for him died right there.

I looked for my father after he turned his back. King Harald was not where I had left him; my searching eyes found him deeper in the hall, standing before a breathtakingly beautiful blonde in an elegant dress. It could only be Ellisef. My nerves, already heightened by the game, spiked through the roof. Something was strange in my father’s face. I stood to go to him without a second thought, accepting the cloth someone put into my hand and pressing it against the open wounds on my arm.

I wove through the milling crowd and got a better look at the apprehension writ large in the Princess’ expression as she listened to my father speak to her. Their reunion did not appear to be a happy one. I hesitated, wondered if I should intrude, and I noticed Uncle Halfdan approaching from the other side with a wary look. Whatever it was, he saw it too, though Father seemed oblivious as urgent words barreled out of his mouth.

She said something that made him start, and my anxiety spiked at the way his expression changed. They both looked at a well-dressed man on the other side of the room. Who could that be? She was shaking her head now, pleading with my father, as he looked angrier and angrier. I knew the signs of impending violence crawling across his face.

I jumped when he grabbed her; I thought that I should rush over and intercede and yet I was frozen to the ground, still too far to hear what they were saying. I felt a moment of relief when Halfdan stepped up behind them, but my blood ran cold when all he did was press a knife into Father’s hand. They were going to kill her. Right here in front of half the world.

A few more harried words were exchanged. I thought I saw my father’s lips say “I love you.” Then he thrust Ellisef away from himself; after one more long look she ran to that other man. Father took a deep breath and then turned, his eyes falling on me.
The pain swimming under the rage on his face threatened to break to the surface when I ran to him; sympathy for him overpowering every trace of my earlier fear. “Father,” I cried as I reached him, arms stretched out for an embrace, “what happened?”

He sniffed and pushed me to the side. I understood; if I comforted him now in this crowd he would look weak. He held my arm and glared down at me, so lost in his thoughts I wondered if he even recognized the limb he was gripping was his daughter’s. He pushed passed and headed for the exit without uttering even one word.

I spun on my heel, looking to Halfdan for an explanation. My uncle wrapped me under his arm, both of our bodies seeking the comfort we could not give to King Harald in this moment. “She married someone else,” he said softly. “I would have pushed that blade into her belly until it hit her spine.”

I shuddered, nodded, though I did not agree with his grisly conclusion. The look on Ellisef’s face… I wondered if she had ever even liked my father, what her version of the story of their betrothal would sound like. Obviously she had not actually considered herself betrothed to him. “I should go after him,” I said in a small voice, though I did not know what I would say.

“I will do it,” Uncle responded. “I do not think he needs to talk to a woman right now.”

I felt a little insulted but I let him go. After decades of campaigns away together, he was certainly closer to my father than I was. I turned my feet in a lost little circle before finding Ivar right where I had left him.

Concern flooded his face when he saw the expression on mine. I rushed back to his side, realizing that I too needed comfort from someone.

Ivar’s arm was so solid and warm as I climbed onto the bench beside him; he tucked me into his side as he pressed his lips into my temple. “What happened?”

“Father’s Princess… she married someone else.” I was still pressing that cloth to my arm; I pulled it back slowly, wondering why I was shaking so hard.

“Did she.” There was calculation in that voice. Ivar was trying to work out what this meant, politically. We both looked at the scabbing lines on my arm. I turned my wrist and flexed until I was satisfied the blood had stopped flowing, and I let the fine sleeve of my dress fall down to cover me again. Ivar ducked his head to look right at my face. “Why are you upset?”

I gave him a helpless look, trying to work out that answer myself. I felt terrible sympathy for Father, but this reaction was beyond that. A creeping sense of horror. “My uncle put a knife into his hand. Father almost killed her over it, right here, in front of everyone. I saw the murder in his eyes.” I shivered anew as I relived it.

Ivar did not look as outraged as I, not in the least. “I would feel the same way, if I were so betrayed.”

“That she should lose her life over loving someone else?”

“She dishonored him,” Ivar said coldly. “She has made a fool of him besides; all of Norway and beyond knows by now what he was doing to win her. And she spat on it. Her life is forfeit.”

It was hard not to feel that his firm grip on my waist was becoming a threat. He thought my father was right; if things did not work out the way Ivar wanted between the two of us, did that mean he would think he had the right to kill me?

I took a deep breath and pushed the thought to the side. It would not work out that way, anyway. We
were making sure of that. Father would come around. Especially since… “This is actually good for us,” I blurted out.

Ivar cocked his head, waited for me to explain.

“You and my father appear to be enemies because he needs to conquer Kattegat eventually, if he is to become King of all Norway, yes? But he does not have to do that anymore. It was only to win Ellisef’s hand.” Hope swelled in my chest as I worked it all out. “He will be angry for a while, heartbroken, distraught. But when he calms down he will see, he no longer has to push so hard.” I smiled broadly at Ivar, until relief started to crack his own face too. “There will be no reason our families cannot continue to be allies, and friends. Our marriage has become a political ideal for both sides, everyone will see.” I kissed Ivar impulsively, here in front of everyone. “We do not have much longer to wait now, my love,” I whispered against his lips.
So part of this chapter might seem super weird, but I had a lot of fun writing it. Seiðr is shamanic magic, with a lot of cryptic references in the sagas. I did a lot of research on how the authentic ancient Norse practice worked, especially here: http://www.vikinganswerlady.com/seidhr.shtml, and came up with my own version of how it might feel to engage in this kind of trance-based, spirit-journeying work. Certainly not claiming to be any kind of authority, just trying to write an entertaining chapter. Hopefully you can at least bear with me through that part if it’s not really your cup of tea.

The night of the sacrifice, I rimmed my eyes with heavy lines of kohl. My tribute to Aslaug, who should have been the one to lead this ritual send-off, bringing down vengeance like a storm for her husband. Instead, the ceremony was to be carried out by her murderer. The woman who had called her a witch, the woman who trusted steel more than magic.

Lagertha was going to do it wrong. Leave something out. I was sure of it. Her arrogance would offend the gods in some way, and even the power of spilling the blood of a man rather than a beast might not be enough to cancel that out. And then how would we all fare on the open seas, and in the battles to come?

These were my fears as I stood between my father and uncle, one face dark and brooding and the other soft and reverent. They were both pious men, and I wondered if they felt the same as me, that Lagertha was not worthy of this.

I know that Ivar did. I saw the growl on his lip when the bitch passed him, saw Floki’s hand on his shoulder steadying him, holding him back.

There were only a few bodies standing between my lover and I, but when I tried to go to him my father had silently grasped my arm. I supposed he thought the ceremony too much of a public display for me to be seen giving any one man my favor.

Father had been so quiet since Ellisef had told him the truth. He kept up appearances with the other men, but when he was at home he was silent as a stone, face heavy with dark thoughts. The only thing he said to me was strange, as if we had already been in the middle of a conversation: *I am the only one who will ever take care of you Sigrunn, you should remember that.*

When the sacrifice was done, the ascendent Jarl’s blood anointed on the ships and splashed in the faces of the ceremony’s attendees, I was finally allowed to leave my morose father’s side. His heart was not open for the drunken revelries that would follow, and he bid us an early goodnight. Uncle Halfdan took off a moment later, headed toward a freshly-opened cask of mead. My feet carried me just as swiftly to Ivar.
He was still outside, alone as usual, seated with his arms propped up on the stained wooden platform that had been the place of sacrifice. The stone bowl that collected his sacred blood remained there, though it was now mostly empty. The body had been burned to bring Jarl Jorgensen to the gods. There was still power lingering here, however, at the spot where the man had breathed his last. I could feel it, like a thickening in the air, and it looked like Ivar could feel it too. His breaths were steaming as he stared into the red smear on the boards where the Jarl had bled out his heart’s blood only a few hours ago.

I sat upon the edge of the platform beside him. Ivar looked up with a small smile of acknowledgement for me, but he appeared to be deep in his own thoughts. I reached out and traced my fingers through the stain in the wood, digits instantly tingling as I made contact with the sacred substance. It was still wet; Ivar’s eyes followed my hand as I lifted it to examine the congealing ichor on my fingertips. “There is still so much power left in this blood,” I said softly, feeling it more clearly the longer I thought about it. “And Lagertha did not do everything that can be done with it.”

Ivar looked up at me, bristling with anticipation. “Seiðr?” he asked.

I inclined my head carefully, watching his face. “I have been taught some of the forbidden arts.”

“Mother?”

I smiled then. I hadn’t been certain how much Ivar knew, but of course Aslaug had no secrets from her favorite son. “Some of it from your mother, yes. Some from the women of my home.”

Ivar’s eyes were narrowed in again on the red staining my fingers, his mouth hanging open a little. “What can we use it for?”

I tried to listen to its sanguine song. There was much I knew of in theory and very little I had ever tried, especially not by myself, not without the guidance of a real volva. “I can paint protections and blessings upon you,” I began tentatively. “I can ply the spirits with it, bid them to calm the seas, convince the winds to take you swiftly to the other shore.” A darker thought occurred to me. “I can create a mara, a sending, that will sap the strength from your enemies’ hearts and minds.”

“Yes,” Ivar breathed. “Harry them. My father’s killers deserve no rest, no peace until I come for them and bring them their agonizing end.”

I suppressed a chill. It was a serious curse I had offered to perform for him, and one that I had certainly never done before. I wondered if it could be dangerous to try it, or if it would have some unexpected toll on us. Then I looked at Ivar’s bright blue eyes urging me on and I knew that I would risk it, for him.

I looked around. The voices of revelers could still be heard from inside the hall, but the square we sat in was now deserted. The magic would be stronger if I entered the trance here, where the power of the sacrifice still reverberated. “You will have to help me find these men,” I said to Ivar, taking his hand, smearing blood in his palm as I did. “You will have to travel with the spirits as I do, as a volva does. Otherwise I will not know who these foreign kings are. Are you… willing to do that?”

It was a difficult thing to ask of a man. Even though Odin himself had been known to use seiðr, it was still seen as a blow to masculinity, a grave one, for a male to let the spirits overcome him like this.

Ivar only gave me a wry grin. “In my life,” he said, shifting his hips to call attention to his bound legs, “I have learned to use any tool that can benefit me. Without bothering myself with pride, or concern about what other men are thinking.”
I could remember times when Ivar had bothered a great deal with both of those things, but I understood the spirit of what he was saying. He already lived the life of an outsider, did not fear scorn or the judgment of the ignorant. “Then lie down here beside me,” I said, stretching my body across the platform until I was laying crossways across the place where Jarl Jorgensen had breathed his last. “We will journey together.” Ivar pulled himself up, heaving a strange little sigh as he rolled his back into the wet blood beneath us.

“If anyone sees us here they should assume we have passed out from too much mead.” Ivar held his head up, looking at me for more instructions.

“We will use the ancient chant to enter into a trance together,” I directed, “the same one they opened the ritual with tonight. Then I will bid the spirits to transform us, and we will leave these bodies and fly as falcons to England, so you can find your enemies and I can strike at them for you.”

Ivar intertwined his fingers, slick with the spilt blood, into mine. “I am ready.”

He laid his head down just as I twisted my body up, reaching up to the stone bowl. I scooped thick, clotted red blood from the bottom of the basin with two fingers and set them against my lover’s lips. “Swallow this. It will help.”

I could feel the beginnings of the trance state myself just from touching it. Ivar opened his lips and dragged my fingers inside, sucking the potent fluid from my skin with an eager tongue. It was a surprisingly erotic gesture but I pushed those thoughts to the side, needing all my focus for the dark business at hand.

I moved to scoop another taste for myself but Ivar stopped me and reached up himself, preferring to swipe his own fingers across the bottom of the basin and return the favor to me. My heart fluttered at the dark intention in his eyes. This was serious for him too, his need for revenge having solidified into something hard and cold, deeper than flickering rage. There was only a trace of warmth around the edges of that gaze for me, a silent thanks for what I was about to do for him as he brought his bloody fingers to my lips.

The coppery taste bloomed over my tongue, warming my whole face and chest with a rush of otherworldly power so heady that I was instantly spinning. Ivar and I stared at each other for a long moment; I wondered if my pupils were blowing as wide and black as his. As wide and black as the night sky, but without a single star.

I started the chant, not to induce the trance as I thought I would need to, but to simply get control of it. To ground myself enough to be able to tear my eyes from the bottomless depths of Ivar’s, where an abyss seemed to be opening up and threatening to consume me entirely. It took all my will just to close my eyelids against that sight, to find my own center as I felt my consciousness spiraling. Soon the spirits would come. And those whose minds were too weak were in danger of being ridden by them entirely, accomplishing nothing and even potentially coming to harm. My lips pursed and flexed around words that had lost all meaning to me, and soon I heard Ivar’s voice in chorus with mine, felt his fingers squeezing tightly as we lay alone under the stars alongside each other.

The rest is difficult to remember. The spirits felt so large, swirling when they came, changing my body and Ivar’s. I know not what I said to them, but it was enough, for soon he and I were birds soaring low over the sea, toward a darkened land that was strange and shrouded.

I was touching Ivar and I wasn’t. His presence was unmistakable, his disembodied essence larger than his physical form. *He is a beast that will devour half of Midgard.* I cannot recall if that thought was mine or someone else’s. He pulled me and he followed me both, until our bird-bodies alighted on a high windowsill, peering into the bed of a large man wheezing softly in his sleep.
“Aelle,” Ivar croaked.

I sucked off some of his omnipresent, coiling rage, added it to the power of the blood I could still taste on my tongue. I spat a dark little thing onto the recumbent king’s chest. We watched it grow for a while, springing talons that sank into his flesh, staring down at him with red, malevolent eyes. The sleeping man started to screech and Ivar’s laugh was more terrifying than anything else.

Then we were away, flying south, tracing the rivers from Northumbria to Wessex. Likely the same route the boats would take not long from now. We found a gray-bearded man in bed with a much younger woman, who purred contentedly under his arm.

“Ecbert,” Ivar growled, a noise no bird should be able to make.

He had caught on quickly to the way I made the last mara, added his own burst of sadism to the intentions I was drawing off him to form the sending for this king. The creature I coughed up into that room skittered down the wall and went right into Ecbert’s open mouth. He had just started thrashing when the spirits carried us off again.

I felt Ivar balk when our motionless bodies came into view, lying on our backs on the deserted dais. It was in my heart too, the reluctance to go back. It felt so amazing to fly, to ride this kind of power and be ridden by it. But the spirits were not indulgent, dropped us back into our mortal shells so fast we were left gasping and clutching at each other.

“What…” Ivar sputtered, “…is it always like that?”

“No,” I rasped back. “I have never done anything like that, nothing has ever been so… vivid…” we both looked down at the slippery red between our clasped hands. “But I have never been able to offer the spirits a human sacrifice before, blood drained from a heart beating its last.”

We sat up, still entwined with each other, and stared in awe down into the sacrificial bowl. Coming back into the sensations of our normal bodies. “What will they do,” Ivar asked, “the creatures you made?”

I could only offer him theories, based on the teachings I had received from the women of my home. “They will steal the rest from the English kings’ sleep; sap their courage, perhaps even the rational thoughts of their mind. Maras can drive men mad, drain their life essence, even kill them. It depends on the strength of our sending, and the fortitude of their victims.”

“I think our sending was strong,” Ivar said, staring down into the red so dark it was almost black in the light of the moon. “Though it would be a pity if either of them were to die before I could get my vengeance in person, with my own two hands.”

“That is not likely. I did not instruct them to kill, only to weaken. You will see your foes across the field of battle. They will not die until they are under your blade.”

Ivar smiled and I got chills again as we both imagined the moment of his vengeance.

“Let me give you as many blessings and protections as I can before you go and face your enemies,” I said softly, picturing Ivar resplendent in his chariot barreling down on the field of battle. Open to every flying arrow and flailing sword. I shuddered and plucked a long thread from a seam at my sleeve. “I will stitch this into your armor as we sail tomorrow,” I explained as I dipped it in the bowl with a ceremonious turn to my wrist. “I will enchant it so that your jerkin becomes impervious to every arrow, so that it will turn aside every blade that tries to strike at you.”

Ivar hummed his approval, ready to believe that everything I said was possible, after what he had just
experienced.

I tucked the thread into the pouch at my belt, saving it for later. I dipped my fingers into the blood again. “Turn this way, let me touch your brow.”

Ivar sat patiently as I anointed him just below his hairline. I was tingling again with the power of the sacrifice, and I knew that the spirits were still listening. “Grant this man the wisdom of Odin and the cleverness of Loki,” I bade them as I spread the pad of my thumb across his brow. “Sharpen his mind so that he may outwit any man, any person that stands in his way. Friend or foe,” I added, thinking on how many allies, how much of his own family, even, fell into that category.

I touched the blood again, motioned for him to take off his heavy jacket. I pushed aside the collar of his tunic so that I could smear the sacred crimson across his wide shoulders. “Give him the strength of giants. May he never tire, never falter. May he be a terror on the battlefield.”

Ivar was breathing through his mouth again, face flushing as he watched me work on him. He must have been feeling the coursing power too.

I loosened the strings at his neck further, pulling the shirt down the center of his chest so I could press my bloody hand over his heart. “The fires of Muspelheim are already here,” I said, a smile curving my lips, “but I bid you to keep them burning. Do not allow his heart to falter before he has achieved every one of his aims.” Including making me his wife, I added silently.

Ivar’s hand wrapped around my wrist, trapping my palm against his chest. The look in his eyes was deep and needy.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You look every inch a Queen, like this. My Queen. Blood in your hair, fire in your eyes, the strength of the spirits arrayed all around you.”

“You can see them?”

Ivar shook his head. “Not really. But you have a glow. Kiss me.”

I startled just a little, that he would ask rather than just take. His words must have been true; I must be looking powerful enough to intimidate. A slow smile graced my lips as I leaned over and pressed them to his.

A different kind of spark jumped between us then, one more familiar, though no less inspiring. I sighed and shivered when Ivar pulled back, dipped his own finger in the bowl. “The magic that I know is in runes.” He brought his reddened digit to my forehead, traced a deliberate pattern there. “Wisdom, cleverness for you, too. I need your mind sharp as you sway your father toward our cause. Keep his camp loyal to mine as we campaign through England.” His voice rumbled deep as he intoned his own wishes for us.

He captured both my hands next, spreading and lifting my palms before him. He traced uruz for power in the center of both. “May your seíðr be strong. May these hands continue to bring comfort and healing.” He pressed them together, tight between his own, and pulled me close for another long, deep kiss.

It was so easy to get lost in the play of Ivar’s lips and tongue. Heat was flooding my chest at the romance of his praise, and my sex was awakening in the pull of his limbs and the scrape of his teeth. Perhaps there was one more ritual left to complete tonight.
Ivar broke the kiss with a hand at my belly. I looked down to see him smearing blood over my already-dirtied dress, closing the lines for *berkana*. He still held my hands trapped in his other, clamping down like he had anticipated I would try and stop this one. That rune was used for fertility. “May your womb be fruitful, and bear me many strong sons.” He completed the sigil before I could break free of his grip, screeching my protest. “Eventually,” he added, relenting to my hesitation, smearing the rest of the blood from his hand down the side of my hip as he went to pull me closer to him. “Whenever the gods see fit to bless us,” he murmured, nipping at my ear.

Becoming with child right now would be a disaster, for so many reasons. But I could not deny that his words stirred me; the thought that Ivar wanted me to bear his heirs sent a scorching heat through my loins, sent my limbs winding all around him. I could still feel the sacred trance, the power of the sacrifice, but it was intermingling now with that equally primal urge to become one with my lover, to perform that one magical act of creation that all beings of flesh and blood knew how to do.

I wanted to be freed from my clothes but part of me was still conscious of the fact that we were in the public square, literally on a stage, though currently our only audience was the stars. And the hovering spirits, waiting to witness one more form of tribute. We were too eager anyway, suddenly desperate to let nothing stop us from joining, and as immediately as possible.

Ivar pulled himself from his trousers and I sank down onto him with a sob. He filled me to the brim; I was complete, and I felt all the spirits shiver at the power of it. The gods were pleased at our coupling, I was certain of it. I rode Ivar’s cock until he collapsed back onto the boards, too overcome at the ecstasy of my *kunta* to even hold himself up. His left hand scrambled through the crimson pool beside us; my lover’s eyes flashed and he smeared it with almost a child’s joy over my face and down the side of my neck.

I giggled, a deep, throaty, *womanly* sound, and swiped up more of the blood to do the same to him. It could have seemed irreverent, but it didn’t feel that way, not when I saw Ivar’s eyes flood even blacker as I invited him to enjoy the gory revel just exactly how he pleased.

He pulled my bloody face down to his, kissing me with an open mouth, sloppy, sucking the thick fluid off my chin. The rhythm of his hips changed, and I knew his orgasm would come soon.

I arched to pull him out of me, as we had become so used to doing, to make sure there was never a baby to complicate our already complicated lives. This time Ivar’s arms clamped down on mine, stopping me before he was all the way out. “Please,” he cried, eyes wide and desperate. “Do not remove your warmth from me.”

“You are mine and yet you are not. I need to lose myself inside you, I need to feel that again. Tonight of all nights, let me. Do not make me spill my seed onto the ground.” It wasn’t smart. But it was so hard to deny him, especially when his face was so open, all pride forgotten in the basic bareness of his need. He pressed on. “Surely it would be an insult to the gods if we did not do this the right way, in such a sacred place. Surely if we did conceive, the child would be favored. The gods will take care of us, Sigrunn. Please.”

My body was crying out for it too. And the poetry of his words, the promises he was making, were all too much for my heart to deny. I closed my eyes and pressed myself firmly back down, welcoming Ivar back into the depths of my body. We sighed together as we rocked, more slowly this time, focused solely on savoring the feeling as the heat built back up between us.

When I opened my eyes, Ivar was staring up at me as rapt and awed as he had the first time we had ever made love. Like I was something absolutely sublime. “Gods, Sigrunn,” he moaned as he
reached up and rubbed his palm over my cheek. “You will be my Queen. There is no other choice. Even the gods have no other choice. I will make them see.”

His arrogance offended me and aroused me in equal measure, but he gave me no chance to react. Ivar used my throat to pull my face in closer as he snapped his hips harder up into me, then used both hands to grind me over himself, taking exactly what he wanted, spurring himself relentlessly toward his end. I closed my eyes at the sudden intensity and lost control too, wailing into the night just before I felt him spasm and loose his seed deep inside me.

I spent the rest of the night in Ivar’s bed, wrapped up in his arms and soothed by his steady breaths. Amidst the chaos of the Army leaving tomorrow, there seemed little reason to slink back into Father’s tent to sleep for the few hours left before dawn.

My plan to leave in Ivar’s boat played out exactly as I had promised it would. I appeared at the great hall in the morning with my trunk, only a little lighter than it should be, escorted by my father and uncle who made a big show of their goodbyes. I moped and sighed after they left, annoying everyone in Lagertha’s household until I asked to be allowed to go down and embrace Ivar one last time. Astrid sniffed loudly and Lagertha actually rolled her eyes, but no one stopped me when I set my feet toward the docks.

I had hidden a spare dress amongst Ivar’s things, and a few more of my personal items had been entrusted to Finna, but I still felt woefully unprepared, protected only by my heaviest cloak as I hopped into Ivar’s boat and let it take me with them into battle in a faraway land.

Ubbe did not look surprised, smiled at me warmly when my feet landed on the deck. Then everyone scrambled to launch before Lagertha’s loyalists could react and try to take me back. We were off down the fjord toward the open sea before nothing more than a few shouted words could be exchanged.

Travel on a longship is far from pleasant. No shelter from the sun, crammed almost beyond capacity with fighting men and only one place for each to sit, hardly any way to stretch your legs without tripping over someone. I tried to focus on the pleasure of my victory, enjoy the fact that I was here with my love after so much worry that I might not be.

Not that he was doing much to aid my comfort. Ivar spent most of the first few hours shifting between various shades of white and green, staring at the horizon and largely silent in his suffering. He said my hands on his forehead helped, however, and Ubbe and I tried to keep up a conversation that might be both distracting and pleasant for him. The other brothers were on another boat, which I thought was an exceedingly wise decision. Sigurd or Bjorn would both be bound to stir Ivar’s temper, or find ways to mock the weakness of his stomach for sea travel.

I did not judge Ivar’s struggle; after all, his first voyage had ended in shipwreck. He gripped my hand tightly and sat up straight whenever another boat drifted close to ours, putting on a good show, but he still vomited over the edge a few times, and he spent most of the trip with his lips pressed so tightly together that I’m not certain I ever even saw them. He vacillated unpredictably between rejecting my support and demanding it; I knew it was only because he was struggling both to look strong and to soothe the suffering inside of himself. He cursed me between dry heaves at one point, berating me with a sad attempt at a smile for not convincing the spirits last night to provide calmer waters. Finally one of the older warriors caught Ivar’s eye and called across the deck to him: “If my woman was on this boat, I’d spend the whole trip in her arms too.” That seemed to ease my lover’s dilemma; after that he allowed himself to accept more of my soothing affections. By the time the sun dipped closer to the horizon he was able to relax more comfortably beside me.
I kept catching Ubbe smiling at me, eyes soft and a little sad, as he watched me tend to his little brother. “Was it hard to leave Margrethe behind, so soon after you wed?” I asked, guessing at his thoughts.

Ubbe nodded, face twisting into a self-conscious smile. “A little. But I wanted to keep her safe.”

We both trailed off into silence, contemplating the implications of that remark. “Will I be in much danger, even if I stay back in the camp?” I asked softly.

Ubbe tried to look reassuring, but his eyes were tight. “We plan to move swiftly through the country, and it is not likely the enemy will come around to the camp… but it is something that has happened.”

“But you learned from that,” Ivar interjected, voice still strange from being sick earlier. They must be referencing a story I had not heard. “We know to account for that now. You will be very safe, Sigrunn. I will make certain of it.”

I turned to Ivar as he clutched more tightly at my hand. “I am so excited to be by your side as you prepare for battle, my love.”

“If your father lets you,” he responded, more than one kind of bitterness on his tongue.

“All Father does is brood and nurse his broken heart,” I said flippantly. “He will not even notice where I am, or how I spend my time. And once he realizes that Ellisef has released him from his vows, I am certain he will embrace a strong alliance with Ragnar’s sons.” Caught up in the excitement of that vision, I made an impulsive decision to allude to Father’s secret plans, the ones that I now fully expected him to change or abandon. “He will probably even help you take Kattegat back,” I promised, my eyes sparkling into Ivar’s. “I will ask it for my dowry. The perfect wedding present.”

Ubbe’s face looked sour over something but I ignored it, focusing instead on my beloved’s growing mirth. “And then you will truly be my Queen,” Ivar said, eyes echoing a trace of the awe I had seen in it last night.

Ubbe could not hold back any longer. “Oh you think that once Lagertha is defeated, you will be the king at Kattegat?”

Ivar looked his older brother square in the eyes. “If the army that takes it back is following me, do you not think that that would be natural, Ubbe?”

Technically, in the scenario we were discussing Kattegat would be mine, and I would only be sharing the administration with my husband, but before I could point that out the brothers were off on their own tangent, an old argument still unsettled between them.

“I already told you,” Ubbe growled, “no one is letting you lead this army. No matter what you think our Father said to you.”

Ivar’s smirking smile did not waver. “We shall see how the loyalties lie, by the time we are ready to return home. Perhaps Sigrunn is right, perhaps there will be another wedding soon. With a bride who brings much greater gifts with her than yours did.”

The slight to Margrethe made Ubbe’s face darkened, but so did the skies, and the sudden lurching as the boat hit a patch of rough waves cut off any further conversation.
The strong winds did not make for a particularly pleasant voyage, but they did make it a quick one. We sighted the shores of Northumbria by evening the very next day. Chaos erupted quickly as hundreds of boats rowed into the shore, everyone rushing to beat the dying sun. Ivar and I sat at the back of our vessel with the heaviest gear as the rest of the men jumped out and pulled the boat as far up the beach as they could manage. When we were firmly lodged in the sand, Ubbe offered me a hand to climb the edge before hauling Ivar up over his shoulder.

The other longships were pulling in tight all around us, the air filling with the grunting and harsh shouts of warriors ordering each other about. Supplies were being pulled off before anyone even knew where to put them yet, the light already reddening as the sun began to kiss the horizon.

“Get my chariot unloaded,” Ivar barked from Ubbe’s back.

“It’s coming, Ivar,” Ubbe responded, sounding for all the world like a tired parent. “I lost track of the boat carrying your horse, but as soon as they are unloaded they will certainly be brought to you.”

“I need to see where we are. How far away from Aelle’s fort we have landed. The sooner we can strike at him, the less time he will have to gather his soldiers.”

“And I am certain Bjorn has thought of that too. Certainly he has already started sending the scouts.”

Ivar scowled, like there was a bad taste in his mouth. My love was a born leader, not content to trust others to handle anything properly.

Ubbe set Ivar down on a convenient barrel, on a spot of high ground where he could oversee the work on the beach. “We will not be attacking anyone tonight, anyway,” Ubbe continued. “Three thousand men cannot march through a forest in the dark. Our first priority is to find a place to make camp for the night.”

“I need my chariot,” Ivar insisted. “I think Bjorn thinks like you. I think he sent the scouts in search of a large campground first, and is neglecting to determine the location of our enemy.”

“Ivar.” Sigurd’s voice cut in as he trudged up the beach toward our group. “Bjorn has seen many more raids and battles than you have. You are not the only person here with a brain.”

“Yes, but I am the only one that uses it,” Ivar fired back, twisting in his seat to scowl at his least favorite brother.

If Sigurd was here, that meant the other command ship had put in not very far away from ours. I whipped my head in the direction he had come from just in time to spot the eldest son of Ragnar at the same moment that he noticed me. Bjorn’s face went from irritated to livid in a flash. “What is she doing here?” he bellowed.

Ivar shifted in his seat and waggled his head smugly. “Princess Sigrunn just could not bear to be away from me.”

Bjorn stomped into our circle and tried to grab at my arm, though I pulled back before he could make contact. “This is not acceptable, Ivar. She is supposed to be my mother’s hostage. You have just upset a very delicate political situation.”

“Do not blame Ivar,” I interrupted, though I knew he did not need saving from his brother. “I was the one who decided to jump into his boat.”

“And why did you do that?” Bjorn roared, stepping up close and attempting to intimidate me with his size. “If this isn’t between you and Ivar then it must be a plan of your father’s. Why is he breaking
“What is going on?” Harald’s voice boomed, causing us all to turn in his direction. He and my uncle were striding across the beach from the north end. “Sigrunn, what are you doing here?”

It was a decent acting job. His face was turning just about the exact shade of red I would have expected if I had truly angered him. My body started to tremble just on reflex; which made it even easier to give Bjorn the show he needed. “I—I did not want to be separated from Ivar,” I whined. Watching Father bristle as he barreled down on us actually made my throat stick a little, reminding me too much of what always came next when I was disobedient in my youth. “Please, forgive me.”

“Do you really expect me to believe you had no knowledge of this?” Bjorn accused Harald, at the same time trying to catch at my arm again.

I stumbled toward my father to stay out of Bjorn’s reach. We met each other a few paces away from the knot of Ragnarssons. I could see King Alfgeir and a few other of the important men of the Army approaching behind my father’s shoulder, soon to come within earshot as well.

I reached out to my father, the feigned fear and remorse in my eyes growing more real the longer I looked at his indignant face. He grabbed my upper arm and twisted it roughly. “You willful fucking child,” he spat, then reached back with his other hand and struck me across the cheek so hard that I stumbled, probably would have fallen if not for his iron grip below my shoulder.

A rushing sound filled my ears as the surprising pain bloomed on my left cheekbone. For a moment I was on the cold floor at home, reliving every time that I had broken the rules and had to stand to take my punishment from him. Cursing myself for not hiding better when I heard that tone in Father’s voice; the one that said he was not going to be reasonable today. The one that had me wondering whether I would deserve more blows if I stood back up or just stayed down.

I missed whatever was said next. Bjorn was pacing and shouting when my awareness came back to the present moment. “I will just have to keep her hostage myself, here.”

If attention was on Bjorn, I was probably safe from further punishment, at least in this moment. So I straightened, came back to my feet while my father answered him through gritted teeth. “That, I will not allow. This is a war camp. It will take extra measures to keep a girl like her safe, and I will trust no one to provide that protection but my own men. Besides, if she is in your camp I cannot trust you to keep your brother off of her.”

A thousand thoughts were spinning through my head but that last statement caught at my mind. Father had never cared how much Ivar touched me before, not in private at least... But Alfgeir and the other men were standing near us now, watching closely. I could not read the look on my other suitor’s haughty face, but his eyes were lingering on my cheek. I wondered if a bruise were forming there already.

Bjorn gave a mirthless little laugh. “I can handle Ivar. She will be kept well away from him, from all of my brothers, if that is your wish.”

Harald just shook his head. “I am not leaving her with you, not out here. I am sorry that our original deal has been broken, through my daughter’s regrettable actions, but the facts are different now, and she will not be kept like a prisoner when all I have ever shown you is good faith and loyalty. We are in the enemy’s lands and I am going to keep her close. Her safety is more important to me than your peace of mind, Bjorn Ironside.”

Father tugged at my arm, turning on his heel to bring me with him toward the cluster of his boats up
the beach.

Ivar’s voice interrupted us, thick with emotion. “Are you certain she wishes to go with you, Harald? After you would strike her, shame her like that in front of everyone? In our camp she might be treated better.”

He was talking to me as much as to Father. He was being naïve, but still my feet hesitated.

“A father has a right to discipline his daughter, Ivar,” Harald boomed back, grip on my arm only tightening. “Perhaps if you had been better disciplined yourself...”

Ivar growled, upper body lunging forward from his seat, but for once he seemed at a loss for words. I could see what he wanted to say, emblazoned across his eyes. I won’t let you treat her that way. But he was in no position to make good on any threats. One day he would be a powerful man, I believed that in my bones, but tonight he was still just a youngest son carried along by the decisions of his brothers. And I was still my father’s daughter, subject to his rules and his whims. I had borne the intensity of his ‘corrections’ all my life. I appreciated Ivar’s desire to save me from that, but the embarrassment was mine and he was only making it worse to call attention to it.

Ivar looked to Bjorn, as did I. If I was required to spend this campaign as his prisoner, I was certain Ivar would find ways to see me. I almost hoped he would keep pressing the issue. But Bjorn only blew out a heavy breath and shook his head. “Take your daughter, Harald,” he resigned, waving his hand dismissively. “I will not make this an issue that delays or distracts us from our purpose here. We have many preparations to make tonight.”

Father nodded his head. “I will return to consult with you further, once I have handled the proper accommodations for my daughter’s...unexpected presence in my camp.” He glared at me for good measure, once again selling the surprise.

He all but pulled me down the beach, taking long strides toward the cluster of boats bearing his colors as his body crackled with irritation.

I let him draw me along until I was certain we were out of earshot. “You can drop the act now, Father,” I said, pulling my arm from his grip and slowing my steps. “I am starting feel like you are actually angry with me!” I could not stop the nervous laugh that leaked out after those words.

Father did not slow down, his voice low and intent as he answered. I had to scurry after him to make sure I could hear his words. “I know it was the only good plan, but I did not like that at all, feeling like an oathbreaker back there, disrespectful to my allies. It was... regrettable that so many of the important men were around to witness that scene. They all will be wondering whether I planned this treachery, or if you are truly just that willful.”

“Is that why you struck me so hard?” It felt dangerous to even ask but I had to, a hopeful little thought seeking confirmation that it was only part of the act.

Father’s jaw clenched. “I struck you that hard because it felt like you could use it.” My stomach sank, and he went on talking. “I do not want you to be seen with Ivar around the camp. It will only make this worse. I don’t want you to be seen far from my tent at all. It might be best if everyone could just forget that you are here.”

I frowned, thinking of my plans to tend to Ivar, to go often to help Finna and the babe...“What am I supposed to do? Sit in your tent for weeks just twiddling my thumbs?”

“Every seat on those boats was for a warrior, Sigrunn, or for a hard-working thrall. In a war camp
everyone must be useful. You will find a way to pull your weight. Mending, cooking, washing our clothes… I know the hands of a princess are soft, but certainly you know how to do those things?”

There was the barest hint of a twinkle in his eye as he asked. Father was teasing me, trying to mend my sore feelings. “Of course I do,” I shot back. *Though certainly someone else can do their King’s bloody laundry.*

“And certainly you are not saying your poor Father is terrible company?”

“I would not dare,” I teased back, giving him what he wanted, though my heart was not really in it.

“Then you will be all right,” Father smiled, draping his arm over my shoulder, pulling me in to a paternal embrace. We were almost to Father’s boats, I could see Uncle Halfdan standing under the elk horns at the prow of his longship, slinging sacks of supplies down to the beach. “And you will have your Uncle watching over you too,” Father added. “He has always been good at keeping you entertained.”
playing politics

I might as well have stayed back with Lagertha. Even though once Father’s forces attacked my life would have been in danger, I imagined that I could have made an escape, hidden somewhere until she was subdued. At least there I would have been comfortable. The war camp was just miserable: muddy ground, unwashed bodies everywhere, and a dampness in the air that made it so that even Father’s sturdy tent couldn’t keep out the chill.

It would have been worth it just to be near Ivar, but I saw him about as much as I would have had I stayed behind. Even if Ivar were not so busy, which he was, I was constantly kept far away from him by my father’s hovering concern. “I fear Bjorn is not above taking you, if he catches you away from my side,” he had told me. “That boy has never trusted me, may still try and force the hostage issue.”

I did as he asked. In truth my vanity likely played a small piece in my isolation as well. A raised knot had formed under my eye where Father had struck me on the beach, which I was told had turned an impressive shade of purple. Every time my hand brushed against my face I was reminded of my humiliation by its dull ache.

I missed the blood eagle; Father and Uncle had decided to stay back with the Army, let the sons of Ragnar exact their vengeance with only a small personal audience. I knew the exact moment it happened, though. The mara I had made for Ivar slammed back into me, my sending returned on Aelle’s dying breath. I was walking toward Father’s tent in the dark when I doubled over suddenly: my body wracked with the agony the Saxon king must have felt as they cut him open, the stink of his fear filling my nose. It lasted only an instant but it left my limbs trembling for a long time. I did not know that this would happen, and the shock of the experience was likely making me just as shaky as the pain.

I had barely even met Ragnar Lothbrok. Avenging him meant very little to me; I had created that sending for Ivar’s sake only. I supposed that someone filled with enough hatred to curse a person as I had would usually find pleasure in the mara’s visceral report, to know exactly how their victim had suffered. It only made me sick. I made sure my stomach was entirely empty before I slipped back into the tent, tried to hide my shivering, pale face under the thin blankets covering the sorry pallet of straw that was all I had to sleep on here.

I needed Ivar so desperately at that moment, to remind me that this all was worth it, but I could not go to him. He was miles away, doing whatever it was they were going to do next with Aelle’s corpse. The pain and panic were awful even in memory, no matter how I reminded myself that it hadn’t actually happened to my own body. The shivering got so bad that after a time I crawled into bed with Uncle Halfdan like I used to do as a child. He assumed it was only the cold, or a bad dream, rubbed my shoulder briskly and made soothing noises until I finally was able to fall into an exhausted sleep.

****

“Were you ill last night?” Father asked the next day. I could tell he was a bit hurt that I had chosen to be comforted by his brother instead of him last night.
“A little,” I responded vaguely. “But it has passed.” My upset with him and his new restrictions was still too fresh. I could have shared the story of the *mara* with my father, after all it was his sister that taught me the way of doing such a thing, but I held my tongue. Perhaps because the topic was a woman’s domain, or perhaps because of Ivar’s part in it. The shock of its return had subsided, anyway. I tried not to think about whether that black thing was curling up inside me somewhere, or if it was dissolving back into whatever I had created it out of.

I refilled Father’s cup from a pitcher of icy water on the makeshift table between us. I had stumbled out at dawn and drawn it myself, picking my way between smoking campfires and snoring men down to a nearby stream. Some thralls had traveled here with the army, but not enough to stand around waiting on their King. Not when he had a perfectly capable daughter lying around for that purpose. I was told there would be more help once we started taking new thralls in raids, but for now I was expected to work as hard as any servant.

Uncle Halfdan emerged from between the tents to the east of us, wild eyes buzzing with news. “Bjorn and the rest that went up to do the blood eagle have returned. We will break camp and move on today, it seems.”

An answering spark glinted in Father’s eye. “To York? It is high time to sack the capital, now that their King is dead.”

Halfdan shook his head. “The sons of Ragnar can still speak of nothing but revenge. This king’s blood did not slake their thirst; they are howling to turn us toward the next one already. I think we will be moving south to Wessex immediately.”

Harald frowned. “I saw the riches this Aelle adorned himself with. Surely his home will be filled with many more treasures. We have defeated his army, and now we are just going to leave it all lying there?”

Halfdan just shrugged. “Go argue with Ragnar’s sons about it if you like.”

Father sat back, eyes calculating as he stared into his cup. “We all agreed that vengeance for Ragnar Lothbrok was our purpose here. But there are many who slung their oars this way on the assumption that killing these kings would mean spoils to take home. A great deal of them.”

“Was that your main purpose in coming here, brother?”

The two of them locked eyes and exchanged something I couldn’t read. “You know why I came here.”

Halfdan smirked. “So how are you going to play this today?”

Harald sucked down the rest of his cup in one gulp. “Help me get my armor on, Sigrunn. I have some visits to make.”

I followed him dutifully into our tent and pulled out his red tunic, which was both finer-looking and cleaner than the one he had on. I understood the general intent of that vague conversation; Father was off once more to influence and persuade, to pull more support out from under the noses of his adversaries. And the better-dressed he was, the better impression he would make as he tried to appear to be a wiser and more generous leader than the sons of Ragnar.

If I thought hard about it, I could probably have worked out more of his plan, but I was preoccupied with my own concerns. The words burst out of me suddenly as I was helping straighten his tunic under the heavy armored jerkin he had just shrugged on. “Let me go see Ivar today.”
Father pulled in a deep breath through his nose. “No.”

I tried to hide the jolt of anger that surged through me at the simple finality of his response. I hadn’t spoken with Ivar since the beach, days ago. “I will make sure to go to him when Bjorn is not around, if that will make you feel better.”

“You are not going to be seen near any of the sons of Ragnar anymore, Sigrunn.” Father’s voice was cold and patronizing. “The time for that part is done.”

I stepped back, outrage growing plain on my face. “What do you mean, Father? You promised me. My feelings for Ivar have not changed.”

He brushed past me, retrieving his belt. “I gave you too much freedom, I see that now. I should not have indulged your childish whims.” He wouldn’t look at me, speaking over my head, as if to himself.

“What…” my outburst started strong, but my strength was draining quickly under Father’s stony expression, my dawning realization of what it might mean. “You never took Ivar seriously.”

“And you should not have, either. He would be a foolish choice for your hand, for many reasons.”

“I love him,” I insisted. I meant it to come out strong, but the words wavered and wilted in the cold air between us.

“Love.” Father’s face twisted, the word falling from his lips like a curse. “What good is that.” He twisted away, resumed the final adjustments to his clothing. “You do not know what’s good for you, Sigrunn. Not like I do. Perhaps I should not have let my sister have so much of the raising of you. You have grown up sentimental, and entirely too willful.”

“Father…” It came out so weak. I knew once he got rolling this way there would be no stopping him.

“I know this will be hard for you, to let him go. I will take the blame for that. I should never have let you get your hopes so high. I thought you would tire of the boy on your own if I left you to your little dalliances.” He lifted his dark winter cloak and threw it over his shoulders, finally looking me in the eye again. “It is time to face reality now, Sigrunn. He is not the right match for you. We do not always get what we want… or who we want…” he trailed off with his hands on the silver clasp halfway toward fastening it, sadness twisting his gaze down to the floor.

I knew he had to be thinking of Ellisef. I cursed myself for linking our situations so closely in his mind before we learned the truth about her. What could I say now, to change his mind? Frustration and fear had my body positively vibrating as I searched for some new angle to take, some fresh argument for my love. It could not be over, I would not give up.

Father’s big arm came up unexpectedly, pulling me into a tight embrace. “We both have broken hearts now,” he said softly into the top of my head, patting my shoulder like I was a fucking child. It was such a misreading of my current emotions that I almost laughed into the fur covering his shoulder. Or perhaps sobbed in frustration. I itched to push him away, as Father tried to soothe my pain as if he wasn’t the one who had just inflicted it. “It will be difficult, but we will comfort each other as we mend, won’t we. Promise to be kind to your dear father? Do not give me any more cause to suffer.”

*****
I told myself that it was just a setback, just a tantrum. Father’s heart was hurting so badly after Ellisef’s rejection that he did not want anyone else to be happy, either. It would pass, and then he would be supportive of me again. And by then Ivar will have proven himself in victory over the army of Wessex as well as Northumbria. I just had to be patient, and weather this phase. I thought about setting off to find Ivar as soon as they left me alone in the tent, but I decided it would be better to slip out after my family had fallen asleep tonight.

Previously I had wandered close enough to the Ragnarssons’ end of the camp to find out which tent was Ivar’s, so now it was only a matter of picking my way through the clutter and mud by the light of the moon. I told myself that my pounding heart was only excitement, that there was nothing dangerous about what I was doing. Still, when I got there a thrill of nerves flashed through me before I pushed the flap aside, wondering if I had the right tent. Wondering what Ivar was like when awoken unexpectedly. Fearing what might happen if this were Bjorn’s tent instead.

It was so dark inside I could learn nothing simply peering through the portal. I ducked my head, set one foot inside. “Ivar?” I whispered. I could hear the heavy, ragged breath of sleep coming from more than one set of lungs inside the enclosure, but no one responded.

I stepped in further, meaning to speak again a little louder, but my foot collided with someone’s body before I had the chance. An indignant noise came from a throat that did not sound like Ivar’s. “Watch it.”

“Hvitserk?” I asked softly, recognizing the terse voice. “I am sorry. Is Ivar in here?”

“Sigrunn?” Ivar’s voice came from further back in the tent, bleary with sleep and sounding so young that way.

“Yes, my love,” I said breathily, taking small, quick steps through the cluttered space toward the sweet sound of him.

My eyes were beginning to adjust to the dim moonlight filtering through the fabric walls; I could see a pale face shrouded in dark hair now as Ivar lifted his head from the ground. “What are you doing here?” he asked, voice still thick and confused.

“I could not sneak away any earlier, I am sorry,” I said as I reached him, sank to my knees by his side. “My father wants me to stay away from you now.”

Ivar tilted his head as I reached out to him, moving slowly like he was still awakening. I took it as an invitation to run my fingers through his hair, and though he leaned into my touch his brows creased. “I tried to come to you today. They turned me away.”

Tears sprung into my eyes, the ones I had been refusing to shed all day. “Father does not want me to see you anymore. He tried to tell me to give up on marrying you today. That he does not consider you an option.” Ivar’s eyes went wide in the pale light and I rushed to keep talking. “But I am not giving up. He is only grieving his own lost love. There is still time for you to prove yourself to him.” I pressed kisses to Ivar’s furrowed brows, desperate to smooth them. “My hope is not lost; so yours should not be either. And in the meantime I will come to you when I can, just as I have tonight.” I kissed down to his mouth, fervor rising to prove the strength of our love to Ivar, and to myself.

His mouth opened underneath mine, and a moment later he was pulling me down to press my body alongside his. I moaned as I fit myself against him. Even a few days’ absence from his touch was too long, had me almost begging to reunite my flesh to his. Ivar must have had similar thoughts as he
muttered incomprehensible fragments of words interrupted by the hungry clash of our tongues and teeth. His hands were flying to shift blankets and skirts out from between the eager press of our bodies, until his fingers could dance across the bare skin of my thighs as I hummed out my encouragement.

I had forgotten Hvitserk until I heard him emit a frustrated growl. Suddenly I became aware of the many sounds Ivar and I had been making, the flurry of rustling fabrics and smacking lips.

I felt Ivar smile against my mouth and then he claimed it with another sucking kiss, dragging my lower lip between his teeth and driving his fingers into the sensitive flesh between the backs of my thighs until I could not help but moan for him. And for our eavesdropper. Of course Ivar would be enjoying his brother’s discomfort, and not try to make it any easier on him to be sharing this space with us.

We heard a loud exhale from the other side of the tent, then a thump as Hvitserk rolled over.

Ivar did not let up, stroking and teasing at my slit to keep me squirming and sighing. He had three fingers plunged inside me, my hushed breathing running ragged and quick, when Hvitserk groaned again.

“I hear you huffing and blowing over there Hvitserk,” Ivar said. “Perhaps you should find somewhere else to sleep tonight. Unlike Ubbe, I do not share.”

Hvitserk barked out a strange noise and started gathering a few things in the dark. “Bjorn snores too much for me to get any rest in the other tent. I am only going to wait outside for a while. Do not take too long.”

We did pause our amorous activities, finally showing some small amount of respect until Hvitserk had left the tent. Then our lips and limbs were a flurry again, Ivar quickly pushing me down onto my back. “You have kept yourself from me for too long, Sigrunn.” His hand came up to grasp my face, tone telling me he was working himself up for another one of our more intense games as he put his eyes close to mine. “You need to be punished.”

His fingers accidentally dug into the bruise on my cheek. Sudden pain bloomed, and in its wake came seething shame, accompanying the memory of other, more real punishments. Tears were instantly pricking at my eyes again, and I tried to shove Ivar away. “No,” I said sharply. He let up in confusion as I cupped my hand over my own cheek, trying to soothe myself. “I do not want to play that kind of game tonight.”

It was hard to see each others’ faces in the dark, but I felt Ivar’s whole body shift, backing off from that needy intensity, hand stroking over mine only in concern. I did not know if he could see the bruise on my face, but when his fingertips softly explored my cheekbone I knew he could feel the raised welt that Father’s blow had left.

“Does he do that often?” Ivar asked softly.

A bitter sound came out of my throat. “Only when I do something to deserve it. So not very often.” I didn’t tell him I was likely to get another one for sneaking out here.

Ivar thought about my words for a while, fingers still tracing my face. “I hated seeing that. Is that how you fear I might treat you when I am angry? Why you sometimes….hesitate?”

I took a deep breath. “I am not a fool. I know the violence that men are capable of. You cannot blame me for trying to avoid it.”
“No I cannot,” Ivar said softly, started laying soft kisses along the side of my face. “And if you stay with me, he won’t be able to hurt you anymore.”

I frowned. “Ivar I cannot stay. I will not be the cause of your army splitting. Even if I want, more than anything else, to remain here in your arms until the end of the world.”

Our lips found each other’s then, silencing further conversation as we let tender touches communicate the rest. Right now, I had him. His scent, his taste, the warmth of his body… I tried to lose myself in it all, to burrow into the solace of my lover, that which I had so desperately needed the night before. A part of me longed to tell him about the way the mara had returned, but I could not find the words, and did not want to interrupt our peace to talk more of pain.

Ivar chuckled softly against my lips, shared some of his own, lighter thoughts with me. “I remember when you used to sit so still, when I would first come to you. I could feel you deciding whether you should run from me then. Look at you now, all greedy hands and wanton lips.”

“I did not understand.”

“You were cautious. My timid little lamb, afraid of being devoured by the wolf.”

But I had been devoured, hadn’t I. There was very little sense in my love for Ivar, but it seemed that nothing could keep me away from him. As his hand slid around my neck, thumb stroking over my throat I remembered how he had almost killed me when he took me the first time. He used to be much less gentle with me, so much more thoughtless. I wondered if he was truly changing now, or if there was a storm about to break.

“You keep calling me prey,” I teased. “And I keep telling you that I am not. You may be a wolf, Ivar, fearsome and terrible, but do you really know who you are chasing? Maybe I am Sól, the sun herself, pursued but never taken.”

Ivar made a pleased little growl and centered himself on top of me. “Then I will be your Skoll, eternally chasing you across the skies. But Sól does not let herself be eclipsed by him so often as you do.” His mouth came down to claim mine again, his hand groping boldly and tugging at my clothing. The metaphor had pleased me at first but it had a sad conclusion neither of us dared to speak. Skoll would only truly catch the sun and slake his ravenous desires upon her on the day of Ragnarok, at the end of the world as we knew it. I was still clinging, stubbornly, to my hope that Ivar and I would be more likely to end up together than that. The truth was that the obstacles between us were only growing ever taller.

I grasped at Ivar, fingers raking across his flesh, arms winding tighter, already so close but needing him to be somehow even closer. I tore my lips from our desperate kiss only to beg him for more. “Please, Ivar, make me yours again. I need you to remind me that I am yours. Drown out my fears.”

He ground me into the furs, sharp hipbone pressing into my belly, hand on my throat to make the whole world stop with my breath. “Look at me, Sigrunn,” he ordered, face looming so close to mine in the thin light. “You belong to me. Do not ever allow yourself to doubt it.” He let me have one gasping inhale, then pressed down again. “You are mine in body, heart, and mind, and this wolf will pursue you to the ends of the earth. Whatever it takes.” He glared down at me, his eyes as loving and frustrated and sad as mine.

When he let me have my breath back again I could only plead with him for more. “Take me now Ivar, please. I need your cock to fill me. I need to feel your claim fresh again.”
Ivar grunted and pressed his lips to mine instead, hand loosening enough to let me breathe but not giving up his grip, keeping the option to throttle me again. I ran my hands down the line of his body, searching out the object of my desire.

He grabbed my wrists before I could get there, set them upon his shoulders instead, then his own hands resumed stroking at my waist and my breasts. He wanted to go slowly, take his time to pleasure me, but I had no patience for it tonight. I pulled his shirt off of him and then my hands were diving for his hips again, too eager to wait.

He tried to catch me but it was too late; this time my fingers brushed his cock and I realized how soft he still was.

We both froze. A pang of insecurity stabbed me; why was I not able to inspire Ivar tonight? Then I remembered the trouble he had when we first made love. It dawned on me that what I had mistaken for violent passion just now was mostly frustration, Ivar’s attempts to force a reaction out of himself. I hummed a noise in his ear that I hoped sounded reassuring and tried to coax his limp prick with my hand like I had on our first night together.

He buried his face in my neck and let me try for a few moments, with little result. I tried to make pleasing noises, rolling my body against his in that wanton manner that he had seemed to be enjoying. Finally Ivar exhaled abruptly and pushed my hand away.

“Ivar,” I began, hoping my tone sounded soothing, but he cut me off.

“Don’t.” His mouth covered mine to silence any further words. His hand slid down my leg, working its way under my skirt.

He kissed me so seriously, his fingers working between my leg to stoke my passion again, but the rest of his body was still and I could tell his heart was no longer in it. He must have thought that he still needed to pleasure me. But he wouldn’t look at me; his movements were curt and he was obviously preoccupied with his own embarrassment. The hurt that he was trying to ignore, and would not let me soothe. It made me feel numb too. “Ivar, it is alright,” I tried, pulling his hand away from the little circles he had been tracing over my barely responsive clit.

He looked me in the eye finally, outrage filling his face. “What, now I cannot satisfy you with my hand either?” he all but shouted.

“No, that is not—”

“Lie back,” he commanded, pulling himself up so he could loom over me further and watch my face. His hand came back to my sex, cupping me roughly. My brows creased at the slight pain and he lifted his fingers to his mouth, coating them with his spit before returning them to my opening. “I can still fill you, Sigrunn.” He pressed two digits inside all at once, making me buck and cry out against him as he held me down. He started thrusting them in and out, with a precision that his cock had never quite achieved.

I was still full of sadness and worry over his problem; at first I thought the mood was too ruined for me to be able to reach my release either. But then Ivar sat up and pulled me over his lap so that he could use both hands freely to achieve his aim. With one hand still mercilessly fucking my cunt, he started pulsing the fingers of his other hand over my clit. It was precisely the kind of overwhelming sensation I had been begging for, and in truth it was much more pleasurable than what he could do with just his cock.

Still, there was no intimacy in it. My hopeless mood was still likely to win out; then Ivar began to
speak. “You are mine, Sigrunn.” He said it through gritted teeth, the strain of his effort and his complicated emotions evident in his voice. “I will not allow you to forget it. This kunta is mine, and I will make you come whenever I desire. In whichever way I desire.” His words ignited the rest of the blaze inside of me, the ruthless pace of his fingers in my most intimate places fanning those flames until I thought that I might incinerate under his hands. “This is what you want, isn’t it. To be fucked and overwhelmed. I will always give you that.”

The orgasm he ripped from me was almost painful, twisting my limbs and tightening my gut with its shuddering ferocity. The noise I made didn’t even sound human, a keening groan winding out past my gritted teeth that would probably make everyone in this corner of the camp think that someone was being killed. I stared upside-down at the tentflap, utterly dazed and certain that Hvitserk was about to storm back in here to find out what Ivar had done to me.

But we were not disturbed. Ivar finally stilled his hands, petting at my hip as he slumped over above me. I was already feeling sore. As soon as I regained control of my limbs I slid off his lap, pulled him back against me to lay down in the circle of my arms. “Thank you,” I whispered into his hair, unsure of what else to say about that mercilessly-forced orgasm. The one that was as much about fulfilling his needs as it was mine.

Ivar clutched at me but did not speak for a long time. I wanted to relax but I was uncomfortably aware that I could not fall asleep, had to go back soon or the consequences could be severe. Only when I stirred, thinking that I should rise, did Ivar begin to talk. “I am trying, Sigrunn,” he said quietly.

My heart shuddered. “I know that you are,” I whispered back, longing for this kind of vulnerability from him but also feeling compelled to placate it immediately.

“My brothers block me at every turn. They will not allow me any chance to prove myself. I am doing everything I can to avenge my Father. To become the great man I know he wanted me to be. But no one will listen! They will not give me a chance to lead, to show everyone the power of my mind. And so I am stuck. If my own brothers do not believe in me, how will your father? How will I make my name when no one lets me try?”

I twisted until we were facing each other, stroking my hand down the side of his face. “Be tenacious, my love. Do not allow yourself to be pushed aside.” I gave him a slow look from under my lashes. “I resisted you too, at first…” That earned me a small, flashing smile. “You are not a man who lets himself be ignored. Your day will come.”

“But will it come soon enough? How can I be patient when you are already slipping through my fingers, Sigrunn? I have to impress your father before he chooses someone else. And it does not appear that we have much time left.”

“I will handle Father. Just because he wishes suddenly to keep me cloistered like one of these Christian nuns, does not mean he is rushing to marry me off to someone else. He gave me his word, that there is no need to hurry in giving away my hand. Trust me, my love. Keep to your ambitions and trust me to make him see that you and I belong together. We will not be kept apart forever.”

Ivar’s brows tipped like he was reluctant to believe me, but Hvitserk threw aside the flap of the tent before he could respond. “Time is up, I need sleep,” he growled, stomping back to his bedroll.

Rough fingers spasmed around me as I gathered myself to rise. “The quicker I get back, the less likely Father is to notice that I am missing,” I said, pressing my lips to Ivar’s forehead. “I should go.”

We shared one last melting kiss. I was reminded of my time under Lagertha’s ‘care,’ when we never
knew when next our lips would meet. We had weathered this before. We would survive it again.

As I picked my way in the dark back to my father’s end of the sprawling camp, I wondered what Hvitserk had overheard. My screeching orgasm, surely, but had he gathered that Ivar’s cock could not perform for me? Such a rumor would be that last thing that Ivar needed right now. I could not recall what words we said, and how loudly, could not piece together what Hvitserk might have been able to surmise.

I pondered Ivar’s worry, too. I had rushed to placate him at the time, but I did not truly know what options Father might currently be considering for me. I knew that he always held several contingencies in mind, and that the relative likelihood he would enact one plan or another often changed by the day. Now that the Ellisef angle was no longer available to me, I wondered what options I had left to align his wishes to mine. Would it be necessary to turn to seiðr? Dare I try and charm my own father? It felt like a betrayal; I was not sure if I could ever go that far. Still, I spent the rest of the walk thinking of my various mentors, and what they had to say about bending the will of another to your own.

I slipped into my family’s tent with the smallest disturbance to the hanging fabric that I could manage. I needn’t have bothered with stealth; Father was sitting up in a chair, waiting for me. I stopped in my tracks, heart racing as I froze and waited for his retribution to fall. “You just cannot keep yourself away from him, can you.” His voice was low and thoughtful.

“No Father, I cannot.”

He lifted his hand in resignation, letting me pass. With relief buzzing in my ears, I crawled under my blankets without any further words or punishment.

*****

The Ragnarssons had been convinced to let the army stay in Northumbria for two more nights before heading south toward Wessex. I wondered how much my father had to do with accomplishing that. We were not moving on York, that would have taken much longer, but the men had been raiding every village within walking distance of our sprawling camp as the rest of us prepared to load the boats back up and sail down the inland river south as far as a town called Repton. I could only assume it was the same river Ivar and I had followed the night we had shapeshifted into birds. I wondered if that scouting had helped him to plan.

My father’s warriors had managed to grab enough spoils that tonight King Harald was able to announce a small feast ‘to congratulate the sons of Ragnar on their victory.’ It should have been Bjorn and his brothers hosting such an event in gratitude to their allies; Father almost assuredly had rushed in to fill the void just to call attention to their oversight. All of the important heads of the army had been invited, all the kings and jarls my father had been working so hard to influence. All were expected to attend, aside from the few whose borders were currently threatened by Father’s expanding interests, who therefore bore him nothing but ill will. Ellisef’s husband Earl Vic had not received an invitation.

I was just glad that I was going to see Ivar. We had not crossed paths again after that night in his tent, and the tensions we had failed to resolve by the end of our short time together burned in my throat. My heart sank when my love did not even smile at me. All his brothers were scowling as they entered the area Father had cleared between the tents, filled with makeshift benches and a long high
table for our family and the most honored guests.

As the only woman in my father’s household I found myself playing hostess for the night. After so many stern injunctions to “stay away” it was positively thrilling to finally be allowed to approach Ivar and his brothers with confidence and extend my greetings. I went to Bjorn first, as befit his rank of eldest among them. My smile was warm; his was slight, a mere baring of teeth while his eyes glittered at me like he was sizing up an enemy. The rest of the Ragnarssons looked equally stony as my welcoming gaze passed down the line of them.

Ubbe was carrying Ivar on his back, most likely in attempt to keep his hands clean and out of the muck that passed for ground in our crowded camp. I directed them all quickly to their seats so that he could set him down.

Oh how I burned to seat Ivar close to myself, but my father had been very clear that the Ragnarssons were to sit at his right, in the place of honor, while I was relegated down the left side of the table. As Ubbe swung Ivar down I calculated whether I could risk an embrace. Father had said I was ‘done’ with this family, but it seemed silly to suddenly pretend we were not as intimate as we once were. When Ubbe straightened I reached for him first, awkwardly deciding that if I hugged all of them it would mean something different then wrapping my arms only around the youngest brother.

Ubbe hesitated for just a moment before returning the embrace warmly. “It is good to see you, Sigrunn,” he said quietly, like he did not want anyone to overhear the platitude. Tension had apparently escalated on both sides since we had left Kattegat.

Ivar let me wrap my arms around him next, but the tight grip of his fingers at my waist was something more than friendly. “What is wrong, my love?” I could not help but whisper in his ear before I straightened.

Ivar all but hissed back at me. “This feast. Your Father is trying to undercut us. Do not think we do not see what he is doing.”

I scowled at his petty attitude. “You could have not come, if you are so unhappy with it.” It was a childish statement, but I was angry that he could not even smile at me simply because he was cross with my father.

“Then we would only look worse. You know that.”

Ubbe had taken a seat next to Ivar. “Tell her you are at least happy to see her, idiot,” he advised wryly, looking anywhere but us and pretending he had not just said that.

Ivar’s frown only deepened, but after a moment his pride finally relented, let his face soften as he gazed up at me. “You look beautiful tonight, Sigrunn.”

I had left most of my finery back in Kattegat; the only thing especially noteworthy about my appearance was that I had actually taken the time to clean my hair and clothes, unlike most of the filthy brutes in this camp. “Thank you, Ivar,” I said graciously. I leaned in to kiss him on the cheek but Father caught my eye, shook his head angrily and so I straightened before achieving my aim.

Ivar’s brows creased as he noticed my hesitation, and he followed my line of sight to my disapproving father. “You still insist on playing his game,” he glowered, grabbing onto my hand and squeezing it tightly.

“This is not the time or the place to argue about it again, Ivar,” I retorted, pulling myself from his grasp with a jerk of irritation. “I must attend to the other guests.” I stepped away to greet Hvitserk
and Sigurd quickly, then my duties carried me on to exchanging words with the rest of the new arrivals. By the time the food was carried out to us, I still had not found another chance to return to Ivar.

I had saved a seat for myself at the very foot of the high table, so that I had the vantage to at least see the faces of the honored guests on the other side of my father, even if I was too far to take part in their conversation. When I went to take it I was surprised to find that King Alfgeir occupied the chair beside mine. Father must have put him there.

We exchanged a polite greeting; I had spoken with the Swedish king a few times since our awkward Flinch game and he had treated me with a kind of healthy wariness since then. I was satisfied that he seemed to understand that I was not an ordinary woman destined for an ordinary life. Alfgeir had given up trying so hard to woo my favor, settling instead for a companionable kind of interest whenever my father tried to push us into conversation together.

Thankfully, King Harald’s soaring voice quickly superseded any need for us to make small talk. “My friends,” he called, standing up from his chair at the center of the high table and addressing his throng of guests, “raise your cups with me, in celebration of our victory over the Christians!” He paused for the cheers that he knew would come, then pressed on. “And also to honor the sons of Ragnar, who brought us to this rich land, and who have achieved their vengeance for the death of their great father.”

I looked down the table as the warriors roared and stomped their approval. Ubbe and Hvitserk had schooled their faces amicably, Sigurd appeared a bit embarrassed, but Bjorn and Ivar both continued to scowl. “Not yet,” Ivar called out when the noise died down.

Father looked at him questioningly.

“We have not ‘achieved’ our vengeance yet. King Ecbert still lives.”

The chill in Ivar’s voice almost made me shudder.

Father tipped his head in acknowledgement, drinking horn still held outstretched in the air, signaling his speech was not yet done. “Yes, there will be more lands to plunder to the south,” he agreed, turning back toward the crowd, “where we will all be heading tomorrow!”

King Harald was starting to sound like he was the leader of the group; I saw Bjorn shift as he noticed this too. The big man moved to stand. “I have a few words to say as well,” he said to my father, who was busy basking in the stomping applause of the warriors before him.

“Oh, course,” Father responded, without quite looking at Bjorn, “but first, allow me to hold the floor for one moment longer. I have an announcement I would like to make.”

Bjorn could not hold back an exasperated snort, but he sat back and bid my father to continue with a flip of his hand.

“I meant to save this for our return, but since Sigrunn is unexpectedly with us, we might as well make it official right now.” My stomach dropped as my father swiveled his entire body toward me, pointed the cup in his hand directly toward my face. “I am pleased to let everyone know of my daughter’s betrothal… to King Alfgeir, of Hovgården in Sweden.”

I froze. I wanted to scream, to run, to fight, but I had that nightmare feeling in my limbs, found myself entirely unable to move. This could not be happening. My eyes shifted to Alfgeir; I did not dare to look for Ivar yet.
The king beside me looked uncomfortable too, though not entirely surprised by the announcement. He was searching my face for a reaction. Surely he could read the color of my cheeks; it did not feel as though there were a drop of blood left in my face.

A bestial roar broke through the polite cheers of the gathered dignitaries. My eyes ripped to the source; Ivar looked like he was trying to climb across the table while two of his brothers jumped up to pull him back at either side. The dull knife he had been eating with was embedded into the table, his knuckles white around it while he struggled as if to launch himself bodily at my father.

I think I said his name. I was too shocked to decide on any other action as curses flew from Ivar’s sputtering mouth, most of them directed at Father but a few in the feminine form that could only be meant for me. Ubbe and Hvitserk each got a grip under one of Ivar’s shoulders and they moved swiftly to drag him away from the feast.

It was the right choice. Anything Ivar might have to say at this moment could only hurt the fragile alliances that held the Great Army together. Letting him stay and shout would not help anyone. But I felt my heart shatter as I watched Ivar’s struggling form disappear into the dark, without any chance to explain to him that I did not want this, that I had nothing to do with Father’s heartless decision.

Sigurd looked like he might join his brothers, then thought better of it and sat back down to enjoy the rest of the meal. He could not hide his wide smirk at his brother’s misfortune. Bjorn remained as well, glaring at Alfgeir and I with cold, glittering eyes. I imagined he was certain now that my presence here had all been part of the plan. And now if he tried to press the hostage issue, he would be taking a woman away from her betrothed, and have a larger fraction of the Army to deal with. He had been thoroughly outmaneuvered.

Father was all but gloating. “What say you, King Alfgeir?” he asked jovially, turning toward us again.

Alfgeir lifted his hand as if he were going to take mine, but hesitated at my shudder. His response was in a softer voice, meant only to be heard here at our table. “It seems to me, Harald, that your daughter is already in love with someone else.”

I coughed. In the midst of all my pain I had the grace to look mortified, embarrassed on Alfgeir’s behalf.

Father looked at me, looked over the way that Ivar had gone, then turned back to Alfgeir and said the words that broke my heart. “So what?” His voice was cold, and he did not even try to meet my eyes. “Women do not know what they want. Sigrunn is a good girl, and she will do as I counsel her.”

Alfgeir’s mouth twisted, like the answer had given little reassurance.

Why wasn’t I arguing? Ivar would want me to fight. But I had been trained too well to play politics more deftly than that. There was nothing to gain from making a public scene right now.

Father stepped closer to us, lowering his voice so the conversation could be more private. He had probably not expected Alfgeir to show reluctance when he planned this cursed announcement. “She will give you many strong sons. And our alliance will insure their inheritance. Take her back to your kingdom, and she will forget that boy. It means nothing.”

I waited, heart in my throat. If Alfgeir did not want to marry me, if this whole spectacle was just a spontaneous, poorly-calculated plan of my father’s, then I could still have hope.

“Our negotiation stands,” Alfgeir finally said. My body sagged as he turned back to look at me. They
had worked all this out in advance, I could see that now. I had been sold like a cow just to further my father’s ambitions. “I will treat you well, Sigrunn. You will like it in my country. The land is fertile and the air is often sweet with the flowers that grow by the river that passes my hall.” He took my hand then, and I was still too frozen to resist him. “And perhaps, one day, you will come to look at me the way that you look at him.”

*****

“You did not just decide this today.” I could barely recall how I had made it through the rest of the feast, who had spoken to me or how I had ended up back at the tent with my father and uncle. But once we had our privacy, my anger finally won out and I found that I could speak.

“No.”

“How could you not even tell me earlier?” I snapped at Father, whirling at the center of the tent to face him squarely. In virtually the same place that I had stood not two days ago helping him into his armor and declaring my love for Ivar. “How could you fail to mention that I was practically engaged already?”

He only gave me a slow shrug. “What good would it have done? You would have only tried to argue with me, and I had already made up my mind.”

“Father, this is my life.” I could barely hold back the urge to strike him, but I knew quite viscerally how poorly that would end.

“It is your life, but it is my decision. My most important task as your father is to negotiate you a good marriage. And that is what I have done. You will thank me for being so wise, one day.”

A good marriage? Alfgeir may have been called ‘king,’ but he was not a man of reknown, no one had heard tales of him. “This is not about me at all, this is about you, isn’t it! You do not believe ‘Alfgeir’ is going to become great or important one day, a worthy match for your daughter. You are just selling me for your ambitions, for your schemes. Admit it.”

Father looked at me levelly, then shrugged, like agreeing cost him nothing, like he had already won the argument just by acting like we weren’t having one. “I need his army, Sigrunn,” he said simply. “Alfgeir has pledged to commit his forces to helping me conquer the rest of Norway, in exchange for your hand.”

I was dumbfounded for a moment, the foundation crumbling out from underneath so many of my assumptions. “I thought… you still care about that?”

Father looked at me sharply. “Why would I not? Have I not dedicated my life to becoming King of all Norway?”

“But… Ellisef…”

His face darkened as soon as I mentioned her name, and I watched him grow more offended as he worked out my implication. “You cannot have believed that I would give up everything I have been working towards, all my plans for greatness, just because one woman’s heart turned out to be so fickle?” I was afraid to answer, afraid to react. “You know me better than that. Your foolish idea of love is blinding you. There is no change in my plan. I will do these things. I will conquer all the
remaining kingdoms, and then she will see. Everyone will see.”

He was almost shaking with his own unresolved frustrations now. And I was still too angry to step back. Uncle Halfdan took it upon himself to come between us, cut the tension by suggesting we should all sleep and talk about it in the morning, with clearer heads.

I lay down obediently in the dark but sleep would not come. What must Ivar be thinking? I was haunted by the rage and despair I had last seen in his eyes. He would need me to calm him, I would have to find a way. I could not leave him to grapple with this alone.

I could not wait any longer. The sounds of breathing in the darkness around me had gone slow and even, and so I slipped my shoes back on and stood to find my cloak as silently as I could manage.

“Lay back down,” Father’s voice commanded from the bed. I did not hear him even stir, but his voice was clear and perfectly awake.

I took another step toward the tentflap.

“No more slipping out at night. You are done with that boy.”

“I am going.” I tried to put as much iron in my voice as I could. I was a grown woman, ready to make my own choices.

If my voice was iron, Father’s was steel. “No daughter of mine is going to make a fool of her betrothed by being seen going to another man.”

I took a deep breath, turning to face his bed in the dark. “I do not want Alfgeir. I am in love with Ivar.”

“I do not care. The deal is done. You are marrying a wealthy king, you should be happy. You will understand one day, that love is nothing. Go back to bed.”

My voice cracked across the tent like a whip, though I knew I was losing. “Do not punish Ellisef’s choice, Father.”

“Go back to bed, now,” he growled, in the voice that had always meant the back of his hand was coming next. If I walked out of this tent, he was certain to come barreling after me.

“May the gods damn you,” I cursed softly, though I instantly regretted laying such a dire wish on my own flesh and blood. I climbed back into my pallet and stayed there, though I made sure the grief-stricken sobs that soon began wracking my body were loud enough for everyone to hear.

I was awoken the next morning by a strangled yelp emerging from my father’s lungs as he swept open the flap of our tent. I could only see his silhouette, hesitating against the thin grey light of the early dawn. My heart raced. Was the enemy attacking? Uncle Halfdan sprang from his bed, sword already in-hand. I was not sure if I should stand or hide.

Father just stood there, looking at something on the ground. Halfdan stopped short when he reached the threshold, swearing under his breath as he studied whatever was there as well.

Curiosity overcame fear. I stepped up behind the men who had raised me, peering between their shoulders to get a glimpse at what they were looking at.
A sack of something on the ground. Stained with red. A bag of meat? No, those were clothes. I gasped as Halfdan twisted, making room for me to see more clearly. A man’s body, torn open. His entrails were spilling onto the ground.

Father and Uncle stepped out, pacing around the body, looking to see if anyone else was around. They were used to this sort of sight, I distantly imagined. They may not even realize how horrifying this was for me. I had never been on a battlefield.

My mind focused on pointless details. The buckle hanging off his shredded belt shone dully in the first rays of the sun. His neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, his once-blonde beard muddy and matted. The face was bruised and bloated but there was no mistaking that pale, flaxen hair.

“So much for Alfgeir,” Uncle Halfdan said, poking his toe into the corpse’s shoulder.
are you afraid of me?

The first thing I was aware of feeling was relief. Ivar had saved us. There would be no marriage to Alfgeir. The second thing I felt was a wave of nausea as the corpse wiggled strangely under my uncle’s boot. He looked like he had died in excruciating pain.

“I am impressed, really,” Halfdan said, breaking the silence that had settled as the three of us contemplated the mangled body laying at our feet. He looked over, catching Father’s eye. “You know who did this, right?” He chuckled, and I shuddered. “At least one son of Ragnar is not soft.” He made another appreciative noise as he toed the corpse again. “I have always worried that Ragnar’s Christian sympathy would ruin all his boys. But this… the cripple is savage.”

Father only grunted. I found myself winding my arms around my body in a self-protective gesture as I still struggled to make sense of what I was seeing. There were things missing from its face.

“Come now, brother, you cannot say you wouldn’t have wanted to do the same.” When he didn’t get a reaction, Uncle Halfdan tried to catch my eye next. His eyebrows jumped under the pale hair curtaining half his face. “I think it’s romantic.”

“It is,” I agreed, too loudly, a wild edge to my voice matching the edge of horror filling my chest. Ivar did this for me. I could not look straight at it, but I couldn’t look away either. It. Him. Alfgeir. I forced myself to make that connection.

Father’s gravelly voice finally broke out. “What are you saying, Halfdan, you are on his side?” He stared down at the corpse like he was still trying to believe it was really there.

Halfdan barked a laugh. “Well the other side is dead, so…”

Father looked up at him flatly. “The other side is us.” I knew that tone, the iron creeping under his voice.

Halfdan seemed immune to it, just shook his head like Father was ruining all his fun. “We are used to our plans changing, are we not?” he said with a shrug.

I looked at my uncle for a long moment, wondering suddenly if he had not agreed with Father about my engagement to Alfgeir in the first place. He did not seem as disappointed as Father did, now that Ivar had cut off their scheme so neatly. Cut off. My stomach heaved but I held the bile down.

Father looked around the camp, still pouting but already calculating his next move. It was so early that there were very few signs of motion, especially after the amount of drink that had been poured last night. It did not appear that anyone else had noticed us or what we were looking at yet. “It is not good for him to be found here in our camp. We will bring him to the woods. It looks like a wild animal got him, anyway.”

Halfdan guffawed. “No one is going to believe that this was not about your daughter, Harald. After the scene Ivar made last night? There will be no pretending he was not responsible for this. That you are not connected to it.”

“I still do not want this body on my threshold,” Harald barked back.

Halfdan nodded, ceding the point. He stepped over and bent down. “You take the feet?”

“No,” Father said coldly. “Sigrunn will help me carry him.”
We both stared at him in shock.

“She is Viking, strong like me. She can do it. After all,” his lip curled in a dark, angry smile, “this is her mess to clean up.”

Uncle Halfdan’s wide eyes shifted to me in concern, but he chose not to argue, finally catching Father’s seething tone. He stepped back to make room for me.

I just stood there, still looking at the body without really looking at it. Was Father right, did I bear the responsibility for this? I had not wanted this man, but I hadn’t wanted him dead either.

“Come on, Sigrunn,” Father said, stern voice brooking no disagreement. “Get your arms under his shoulders.”

Halfdan put a concerned hand on my shoulder. “At least let her take the feet, brother.”

Father only scowled. “If anyone is getting his blood on their clothes, it will be her. I don’t want to look involved,” he maintained. “Ivar wants everyone thinking that the blame for this mess is on me. That is why he dropped him here. Pick him up, Sigrunn.”

My body started to move automatically, so accustomed was I to obeying that tone in my father’s voice. I grimaced as I bent too close to the ruined face that once was Alfgeir’s, tried to numb myself to my senses as I grasped his arms and attempted to lift.

“Not like that,” Halfdan muttered as I struggled in vain against the mass of a full-grown warrior. He bent and helped me get him up off the ground, then transferred the rest of the weight to me as Father lifted the lower half of the body with us.

It was so hard to get a good grip when the last thing I wanted to do was let this gory thing touch me, slick with blood and dripping entrails. “Wrap your arms under his shoulders, Sigrunn,” Father directed. “Get yourself centered under his weight.” I suppressed a gag as the ghastly head flopped bonelessly; the face twisted away but it was now tucked revoltingly close to my chin. Father stepped back and I followed. The weight was dreadful but I was managing it; the horror in my belly was what threatened to overcome me.

Halfdan followed at my side, ready to help if I faltered. His head swiveled back and forth, making sure we were not being watched as we made our way slowly to the edge of camp.

My heart was racing and still I could barely process what was happening. Ivar had killed this man that I now bore in my arms. A good man, whose only fault was being manipulated by my father, and being tempted by my beauty. You did this, Sigrunn. The further we walked, the longer the stink of the body filled my nostrils, the more its wetness seeped into my dress, the more guilty I felt. I could not control the self-punishing thoughts flooding my mind. He met his end this way because he wanted you. Because you let Ivar want you. Alfgeir didn’t deserve this.

Father’s sullen eyes were locked on my face as he walked backwards before me. He appeared to be pondering similar thoughts. He grunted when I shifted my grip, hugging the body closer so that it did not slip. “This is not the way in which I imagined you first embracing your betrothed, Daughter,” he said, eyes filled with blame boring into mine.

The comment was so grotesque that I could not hold back the vomit anymore; I dropped my end of the body and fell to my knees, turning hastily to the side before I let the bile fall. The least I could do is not empty my stomach on top of Alfgeir’s already-desecrated corpse.

I heard real anger in Halfdan’s voice above my head. “Enough, Harald. Look at her. You cannot
make her do this.” His words were both sharp and hushed; we did not want to awaken anyone inside
the tents we were weaving between. I forced myself to take a deep breath, willed my limbs to stop
shaking enough to let me move again. If we were discovered now it would be worse than if we had
just left Alfgeir in front of our tent.

When I looked over, Halfdan was already gathering up my end of the body. Father’s mouth twisted
but he did not argue. “She still has to come, and see this through. Get up, Sigrunn. And try not to
embarrass yourself with a weak stomach again.”

“She is not responsible for this,” Halfdan hissed as he jerked the corpse back up in the air.

“But if she had not led that boy on, my plans would not be in the dirt right now.”

Halfdan tsked at his brother. “I seem to recall you instructing her to lead him on, not very long ago at
all.” He paused, contemplating the corpse in his arms. “We probably should have expected this.”

I did not pay attention to how they chose the spot to leave the body. Certainly Alfgeir would be
missed as the camp awoke and prepared to embark down the river; who would search for him? How
long would that take? Halfdan was right, everyone would assume foul play, know the culprit, know
the reason. What would people think? What would happen to Ivar?

*****

“That had to be terrible for you, Sigrunn,” Father said when we got back to our tent, tried to go about
the morning’s business of packing up camp as if nothing at all unusual had happened. The sympathy
in his voice sounded so real, but it was so out of place. He had not shown any compassion at all
when he blamed me for the corpse at our threshold, nor when he made me take the horrific thing in
my arms. “Why don’t you sit down and rest, let others do the work.” Now that he had time to calm
down, he thought he could just pretend he had not been so cruel to me?

“I can manage,” I replied coldly, stalking over to my pallet and starting to fold up the blankets. It was
indeed tempting to take that permission to sit down and nurse my aching heart, but I was suddenly so
tired of doing whatever my father told me to do. And of going along with whatever he wanted me to
be, whatever he wanted to pretend our relationship consisted of. He had betrayed me last night. And
just because Ivar had undone that possibility, did not mean that all was forgotten and forgiven.

We packed our belongings in silence for a while, but Father just could not let it go. “I see how
disturbed you are, Sigrunn. Your hands are shaking.”

I set down the bag I had been holding and clenched my fingers into fists. “It will pass.”

“I hate seeing how much he has hurt you.”

I looked over at my father with wide, shocked eyes. Was he really trying to say…?

“This is why I wanted to keep you away from that boy,” he continued, seeing he had my attention.
Halfdan looked up at him too. “He has no care for your feelings. Such a gruesome thing to do to
your betrothed, and he had to rub it in your face. He is too cruel, and entirely selfish. I hope you see
now why I do not want him for you.”

I felt my body trembling anew as I listened, but it was not with fear this time. “You think I am upset
with Ivar? He was not the one who made me touch it,” I spat at Father, appalled and enraged at the sheer hypocrisy of his words.

“But he was the one who left it there for you,” Father replied, completely unruffled by my tone.

“Was it for me?”

He crossed his arms, holding his head high and imperious. “Which one of us do you think he was warning, Daughter?”

I turned back to my packing with a huff. I did not want my father to see the flash of true fear that thought sparked in me. I pushed it back quickly, denying the implication. “Ivar was not trying to scare me,” I insisted, but I could not make eye contact again.

“Even so, you would be wise to be frightened,” Father said to my back.

It was no use arguing with him any further, or even trying to get the final word. I shoved the last of my few possessions into a sack and yanked hard on the drawstring. “This is done,” I snarled. “I am going out.” I straightened, trying to look more confident than I felt. It was obvious where I would be going: to the same place he had forbidden last night. But I no longer had a fiancé that could be embarrassed. I stepped toward the open flap of the tent.

“Is that what you think?” Father said, whirling to intercept me, but Halfdan stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Let her go,” my uncle counseled softly. “Let her find out where Ivar’s mind is now. Like it or not, the board is changed, and we must study the new arrangement of the pieces.”

Father took a deep breath, still glaring at me. His body relaxed and I knew he was giving in. “This does not mean that he has won,” he declared coldly, but his voice wavered almost imperceptibly.

I looked back over my shoulder. “I will tell him that you said that.”

I kept my ears open as I made my way toward Ivar’s end of the camp, waiting for uproar, outrage, or even the hushed tones of rumors about the fate of King Alfgeir. There was nothing. Perhaps the body had not been found yet. Perhaps no one had realized he was missing.

I did not even know what I wanted to say to Ivar when I reached him. The only thing I knew for sure was that I had to see his face, and that only the strength in his arms could stop the trembling in mine. This was all so much. I had barely slept the night before, between my anger at my father and worry over my lover.

Ivar’s pure, helpless rage as they had dragged him away haunted me, and I had spent half the night wondering what he was doing to handle his pain. I knew now: impulsive violence, once again. Did he have any other solution for his problems? He would have to learn some kind of subtlety, and soon, if he truly wished to gain real power and rule a kingdom one day. I hoped to help him with that, to be a balancing force that could soothe his rages and help him focus that iron will more rationally, but I could not do that so long as we were kept apart.

Alfgeir’s ruined face kept intruding into my thoughts. I had not loved the man, but I felt so terrible about the manner of his death. I was certain Father had been trying to make that guilt worse, making me get so close to the body, but my anger was not quite enough to stop it from working a little. My mind just kept floating back to the sickening details of the wounds. Ivar had done more than just kill...
the man. I thought about the look I had seen in his eyes during the Flinch game, when he had frightened his competitor into ceding. I was almost sick again right there, imagining that face as the last thing that Alfgeir had ever seen. Wondering how many of the insults to his flesh had been delivered before or after the moment he died.

I pushed those thoughts away as I drew near the Ragnarssons’ side of camp. I decided that I was not going to let Father’s manipulation work on me. He had tried to use my obvious horror to drive a wedge between Ivar and I, but I did not have to let it happen.

I came upon Ivar and his brothers at the river’s edge, overseeing the loading of their own boats. A flash of bitter nostalgia confused more than comforted me as my eyes fell on the vessel that had carried us over here with Ivar locked in the circle of my arms. Just a few days had passed and already that time felt so much simpler, both of us buoyed by an optimism that now appeared so silly I wanted to slap my former self as hard as my father had.

Ivar did not smile as he watched me approach, but neither did he look away. His body froze until his brothers noticed his distraction, stopping to stare at me too. All four sons of Aslaug were arrayed in a scowling line by the time I drew close enough to speak, and Bjorn was watching me carefully from the prow of his own boat as well.

I tried a smile, though the looks on their faces were making me apprehensive. “Ivar,” I began, “What —”

He cut me off with a wave of his hand. He glanced quickly at his brothers, looked back at me just as fast, like he was trying to pretend he had not just done so. “Not here. Come.” He slid off his perch and started pulling himself through the mud toward the wood at the edge of the rapidly-dissolving camp.

“Ivar,” Sigurd called to him, a clear warning in his voice.

Ivar paused only to wave an angry hand back at his brother, without even turning to look, before continuing to haul himself across the ground.

He looked up just once to make sure that I was coming, then dropped his head and focused solely on getting us out of the camp as quickly as he could move. I wanted to speak to him but I could not think of how to start, finding something very intimidating in the set of his shoulders. I followed him down a little game trail in the woods hugging the riverbank, heading the opposite way than how the boats would travel.

It opened out finally under an overhanging cliff of stone at the river’s edge. I had to stop and marvel a moment at the little sanctuary that Ivar had found for us. It was a shame that he was only able to bring me here on the day we were about to depart; it was so beautiful and calming. The overhanging roof of yellowish rock was scooped almost like a cave at a bend in the river, shielding us from the cold wind. The colors in the stone were variegated and unusual, and the place felt safe, perhaps even blessed by some local god. Broken-off boulders were scattered under that space, creating many choices of flat, clean surfaces for us to climb upon and sit. Ivar chose a large one with a wide seat that reminded me of a rough-hewn throne. I was certain the choice was intentional.

Only when he had seated himself, and rubbed some of the mud from his hands and clothes, did Ivar finally look me in the face. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of his handsome, achingly familiar features now just as still and stony as the rocks that surrounded us.

“Ivar,” I said, then had to swallow against my suddenly dry throat. “My love.” I clutched my skirts higher than I needed to, just to have something to hold as I stepped over to his perch. His face
changed not a bit at my words. In a flash I was once again that timid girl I had been at the beginning of our affair, when I knew what it was to fear him and want to draw closer at the same time. “I—”

He cut me off again. “Did you know?”

It took me a moment to reconstruct what he was referring to. He waited, watching my face like a deadly bird of prey as I thought. The last time he had looked upon me, he was being carried away screaming while I was sitting frozen beside Alfgeir. The betrothal. I stepped up next to him, hands reaching out for reassurance. “No, Father told me nothing. I was as shocked as you.” I traced my fingers down his cheekbones but he did not smile, did not react at all to my touch.

“And yet you did not protest.”

My face crumpled, but I forced myself to keep eye contact. “And I am ashamed of that.” Still no reaction, just that hooded, baleful glare. “But what good would it have done?”

Ivar pulled his face away from my fingertips, bared his teeth at me. “What good? It would have shown everyone that you are mine, that you did not want this either, that I am not just some lovesick idiot wrapped around King Harald’s daughter’s little finger, blind to the truth. Or is that the truth? Is that what I really am to you, Sigrunn?”

I tried to take his hands in my own but he wouldn’t let me. “What do you mean?”

“I was humiliated last night, and you said nothing, did nothing, while I was dragged away like a madman. Was that you and your father’s plan all along, to make me look weak?”

My stomach dropped; all at once it felt like a cold ocean was spreading out between us. “Ivar, no. I love you!” I cried across the distance.

“And I do not know if I believe that anymore!” he shouted back in my face.

I sucked in a breath, resisted the urge to step back from the anger he all but spit at me. Instead, I shifted my weight even closer to him, squeezing my own fingers tightly to stop myself from reaching for him again. “You truly did not see my heart break in that moment?” I asked softly. Perhaps he was right to be disappointed in my actions, perhaps another woman would have flailed like a wild animal and created an ugly scene that only embarrassed everyone further. But in that moment I was only being myself, and when I was shocked and hurt I drew inward; that was just who I was. I needed him to see that, to see me beyond the image of who he wanted me to be. Where he was fire, I was ice. It was just my way.

”I am only trying to see the truth,” Ivar replied. “You tell me so often that you desire nothing but our marriage, you claim to support all of my ambitions and desires… and yet every time I turn around you are taking your father’s side, or telling me not to worry about him, a man who has already sworn to conquer my home. Is that your true purpose here, Sigrunn? To distract me, to lull me to sleep while your father steals everything from under our noses?”

My own anger finally bubbled up, hot and thick behind my throat, as I listened to that nonsense. “Do you really think that I was sent here to seduce you?” I scoffed. “How can you claim to love me and then insult me so. Do you not remember how this started? I was determined to resist; you were the one who stalked me and gave chase at every turn. You made me love you.” I grabbed his hands then, managed to trap one between my own and press it over my heart. “And you insult yourself. You must think yourself blind, must have such a poor opinion of your own intellect, if you think that you, Ivar Lothbrok, could be so callously tricked.”
Ivar’s hand stopped resisting abruptly, his fingers curling into the soft flesh above my breast.

“I love you, Ivar. Some days there is nothing I am certain of but that. Do you think that my body, or my heart, could possibly lie to you? Look into my eyes, what do you see there? Do you think that I would go through all this, that I could trust you to do the things that I let you do to me, if I did not love you with all that I am? I desire nothing more than to care for you, and be with you, for the rest of my days.”

Ivar continued to glare at me, but the anger behind his eyes was fading as he listened. He pressed his hand up toward my throat and I let him, could feel in the way that his fingers slid that he was not intending to do me harm. He cupped the column of my neck with his hand resting on my collarbones, fingers gently pressing around both sides with a soft strength devoid of threat. That enveloping touch calmed me more than anything else could. “I had to make certain,” he said softly. The hardness in his eyes melted away, and I could see that much of that cold look had been forced as he attempted to get the truth out of me. The love was welling back in now. I could see he was happy to be with me again too, his hand relaxing and sliding around the back of my neck. “My brothers’ counsel… they make me doubt you sometimes.”

My brow creased, sudden insult spiking. “Who?”

Ivar sighed, used his grip on my throat to tug me down over his lap. “Bjorn.” Just like that, the tension was gone. I sighed softly at the relief as I settled most of my weight on the rock beside Ivar, tucking myself into his side while sliding one arm around his waist and letting my legs splay over his. “He thinks that Harald has set you on me in order to distract us. A theory that Sigurd constantly delights in reminding me of.”

I buried my face just under Ivar’s ear, clutching him tightly around the shoulders and pressing my body to his. “Do not listen to them. They do not want you to be happy.”

“I know,” Ivar growled, pulling me more tightly into him. A few tears leaked from my eyes at the sheer relief of being nestled against his body again; I had needed the comfort of his touch so badly. First after the heartache of Father’s betrayal, and then the horrors of that gruesome corpse… I just wanted to drown myself in Ivar’s heady scent and the perfect grip of his arms hugging me close.

But I quickly found that I could not rest that way. My reservations over the manner of Alfgeir’s death were like a cold block in my chest, which even the heat of our love could not simply melt away. I had to bring it up. “If you doubted me so, why kill Alfgeir?”

“Because doubt cannot drown my love for you.” Ivar’s jaw moved against the top of my head as he spoke the words like an oath. “I will let no one else have you, not even in name. I could not allow him even one day to call himself the betrothed of Sigrunn Haraldsdottir.”

Uncle Halfdan was right; there was something terribly romantic about all of this, even if it could not completely wash away the horror and guilt coiling around my heart.

“I am sorry that I accused you of those things,” Ivar continued, voice little more than a whisper. “I am ashamed that I let my brothers’ doubt infect me. I know it is your way to go still and quiet when you feel threatened. I forgive you.” He kissed the top of my head and I sighed softly, afraid that if I spoke I would disrupt this rare moment of humility and kindness from him. “I know why you did not move when your father betrayed his promise last night.”

I tried to forget my doubts and just bask in this unfamiliar tenderness. My fingers found Ivar’s and wound tightly between them. “Everything inside me died in that moment.” Ivar made a soothing noise and hugged me tighter. “I tried to go to you later, but Father caught me, would not let me
Ivar stroked his cheek across the top of my head. “If you had come, you would not have found me. Or at least, you would not have wanted to.”

I shuddered in his arms, could not help but pull away a little. “You went to find him.”

“I knew what I had to do.”

I rocked back, sitting up straight and drawing into myself. Every time I remembered the sight of Alfgeir’s corpse it was like an icicle was being stabbed down my spine. “It was so… brutal. The wounds on his body… did you do all of that yourself?”

Ivar actually smirked at me. Did he think I was complimenting him? Then his smile slipped into something more boyish and self-conscious. “Ubbe and Hvitserk helped,” he finally confessed. “Though they did not do much more than hold him steady for me.” He paused, sucking in a satisfied breath like he was enjoying the memory. “Even Bjorn agreed that it had to be done. Your father was clearly drawing in an ally with that betrothal, and seeing as Alfgeir was Swedish we can only assume it was part of a move he was readying to make against the rest of Norway. Meaning us.” He smiled smugly. “Now, no more ally. We do not let the wolf at our gates grow any fatter.”

“That is why you dropped the body at our tent,” I guessed, voice hollow as I tried to stay calm and rational, focus on the politics of it and not think any longer about the creeping horror of the corpse. “To make Father’s part in Alfgeir’s death clear; to warn others against allying with him.” I did my best to ignore the way my heart had started racing faster and faster as the details of Alfgeir’s grisly wounds were again flashing behind my eyes.

“And to show Harald what I am capable of,” Ivar said lightly, as if he was not just confessing to threatening my own father. “To make him understand the lengths I will go to keep you near me, Sigrunn.”

Father’s words rang in my ears. Which one of us do you think he was warning, Daughter? Suddenly I couldn’t look at his face.

I was not sure how much time passed before Ivar spoke again. “Are you not even happy that I took care of this problem for us?”

He must have read my silence, the rigid stillness of my body. I realized that I wasn’t even holding him anymore, that I had wound my arms defensively around my own body.

I felt him grasp my chin, turn my face up to his so that I was forced to meet his scowling eyes. “Sigrunn, are you afraid of me?”

It was so hard to look at him. His features were twisted up and he appeared offended at the very idea, like my shuddering and cowering were betraying him somehow. Like my fear was wrong, a personal attack on him. I was tempted to hide myself like I usually did, to crumble internally and give him the answer that he wanted. Only this time I was not sure that I would be able to pretend, to try and show him only exactly what he wanted to see in me. And it felt too much like what Father was always making me do, and I was not going to slip from the grasp of one heartless man just to fall into the arms of another. With Ivar, I would have to be something different. “Yes,” I said softly.

I was at least brave enough not to look away, to watch the word stab him with implications that he did not want to be true. His hand fell away, back down to his lap. “Why?” he asked through gritted teeth.
“You tortured him.”

Ivar’s brow jumped, a moment of confusion. “I did.”

“How?”

He pressed his lips together. “Because I wanted to.” He looked away, then turned those burning eyes back on me just as fast. “Because I was angry and I wanted him to suffer.” His voice was tight, his features growing impassive and defensive.

“Did it make you feel better?”

“Yes,” he said quickly.

“That is why I am afraid.” I forced my breaths to stay slow and calm, even though it felt dangerous just to have this conversation. “How can you say you will never hurt me the same way? Did you leave that body as a warning to my father, or to me?”

“Ivar, I would never do that to you. I would not ever desire your death.”

I paused for a deep breath, taking a moment to see how his words felt before I chose my reply. I believed he did not mean to threaten me, but I was not certain he was taking my point seriously. “If we will be married, it is inevitable that we will quarrel,” I tried to explain. “All couples do. I will say things, or do things, that will enrage you. I see the awful acts you are capable of, Ivar son of Ragnar, and it is hard to trust that I will not be putting my very life in your hands when we are bound together on our wedding day.”

Ivar closed his eyes and sucked a deep breath in through his nose, collecting himself as well. “I was not trying to scare you.” He opened his eyes and looked at me intently. “Alfgeir, his life means nothing to me. His death means nothing to me. But you, Sigrunn, you mean a great deal to me. I would never be so callous with the life of someone that I love.”

I stared into his eyes, trying to decide if I believed him. No one could know the future. It came down to trust. But I saw the softness around the edges of his brilliant blue eyes and I knew that I wanted to try. The love that had grown between us was as deep as an ocean, and I was finally ready to give myself fully to its tides. “All right,” I said. “I believe you. I love you.” Trust is a choice.

Relief cracked through Ivar’s eyes and we both crumpled back into each other’s arms. His lips found mine and he seemed intent to reacquaint me with the love of which he spoke.

With great internal effort, I stopped him. “We are not done.” I was tired of leaving unspoken words hanging between us. “I am glad that Alfgeir no longer stands in our way, Ivar, but I cannot claim to be happy about what you did,” I said. Honest. Simple. “I feel guilty. Alfgeir was a good man, and I hate knowing that murder was committed on my behalf. Who are you to say he deserved to die?”

“Who are you to say that he did not?” Ivar responded, brows creasing. “Maybe he was a good man, maybe he was not, but that is not important. All men are fated to die on the day of the Norns’ choosing. None of us get to change that. Clearly, yesterday was Alfgeir’s appointed day. Who am I to argue with his fate? Who are you to say that he did not die for a good enough reason? He died so that we could be together. He died so that your father’s schemes could be halted.”

“He died because he got in your way.”

“Yes,” Ivar said, without a trace of shame. “Just like the many Saxons I just faced on the battlefield,
who stood between me and my vengeance on Aelle.”

Good point. I wavered a moment before I saw the difference. “But Alfgeir was not your enemy. He was, in fact, your ally.”

“He became my enemy the moment he made a deal with your father to take you away from me.”

I tried to think of something else, but found I could not argue with Ivar’s logic. I still felt unsettled, but perhaps that was my problem, not his. It was true, sudden death was just the way of life, and not even the gods could interfere with the Norns’ chosen timing for that end. Besides, men killed each other over causes less noble than love all the time.

“You may be right,” I said softly, knowing I had to make my resignation explicit, for Ivar would not be able to relax until he knew his point had been made. “And I am happy that I will not be forced to marry him, that there is still a chance for us now. I just…” words continued to fail me, and I trailed off with a heavy breath. It was hard to let the horror go. “You must think me silly. Perhaps I am just a sheltered little princess, who has no business being out here a-Viking, staring violence in the face and wringing my hands at the consequences.”

Ivar smiled indulgently, stroking his big hand in comfort over the top of my shoulder. “You are my sheltered little princess, and I love your gentle spirit. Even when it leads you to conclusions I do not understand.” He wound his fingers between mine, then grew distracted by something he saw there. “Or maybe not so sheltered. Is that his blood on you?”

I looked down. He was drawing back my sleeve, finding a smear of dried red ichor clinging to the fine hairs of my forearm. I must have missed it when I scrubbed myself furiously before changing my dress. My body stiffened as I made an affirmative sound.

Ivar pulled back to look at my face, bidding further explanation with one arched eyebrow.

“We… moved him.”

Ivar barked a short, satisfied laugh. “I was wondering why no one around the camp had spoken of it yet. Your father tried to hide it?” He tipped his head, peered into my eyes with interest. “And you helped?”

I could not stop myself from shuddering at the memory. “Father made me. He said it was my mess to clean up.” I searched Ivar’s eyes for some kind of sympathy, and he creased his brow and pursed his lips appropriately. “I had to carry him.” No further words came as I remembered the feel of the cold corpse flopping against my chest, my mouth twisting in frightful disgust.

“Was that the first time you touched a corpse?” he asked, a strange sort of interest in his voice. When I drew back he schooled his features into something more comforting. “No wonder you were so horrified. I was not intending to shock you in that way.”

“Father was,” I said bitterly. “I am sure he made me do that to try and make me feel disgusted with you.”

“And are you?”

I gave Ivar a weak smile and a shrug. “I am getting over it. I hope you can… keep me more sheltered from these things in the future.”

Ivar hummed a pleased little affirmative and ran his hands down my arms. “Yes, I will keep you safe, my gentle heart.” He sounded a little condescending, but I was soothed anyway.
“So that message you were trying to send about alliances with my father, it will not be so obvious,” I continued, trying to recover my pride by going back to a political analysis. “Now he is just a body in the woods, if he is even found before we leave.”

“The message will be clear enough,” Ivar said. “No one will think it a coincidence that he died on this day.”

“No, that is not likely. The motives are too clear.”

“Maybe now I can see you more often,” Ivar said, stubbornly attempting to distract me from a discussion of consequences by pulling my body closer to his. “You defied your father’s wishes coming here to England, just to be with me, and yet we get so little time.” He burrowed his face in my hair, breathing in deeply of my scent as his hands began to stroke over my belly and hips.

“He did allow me to come to you just now,” I said, but for once I was not the optimist out of the two of us. I ignored the temptation of his dragging fingers, pulled my face back to look at him. “Though he also told me to tell you: ‘this does not mean that you have won.’”

Ivar just smiled, one of those bitter, mirthless smirks that spread over his face whenever he felt challenged. “But neither have I lost, after that. The game is not over. Do you think I have earned a little more respect?”

I thought about it a moment. “From my uncle, yes. He actually laughed at the corpse, and said you were a real Viking.” The smile that spread across Ivar’s face at that compliment was so innocent, so much like a child receiving a pat on the head, that in that moment the last of the tension in my chest gave way under a flood of love and I forgave him everything. Ivar just wanted to be seen as a man, to be respected and feared as a warrior. I pressed a kiss to his lips, innocent and fleeting. “It is harder to tell with Father,” I said, finishing my answer. “He is so angry to have been foiled; I can only imagine how many of his careful plans are in disarray now.”

Ivar’s fingers were rubbing idly over my ribs, their quickened pace more an expression of how pleased he felt with himself than any attempt to woo me into amorous activities.

“I do have to say, Ivar, it does not seem to me to have been a wise political move for you either. It sours loyalties when you murder men pledged to your own cause. And now you will likely have new enemies amongst Alfgeir’s family and friends, some who might claim vengeance against you. I worry what will happen to you now. They will know it was you, however the death ends up being discovered. At the very least, his army will likely go home, and reduce your forces for Wessex.”

I was surprised to see Ivar only settle back in his seat in reaction to my carefully worded warnings, a smug look falling across his features. “I did think of that, actually. Worry not. Did you know that Alfgeir came here with his brother?” He spoke slowly, and watched my every reaction as he went. “A half-brother, younger, who had not been favored as heir in that family. Not until now, at least.”

“I tried to keep my face neutral, but the story he was telling me was fairly revolting. Where was this man’s filial loyalty? “So, now I have turned your father’s allied army into mine.”

I clenched my teeth as he went on, guessing where he was going.

“He did not get on well with Alfgeir, though he never could bring himself to kill him. That is what he said to me.” Ivar positively preened, rolling his neck. “He may try to squeeze the _wergild_ out of me, but I have
assurances he does not need me to pay in blood.”

I was impressed, I could admit that. Ivar had turned what appeared to be an impulsive act of rage into a move that benefitted him on many fronts. But he had chilled me a bit, too. These conversations with Alfgeir’s brother must have happened sometime before last night. Which meant Ivar had to have been planning for the possibility of killing Alfgeir already. I felt a flash of that kind of respect one acquires for a bear that wanders too close to one’s home. I knew for certain now that Ivar was capable of more ruthless decisions than I ever would be, and that was something that I was always going to have to live with.

I was optimistic that I could. “Well that is good news,” I agreed, then let out a deep, relaxed sigh and rested my cheek upon his shoulder. Ivar squeezed me tighter into his side and we stared down in companionable silence toward the river. For the first time possibly ever, it seemed like neither one of us wished to use each other’s bodies for anything but comfort. Ivar stroked me idly, and I burrowed myself ever deeper into his embrace, but he made no moves to inflame my passion, and my hands did not wander.

“The boats will be almost full by now,” Ivar said after a while. Already thinking about what had to come next.

“They will not leave without us,” I answered, “though I suppose that the longer I am away, the fouler my father’s mood will turn.”

“How can you go back to him now?” Ivar said softly. “How can you look your father in the eye, sleep in the same tent, follow his orders, when he betrayed you like that?”

“Because I have to,” I said simply. “I want more than anything to come back with you right now, get in your boat, sleep in your tent tonight and every night. But you know what would happen.”

“Your father would demand that you come back.”

“My father would arrive with a host of warriors, and split the army right here.”

“He won’t.”

I stirred loose of Ivar’s arms to look up at him, waited for him to explain.

“He is not ready to go to war with my brothers and I, otherwise he would have pressed the York issue harder, split the army already.” Ivar smiled, confident and seductive. “Come back with me; he will not do anything about it.”

Ivar did not know that Harald had already taken action against his interests back in Kattegat, that my father may be more set against him than he appeared. “We should not take such a risk,” I replied, shaking my head with a soft smile. “You two are still playing a game of loyalties, are you not? How will the other leaders take it, when they see you steal the daughter of a man pledged to your cause? Men who would not have followed Father to York only for greed and glory might be able to use such a betrayal as a better excuse to abandon you and your brothers’ cause.”

Ivar’s face clouded. “You are doing it again. You are filled with endless excuses to keep us apart. It is not very reassuring, when you talk like this. You are not reminding me of your love.”

I set one palm on either side of his pouting lips, pulled his face down to stare into mine. “And you need me to be constantly reminding you,” I teased.

“Yes,” Ivar replied, unrepentant.
“You want to imagine me clinging to your side as my father and his warriors fight through the camp to come take me back by force.”

Ivar grinned. “I am surrounded by loyal warriors of my own. They could try, but my brothers and I would rain down a storm of blades to keep you.”

My smile dropped. “And even more blood would be shed over me. What a waste that would be.”

“Sigrunn, you are worth the blood of many men. I would slaughter half this army for you.”

My body flushed with warmth. It sounded romantic when he said such things, but a chill spread through my gut when I remembered that really looked like, how I felt when the evidence had laid at my feet this morning. “Not before you get your vengeance on Ecbert,” I deflected. “You want my father’s loyalty, no, you need it, until that day. In Wessex they will know we are coming. They will have had more time to gather their own forces.”

Ivar’s jaw clenched but I could see in his eyes that I had won, that he was pushing his passion aside and looking at things reasonably again. A hollow victory for me, when all I was coaxing him to admit was that he had to let me go once more. “This is so hard,” he said softly. He looked down at the ground, stiffened a little. “Some days I think that I do not even want to embrace you. All I can think is how I will feel when I have to let you go again.”

A stab of panic. It hurt to even contemplate Ivar giving up, deciding I was not worth all of this torment anymore.

“I know, my love, but we are getting so close now. The gods are teaching you to be as patient in love as you are in vengeance. You bought us time with blood last night. Do not let it be for nothing. You can do it. We can do it.”

I kissed his cheek with parted lips, pressing my passion into his skin as I curled my fingers under the edges of his armor. I could not stand the thought of him turning away from me. Ivar held rigid for a moment longer, then emitted a pained little cry and turned to capture my mouth with his own. His hands stroked my cheeks as he kissed me, over and over as my whole body flushed hot and wanton, finally ready to offer itself to him.

“Do you make me weak, or do you make me strong?” he murmured against my skin. “I cannot tell anymore.”

I hoped then that he would turn me against the rock beneath us, scramble under my skirts, mount me and claim me again. But I made no move to suggest it. I was cautious now, after his difficulty the other night. I was afraid to show him how much he inflamed me, how quickly I was dissolving into a needy little mess. I did not wish to push the issue in case his body once again did not stir in response.

When he broke the kiss to press his forehead against mine, his eyes were stormy, conflicted. I hated to see him in so much pain. “You are strong, Ivar. Do not give up. If we do not have your endless, iron will, we have nothing. Keep fighting for me, please.”

Something faltered behind Ivar’s eyes as he nodded, swallowed, and kissed me again. “I shall,” he whispered against my lips. “Do not worry, my love. I will be as strong as you need me to be, always.”

He kissed me again but it was too hard; his hands felt forced as they crushed my ribs against him. And then I realized what I had been doing to him. Painting him as this indomitable creature, requiring him to never have doubts, never allowing him to falter or show any weakness… No
wonder his body did not trust me anymore. I had to recognize that he was human too. If a man can’t break down and show his sadness, his fears, in the arms of his woman, then where could he? I wanted him to be strong so that I could stay weak. I wanted him to act so that I didn’t have to. But look where that had gotten us.

I did not know how to express this new thought to Ivar. It was too fresh, unfinished, and I knew he would not respond well if I said it clumsily, suddenly told him outright that I would welcome his weaknesses. He did not want to believe he had any, either. All I could do in this moment was try to help him relax, remove the demand hanging over our heads that he should once again dominate and fuck me so that we could pretend we were not afraid.

I brought my lips gently to Ivar’s ear. “Shhh…” I soothed, smoothing my hands over his tight shoulders, coaxing his arms to slow the driven caresses he had been working into my flesh. I pulled my head back and just looked at him. Really looked. My face relaxed into a tender sort of smile as I gazed at him, took in the tension of his brows, the slight wobble in his jawline, the depths of his breathtaking eyes. The love swelled up so thick in my chest I thought I might cry again as he gazed back at me with a trembling question in his eyes. He was wound so tight he looked like he might break, as much as he tried to hide it with his veneer of confidence. “We don’t have to—I should go.”

He frowned and I leaned in to place a kiss on his temple. “We both need to go back.”

Ivar did not look calmed. The thought of giving up on pleasuring me went directly against his pride.

“It’s alright,” I continued to reassure. “I love you, even if…” I trailed off at the warning of Ivar’s frown. He did not want to acknowledge the difficulties of his manhood.

He pulled me closer, eyes still hooded. “I need to mark you,” he said. A counteroffer. “One more claim before I let you out of my arms once more.” He kissed down my throat without waiting for a response, arms winding to immobilize mine.

“How?” I asked, and he answered me with the scrape of his teeth across my skin.

Was he remembering our first night? This was how everything had started. His jaws closed over the tender flesh of my neck and I closed my eyes as the rush hit me just as it had that night in the hall, the desire in that bite turning the pain into white-hot pleasure. But unlike that first night, I knew now that Ivar’s desire was not only for my body, but for my whole being. Even when we disagreed, even when he was displeased with me, he still wanted me for his. Even when he could not take his pleasure from me with his cock, he still wanted me, to taste my skin and to hear me sigh against him. And so I felt as high as if we were making love as Ivar worried at my throat with his teeth and lips, making sure to leave my flesh mottled and purple in many places before he let me go.

I held my head high as we returned to his brothers, knowing now what they thought of me, and refusing to cower under their disapproval. They would see the honesty of my love for Ivar before this was done. They would see how I worked to bring us together. I bent and kissed Ivar deeply right in front of them, then tore myself away toward my father’s boats. We would do whatever needed to be done, to end up together.

Last night it had meant a show of Ivar’s force; today it meant a strength of a different kind. The fortitude to bear one more separation as I went back and worked to turn my father’s mind once more. I still had to play his game, but one thing had become certain to me today. I did not belong to my father anymore; not in my heart. I had chosen Ivar for myself, and I could not just float passively along trusting Father to make the best decision on my behalf. There was only one man in my destiny, and I would accept no other outcome.
Yet if I was to be Ivar’s legal wife my father had to agree to the marriage. There were prices to be paid and the negotiations would be tense, but I felt some deep strength opening up within me; perhaps Frejya had looked down and blessed me and my love. I would use every resource I had to bring my father to that table. I could play politics too; it was what Father had raised me for.

My strongest potential ally was at home, one who had showed me in several ways today that he might take my side. It was time to corner Uncle Halfdan.
When I returned to board my father’s boat and embark with the fleet down the inland river toward Wessex, I found that my newfound resolve had also awakened a bitter anger. Ivar was right; I could not stand to even look at Harald Finehair, who had lied to my face and betrayed my trust. And so on that first day, I discovered that my commitment to convince my father to marry me to Ivar did not extend to actually talking to him about it. With my family’s begrudging permission I started the voyage instead in neutral territory, with my friend Finna on her husband’s boat.

She had favored Alfgeir for me as well, so she was somewhat less than supportive when I began to rant about all that had transpired the night before. But Finna had been my friend for a long time, and as we spoke and compared experiences all day huddled in the back of that boat, some things about my family started to become clear. My whole life, I realized, had been about growing accustomed to the concept of being used. I was rewarded with Father’s praise and attention when I did things that pleased him, and punished coldly and severely when I did not. As he raised me, my father had emphasized nothing more strongly than my role as an extension of himself, a helpful tool for his ambitions. When I was younger my sweet company made him look warm and trustworthy, and I was sent strategically to sit on laps, smile and coo and charm important wives. As I aged, the advantages of making a good match of me through marriage were always stressed. My own desires and interests went undeveloped and ignored unless they were useful to Father’s causes.

I thought he was a good father because when I pleased him he was kind and indulgent. It was only now, when I was old enough to know better, that I could finally see that he did not care who I really was inside. And now that I could see these things, I forgave myself for going along with my father’s wishes for so long. How was I to think it was possible to behave any differently? I forgave myself, too, for letting Ivar treat me cruelly, callously, and without respect in the early days of our relationship. How was I to expect another man might ever treat me differently? But I could not forgive myself for letting these things go on any longer. And I could not forgive either of these men the next time they tried to use me.

Only I could change the situation of my life. Only I could require them to treat me differently. I had already begun this process with Ivar, and I knew I was lucky that he had responded as well as he had to the shift. A smaller man would have simply walked away and hunted for another victim that would better let him exploit her. I realized this had to mean his love for me was true, because when I demanded respect he responded by learning how to give it.

With these thoughts honing my anger into strength, I returned the next day to finish out the trip on my family’s boat. I was done licking my wounds and ready to take action. Reaching out to Halfdan was the first part of my plan, and so I wrapped my cloak tightly around myself and kept my thoughts to myself until I could find an opportunity to talk with him away from Father’s listening ear.

I came upon my uncle in the evening, after the fleet had put in for the night and we had left the boats to stretch our legs and attend to various needs. I found him after a time, sharpening his axe as he rested in a secluded area near the water. “Got you, Hada!” I cried, in a sing-song, childish voice, using the name I used to call him when I was young, then dropped down to sit beside him. “Do you remember when we used to chase each other through the woods to the north of the hall at Vestfold?”

“Of course, little pup,” he replied, greeting me with a smile full of nostalgic cheer. “Though it has been a long time since you have wanted to play such games.”

“I am not a child any longer,” I agreed, “but they are fond memories. I will always cherish those times we had together.”
“They were good years,” Halfdan agreed. He drew the axehead over his whetstone a few more times. “Simpler.”

With that one word, he let me know that he knew I was troubled, and that his ear was open for me. So often my uncle could say more with just a phrase than my father could with any of his long, blustering speeches. And be more honest, too.

I decided to be just as succinct. “Are you on my side, Hada?”

Halfdan looked up at me without turning his head, taking in the wild look behind my eyes. “Of course, little pup. I will always want what’s best for you.”

A careful answer that told me precisely nothing. “Yes, but do you want me to be happy,” I said, pushing closer, “with Ivar?”

Halfdan set down his tools, sat back on his heels and thought for a while. I could see that he had some opinions, and that he was choosing which of them were wise to share with me. I did not speak, let him think, but I held his eyes to make sure he could not ignore my feelings while he decided. “I think your father is being stubborn,” he finally said, “and refusing to consider Ivar’s advantages.” I felt a wide smile spreading across my face, saw it infecting my uncle’s features too, coaxing him to open further to my cause. “He could make a very useful ally. And it is obvious that the boy loves you very much.”

“He really does,” I said. “Does that truly mean nothing to Father?”

Halfdan’s mouth twisted, and he looked away from me. “We can both see how strong your affections have grown. But you are right that your father is not taking that into account.” My uncle released a heavy sigh. “Harald is not taking Ellisef’s rejection well. It is affecting him on many fronts. I think he is making some foolish decisions.”

“No, Ivar’s response.”

Halfdan chuckled. “Yes, I see that.” He cocked his head, gave me a scrutinizing look. “And I can see that it no longer bothers you as it did, the way he killed his rival.”

I tossed my head. “You were right, Uncle Hada. It is romantic.” He looked at me skeptically and I dropped the façade. “It was hard to be faced with the body. But I am making my peace with it. I am proud of Ivar for fighting for me.”

“I am glad that he has proven to be a fighter too,” Halfdan said. “I want someone fierce for you, Sigrunn. Someone with a great name.”

“Ivar will let nothing stand in the way of his ambitions,” I promised. “There is an unquenchable fire inside of him.”

Halfdan cocked his head, looked up at me with his one visible eye wide. “But you are certain that is the kind of man you wish to tie your life to? It will not always be an easy path.”

“I am certain, Uncle. This love is worth any amount of suffering to me.”
Halfdan nodded thoughtfully, taking the measure of the ferocity in my face. My hunch had been right; I could see his support now.

“I must know, Uncle,” I asked, moving to the next obstacle. “If you think Father has been behaving foolishly, why did you not stop him?”

“You know how your father is,” Halfdan replied, mouth twisting up at me in a bitter, conspiratorial smile. “He does not often respond well to direct challenges. I wait for the times when he seems open to other ideas. And they do not come very often. Especially lately.” Halfdan sighed again. “Harald should have just killed Ellisef. Then he could move on, and get his feet under him again. I think so long as she lives, he will be bitter and distracted, making emotional decisions. I think the beauty of her face distracts him from the truth.”

“And what truth do you see?” I had my own ideas but I was more interesting in learning how my uncle saw it.

“I think she never loved him.”

“Yes, after seeing her reaction that day in the hall, I think she had been lying to him from the beginning.”

Halfdan nodded his agreement. “So this love he devoted his life to, it was never going to work out anyway.”

I nodded, opened my mouth to point out how different my love for Ivar was, but Halfdan spoke again first.

“But your father does love her. Ferociously. He held tight to that love, stoked the embers over those long years to make sure it never went out. Now that he knows it was a lie, he does not know what to do. He is not sure what he believes in. And he does not want to let you choose love, when love broke his heart so suddenly. He thinks he is taking care of you, Sigrunn.”

“Is Father even capable of love?” I asked bitterly, shaking my head and ignoring his last statement.

“That might be a good question,” Halfdan said evenly, surprising me. “He thinks he knows what love is, and look where that got him. He loves us. But he understood this woman so much less well than he thought he did.”

“He does not understand me, either.”

“He only wants what is best for you. He is trying to be a good father, Sigrunn, he is just very confused right now. You have to see that.”

“How can you say that?” I said, anger sparking as his words reminded me of my recent revelations. “All he does is use me. He admitted to my face that he chose Alfgeir because of his army, just to get a useful alliance out of the deal. He doesn’t care what will make me happy, he only cares how I can further his own ambition.”

“It was not the only reason.” He said it soft and even, refusing to match my escalating emotions.

“No? Then what else was there?”

Halfdan shook his head softly. “Ask him yourself. I hate to see you two so angry with each other.”

“I have every right to be angry!” I shouted. “He broke his promise to me! He promised he would
wait. He promised me time, to give Ivar a chance to prove himself.”

“And now you have time again.”

“Only because Ivar bought it, in blood,” I huffed.

“Which only helped him prove himself, do you not think?”

I paused, my anger taken off track. “Yes, I had hoped you two would see it that way. Do you think Father sees it that way?”

“I think he will. Once his pride heals.”

I tossed my head. “My point was, just because Father’s plan failed does not make me forget the betrayal of my trust. Was he lying to me from the start, or was it just too easy for him to go back on his promise once he found a deal he liked better?”

Halfdan shook his head serenely, refusing to answer for my father’s behavior. “Just talk to him. Ask him why he chose Alfgeir for you. It will not mean as much if I say it.”

I scowled at him. “If I talk to him, then I need you to talk to him too. Help him see the advantages of marrying me to Ivar, making him an ally rather than an enemy. His father Ragnar is one of the most famous men of our people, and Ivar is going to surpass him in glory, I know it. Surely such an alliance is to Harald Finehair’s advantage as well. I will try to make peace with Father, but I need you to speak your thoughts more plainly to him too. Will you do this for me, Uncle? Will you take up my cause?”

“I will see what I can do, little pup.” He reached out his arm, and I leaned under it for a reassuring embrace. “And, when you talk to him, make sure to cover up your neck before you do? You came back from your visit to Ivar looking like you were the one that got attacked.”

I blushed a little, and pulled the fabric of my cloak a little higher.

Halfdan chuckled and squeezed my shoulders affectionately. His tone was contemplative when he spoke again. “You truly believe Ivar will give you a good life?”

“It is the only life I want. He will conquer here, and he will provide for me. He will take care of me. He loves me.”

“And does he respect you?”

I felt my chest tighten but I pushed on. “He does. I know he does not appear to respect anything, but I do not let him disrespect me.” Not anymore. “He will listen to me, and care for my heart.”

“And what if one day your husband stands on the other side of a battlefield from your father?” he asked softly. “Are you prepared for that?”

I took a deep breath. “I am prepared to do everything I can to prevent that. Ivar loves me. Father claims to love me. If that is true, then they can come to terms.”

Uncle Halfdan looked at me with a strange cast to his face. It looked like appreciation. “Then I will do my best to help you get what you want.”

*****
I felt pulled to honor my promise to my uncle, even if the last thing I wanted to do was try to see things from my father’s side, to feel softer toward him ever again. My newfound clarity about the ways that he used and manipulated me was so tenuous, and I feared that if I tried to understand him again, I would lose my purpose and be buried under his twisted words once more.

But if I wanted my uncle’s help, I had to try. And the more I knew of my father’s thoughts, the better I could make my case to change his mind about Ivar.

I made sure my uncle was paying attention when I began the conversation with my father the next morning. The wind had died and most of the men were occupied with rowing so that we could continue our course upstream. Father deemed himself too important to take a turn at the oars, but Uncle Halfdan was pulling just in front of us as we sat at the back of the boat.

“Are you ready to apologize to me about Alfgeir yet?” I asked my father. Perhaps I was as prideful as he; I could not bear to re-open the topic with any more humility than that.

Father scowled and crossed his arms tighter over his chest, refusing to look at me. “I have every right to decide your marriage, Sigrunn.”

“Yes, but most men make sure their daughters agree to the match first, Father. You, you lied to my face about it, promising me time when you were already making negotiations with him. Even slaves are treated better.”

“Sigrunn,” Halfdan chided, then grunted as he pulled the oars again. When I looked at him he raised his eyebrows high. This wasn’t the conversation he had been envisioning.

I huffed, then turned back to Father, who was continuing to act as if I were beneath his notice. I knew what Halfdan wanted from me but I was still too angry to ask nicely. “I am lucky that Ivar is so decisive, ready to kill to protect me and what I want. At least there is one person in this world that puts my wishes first.”

Father turned in his seat then, finally ready to engage me. I expected to see him defensive, but his face was so calm, even a little sad. “You were always such a gentle soul, Sigrunn. I never expected you to fall for a man that could do something like that. Kill an unsuspecting ally in cold blood. I really thought that Alfgeir was a better match for you. Not just in wealth and fame, but in his heart.”

Father smiled, that soft smile that always made me feel like the center of his world, but this time tinged with sadness. “He would have treasured you, your kindness, appreciated the home you would have made for him. I fear you will never get that from Ivar. I think his brutality will kill your spirit.”

“Do not try to pretend you were thinking about me at all when you made your deal with Alfgeir,” I spat, though could feel myself already softening. Father had always treated me as a thing to be treasured. Was it too much of a stretch to believe he was actually trying to find a husband for me that would do the same? One that also happened to bring an army and a useful alliance too, of course, but perhaps Alfgeir really had been about both. I glanced back at Uncle Halfdan, who gave a slight nod. This was what he wanted me to know.

“Does Ivar appreciate you, Sigrunn?” Father continued. “Does he cherish your goodness, does he want to make you happy?”

“Yes,” I hissed, “yes, and yes.”

Father made a dismissive motion with his hand, like he did not believe me. Like he thought I was
lying because I was being stubborn.

“Does my word mean anything to you, Father?” The outrage made me ball up my fists in my skirt. “Do you really not care that I say I know I will have a good life with him? I am more than just a sweet, gentle little girl. You don’t think you raised an intelligent woman, one who knows what is good and what is bad for her?” Father and Uncle Halfdan were both just staring at me as I ranted on. “I think he is a good choice. Does that enter into your calculations? I have faith that he will give me the life that I want, that you want for me. I wish you could have faith in me.”

Father pressed his lips together, but said nothing.

“All I am asking is that you not use me without my consent again,” I said, feeling just a little defeated at his stoic silence. “If you mean what you say, that you do care about finding me a husband I can love, then please, by Frejya, I need you to promise that you will wait until we agree on someone before you negotiate an engagement. I am not a tool for you to use to expand your influence. Do not treat me as such. Not ever again.”

I half expected Father to snap back at me, or possibly even strike me for taking such a firm tone with him, but he remained still. I held his gaze strong for another moment, until he sat back, settling into a more comfortable position and looked away.

“It’s not like anyone else will have you now, anyway,” he said flippantly. “Not while we are all gathered together like this, and Ivar has made it clear that death is the price for courting you while he is around.”

Relief flooded me. Father had not agreed to anything I had said, but he had shown me some of his thoughts; Ivar really had bought us time. Now there would be no competition to worry about while my love had a chance to prove himself in the coming battles. All I had to do now was to open Father’s mind to the advantages of Ivar as a son-in-law. Somehow.

“Brother,” Halfdan called out softly from behind his oar.

Father looked at him, mouth still set in the pout that seemed to be becoming permanent.

“What about the rest of what she said.”

I saw Father grind his teeth a little.

“She’s right, Sigrunn is a grown woman now. Are you going to treat her like one? If you think she deserves respect from her husband, then she deserves respect from you too.”

Father turned toward me almost like it was physically painful. I thought then perhaps Uncle Halfdan had already spoken with him, just as he had already asked something of me for this conversation. “Alright,” Father said, looking me levelly in the eyes. “I will not use you for any more plots. Not without your agreement. And I will let you choose your husband.” He paused. “But not Ivar.”

I did not have to ask him why this time. Halfdan had already prepared me. “Because soon our families will no longer be friends?”

“Yes. We are allies for now, but that will shatter soon, as it always was meant to. I will give you to a man of your choosing, Sigrunn, but I will not give you to an enemy.”

It was my turn to pull back, look away, and just think. What was there to say in the face of that? “I am not giving up,” I said into the overcast sky. “He is not your enemy yet. Maybe there is another way.”
Father grunted, and no one was interested in any conversation after that. I chewed over his words in silence, avoiding everyone’s eyes for the rest of the afternoon. The bitterest truth to swallow was this: perhaps Father did care about me, but he was still not going to put my wishes over his own. I could demand that he not use me anymore, but I could not demand that he sacrifice anything of himself and his ambitions for my sake.

I could not ask him to change his mind about going to war. It was already in motion, anyway. So I was back to making myself useful to get what I wanted, even after all the revelations and my angry little speech. The only way he would recognize a legal marriage for me to Ivar would be if I could find a way to make that an advantage for Harald Finehair. There was no other path.

*****

On the afternoon when we found a good place to pull up the boats near the town called Repton, the army belched forth onto the land in a flurry of activity. The rest of our journey to Wessex would be several days’ march overland, and that would take some reorganizing and replenishing of supplies.

When Father was distracted, Uncle Halfdan called me over to his side. “You must miss Ivar terribly by now,” he said, eyebrows jumping.

I nodded, but was reluctant to say much before I knew where he was going with this. In the nearly week-long river journey, I had seen Ivar only in passing, when our boats happened to pass nearby. We smiled and gave each other long, promising looks, but could not converse.

Halfdan bent his head toward me, lowered his voice. “Do you want to go to him tonight?”

I nodded again. “But you don’t think Father would allow that, do you?”

My uncle smiled at me indulgently. “I will distract your father. Keep him out tonight, so that he does not know you are gone. I will make sure he does not find out. Spend the night with your love, Sigrunn.”

“Why are you doing this for me?”

“Because I want to see you smile again, little pup. There is more than one person in your life that wants to see you happy.”

I leaned in to embrace him just as Halfdan noticed my father approaching over my shoulder. “Brother!” my uncle called. “What we really need are some wagons. Probably some more food, too. In the mood to raid?”

I slipped away while they were organizing, excited to tell Ivar the good news. “Make sure you have a tent to yourself tonight, my love,” I whispered in his ear when I was able to pull him away from planning with his brothers. “I am sneaking away from my father’s camp, and I will be able to spend all night with you.” He clutched my hand tightly, excitement shining from his eyes. Then I twisted from his grip and ran back, lest Father notice I was gone and become suspicious.

I heard my father order some men to watch the tent where I was supposed to sleep while he was gone, and I saw my uncle saying something low to them a short time afterwards, which made them
all smile and nod their heads. When Halfdan embraced me before setting off with the raiding party under the slanted rays of the evening sun, he whispered one last instruction into my ear. “Do not call attention to yourself, and everything will be fine.”

I wanted to run off to join Ivar as soon as I saw their backs, but he was likely very busy too. I waited, attending to what affairs I could in my own camp, until after the evening meal when most of the army had retired to their bedrolls. Screening my face under a heavy cloak borrowed from my uncle’s things, I tried not to be seen as I made my way across the trampled earth toward where the Ragnarssons’ supplies had been unloaded.

I found Ivar sitting outside a small tent, eating a late meal with his brother Ubbe. We were at the edge of the swarming mass of the Great Army, and very little foot traffic was passing by this way. When Ubbe stood and welcomed me to take his chair, I thought it would be all right to sit out there for a time.

Ubbe picked up his bowl and made his farewells with a twinkle in his eye, still tearing at a piece of bread as he walked away. At least he was more approving of my presence than last time; Ivar must have convinced him of my innocence as well.

Ivar smiled at me around his mouthful of food. “Have you eaten?” he asked. I nodded but he reached out anyway, lifting a cloth from another dish on the table. Someone had found blackberries today. My hand shot out instantly; I was certainly still hungry enough to enjoy such a treat. Ivar grinned at me as I savored their sweetness. “The food is not as good in your father’s camp?”

I shook my head and smiled at him, then closed my mouth quickly as I wondered if my teeth were already staining purple.

“How is it that you are able to come to me tonight?”

I lifted my chin and gave him another close-lipped smile, proud of myself. “I have recruited my uncle to our cause, and he is distracting Father for me. They are out raiding and will not return until the morning.” I leaned closer, put my hand on his leg. “We are getting closer, my love. We have Uncle Halfdan’s sympathies. He will help my father realize how deserving you are.”

“That is something,” Ivar mused, but did not share any more of his thoughts.

We sat in companionable silence for a little while. For once there was no urgency, and we studied each others’ faces as Ivar finished his meal and I savored the dark, sweet fruits he had saved for me.

He looked weary, and I could see all the heavy concerns behind his eyes he was trying to push back so he could enjoy this time with me. He was still in his armor, and bits of dirt streaked his face and the backs of his hands. The thin muscles on his thigh felt tighter than they had in a long time.

“Are you in a lot of pain?” I asked softly, stroking my hand over the stiffened tendons crossing his knee.

Ivar set his spoon down, pressed his lips together and then released them with a sigh. “Constant.”

“Let me care for you,” I said, standing to draw him back into the tent.

The noise Ivar made as he pushed back his bowl was almost a sob. He put the candle from the table into my hand before dropping himself to the ground. I moved to enter the tent before him, but he asked me to wait. The thin light of dusk was too weak to show me much of what was inside as he pushed back the flap to enter. After he had crossed the threshold, he reached out his hand for the candle and then disappeared inside with it.
The glow from behind the fabric of the tent amplified and I realized he must be igniting a few more lights. He reappeared at the portal a few moments later and held out his hand to coax me in.

The tent was very small, nowhere near as grand as my father’s. It was only a few paces across and so low that I could barely stand inside. But we would not need much space. A sweet scent hit my nose and then my breath caught in my throat as I looked around. Ivar had lit enough candles to fill the space with a soft, warm light, which illuminated the blossoms of tiny blue flowers cascading from everywhere. He had tucked them into the seams of the walls and wrapped their stems around the support poles. They reminded me of the little blooms at our place near Frigg’s grove back at Kattegat. He had found extra furs somewhere too, and made us a bed that looked as cozy as the ones back home.

My eyes found his as I dropped to my knees beside him, where he sat with his legs outstretched. “This is beautiful, Ivar.”

He preened, wiggling his head proudly under my appreciation. “Just a little proof that I am not as self-absorbed as you used to say. I think about you often, Sigrunn, and how I might make you happy. I saw these and thought they might brighten your eyes. I know that so much of life here is ugly for you. And I am going to ask a lot of you tonight. But believe me when I say: I want to see you smile at least as often as I make you cry.”

I shivered a little at his implication for our activities this evening, then leaned forward and pressed my lips sweetly to his. “I want to take care of you tonight,” I said, capturing his gaze with both my hands caging his cheeks. I had not forgotten my revelation when last we were together, that if I loved Ivar I had to let him be soft with me. “I want to give you solace, and comfort, and rest.”

Ivar only smirked back into my face. “You will, pet,” he promised. “In so many ways.”

My hands stroked down the studded leather covering his shoulders. “Let me take this off you. Let me help you forget the world for a while.”

His gorgeous lips slid into a soft smile as I fumbled at the buckles holding his armored jerkin together across his broad chest. He sat back and helped me only as little as was necessary, letting me do the work for him just as I had asked. He sighed in quiet relief as I pulled it off him. When I turned to set it aside I noticed a bowl of water, with clean rags beside it. I wet one, ignoring the knife Ivar had laid out on the other side of the bowl. Our knife. I turned back to clean the dirt from my lover’s face.

He closed his eyes as I drew the cloth across his skin, gently wiping across his forehead and cheeks, down around the back of his neck. I had never seen a face as beautiful as his. I remembered how angry it used to make me, back when I thought him cruel and beyond redemption. And now I was his, and he was mine. I could not resist pressing soft kisses to the peaks of his cheekbones, the sharp angle of his jaw, the bridge of that perfect nose.

Ivar hummed his appreciation and did not open his eyes. I took up his hands, unbuckling the bracers that protected his calloused palms before washing them reverently as well. I marveled at how much bigger his hands were than mine, feeling myself flush as I thought of how often they had brought me pleasure and just the right amounts of pain. I kissed every fingertip, and the center of each palm.

He was looking at me when I lifted my eyes to his face again. “I know that the gods favor me, Sigrunn, because why else would they bless me with a creature as wonderful as you?”

I smiled self-consciously. “What do the gods have to do with it?” I teased. “You took me all on your own.” Ivar gave a satisfied grin and I pushed at the center of his chest. “Lay down.” I looked around the little tent as he scooted back onto the bed of furs. “Did you bring the salve?”
Ivar pointed to a bag near the tentflap, which I tied shut securely against the cold night air before retrieving the little bottle. “I was planning to remove all of your clothes and ravish you before my armor even came off,” Ivar informed me as he relaxed into the bed, loosening his trousers.

“I am certain that you were,” I replied. “But let me ease your pain first, my love.” I took off my overdress and rolled my thin linen sleeves up past my elbows, then set the vial by his feet and began working on the laces of his boots. Ivar crossed his arms behind his head and looked down at me with an appreciative, possessive sort of gaze as I loosened the strings and undid the straps holding his shins together. No matter how much we talked about fear and respect, nothing ever stopped my kunta from tingling and growing warm under that predatory look of his. I basked in his attention as I freed one foot, then the other.

There was so much pleasure in serving Ivar like this, especially when he was looking at me in that way. Anticipation warmed my insides, twisting like an affectionate cat in a lazy, slow kind of excitement. There was no rush; we had all night to pleasure each other. I crawled up to his side and knelt, trailing my fingers softly up his legs. I paused there for a moment, leaning over him and just taking in the sight of Ivar Lothbrok actually looking relaxed as he gazed up at me framed by the dark furs.

“Is this what being married will feel like?” he asked softly.

“It will be better,” I said. “Because there will be no more uncertainty.” My lip twisted. “You will probably even get tired of me.”

“Never,” Ivar promised. “If these months have taught me anything, they have taught me how to cherish you.”

I smiled softly in response, and began to draw his trousers down. His tunic was long enough that it covered his manhood, which I planned to give plenty of attention later but did not want to be distracted by now. He curled his body just enough as I removed his clothing that I was sure he was feeling self-conscious about it again, too. My highest commitment tonight was to help him regain his trust in his body, so I would move slowly and give him plenty of time to become ready.

I poured the salve into my hands and turned my attention to the muscles of his legs. If I could accomplish nothing but easing Ivar’s pain tonight, it would still be a victory. The cramping was extensive and I soon became lost in the work of coaxing the stubborn muscles to release. He did not talk much, only sighed and groaned occasionally to guide my hands.

As I grew close to completing the techniques, the ones Harbard had taught me so many years ago, I pondered again how much magic there really was in what I was doing. It felt tonight like the essence of my love for Ivar was pouring out through my hands. I wondered if he could feel it. So often, Ivar seemed ashamed of his legs, kept them hidden when we had sex, and I hoped that he knew they were as beloved to me as every other part of his body, because they were him.

The treatment was done. Ivar rolled himself onto his back again. I saw him casting about for a blanket to cover up with.

I ducked my head and kissed the arch of his foot.

Ivar froze, looking down at me with wide eyes. I let all of my love pour into mine as I gazed up at him and kissed his ankle, then pressed more of them in a line up along his thin shin.

He did not move to stop me, though the look in his eyes was not entirely comfortable.
“I love you,” I said, and kissed his other foot. “All of you.”

I could see him trying to relax into it, though his brows were still troubled. As soon as I kissed up high enough for him to reach my head he caressed my scalp, wove his fingers into my hair so he could have a little control over my movements. He did not use it to stop me, only to control my pace and my direction. He pressed me a little harder into the inside of his knee, and when my breath tickled up his thigh he sighed in pleasure. “Take off your dress,” he ordered softly.

I sat back on my heels as I drew my underdress up over my head, and when I was finished Ivar had removed his tunic as well. His skin shone in the warm glow of the candles, and I imagined I must look beautiful to him too, framed by the flowers hanging from the walls of the tent.

“Come,” he beckoned, settling back into the furs again. “I want to feel your skin all over mine.”

How long had it been since we had felt this calm, this safe? Entirely naked and knowing that no one was going to disturb us, no one would even be looking for me. Maybe not since that first night in his cabin. And even then, there had been interruptions. I sighed into Ivar’s neck and dragged my breasts across his chest, felt a pleased rumbling answer me there. His arms wound around my body, hands stroking over all the bare skin of my backside, keeping me just warm enough on this chill night.

I resumed my mission to kiss every inch of his skin, pressing my lips along the dense muscle at the top of his shoulders, down the smooth expanse of his chest. Ivar continued to push and squeeze at my body as I traversed his, just enough to remind me that while I may be the one taking care of him, I was not the one in control here.

I kissed over his stomach and saw his cock begin to stir. I dipped my head to hover over it, making sure my hot breath caressed that soft flesh as I caught his eyes and asked: “May I?”

Ivar’s eyes were flooding black. “Oh yes. You must.” He pushed my face down toward it, but let me make the first contact under my own power. I kissed his tip as soft and sweet as I could manage, and was rewarded with an eager jerk in his hips.

“Patience, love,” I teased.

Ivar’s fingers clenched in my hair. “Do you presume to order me, pet?”

I pressed my lips to his flesh again and giggled softly, enjoying at the ache he was creating in the roots of my hair. “Only if it pleases you.”

Ivar made a considering noise, then released me, rested again back against the bed. “Perhaps it does. What else do you wish of me?”

I purred against him, noticing that the vibrations seemed to be helping to wake his manhood. “Close your eyes,” I instructed, “and just enjoy what I can do for you.”

Ivar gave me one last grin. “All right,” he agreed. “Make your tribute to your future King.”

I hummed my pleasure at his words as I opened my mouth and pulled him softly inside, feeling his cock swell more as I did. He began to moan softly as I suckled on him, less and less of his shaft fitting into my mouth as he grew with every pass. A warm, gentle pride swelled behind my ribs as I felt my plan working, listening to my sweet rewards trickling from Ivar’s lips.

“That’s right, pet. Feels so good. Gods, Sigrunn. Why do I let your mouth do anything but this?” He alternated between emphatic awe and gentle filth like that until he was so hard he was twitching, the salty taste of his seed already starting to slide over my tongue.
I would have been happy to bring him to his finish like that, but Ivar had other ambitions.

“Climb on top of me, Sigrunn,” he urged, tugging at the back of my head gently. “I need to look at you.” I released him from my mouth with one final suck, then began crawling up, my body hovering over his. “I need to hold you.”

His arms came up and he crushed me down to his chest, our eager mouths finding each others’ as I collapsed into him. I was overcome with that strange sensation again, the urge to bind my body closer to his than was humanly possible. To somehow climb inside of him. Our tongues slid together like he felt the same way, and as he rolled me over I found all four of my limbs winding tightly around him. Before I knew it he was trying to get my legs to relax enough to let him line up and slide inside.

As soon as I realized his intent I bucked toward him, and the dull pain that came from how quickly we slammed together was as satisfying as the pure pleasure of his next, more lubricated thrust. He made an odd chortle against my ear, and then Ivar’s hands were pushing my shoulders down into the furs. “Slow,” he commanded, bringing his own hips almost to a stop. His eyes were wild and almost pleading when I finally opened mine to look at him. “Slow,” he whispered again.

With shuddering effort, I stopped the writhing frenzy of my hips. All I wanted in that moment was to milk him with my kunta until he came, but I knew he wanted this to last longer than that. After a few breaths we stared at each other, wild-eyed and humbled, and he began to slowly slide himself in and out again.

Ivar whispered my name over and over as I watched the pleasure play across his face, mirroring my own as the slide of his cock against my needy, swollen walls sent wave after wave of tingling heat through my body. A distant thought warned me that I ought to make him pull out before he finished, but this moment felt so much bigger than that. We were in the hands of the gods again. I would bear Ivar’s child if I were meant to. Nothing felt more right.

His thrusts had started speeding up again; our bodies were urging each other on even as our minds were trying to slow down and savor everything. Finally I saw Ivar give up on trying to hold himself back, shifting his arms to brace himself better as he screwed his eyes shut and started driving himself into me as hard as he could. His onslaught only stoked the embers of my own arousal, my body clenching and shuddering underneath him.

Ivar buried his face in the fur next to my neck and changed his grip to lay one hand over my throat. He shifted his weight to his other hand and his head so that he could control my breathing without crushing anything as he continued to slam himself against me.

As soon as I felt that pressure close my throat, the pleasure in my core spiked so high I wanted to gasp but nothing came. The first rasping breath he allowed me to take made him groan like a beast and rut into me harder than I thought possible. The second breath brought an orgasm crashing over me so suddenly my whole body seized, and tears leaked from my eyes as Ivar clamped down once more and made me shudder through the never-ending aftershocks in the strange rushing silence that always came without the familiar rhythm of my own breath in my ears.

This time, he let go of my throat as his own orgasm overtook him, howling into the fur that pillowed our heads as I gasped life back into my lungs and his whole body jerked in time to his cock emptying into me.

We clung to each other, gasping and sweating, like we had been shipwrecked and just washed up on the shore. It felt like ages before either one of us seemed capable of moving a muscle. My first act was to giggle, as a sudden thought echoed Ivar’s earlier question. “Is this what being married will
feel like?” I asked him.

Ivar hummed his amusement in my ear. “Better,” he mirrored. “Because I will be able to do that to you whenever I please.”

“I shall lose my ability to speak,” I mused, hearing the rawness in my voice from just that short amount of rough treatment. “Your Queen will be entirely satisfied, and entirely mute.”

“I might prefer you that way,” Ivar teased, cringing as I punched him gently in the ribs. “I will not have to listen to you trying to correct me anymore.”

“And then your kingdom will fall into disarray,” I pronounced, “and you will have to send for healers from around the world to try and cure your Queen, so you can hear the wisdom of my counsel again.”

Ivar’s laughing face loomed over mine. “I will be filled with remorse, and follow your every instruction.” He grinned. “And then the next morning the healers will curse to find that I have rendered you unable to speak once more.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and tried to push him back, but he kissed me so sweetly then that I let every pretense of hating him go. These games thrilled me as much as him, and I had no intention of actually convincing him to give them up.

He released my lips and dropped his head back to lay next to mine, face suddenly more serious. “That was amazing.” His eyes were wide and so honest. “I thought I was going to have to take my knife to you, make you bleed to get my cock to work again.”

“Blood helps that much?” I asked, thinking back to way Ivar had behaved after the sacrifice, the last time we had made love. Or all of the other times his knife had touched me before his cock.

“It often does.” He ran his hand over my forehead, brushing a strand of hair from my face before pressing his brow to mine. “But it is a relief to know I do not always need to hurt you.”

“Only when you want to,” I teased, rubbing my nose against his.

“Only when you want to,” he replied, eyes wide and earnest. It really touched me, how often he was making certain to remind me that he knew how to respect me. “Though truthfully, I was looking forward to it for tonight,” Ivar continued, pressing his body closer against mine. “Opening your skin, marking you with something that will scar this time.”

“Well… we have all night.”
I woke when the first pink rays of the sun were just starting to illuminate the walls of our tent. It was so hard to imagine leaving Ivar’s arms, stepping out of this cozy little sanctuary he had created for us, but anxiety was already creeping in and ruining the effect. Halfdan had said he would keep Father out all night, but how early would they return?

I rolled away to get up but Ivar stirred, rocked me back against his side with winding arms. “No, I forbid it,” he said sleepily.

I sighed into the skin of his shoulder, relaxing and drinking in the warmth and comfort of our love nest here for one last moment. Everything was perfect; the furs warmed by our bodies, the sweet fragrance of the hanging flowers, even the ache in my thigh where Ivar had carved his claim into me before we made love again. We hadn’t slept until well after midnight. And now our stolen time was already at an end. “It is time for me to go. I am making such progress with Father, it would be better if we do not anger him right now. I do not know how early he will return.”

Ivar kissed the back of my neck and then released the pressure of his caging arms. “Go back, then. Keep working your magic, and I will await the day your father presents you to me as my bride.”

We kissed long and deep before I dressed. It tore at my heart to leave the warmth of Ivar’s bed, but I was filled with renewed confidence for the work that still lay ahead. Soon every one of our mornings would be just like this one.

Father barely even greeted me when the raiding party returned, perhaps an hour after I got back to our tent. He seemed entirely preoccupied with some sort of dark, frantic thoughts, pacing around the camp like he was in an argument with himself. Halfdan watched him carefully, like he knew what was going on, but only shrugged when I shot him questioning looks. They must have talked of weighty things as they traveled. I wondered if the pendulum were swinging my way or not.

Everyone was busy preparing for the march south, which we would begin today. Perhaps I could have asked Father what was weighing so heavily on his mind, but I was distracted by the throbbing on my upper left thigh. Ivar had carved a complicated bind rune there, and some movements tugged at the scabbed flesh quite uncomfortably. When I slipped out of sight I discovered that the wound had started bleeding again. I did my best to keep pressure on it without calling any attention to the problem.

And so I almost missed it when Father’s thoughts came to conclusion and he stepped into action. I heard him instruct Uncle Halfdan to “gather some of the men” in a gruff, low tone, and then my stomach dropped as I saw the murder in his strides as he took off alone through the rapidly disassembling camp.

He was going toward Ivar, and three breaths later my uncle followed with a group of large, armed warriors.

I scurried up behind them, heart in my throat. Halfdan and the men were pacing themselves carefully behind Father, staying mostly out of sight to anyone that might approach him.

“Uncle,” I cried softly when I got close. “Hada! What is going on?” Fear for Ivar hammered in my chest.
Halfdan turned only his head back to find me. “Shhh,” he soothed when his eye caught mine. “This isn’t about him.” He waved his axe back toward our half-disassembled tent. “You should go back; I doubt you want to see this.”

My feet froze, which seemed to satisfy my uncle. He fixed me with one last meaningful look and then turned back to his grim course.

They were about to do violence to someone. My uncle was probably right, it might be better if I simply questioned him about it later, but I found myself pressing on behind them, at a discreet distance, without even deciding to do so.

I was almost relieved when I saw that Father was approaching Ellisef; there had been a slight chance Uncle Halfdan might have lied to me so that I didn’t have to see them go after Ivar. Still, I felt sick as I realized what was likely about to happen to the woman who had scorned my father. I knew Halfdan had been pushing him to kill her over the insult, and it seemed like Father had finally agreed.

I wondered if I should stop him. Killing her would be just, from Father’s perspective, after the insult to his honor, but I knew in my bones this woman did not deserve to die simply for loving someone else. Surely she had assumed Father would just forget about her. And yet stepping in now would be taking action against my father, publicly. A major betrayal. It would upset everything I was hoping to gain with him. If I could even succeed in holding him back.

I wondered if I should just turn around and pretend I did not know. I was angry and frightened and numb all at once.

I saw Ivar not ten paces away, climbing up into his chariot.

I skirted around the waiting warriors, ignored the other Ragnarssons and climbed up next to Ivar, burying myself in his arms without explaining why. His eyes followed mine to the unfolding scene less than ten paces away. Ellisef looking worried, regal, polite. Her husband smiling at my father, hiding his fear only a little bit better. A show of goodwill, as he stepped closer and offered my father an embrace. A flurry of movement and an axe through his skull.

I was surprised, and appalled, that father had chosen to kill the husband. Why would he spare her? Did he hope that Ellisef would change her mind and come to him after this? Was he that brutish, did he understand a woman’s heart so poorly?

I barked a laugh low under my breath. Of course he was.

Ivar turned to look at my face with one brow raised and I instantly felt bad for laughing. “I am not proud of him,” I clarified.

(Of course you are not.)

Father stood there until she looked up at him. I am not sure what he said but I hoped he could see the horror writ plain on her face. I hoped this was the end of it for him. And I knew it probably was not. He was letting her know that she was still his, whether she wanted to be or not. I shivered in Ivar’s arms.

When Harald turned he did not react to the small crowd whose attention he had drawn, but when his eyes fell upon me and Ivar he strode purposefully toward us as his warriors closed ranks behind him. He held out his hand for me to come back with him, one last little show of possessiveness and power to complete the scene. He was looking entirely too pleased with himself. “This is how things are done in your army, Ivar, yes?” he asked as I climbed obediently down off the chariot. His meaning
was plain. *If you can get away with it, so can I.*

Ivar responded only with a nod and a false little smile.

Harald’s mood changed after that. It was like he had come back to life; he was almost cheerful as we walked along for the day’s march. Evidently he felt like he had regained something with that murder, as pointless as I was sure it was likely to be. When I asked him why he had killed the Earl when it was Ellisef that had broken his heart, he said only that the man had taken her from him. I wondered if anyone would be coming down to our tent seeking vengeance or the *weregild* now, or if Father had pulled strings beforehand just like Ivar had.

I confess I did not question Father too much because I did not wish to set us at odds with each other further than we already were. Now was the time to reconcile, to find our common ground so that I could convince him carefully to see things my way, to want what I wanted. It seemed counterproductive to ruin his good mood. Father’s voice was brash and loud again, and he seemed to have regained the confidence that Alfgeir’s death had taken from him.

Over the ensuing days of the army’s march he visited with many of the smaller factions, resuming his scheming and rubbing elbows will all the important leaders once more. He did not bring me with him often enough for me to follow what his new plan entailed, but it did not seem that it had anything to do with offering me in marriage this time. Most men’s eyes slid off me quickly as I passed by. Ivar’s threat had done its work, and no one dared to even look at me for long.

Sometimes we walked at the head of the column with the Ragnarssons, and while I did not get to speak intimately with Ivar, it was still pleasant to be able to be near him. When Father was distracted I even climbed up and rode with Ivar at times, enjoying the excuse to press my hip against his for balance, and surreptitiously entwine our fingers together.

“What are you doing up there, Sigrunn?” Father asked when he finally noticed.

“My ankle pains me,” I tried. “I stepped wrong a little while back.”

He grunted and moved closer to us. “We have wagons. You can lie down and rest.”

He lifted his hand for me but Ivar tugged at the reins, veering the chariot away from my father. “I will bring her there, it is no trouble,” he said, feigning an agreeable tone. “Certainly that will be more comfortable for her than hobbling over your shoulder.”

“Certainly,” Father grumbled, and Ivar turned his horse out of the column as I smiled down sweetly, hoping that I didn’t look too smug.

It felt like victory though, sitting proudly at Ivar’s side as we rode down the column of the army. Everyone seeing the casual way he stabilized my body with a hand on my lower back. The wagons my father had won on his raid were behind the bulk of the fighting men, so Ivar and I got to send one more message to the assembled forces concerning our intimacy as he took me back for the “rest” we all knew I did not need.

And there was no one with enough rank back there to stop me from inviting Ivar to climb into the wagon and lay alongside me for a while.

*****
“Even if he has it when we return,” Halfdan was saying, “the hard part will be keeping it.”

We had made camp early this afternoon, in anticipation of meeting the enemy tomorrow. I was just returning from the cookfires with food for my family’s evening meal, and it seemed the conversation had turned to Kattegat and what was coming next for Father’s plans.

Harald was scowling lightly as I put a bowl in front of him and settled myself close to his side at the wooden table.

“Bjorn is likely intending to sail back to the southern sea,” Halfdan continued, “but the sons of Ragnar will still have an army as big as ours right at their backs when we all return to find Lagertha deposed.”

“If your man Egil succeeds,” Father grunted.

“You certainly bought him enough men to do it,” my uncle reminded him.

“Yes. Well, that is why I have worked so hard to shift all these loyalties, brother,” Father replied dismissively. “Ragnar’s sons will find ‘their’ army not to be so big as they thought, if they ever try to turn it against me.” He smiled but I could see how forced it was. He did worry, too.

“We have not seen Wessex yet. If these boys achieve glory there, they may be pulling some of those loyalties right back.”

“I think Halfdan is right, Father,” I said, seeing an opening for the proposition I had been turning over in my mind for some time now. I knew the facts that Halfdan had laid out too, and I thought I had a plan that might satisfy everyone. “When we return, Ragnar’s sons will not let you hold onto Kattegat without a fight. And neither will its people. That kingdom has been ruled by Ragnar’s family for decades now, and I have seen how ferociously loyal the people are to them. Do not forget I have spent more time amongst them than either of you. Believe me, it will be hard for you to hold it. But… I could.”

Father turned to look at me squarely for the first time tonight. “You could.”

I met his gaze without wavering. “If I had Ivar at my side.”

Father’s brows creased. “What are you suggesting, Daughter?”

“Conquer Kattegat just as you intend. And then give it to me as my dowry. When I marry the son of Ragnar and Aslaug in Kattegat’s great hall, the people will welcome us as the rightful rulers. After all, he is the boy that had been sitting at the right hand of their legendary monarchs all along. Come home dripping with gold and glory. They will not feel that they are under foreign rule, then.”

I thought I heard Halfdan swear under his breath. I glanced over at him and saw pride beaming from his eyes.

“But then it will not really be mine,” Father grumbled.

“It will be part of your legacy, your grandchildren will own it.” I looked back at him levelly, thrilling at my own bravery. “This way it stays in your bloodline, and is that not what is truly important? I think it is either that, or lose it almost as soon as you’ve had it.”

I searched his eyes, watching their focus go inward as he processed my words. He looked petulant,
but he was not discounting me out of hand either.

“She is your daughter, Harald,” Uncle Halfdan said, reaching across to slap him lightly on the shoulder. “Cunning, and determined. But where did she get this intelligence? Not from you, certainly. Must have been her mother. You should think about this. She has a point.”

A slow smile broke through the scowl Father was directing into his cup. “You know, Sigrunn, you have only made the case for me to marry you to the most popular son of Ragnar. Not necessarily to Ivar.”

I could see by the twinkle in his eye he was teasing me. Not that I didn’t put it past him to consider actually doing that to me, if it were to his advantage. I opened my mouth to reply, but we were interrupted by the graceful figure of Princess Ellisef approaching our table. She looked at no one but Harald.

“Can I talk to you?”

Halfdan kept me out of the tent until it was all over. We knew immediately this was a bad idea, that Father had to be hoping she was wishing to reconcile, and that that could not possibly be true. My uncle had watched their backs retreat toward our end of the camp, slammed the rest of his ale, and then started stalking after them with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

I was saved from the sight of the violence, but once again my family was requiring me to scrub fresh blood and help dispose of a corpse. Perhaps my upbringing had been sheltered, but they were certainly making up for it now. I felt too exhausted to even summon the outrage I had directed at Ivar last time. I felt beaten down; my morals looked silly. Clearly this was simply the way that all adult men solved their problems.

But I was so sad every time my eyes passed across the princess’ broken body. I wished I hadn’t let Father go with her. I knew exactly what he had been hoping she might tell him, just as I knew there was no way she could have anything but hate in her heart for him now. Uncle Halfdan was more pleased. This was the outcome he had wanted all along, the woman that had wronged my father cold on the ground and freeing up his focus again.

Father, himself, was still shocked. I could see it in the numb way he looked at me as I cleaned the blood off his face and chest. Halfdan had said he found Ellisef straddling him on the bed with a knife raised high to strike him dead. Now Harald knows what betrayal feels like too, I thought as I wrung out the rag full of his would-be lover’s blood. I hoped it stung. Though it was probably too much to hope that this experience would humble him.

No one spoke much that night. There would be battle on the morrow, and there was much yet to prepare.

The decisive victory achieved by our Great Army in the morning certainly did much to lift spirits. When the men returned to where I waited with the wives, thralls, and supplies, Uncle and Father, one with considerably more excitement than the other, told me how Ivar’s unusual plan had muddied the enemy’s lines and sent them charging first one way, then the other, until they fell right into the teeth of our strongest forces. I was informed that their casualties vastly outnumbered ours, and that we had lost many less men than had ever been expected in such a large battle.
We marched after the retreating Saxons all day, but without really trying to overtake them. They had been thoroughly routed and now the sons of Ragnar planned to harry them back to Wessex, where they imagined they would easily capture the capital.

The evening’s camp was a hasty affair, just enough shelter to allow everyone some rest, scattered campfires to cook simple meals to replenish the strength of the warriors after their decisive victory on Ivar’s chosen battlefield this morning. Aethelwulf and his men would likely keep running through the night, but we would be stronger when we reached their destination.

My chest swelled with pride for my love. His name was on everyone’s lips tonight; everyone knew that it was his intellect that had masterminded our decisive victory. The camp was full of good cheer; this time the sons of Ragnar did throw a communal feast, with what rough supplies they had to share. I sat with my family now, but our fire was in view of the circle of the celebrating Ragnarssons. I had already congratulated them once. I made sure to catch Ivar’s eye with a smile every time I got up to refill a drinking horn, but Father was still keeping me close and so I could not join in their conversation.

It seemed like every time I looked, Ivar was being interrupted by a toast, by warm words or a fierce embrace from the warriors of the camp. The women were looking at him too, a different cast to their eyes than I had ever seen before. Everyone was finally taking notice of the youngest son of Ragnar. It was everything we ever wanted, but it made me nervous too. Other men would offer their daughters to him now; perhaps not tonight, but soon. Ivar’s potential was becoming known, and from now on, powerful people would be scrambling to position themselves in his favor.

How much time did I truly have left to convince my father?

“Sigrunn!” Ivar’s voice carried the distinct cast of intoxication as he called me over to him. Father’s empty horn was immediately forgotten in my hand; I had been on my way to fill it for him from the cask of plundered ale we all had been sharing. “Come congratulate me,” he called, and I looked instinctively over my shoulder to see if Father was watching. He was brooding into the fire. He had been quiet all day, likely still gathering his thoughts over Ellisef.

I turned back to Ivar’s smiling face and found I just could not resist. He had a different kind of beauty when he was happy like this, his features effervescent without the usual cast of brooding cynicism. The whole camp was treating him as the hero of the day, and he was thriving on it. And he wanted me to be part of it. “I have already congratulated you,” I teased as I minced over to him and his outstretched arm. His brothers watched my approach with smiles too, though theirs were tinged with more caution.

“But not properly,” he replied, pulling me in close as soon as I got into range. “My victory must be sealed with a kiss,” he said more quietly, in a voice meant just for me, “from the Princess.”

I resisted the urge to check on Father again before giving Ivar his desire. I would not show such cowardice any longer. I placed one hand on Ivar’s cheek and pressed my lips sweetly to his, amidst a few whistles and encouraging whoops. Ivar’s breath tasted of ale but I did not think he was as drunk as he had first appeared. I was just not used to seeing him so happy.

“Join us, Sigrunn,” Hvitserk urged. “Ubbe was about to tell us how he was cornered by four heavily-armored Saxons and took them all down by himself.” I could hear in his tone that he thought this was complete fabrication.

Ivar’s arm was holding me firmly against his body, but the empty drinking horn was still dangling from my fingers. “My father is waiting on me to fill his cup,” I said with exaggerated sadness, holding it up in the firelight. “You may have achieved a great victory today, but no one has bothered
“Patience, my love,” Ivar responded, matching my mocking tone. “We will enslave half this country before we are through. These Saxons are weak.”

“Then on that day, I will be free to relax with you,” I pronounced, coming to my feet and brandishing Father’s horn with exaggerated reluctance. “But for now, it is my duty to make sure my father finds it easy to get as drunk as he likes tonight.”

Ivar’s brothers cheered and lifted their own cups high, evidently in agreement on the pleasure of easy intoxication. Ivar was less amused as I pulled myself away, but he granted me one more soft smile before our twining fingers broke apart.

Father did not seem to have noticed my detour. When I returned with his horn brimming with ale, a trace of a smile flitted across his features as he accepted it and then he was back to staring into the fire. Ellisef’s death had left him off-kilter, almost as much as when he had discovered her marriage. It seemed clear that he had indeed been harboring a hope that he could still win her over, though I knew better than to hurt his ego any further by calling attention to the insanity of that. And I had my own agenda to attend to.

“Ivar is turning out to be everything I said he would be, is he not, Father?”

Harald grunted, looking up and studying my face for a while, then following my gaze over to the Ragnarssons’ fire.

“The boy has a devious mind,” Halfdan added to the conversation. “He impressed me, again, today.”

Father’s voice was gravelly, filled with begrudging respect. “I would not like to ever find myself on the opposite side of the battlefield from that one, if I could help it.”

So he had been brooding about more than just Ellisef. Hope sang in my chest. “I can help that, Father. You do not have to go to war with Ivar. I can be your commitment to peace with him.”

Halfdan leaned in from his other side. “Your daughter loves you, Harald, and she loves him too. And even more importantly, he loves her. She could keep Ivar loyal to the terms of an alliance. She could turn him to our advantage, just as we talked about.”

Father gave me a searching look. “Is that so? Can you do that, Sigrunn; does he listen to you?”

It would not be wise to answer that too honestly. “He does, Father. He respects my counsel, and he hates for his actions to displease me.” Harald looked thoughtful, but not entirely convinced. “And it would break my heart if he ever went to war with you, Father, if he ever tried to kill you. I would never let my husband do such a thing.” I laid my hand over his. “I want to marry him, and I want our families to be friends. I would do everything in my power to keep things that way. You will always be my father; I would never turn against you.”

Father smiled, warm and real for the first time in weeks. He reached out and stroked my hair, then his gaze went introspective and he turned back to the fire. He was thinking about it. And it was probably better if I did not push much harder than I already had. The terrible surprise of Ellisef had knocked him off balance, and I imagined he only needed a few gentle nudges to end up pointed in the direction that I wished.

I sat back, took another sip from my own drink, and followed Halfdan’s eyes back to the Ragnarssons’ fire. Two young shieldmaidens had taken up seats on either side of Ivar, and while one was splitting her smiles between him and Hvitserk, the other was giving all her attention to my love,
twisting toward him in her seat, holding her body like an offering to him and hanging on his every word.

Anger and dread fought each other in the pit of my stomach. The tide had turned today. Now I was the one who would be running out of time, chasing a prize that might be turned away from me at any moment. Bjorn lifted his horn and said something that made the women smile and Ivar frown. He would be pressured to consider other options for his heart, and it was already beginning tonight.

Halfdan spoke softly, mirroring my thoughts. “He will get other proposals soon. Your enemies will try and pull him to their sides now too, Harald. Other men will offer their daughters. We have all seen his worth. Better to talk to him now, rather than waiting for others to start making him offers, pumping up his ideas about himself.”

One of the girls ran her hand across Ivar’s shoulder and my breath hissed between my teeth like a threatened animal. “Father, please. Do not make me sit through that part. Surely you can see the advantage to letting us be together.” I was talking to him but I could not tear my eyes from the scene that I could see but could not hear. Ivar looked uncertain but he was not pushing her away. A self-satisfied little smile was starting to form upon his lips as he basked in her attention.

Father’s hand was surprisingly warm on my back. When I turned, his face held so many emotions I could not read it. “Go to him,” Father said gently. “Tell him I wish to speak with him.”

My face stretched into a wide, hopeful grin. “Do you mean—”

“Do not gloat,” Father interrupted me. “It is not attractive.” But my smile was already infecting his face. “Just go peel those women off him, as I know you are itching to do, and then tell Ivar I want to have a private drink with him in my tent. Do not let him bring any of his brothers along.”

I rose and stalked over to Ivar like a vengeful goddess; like I was already his Queen. The smiles died on those silly girls’ faces when they saw me coming. They knew who I was. The girl to Ivar’s left turned to pretend all of her attention was on Hvitserk, and the one to the right paled as Ivar coldly removed her hand from his body. “Ivar Lothbrok,” I called, voice ringing with confidence as I ignored the shrinking presence at his side, “can I speak to you?”

The smile he answered me with was arrogant and playful. He thought I wished to shame him for receiving the attention of these women. “If you must,” he said just as imperiously, showing off with false pride for his brothers. His eyes dropped to the girl at his side, the dismissal plain in his eyes. She all but squeaked as she stood up and darted away.

Ivar was laughing at me like I was being cute. I knew the attention had flattered him but surely he was relieved to be with me again, especially when my answering smile contained no trace of scorn. I was too excited about my message. I dropped to sit close to him and whisper in his ear. “My father wants to speak to you.”

Ivar’s eyes flashed over to my family’s fire; King Harald met his gaze and subtly inclined his cup. He turned back to me with hope shining in his eyes, mirroring my own. “What does he want?”

“I think he is ready to negotiate terms for our marriage,” I said, excitement pushing my voice louder than I meant it. I glanced at Hvitserk, who was sitting closest to us, but he did not react and so I thought we were safe. I pulled Ivar’s face closer to mine, stroking fingertips down his cheek as we drank the joy from each others’ eyes. I knew Father had to still be watching. How could he see us like this and not want to let me have such happiness and adoration forever? I made sure my voice was lower as I continued. “He wants you to come take a drink with him back at our tent. Privately. Will you come with me now?”
Ivar captured my hand to press soft kisses into my fingers. “I would follow you anywhere, if it meant even a chance at your hand.”
I poured the ale as Ivar, Halfdan, and my father settled in around the small fire outside my family’s tent. There was a bright moon tonight, and so it was easy to see that there was no one around close enough to hear our words. Even if there were, the tents surrounding us belonged to Father’s most loyal warriors. If he wished to reveal any of his secrets to Ivar tonight, the confidence would be kept.

I was proud of my hands for not shaking as I filled the cup in Father’s hand from the heavy pitcher. I did not know what he was going to say to Ivar, and could only hope that he had my own proposal in mind. I was so excited I felt I might burst from my skin, but there was no denying the fear underneath that this could somehow go horribly wrong. Everyone here had volatile tempers and easily-bruised pride.

“Tell me, young Ivar,” Father began, “what comes next for you, after you complete your revenge on this King Ecbert?”

Ivar leaned back, holding up his horn for me to fill as he answered. “In all honesty? I agree with you, King Harald. We have been so focused on our vengeance that we have not done enough raiding. This land is ripe for us to pluck. We have a Great Army, and we should use it.” I was impressed with the utter confidence in his tone. He did not appear to be anywhere near as intimidated as me, even knowing how high the stakes of this conversation might be.

“Your father always wanted land,” Halfdan interjected, ignoring the way Ivar seemed to be catering to Harald’s recent agenda. “New settlements. Is that part of your ambition here? To conquer, and start a new jarldom?”

Ivar turned his narrowed eyes to my uncle. I could see him thinking furiously, deciding how much to reveal, remembering he was among enemies pretending to be friends but needing to impress them all the same. “I have no interest in farming,” he scoffed. “But to conquer? I do like the sound of that. For now, I plan to get rich taking the gold from these Christian ‘churches.’ Afterwards?” Ivar looked around at the earth, the outlines of scattered trees against the night sky. “I could see the advantages of controlling these lands.”

“But what do you want most?” Father asked quietly, eyes glittering in the firelight.

I had taken a seat between the two of them, and almost shivered under the intensity in Ivar’s face as he answered my father from the honest depths of his heart. “I want to be feared. I want a name so great that men quake when they hear that I am coming.”

King Harald nodded. “And I believe there is one person in particular, whom you wish to fear you above all.”

Ivar’s jaw clenched.

“I am surprised to hear you speak of staying here among the Saxons, when you know that Lagertha still rules in your childhood home.”

Ivar answered through gritted teeth. “Believe me, Harald. Once my army has grown strong and fat, on all the riches of these weak people, I will bring my wrath down upon that woman. I cannot rest while she lives, and sits upon my mother’s throne.”

“So you do wish to be King of Kattegat.”
“It is my birthright,” Ivar said quickly.

Father smiled; a slow, teasing thing. “You have many brothers, Ivar. What makes you say that it is yours?”

“Because they are all fools, devoid of any real strength or ambition.” I could not stop my eyebrows from flitting in surprise at the contempt in his voice. “I want it more than they do. The only thing they seem to want is to not let me have anything. But they will learn.”

Father chuckled, his eyes flitting to my uncle for a moment. They thought they had found a weakness to exploit. But if it was a weakness that brought Ivar and them to the same side of the table, perhaps I did not need to worry. “It will take time to build your strength, and this infamy that you desire.”

Uncle Halfdan chimed in too. “Lagertha may sit comfortably for many years in your mother’s chair, before you are ready to get your justice.”

Ivar scowled, gaze shifting to the flames flickering at our feet. “I am willing to accept that. I told her. Her fate is fixed. She may live for years yet, but she will live in fear, knowing that I will be coming for her head one day.”

I wondered if I should be speaking more, but I could see they were setting the stage for Ivar to shift his plans and accept our proposal, and I thought Father and Uncle were doing well enough. And it was utterly fascinating to hear Ivar’s answers to these questions. He had not spoken to me of these things in quite this way. His dark determination was captivating.

“What if you had my help,” Father said, his gravelly voice stretching out every syllable, exaggerating the weight of every word.

Ivar look up slowly from the fire, meeting my father’s gaze carefully. He knew he needed to be cautious, when Harald Finehair spoke of alliances. “Why would you help me?”

Harald smiled and shifted his gaze to me. “My daughter has told me that she also desires to rule Kattegat, with you at her side. Is this a dream that you share with her?”

Ivar turned to me, and to my surprise he reached over and took up my hand. “Yes. I wish to have no queen but your daughter. The cunning of her mind surpasses even her beauty, and I would be happy to share power with her. I know that her counsel will be indispensable.”

A shimmering warmth flooded my body. Ivar did value me. And he was not so prideful that he could not allow me to be the one that owned the land; I could admit that I had been worried about that part of my plan.

Father sat back. “Then I think we can come to terms, Ivar son of Ragnar.”

My fingers squeezed around my lover’s hand, the only way I could stop myself from squealing with joy at the sound of those words. Ivar shifted toward me, until his shoulder was touching mine as he looked past me at my father. “I am listening.”

I almost coughed at Ivar’s attitude, acting as if he were the one who had to be appeased by the offer. But in truth it was one of the things that I loved about him, the way he refused to ever back down. And I think he could tell that Father was building to something, and only had to wait for him to say it.

A frown passed across my father’s face, but he recovered quickly, plastered his pleasant smile upon
his lips. And suddenly I began to wonder why he, too, was acting as if Ivar were the one that needed to be tempted and convinced. “You have proven your worth on the battlefield today, not in combat but in your ability to outthink your enemy. Which in my mind is worth more. I have come to see that you could make a worthy match for my daughter.”

Could. Was this a delay tactic? Was he about to ask that Ivar perform some kind of feat to win my hand?

“I want you on my side, son. You have so much potential. I am sorry that I did not see it earlier.”

It was never genuine when Father spoke humbly like this. I squeezed Ivar’s hand in a quick pulse, hoping to warn him to be careful, not to take these words at face value. He was taking too long to get to the point; I feared it meant Father was changing my plan. But I would not interrupt until I could see how. Ivar shifted in his seat, and a quick glance showed me his face looked guarded. Good.

“And to make certain you believe in my goodwill, I want to offer you more than just my daughter’s hand in marriage. I want to help you get your vengeance against Lagertha. And sooner, rather than later.”

Ivar looked like he was struggling to keep his features smooth, now. “How soon,” he choked out.

“Take the allegiances you will have won by the time we are finished with Wessex and sail back with me to Kattegat. Lagertha will not be able to stand against our forces combined.”

Ivar’s eyes flashed. “No, I think that would be impossible for her.”

“I will even remove the greatest obstacle that has stood in the way of your vengeance thus far,” Father continued. I did not miss the way his eyes flitted to his brother’s face before he completed his statement. “Bjorn.”

My uncle stirred uncomfortably and Father did not look at him again.

“A very generous offer,” Ivar said tightly, not giving any more of his thoughts away.

“And then you and my daughter can marry. With Kattegat as her dowry. We will have taken it together, and so our two families will hold it together.”

“She will own it and I will rule it,” Ivar said.

“Precisely. And then you will have your vengeance, and your home, and your bride. Everything you want. I will plant you right on the throne of Kattegat. All you have to do is kiss my arm ring as you sit there, and pledge to me your loyalty. Name me High King of all Norway. Kattegat is the last piece I need to complete my conquest.”

And there it was. Ivar’s entire body clenched beside me. My heart felt like it was doing the same.

“This was not what we discussed, Father,” I cried, before Ivar could say anything.

“What do you mean?” Harald asked, turned to me with a puzzled look on his face. “This was your plan, Sigrunn.” I thought he was feigning the confusion, but it was possible he was not, that he was so self-centered that he had not understood my meaning yesterday.

“That you would take Kattegat, yes, but then you were to give it to me, in earnest. You will have conquered all of Norway, and your pride can be satisfied. And then you would let your daughter rule in Kattegat, a queen of your bloodline. And we would be your allies in peace. I never said
anything about pledging fealty to you, over us.”

“I am your father,” he glowered. “And you promised you would never move against me. What does it matter if you call me High King?”

I looked over at my uncle, face bewildered. He tipped his head in resignation. He knew this was the plan. He hadn’t talked Father out of it. I wondered if he had even tried.

Ivar spit on the ground between us, noisily.

Father turned his ire on him. “I am giving you everything you two want. All you have to do is kiss my ring. Then you can have your vengeance, and your home, a rich kingdom with valuable trade. And you can trust my daughter to rule it well while you continue to raid in England, Ivar, and build the infamy of your name. I do not see the problem here.”

“I imagine there will be a small matter of tribute,” Ivar hissed. “Especially when my boats return from these glorious raids.”

Father could not stop the ugly smile that spread across his face. “Well naturally, a High King is entitled to a portion of those.”

“You think I am weak.” Ivar’s voice whipped through the night, drawn and dark. “You think because I am a cripple, because I am the youngest, that you can manipulate me into bowing to you, giving Norway over to you with barely a fight. You think to use me as a shield, that this marriage will save you from the retribution of any of my brothers, who would not go against me to try and take Kattegat back.”

“I think you have a great mind, Ivar, and wisdom beyond your years. I am offering you my only daughter, and a powerful alliance along with her. This benefits both of us.”

Ivar shook his head, so angry he was practically spitting as he spoke. “You want to use me, and hold me down beneath your thumb. I will be a greater man than my father was; I want more from life than one simple kingdom, and I will accept no authority above my own. Your offer insults me, Harald. The answer is no.” He twisted his body and dropped to the ground.

“If you leave now,” Father growled, and Ivar froze, “I will not be giving you another chance. This is how you get to marry Sigrunn. Take this deal, pledge your allegiance to me, or give her up forever.”

Ivar hesitated for only a moment. Then he took out the short staves that helped him crawl and plunged them into the earth. “Come on, Sigrunn,” he said over his shoulder, glaring up at me with a face still twisted in stubborn rage, and began pulling himself away.

“Ivar,” I called after him, “wait.”

“Your father has shown his true face now,” Ivar huffed, not slowing his pace as his powerful arms ate the ground in front of him. “There is no deal.”

I looked after his retreating form for a long moment, then back at my father and uncle.

“Ivar’s true self is apparent too,” Father said smugly. “You see how little you are worth to him now, don’t you Daughter?”

I looked back to see how Ivar would respond to that, but he was already out of the circle of our firelight, and perhaps he hadn’t heard.
Indignation pushed my words out of my chest in a near-shout as I turned back to face my father. “I would not have respected him if he had taken that deal! This means nothing about the strength of his love.” I made an exasperated noise, writhing my neck. “If you had just talked to me first, I would have warned you that Ivar would never have agreed to that. But you just had to try and use him, just as you are always using me. We will not let you. Ivar is meant for so much more than sitting in your shadow. And so am I.”

I stood up, and Father moved like he was considering forcibly restraining me.

Uncle Halfdan saved me again, leaning forward in his seat. “You had better go after him, Sigrunn.” He looked significantly toward where Ivar had gone, but he was already out of sight. “Make certain he will not tell his brothers what we just revealed to him about our plans.”

I would take any excuse to walk away from these two. Father gave me a begrudging nod of agreement, and I turned on my heel and stalked in the direction that Ivar had disappeared into the night.

He hadn’t gone far. Ivar must have heard me start to argue with Father, and tucked himself behind a tent so that he could listen to the rest of the conversation. He pulled himself into my view as I approached, and waved silently for us to continue away together.

He waited until we were cutting through a clump of trees so thick that no one had set any tents there before he spoke. “Your father revealed too much of his plan, making me that offer. I see our families will be at war very soon, now.” His voice was still so angry, cutting through the night. He sounded like he was making fervent plans of his own, like he might rouse his brothers as soon as he got back.

“I still hope to prevent that,” I said, halting in my tracks. We had a measure of privacy here, we could stop and speak freely for a while.

Ivar twisted his face up to me. “How?” he barked bitterly.

I sank to my knees in the fallen leaves, so we could speak eye-to-eye. Ivar swung his legs around to sit, facing me. “I do not know anymore,” I confessed forlornly. “I thought I had a good plan. I underestimated the size of my father’s pride.”

“You truly did not know your father would use it to take advantage of me like that?”

I glared back at him in the moonlight filtered through the leaves overhead. “Do you really need to ask me? Do you still think that I would lie to you?”

He held my gaze with smoldering eyes for a moment longer before he spoke. “No. But the lines have been drawn now. You cannot straddle both any longer. You must finally choose where your loyalty lies, Sigrunn: him or me.”

It would be impossible to name all of the emotions that rushed inside of me at the thought of turning my back on my father. “It is not too late to give up hope,” I pleaded.

“It is,” Ivar cut me off coldly. “You heard what he said. No other choice but this one. And I am not selling out my birthright to Harald Finehair. Choose, Sigrunn. Right now.”

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes for a moment. “You, Ivar.” I opened them as I bent forward, swept up both his hands. “It will always be you.”
Ivar used my grip to pull me closer. “Then do not go back to him tonight. Come home with me. He will never give you to me now. You just have to leave.”

I shook my head. “It would mean war, right here.”

Ivar scowled. “Your father just told me that he intends to make war on Kattegat as soon as we return. What does it matter if it starts now rather than then?”

“I do not want to be the thing that starts that war.” I tried to stay strong but I felt the tears pressing against the back of my eyes. I had been bursting with hope, not even an hour ago, and now this. I leaned into Ivar and he held me as I sobbed, knowing he was right. I was out of ways to convince my father to give his blessing.

“I will marry you in the sight of all the gods,” Ivar said, voice low and soothing. “What do they care for the blessings of fathers?”

My chest felt cold, and I pulled myself out of his arms. “If only it were that simple.”

“Why can it not be?”

“Because we are important people, Ivar, and our world is ruled by men as well as by gods. Men with traditions and laws, that mean things to the way that they treat each other.”

Ivar narrowed his eyes but cocked his head, urging me to explain myself.

“When you ask me to run away with you, you know that you are not asking me to be your wife, you are asking me to be your concubine. Our marriage will not be legal in the sight of our people, no one will recognize it, and I will not do that to our children.” Ivar was already shaking his head, trying to dismiss my concern, so I pressed on. “One day down the road some woman will convince you to marry her legally just so that you can have heirs, and you will be wise enough to do it. I am not choosing that road.”

“What are you talking about? This is nonsense. I would never set you aside for another woman. I would never disinherit our sons.”

“Never is a long time. And what if you die unexpectedly, in one of your glorious battles? There will be no protection for me! There will be no protection for our children.”

There was contempt in Ivar’s face as he snarled his answer in my face. “I will protect them! I will protect you! What are you even saying? I will become so powerful no one will dare to question me, and I will say you are my wife. Our children will be my heirs; I will declare it so and they will all listen. You have nothing to fear. This is between us and the gods. I do not care what other people think. I do not care what they will try to say.”

He was clutching me around the arms now. I felt so small in his powerful grip. “You are asking me to risk very much, while you risk very little,” I said sadly. “I will be cut completely off from my people, whatever happens after. Do you understand that?”

Ivar shook his head. “Yes, but it does not matter, because I am saying that I will always protect you, and care for you. I will pledge my life to yours in front of the gods, and nothing will break that bond for me.”

“I will protect you! What are you even saying? I will become so powerful no one will dare to question me, and I will say you are my wife. Our children will be my heirs; I will declare it so and they will all listen. You have nothing to fear. This is between us and the gods. I do not care what other people think. I do not care what they will try to say.”

“No,” Ivar said. “He has revealed himself as my enemy now. You are not going back there, unless
you are my enemy too."

“Of course I am not, Ivar. I just—”

“Good,” he cut me off. “Then there can be no secrets between us now. Your loyalty is to me before him, if you truly love me.” He was changing the subject, trying to pretend he had already won that argument. He lifted his eyebrows high, bending his face toward mine. “Tell me now, Sigrunn, do you know anything more about your father’s plans?”

My mind flashed to the sneak attack on Ivar’s home, and then my stomach sank so fast I almost became dizzy. There would be no hiding it now; Ivar had already observed the nausea playing over my face. I gathered my nerves with one deep breath and strove to speak as plainly as I could, whatever the consequences. “There is a good chance my father already controls Kattegat,” I said in a small, defeated voice, dreading Ivar’s reaction. “He paid a man to gather a force to attack while so many fighters are off on this campaign.”

Ivar’s eyes widened, his fingers tightening around my arms.

But I pushed on. Ivar was right; if my allegiance was truly to him, then I had to share everything I had been holding back. “That is the real reason that I am here in England; Father did not want me in harm’s way if I stayed with Lagertha. And in order to avoid suspicion, we had to pretend he did not know I was going to get on your boat.”

Ivar’s body was so still. “So you have known this since before we left,” he said softly. “And you did not think it was something that I needed to know.”

The shame I had been holding back washed through me, and I heard myself grasping at excuses. “It is silly, but… I only wanted to impress you. I loved how you looked at me when you thought I was sneaking away just to be with you.”

And at that confession I saw his last shred of patience break.

Ivar lunged forward, dropping one hand to launch his body toward me while the other one grabbed me by the throat. We landed hard in the dirt, with his body on top of mine. His mouth wasn’t even forming sentences, just roaring incoherent curses.

I knew I should be terrified, looking up into that snarling face that I knew to be more than capable of murder, but all I felt was a defensive rage. I ripped his hand away from my throat, far enough to release my airway and allow me to yell back at him. “No. You don’t get to do that to me.” I knew in my bones I would not tolerate his violence, not against my body.

Ivar lifted his arm to strike me, eyes still lost in his own rage. If he let that blow fly he would be no better than Father, and I knew in an instant I would never marry him then.

Perhaps Ivar realized it too. He sucked in a shaky breath through his teeth and let his wavering arm come back to the earth softly beside my head. We stared at each other in silence, shame creeping into his eyes as he saw the fear and disgust in mine.

“I was not going to hit you,” he said, voice careful and controlled.

I frowned my disbelief, pushed for him to get off of me.

His hand came to the side of my face instead. “Sigrunn, you know I will never hurt you. I promised that, and I meant it.”
“Let me up, Ivar.”

His face crumbled into a fearful, vulnerable kind of pain I had never seen before. “Not until you tell me that I did not just ruin everything.”

I was still angry, but I believed his remorse. “You did not.” I caressed his cheek with my palm and he rubbed his face into it like it could soothe his every pain. “I am sorry that I lied to you,” I continued, “and that I held so much back for so long. But that does not give you the right to do violence to me.”

Ivar nodded, still seeming to be pulling himself back together. I nudged him again and this time he lifted off me, far enough that I could slip away and come to my feet.

“You are still trying to go?” he said incredulously, voice cracking a little.

“I cannot decide this tonight, Ivar. You asked me to give up everything for you, and then you knocked me to the ground by my throat.”

“Then leave,” he said bitterly. “But do not bother even speaking to me again until you are ready to abandon your father’s tent for mine.”

I turned to look down at him but he was staring stubbornly at the ground. “Ivar.” I waited until his face met mine, and I could see that he was holding back tears. There was no shame in that; my face was entirely streaked in them. “Keep quiet about my father’s plans? Do that for me, at least. Do not start the war today.”

We glared at each other under the silent moon, neither of us willing to back down. “I still need him,” Ivar resigned through gritted teeth. “Come to me by the time we capture King Ecbert. And stay. Or do not bother coming to me at all.”
Uncle Halfdan pulled me away from the tent to talk when I returned with tear-stained cheeks. He knew I would not speak openly in front of my father. “I was not entirely certain you would come back.”

I pulled my cloak tighter around my arms. “He did not want me to,” I said in a small voice, still thinking of the rage and pain in Ivar’s eyes.

“No, I do not imagine he would.” Halfdan looked at me shrewdly, less kindness in his eyes than before. He was not out here just to comfort me. “What will Ivar do now?”

I barked a bitter laugh. My beloved uncle was on my father’s side again, it seemed. I was tempted to lie and make them flustered about a host of warriors coming down to kill them, but there was no advantage in that for me. If I wanted a legal marriage I had to grit my teeth and keep playing their game. I had to keep choosing hope even as despair tried to envelop me. “He promised me he would not tell anyone what you revealed about your intentions on Kattegat.” Relief relaxed my uncle’s face. “Not tonight,” I added coldly.

“And what does he want for his silence?” Halfdan asked.

I was not going to tell him we hadn’t talked about that part. My loyalty was not to them anymore. I would give only a response that helped Ivar and I. “We ask that the negotiation for our marriage not be closed,” I decided. “If Father comes back with better terms Ivar may not disturb his plans, or set Björn upon him immediately.” Halfdan only nodded in response. “Uncle Hada.” I could not resist using my pet name for him once more, just to try and pull his sympathies closer again. “Why did Father ever think that Ivar would accept that deal?”

Halfdan blew out a breath so forceful that his hair flipped up for a moment. “We thought that Ivar knew his place. He is a youngest son, with many strong brothers ahead of him, and a cripple besides. He has nothing and no one but the goodwill of his family. A family that frustrates him at every turn. We thought the he would be smart enough to throw in with us.”

“And so all those pretty things that Father said about his potential were only flattery.”

“They were just that: potential. We are willing to bring Ivar into the family for his mind, for his vision, and of course to make you happy.” Uncle did smile at me then. “But Sigrunn, I do not want to just give you away today to a boy who has nothing. We are willing to set him up with all the
wealth and power that you deserve, in exchange for his loyalty, and his help in our further endeavors. He should take the deal. He would be changing his intended course very little. He would still get vengeance, and Kattegat."

“But he would not have earned it himself.”

Halfdan shrugged. “Well, perhaps Egil the Bastard has failed. Then we will need every man Ivar can bring with him, and we will all win it together. Then he could feel that he had earned it.”

“He would be betraying his entire family, everyone that he has left.”

“Except for you.”

“Except for me. But Ivar loves his brothers, and does not wish to betray his father’s wishes, or his legacy.”

“I would not be so sure of that. You heard him tonight. I think he would need very little excuse to turn on his brothers. I think he chafes underneath them.” Halfdan shifted, cocked his head toward me. “Maybe you can use that, Sigrunn, to help bring him around to accepting our offer. Remind him that we are more interested in his success than they seem to be.”

I stared at him a moment, eyes wide and hard. “You think that I want Ivar to take that deal? Father is selling out my dream too. I wish to be a free Queen, not his vassal for the rest of his days. And after that, I imagine, subjugated under some half-brother he’ll spawn eventually and name High King after him. I’m sure he’ll soon make himself another heir now that he’s not waiting around for Ellisef, one with a little twig between his legs that he might actually treat like a human being and not just some piece of chattel.” I all but spit the last word, my hands shaking once more.

Halfdan appeared to be unmoved. “I see you and Ivar both see yourselves as entitled to more than you are due. Why on earth would your father spend all his resources taking Kattegat and then hand it off to you without getting anything out of the deal?”

“Because I am his daughter!” I roared back. “Because he wants a good life for me! Or he would, if he were a real man.”

Halfdan just shook his head, though the hardness had bled out of his eyes. I could see that he felt sympathy for me still, despite his harsh words. “I know this hurts, Sigrunn. I want that life for you too. But your father is who he is.” He shook his head again, pausing over what seemed like a deep disappointment in his brother. “He is not going to do as you ask; you are asking him to give up his dream for you. His ambition is not to be ‘King of all Norway but for Kattegat.’ And he holds to that ambition more tightly than anything, or even anyone, in his life.” Even you, Uncle Hada? “You are at an impasse. Think of a new plan.”

I took a deep huff of a breath. “And if I do, you will support me again?”

“Depends upon the plan,” Uncle Halfdan responded, a little twinkle of humor in his eye. But for once, his mirth was not contagious.

*****

“I dreamed of you last night,” I said to Father the next day, as we marched along after the retreating
Saxons. At the pace they were fleeing they likely had a destination within a day’s range, and Björn thought it was the villa that the royal family lived in. Which would mean King Ecbert, and the object of our quest for vengeance.

Father responded without looking over at me. “Oh?” He was still irritated with me for how Ivar had behaved last night. Even though if he had shared his full plan with me I would have told him there was no other way it could have gone.

“It was a seeing dream, I am sure of it,” I said levelly. The colors were always crisper in those, even if everything else felt foggy.

That got his interest. “And what did you see of me in this dream, Daughter?”

“I saw you standing at a crossroads.” I always awoke from them feeling like half the information was missing, but that much had been crystal clear.

Father crossed his arms tight across his chest. “And what happened next.”

“To your left, there was a great boar. He ripped up the ground and taunted you to come follow him, like a warrior banging his shield. To your right stood a doe, whose eyes were deep like they held the whole ocean. She ran at the sight of the boar, and he struck off in the other direction.”

“Which one did I follow?”

“I did not see you move. But I saw where the animals were going. I knew that if you chose the path behind the boar, it would lead you to a place where the wind whistles at the peak of a lonely mountain.” It felt like there was more to it, but I could not remember in the clear light of day. “If you follow the doe, it will bring you to a warm hall filled with many banners and many riches.”

“Is that all?”

I dipped my head. “It never feels like I have remembered everything when I wake. But those things were clear.”

“So I am at a turning point.” He looked off into the distance for a while. “And what does the rest of your dream mean?”

I took a deep breath. This was the part that took a different kind of skill from that of a völva. This was the part where errors of judgment were made. “The boar is your pride; your spite,” I said. That was the best way to sum up the nebulous feeling I got when I beheld that beast in dream. “If you follow them your victories will be many, but they will be cold.” I saw Father’s jaw clench, the very pride I was speaking of drawing him up and into himself. “The doe is your heart. If you listen, it will lead you to what is truly important.”

His next question sounded guarded. “And what is it that is truly important, Daughter?”

“A loving family, and plenty of grandchildren.” It was petty of me, to twist a true dream to my own purposes, but how could I not let my frustration color everything?

Father frowned, turning fully to face me. “Is that really what you saw?”

“I described it to you exactly.” I paused, held his eyes as he raised one eyebrow skeptically. “Then, you asked me what I thought it meant.”

Surprisingly, Father cracked a smile at my admission of the distinction. “I am blessed to have a
daughter that the gods will speak to,” he said, wrapping one arm around my shoulder. “And doubly blessed that she has the humility not to pretend that they speak through her.”

I smiled back up at him then, a little guilty and a little relieved that I had not offended him.

“You dreamt of me; did you dream of yourself? Of Ivar?”

I shook my head to both, and pulled myself out from under his arm. It was hard to stomach his sudden affection, with so much conflict still laying between us. I remained resolved to stop allowing my life to revolve around him, and so it stung my pride to admit that the true seeing of my dream was only a glimpse of my father’s destiny, and not my own. Still, I had fallen asleep praying desperately that the gods show me a new way to sway Father’s mind. That must have been why they sent this vision to me.

Father looked ahead, toward the head of the column we were following. “I wish I had some sign of what Ivar’s next move will be.”

“He will not take your deal,” I said curtly. “He could yet be your ally, but not at that price.”

“So what else will he do after he completes his vengeance here? Bring these armies back to Kattegat and fight against me for it?”

“It is possible.”

Father turned and caught my eye again. “And which side of the lines will you stand on, Sigrunn, if it comes to that?”

I looked down. I was thrown off for a moment, that he had asked me so plainly. “I cannot bear to think about that, Father.” The dodge was even truthful. Today I was still refusing to accept that concubinage might be my only way to be with Ivar. And I was still uncertain that I could ever choose that road for myself.

King Harald barked a frustrated sound over my non-answer. It wasn’t what he wanted to hear, either. “Then Ivar had better stay in England, raid and conquer here. We could be respectful allies so long as he never threatens my interests in Norway.”

My battered heart swelled anew, even though I did not want to feel anything positive toward my father ever again. But it seemed as if he were offering me an out, telling me how I should sway Ivar so that I could still get everything I wanted. “And if he did that, you would agree to the marriage?”

An indulgent smile ghosted over Father’s face at the eagerness in my voice. “Give it a few years, Sigrunn. If he is successful here, and interested in a mutually beneficial alliance, then I might consent to give you to him.”

Why did he have to be like this. “A few years? I am in love with him, Father, more and more each day. Do not make me wait. Do not make me leave him now. I could not bear to be apart for so long.”

“I spent almost a decade making my fortune, to win my—” he cut himself off as he realized what he was saying.

“And look where that got you all,” I said coldly. “Do not do this to us, Father. You could not bear to see that story repeat itself, either. I know you love me more than that. Make another deal with Ivar, and soon. Let us marry happily, and part ways from you in good faith.” There was a ghost of a threat in that last sentence, I realized after it came out of my mouth. Perhaps I really was preparing to abandon my family and elope if it came down to it.
Father crossed his arms tightly again. “Your mother was this tenacious.” My heart swelled with pride at the comparison, but he wouldn’t look at me again. We walked in silence for a few minutes. “Let us see how many of the warriors follow Ivar after their business of vengeance is done. And let us see which direction he tries to turn them next.”

*****

I had plenty of time to think after that, as those of us who were not warriors hung back well outside the Saxon gates while the army ransacked the villa. I was not worried about them; from our safe distance it sounded like they had not met much resistance. I had nothing to occupy my mind but my own future.

Father’s final words tantalized me. It was hard to think that Ivar would accept a treaty that involved him foregoing Kattegat, and his vengeance on Lagertha. But my heart swelled every time I imagined my own kingdom here, neighboring my father’s, a strong alliance between us and many friendly visits exchanged over the years. I imagined Father covered in grandchildren, the children of Ivar and I, with nothing but warmth and laughter between all of us. How hard it was to give up such a dream.

I wondered if I was already carrying Ivar’s child. It was certainly possible; the more I thought about it the more it seemed that the timing of that night of the sacrifice was right, though it was still too soon to know anything for certain. I thought my appetite was greater than usual, though I might simply be missing the rich foods of a warm hall, my stomach not content with the meager rations of a traveling army. Or perhaps Ivar’s ferocious seed was already demanding more of me.

There was probably good food inside that villa. Word traveled back to us that it had been abandoned by the retreating Saxons, there was no danger inside, and many of our people were making their way in now. I thought about finding Finna, exploring the place with her, but my thoughts were too heavy and I preferred to follow them alone today.

Could I really elope with Ivar, cut ties with my family entirely? On the other hand, could I really get on my father’s boat after this and sail back to Vestfold, let my heart break and hope that some day it might love another? I bore Ivar’s mark now, scarred deeply into my thigh. That part of him would never leave me, and I wondered if he was etched as deeply into my soul. It felt like the wounds on my body were only a shallow reflection of the ways Ivar had changed my heart.

Abandoning my name, my security and pride, or abandoning my love. Both of those paths seemed impossible, and yet I had to force myself to face them. Each one was more likely than that dream of the warm hall filled with laughter. The more I thought upon it, the more certain I became that at the foggy end of my vision last night, Father had chosen to follow the boar.

*****

I came upon Ivar hours later, brooding in the courtyard of the villa. King Ecbert had been found, and Father told me he had offered rich terms to the sons of Ragnar. They had just signed a contract transferring ownership of a small kingdom over to our people. It should be a cause for celebration, but I saw only anger simmering under Ivar’s eyes as he sat on the low steps of the little dais at the
My love’s gaze softened only a little as I stepped up to him as confidently as I could. Still, he got the first word. “I told you not to speak to me again until you are ready to leave your father. And yet somehow I do not think you have come over here to tell me that you are mine.” His face twisted as he spat the words at me, deep emotions simmering under the stillness of his body.

I bent my head in only a faint echo of my old submissiveness. “I am yours, Ivar, always,” I said smoothly, rolling with his mood without losing my footing. “But I am still hoping to change my father’s mind.” I flatly refused to respect the emotional ultimatum he had given me last night. It wouldn’t help anything. I gathered up my skirts and sat down next to my love in the bustling courtyard. “I had a good conversation with him today.”

“Oh?” Ivar asked, voice flat and without hope. He was staring at the entrance to the villa’s inner sanctum.

“I think he will soon be ready to negotiate again.”

“And ask me to make more concessions? More compromises?” Ivar tossed his head. “It makes me sick, how much compromise is being done by these men that call themselves Vikings.”

He was still glaring into the villa. It did not seem like a good time to bring up the concession that I thought Father would be asking for. “What happened in there?” I asked instead, nodding in the direction that Ivar was staring. “You have your victory, and yet your mood is so foul. Did Ecbert not deed you a great tract of land today?” I was excited about that news myself; it could only help Ivar look more powerful in my father’s eyes.

“And in return, he convinced Björn not to let me blood eagle him,” he said through gritted teeth. “My weak excuse for a brother is going to allow Ecbert a death without pain.”

“Your father’s murderer deserves worse,” I agreed. “It is a great insult to take your full vengeance away from you.” Not that I didn’t understand the value of Björn’s deal, too. I would even have likely made the same choice. But I recognized how badly Ivar’s honor felt compromised, and how his eagerness for the bloody spectacle must have been terribly frustrated. I would not take Björn’s side today; I was learning when the right times to argue with Ivar were. “What are you going to do about it?” I asked instead.

Ivar blew out a frustrated breath. “What is there to do? The contract is signed. Ecbert is probably dead already.”

“No he is not,” I said without thinking.

Ivar looked straight at me, for the first time since I had sat down beside him. “And how do you know this?”

I decided not to dissemble. “The mara has not yet returned to me.”

Ivar raised one perfect brow, intrigued and annoyed both at once. “There is more to the magic we did that night? I thought you said you were keeping no more secrets from me.”

“It is seidr. It is women’s knowledge,” I deflected.

Thankfully, Ivar seemed ready to let go of the offense. Learning about the power was more intriguing to him. “So the mara tells you when its victim is dead?”
“I did not know, until it happened with Aelle.” I shuddered and looked down at my hands. “I was given a vision of everything he felt, at the moment of his death.”

Ivar’s face was looming closer to mine. When I glanced back at him I almost wished I hadn’t. I was sure he was remembering that grisly death too, and much more fondly than I was. “He suffered greatly. The way Ecbert should be suffering.” His eager grimace was both unsettling and captivating. Nothing could distract him from his need for vengeance today.

I shuddered again. “It was terrible.”

Ivar closed his mouth, looked away in thought. “So the magic you did, it connects you to your victim.”

“For longer than I had expected.” I jumped in my seat, a new idea occurring to me. “I wonder if the mara can tell me anything else?”

Ivar cocked his head and waited for me to go on.

“What if I could make contact with it again?” I continued, thinking aloud. “Ecbert’s must still be with him, and it must have access to his mind, or his heart. I cannot think of any other way that Aelle’s could have shown me what it did. I did not just watch his death, Ivar, I felt it.” The memory of that ate away at my sudden enthusiasm. “As if it were happening to me.” My voice broke on the last word as I remembered the pain.

I could not read the emotions that flicked across Ivar’s face as he realized what I meant. He reached out for me immediately, but there was something other than comfort in his grip at that first moment of contact. Then he pulled me against him in a firm embrace and set his chin atop my head. “That must have been very difficult for you,” he said softly.

“I could not stop shaking, for hours.”

He made a soothing sound low in his throat.

I did not really want to reflect any more on that experience. Especially not while I was thinking about how there was another one still out there. I forced myself to return to more practical thoughts. “If it knows his heart, Ivar, then maybe I can use it to learn something more about Ecbert before he dies.”

We found a quiet place I could use to enter into trance, to see if my spirit could contact the mara again. My chanting seemed all but fruitless until Ivar cut his thumb and set his blood to my lips. Almost immediately, I was floating above myself, and could feel the sucking blackness of the mara’s malevolence deeper inside the villa.

It was hard to say if I went to it, or it came to me. I knew where it was, inside Ecbert, and I was aware of my own body in roughly equal measure. I summoned it, but it felt like I was the one being summoned, and my consciousness was sucked into Ecbert too.

“What do you see?” Ivar asked, too eager to wait. I found that I was still in both places.

“He is contemplating his death.” I could see what he wanted. “He intends to die in a pool of warm water. A very large pool, in a gloomy stone room.”
“I know where this place is.”

“He will ask Björn to be left alone, and he will spill his blood into the water.” I was not exactly hearing Ecbert’s thoughts, but I could see the intentions he held in his mind’s eye, feel the glimmer of peace he thought he might feel as he died in that tranquil place amidst the turmoil of regrets in his heart.

“A coward’s death. Too peaceful for what he deserves.”

The mara reacted like it could hear Ivar’s anger, billowing up in cloud of black that made Ecbert cry out and covered my connection to his consciousness completely. The thing was made largely out of Ivar’s ire, perhaps it really was responding to his direction.

Ivar gave me a questioning look when my eyes focused on his face again.

“I was forced out. But I saw how he wants to die. Where it will happen.”

“You could hear his thoughts?”

“No. But I could see what he was picturing, what he was thinking about.”

Ivar grunted. “This could be very powerful. To know my enemy’s thoughts…”

“He will not be your enemy for long,” I reminded him. “Today is Ecbert’s dying day.”

Ivar huffed through his nose. “A weak, gentle death, without any of the torment that he deserves.”

I hated the turmoil I saw in my love’s eyes. Several thoughts connected suddenly. “Ivar. You know where this pool is?” He nodded. “The room looked so wide, and dark. You could go there now. Hide in the shadows.” Ivar drew in a deep breath, sitting up straighter. “When Björn leaves him there alone, no one will be able to stop you from getting your own revenge on his flesh.” I was not sure why I said it; the words just came rushing out.

Ivar looked back at me with excitement growing in his eyes. “Yes, I agree. Though it will take two to keep him quiet enough, so that I am not interrupted before I have achieved my satisfaction.”

I swallowed. My limbs started to tingle as a sinking sensation plummeted through my gut. Ivar had never looked more beautiful than he did in that moment, eyes wide and intent and lit with his eager need to convince me to help him with this terrible thing.

“Is this something you can do for me, Sigrunn?” Ivar held my gaze levelly, knowing that the request broke his promise to shelter me from the more violent aspects of his nature. He made no apology for it, showed no trace of shame for asking me to hold a man down while he tortured him.

I felt dizzy, but it was like my whole world was turning around Ivar Lothbrok. I was a boat spun by stormy waves and he was the anchor. My every instinct cried at me not to move away from him, not to disappoint. If I truly loved Ivar, I realized then and there, I was duty-bound to help him with this. My love for him meant nothing if I did not embrace all that he was, and aid him in his goals in all the ways that were within my power. I had to do this with him, or I did not deserve him.

I sucked my breath in, hard enough to try and stop my very lungs from trembling. Ivar seemed gratified just to watch me pull myself together for him.

“Yes, my love. I will do this with you.”
I was the one who moved into view first, stepping out from the shadows at the back of the warm room wearing nothing but my underdress. We assumed that if Ecbert saw only a young woman first, he would be less likely to cry out to Björn or whoever might be guarding the door. My heart was racing, and my skin had gone almost as pale as the white garment I wore. Before me was my love’s worst enemy, his nakedness concealed by the steaming water in which he sat. We were about to bring him the end that he deserved, and I was wholly focused on my part to play in it. I had committed myself and there was no room for doubts now.

The doomed king’s face shifted when he saw me, but he did not move, only watched silently as I stepped down into the water. I kept one hand behind my back to conceal the ball of fabric we planned to use for a gag.

Ecbert’s eyebrows jumped. “Somehow, I knew that you would come.” His voice, rich and surprisingly calm, echoed through the silence of the stone room. He recognized me? I kept my face still, happy to play along with whatever he meant if it would let me get closer to him. I kept pushing through the waist-deep water. My only goal was to be able to hold his mouth shut before he saw Ivar. “She has your face,” Ecbert explained when I did not respond, “the hag that rides me every night, and tortures my dreams.” The odd man actually smiled briefly. “But you are much more beautiful in this form.”

I did not allow myself to be disturbed by his words. In fact, right now the idea that the mara looked like a monstrous version of myself only thrilled me with pleasure.

“That’s just the way it smiles,” Ecbert said, and I realized my lips had pulled back at the thought. Just as we had hoped, he was letting me come close enough to touch him. A visit from a mysterious young woman at the moment of his death was too fascinating to cause alarm; when I had glimpsed Ecbert’s mind I had seen a man who was in love with dramatic gestures and almost entirely resigned to his fate to die. I held out my hand, slow and imperious, and looked significantly at the short knife in his grip.

He pondered the blade for a long moment. “Demon. Heathen witch. Angel.” He watched my face closely as he spoke each word, but I did not react to any of them. I did not even know their meanings. He put the knife’s handle into my palm. “Are you here to end it now?” was all that he wanted to know.

“Yes, Sigrunn,” Ivar teased, pulling himself from the darkness at the back of the room, “are you here to end it?”

Ecbert’s soft awe turned to a grimace as he recognized Ivar, but I clapped my hand full of cloth over his mouth before he could cry out. “Eventually,” I answered them both, in a voice that was mine and yet was not. A part of me was rising to the thrill of this, and I let it come. Anything that would give me the strength to see this through. Ecbert’s eyes rolled up to me in outrage and I met them serenely before looking back at my love.

Ivar grinned; an unhinged movement of his jaw as his head lolled to the side. “Are you surprised to see me, Ecbert?” he said as he hauled himself across the stone floor toward us. “You may have made a deal with my brothers, but I am Ragnar’s true heir, and I would never give up on vengeance for my
father.”

Ecbert was struggling against me at first but he stilled when Ivar mentioned Ragnar. He deliberately relaxed his body and tapped on my arm, requesting to be allowed to speak.

I looked to Ivar, who had just settled himself down beside us. He nodded, eyes cautious, and I withdrew the gag from Ecbert’s mouth.

“I went there, to where they killed your father,” the Saxon king said, voice smooth and velvety again. “I was present for the moment of Ragnar Lothbrok’s death.”

“To make certain it was done?” Ivar snarled at him.

“To pay my respects to a wonderful man. I considered your father my dear friend.” Ivar scowled and shook his head. “I know that you do not understand that. But I must tell you that he went bravely to his death, calling out to his pagan gods until the final moment when they dropped him into the pit.”

Ivar pressed his lips together, many terrible emotions passing across his face. “Well.” Ecbert stirred against me, and I almost laughed at the falseness of his hope. Ivar was not going to care what sort of feelings Ragnar’s murderer professed to have held for him. “Let us see if you can face your own demise as bravely,” Ivar growled, then started hauling Ecbert out of the water. I pressed the gag back into his mouth quickly and helped shove the struggling man up onto the stone floor.

Ivar had a rope. Once we had Ecbert trussed up I could have left; he did not technically need my help anymore. But I found myself absolutely transfixed by the look on Ivar’s face as he loomed over his victim. His predatory eyes promised two things: that there would be pain, and that Ivar would enjoy it. It was so akin to the gaze he gave me when I was helpless in his arms, and yet so different; darker, more furious, more real. I felt envious of Ecbert and I wanted to be a million miles away, both at once.

The Saxon king’s head had ended up in my lap as we struggled with him, and I left it there now as I watched Ivar drag his knife over the old man’s exposed belly. “They say my father suffered for days,” Ivar remarked. “I wish that I had time to repay you in kind. But I promise you, the last moments of your life will feel like an eternity.” He pressed down and the red began to flow.

Ecbert’s voice was muffled by the gag, but he rolled his eyes up to meet mine above his head.

“You think because my woman is here I will show any mercy?” Ivar scoffed when he noticed. He pressed down again and Ecbert twisted, moaning through the cloth. “She is not like your Saxon cows. Viking women are strong. She will not try to save you any ounce of pain.”

The message was for me as much as for Ecbert and I did my best to live up to it. Some corner of my mind was screaming but I refused to listen. My love needed me to be strong. Ivar was getting the vengeance he had been dreaming about for months, and I was helping to give it to him. This was the man I was about to bond my life to, and I forced myself to see him, to love and accept even his darkest deeds. It was righteous, after all. We were satisfying his family’s honor. So I kept telling myself, as even the gag could not stop the desperate keening that had started pouring from Ecbert’s throat as he suffered.

Finally Ivar took a pause, wiping a bead of sweat with the back of his hand and coming away with a streak of red across his brow. I had been keeping my gaze fixed on my lover’s face, not looking down lest the weakness of my stomach betray my resolve. His eyes were livid, utterly transfixed by his work. I almost gasped when they flicked up to meet mine. “Call the gods, Sigrunn,” he coaxed softly. His pupils were blown out, his face so frightfully intense and joyful that there was nothing I
would have refused him. “Ecbert offered up Father like a sacrifice and now I am going to do the same to him.”

The dying king’s body jolted in my arms.

“Do you like that, Ecbert?” Ivar asked, his cruel gaze whipping down to the man’s tear-streaked face. “Your dying Christian blood will feed the true gods. That is your end.” Ivar’s dilated eyes captured mine again, and he even brought one bloody hand up to cup my cheek. His smile said that he was grateful I was still here with him. “Call upon the Allfather, Sigrunn.” His smile said he had every faith in me. “Be the völva for my sacrifice.” His smile said he loved me. “This king’s blood will bless my conquest of all these lands.”

I thought the trance might be difficult to reach under these circumstances. But as soon as I began the sacred chant, it comforted me. We were doing holy work here. The gods were pleased with us, and they were going to help me through this part. I felt awareness of the spirit world rising up around me and I felt soothed; even approved. There were things here that were singing for this king’s blood.

I called out to Odin, the Allfather. I am not certain exactly what I said. Ivar looked up at me like I was half a goddess myself as I said the words, and even the thrashing of Ecbert’s head in my lap could not break my focus now.

I was finally brave enough to look down. Ivar had his fingers in the bloody wounds. He was tracing them like he often caressed the curves of my body, slow and savoring, his mouth hanging open in total focus.

A sense of golden, glowing presence was coming into the corners of my vision. I turned my head but could not catch it. I thought I knew what it meant. “The gods are ready, Ivar,” I said softly.

I cannot describe the eager, sadistic grin my lover gave me when he heard me say those words. Then his gaze dropped to his victim again. “I regret that I lack the time, or the set-up, to give you the blood eagle like we gave Aelle. Your brother in guilt,” Ivar crooned to the almost-delirious Ecbert. “I will not be removing your lungs from your back. But,” he added, with a soft laugh that made my skin crawl even through my heady trance, “I think it will make a fitting substitute to take your heart from your chest while it still yet beats.”

I forced myself to watch. It was a fitting way to perform the sacrifice. Ivar made the way for it with his knife, slicing deep under the ribcage. Then his hand disappeared, past the wrist. Ecbert screamed and his back arched as far as his body could stretch, and I could see in Ivar’s face the moment that he felt that heart beat within his palm. His shiver was pure ecstasy.

It was harder to get it out than Ivar had probably anticipated. Ecbert died somewhere during that process. The divine trance numbed the assault on my senses triggered by the mara’s release. This time, I did not need to experience the agony; I had seen it unfolding right in front of me. I pushed the mara toward the golden glow and I felt its energy disintegrate back to the world of the spirits again.

“This is for you, Allfather,” Ivar called, holding up the glistening red heart when he finally freed it, his hand and arm coated with gore. “I offer you the blood of a King. Bring me nothing but victories, over anyone who might dare to stand in my way now. No matter which gods they pray to. Remember that I amongst all your people love you best. And that I was the only one of my brothers to truly avenge my father, and to honor you properly, Odin.”

As I stared at the bloody thing held up in Ivar’s hand, a figure began to solidify out of the golden glow, standing behind my love. A man with just one eye. I looked away from the god on pure instinct, certain that I should not be seeing him. Ivar held one of the gaping openings at the top of the
organ to his lips and sucked down. My eyes focused on the movement of his throat as he swallowed deeply of the heart’s blood.

Then he offered that terrible cup to me.

I hesitated, for the first time in this entire ordeal. But the god stepped forward, raised his hand as he urged me to take it. “For the babe,” it said, without words, a deep voice that rang inside my head.

I was with child? I thought I could sense the life deep in my belly as the Allfather pointed there. And for that life, I would do anything. I leaned forward and let Ivar press the warm, grisly thing to my mouth.

The blood was spiced with so much power I almost swooned. I could make a dozen maras. I could ascend and look upon Asgard itself. But when I tried to take hold of that power, to use it for I didn’t even know what yet, it was like a great hand slapped me back. Hatred so pure that I screamed splashed over my weak mortal form, like being hit by a horse-sized wave off the rising tide. The sacrifice had not been willing. My seiðr was not strong enough to harness this particular death.

I thought I might have nightmares forever about this day. But at least Ivar would be there to hold me when I woke up. We had committed this act together, and the gods had smiled. I had not turned away from my love’s true face.

I felt closer to Ivar than I ever had in my life, as he lay curled in my lap with his face against my belly. I had told him what Odin said to me. Now he was purring happily and tracing careful, bloody runes of protection over the white fabric on my stomach.

I was amazed no one had come to check on Ecbert yet, though I did not fear being discovered. What could anyone do about it now? And the waters of that bath were still stained red with his blood, just as he had imagined his death would unfold. I cut off every guilty or compassionate thought that tried to arise. He was a Christian, and a murderer. He deserved no dignity in his final hour.

When we finally emerged, we got to the very doorway to the courtyard before anyone noticed us. Ivar was moving slowly because he insisted on carrying Ecbert’s heart with him as he crawled, cradling it in his palm as he pulled himself along on one elbow. The grisly thing didn’t bother me anymore. It felt like nothing would ever bother me again.

My uncle Halfdan saw us first, emerging into the light from the dark passage to the bath. His head jumped as if he was not sure what he was seeing. He and Björn had been leaning against either side of the doorway, talking amicably before our approach interrupted.

Björn’s brows creased as soon as he saw his brother, knowing where he had to have been coming from. “Ivar, what did you do?” His eyes flicked to my white gown, sodden to the waist and striped with blood. I had forgotten my cloak and overdress. Perhaps I was not yet back to my right mind.

“The thing that the rest of you lacked the strength for,” Ivar snarled back. He made sure his voice carried and pulled himself past his brother, endeavoring to call the attention of everyone milling about in the courtyard of the villa. “I gave Ecbert the death he truly deserved. I cut his heart from his chest while he still lived.”

Uncle Halfdan grabbed my arm as I tried to follow, checking to make certain I was alright. I did feel a little unsteady on my feet, now that he forced me to think about it, but I refused to let any kind of weakness ruin my show of solidarity with Ivar. I shook him off with a reassuring smile and followed
my love into the open air.

Ivar was holding Ecber’s heart high above his head. He was attracting a small crowd as everyone dropped their work to come see. “I made a sacrifice to Odin of him! Here is my völva,” he said, indicating me, waving me to come stand proudly beside him. “She saw the god receive it. Our army is blessed, to raid and conquer!” His voice had been swelling louder with every statement, and after he crested many cheers and much stomping of feet broke out in the courtyard. I felt like Ivar and I were shining, floating above the people he was surely destined to rule. I saw pride and approval in so many of the faces turned up to us. Ivar had once again set himself apart from his brothers, and given the people another sign of his capability.

Björn came up behind us with heavy steps, pulling my awareness down to earth a little. “You betrayed our deal,” he fumed.

“A deal with a Christian,” Ivar sneered back. “And now he is too dead to complain. Who cares?”

I heard myself giggle. That wasn’t like me. Was I still coming off of the trance? Was some spirit still riding me? Everything was hot and sweet in my ears.

Björn scowled down at his little brother, frustration etched at the edges of his eyes. He looked at the heart still held up in Ivar’s hand like he was considering snatching it away.

Ivar drew his arm back down, curling his prize protectively against his chest. “Look around, Björn. Our people are happy with my sacrifice. You should be happy too.” His eyes scanned the fortifications. “Floki should see this. He will appreciate what I have done. Where is he?”

Björn faltered. I saw a sadness in his eyes before we were all interrupted by the arrival of Harald Finehair.

“What is this?” my father roared as he came up to us. Evidently he had missed the speech. He grabbed hold of my ruined dress. “What did you do to her, Ivar?”

When my father touched me, all traces of the divine trance fell abruptly away from my mind. Without the spirits bolstering me, it felt like the life was draining from my heart as quickly as it had from Ecber’s. A sickening horror rushed in soon after. Had I really just helped Ivar do those things?

Ivar sputtered something about the blood on my dress not being mine, but I could barely listen to his words. My head was spinning and my limbs felt dead. I tried to stay strong, and let none of it show on my face, but black spots started to appear across my vision. I stumbled against my father’s shoulder. He tried to catch me but I collapsed to my hands and knees on the ground before he could get an arm around me.

Instantly, Ivar was there, rubbing his shoulder against mine and asking if I was alright. The dizziness was better down here. I turned to look at him, slowly, against the bile that was rising in my throat. The concern in his face seemed absolutely sincere as he held himself up with one hand beside me there on the ground; the other still held Ecber’s glistening heart against his chest. That was why he had comforted me only with a brush of his shoulder. He refused to set it down, even now.

I turned and vomited. I hoped Ivar would blame the pregnancy.

Father came to my other side, hand on my back just how I remembered him comforting me as a child. “What happened to her?” he demanded to know. “She is barely dressed, and soaking wet; she’ll catch her death out here.” I was already starting to shiver. At that moment I was no longer certain the spirits had done me any favors today.
“She is alright,” Ivar insisted. “She just needs to get warm. Take her—” he said it begrudingly, like he was losing something in letting anyone else care for me, “—take her someplace she can rest.”
They found me a bed, in one of the rooms of the villa that had not been burnt. A real bed, after almost two weeks sleeping in boats and thin blankets, meager piles of straw. I slept like the dead even though it was the middle of the day.

I opened my eyes hoping to see Ivar waiting for me. We had so much yet to talk about. Odin’s appearance, the baby… To my disappointment I found that both Father and Halfdan were sitting in the room with me instead.

“How do you feel, little pup?” Uncle Halfdan said when he saw that I had awoken. Father stepped to my side as well. I sat up carefully, clutching the warm blanket around me. The Saxon-style shift I had changed into before falling asleep was unfamiliar against my skin, and its low neckline felt immodest. But at least it was clean and dry.

“Better,” I said, and flashed them a soft, harmless-looking smile. I wanted to reassure them, and then I wanted them to leave as quickly as possible. My mind still felt cloudy and strange, and I did not feel like talking to either of these two men.

“You were so deeply asleep, you looked dead.” My uncle pressed closer, sitting on the edge of the bed with concern still etched on his face. “Promise me you are not injured?”

I shook my head, closing my eyes serenely as I did. I felt hollowed-out inside, but it was not an injury. I felt like everything meaningless had been stripped away as I lay there and dreamed. What had I dreamed of? I could not recall.

Father shifted on his feet. “I heard what you and Ivar did,” his gravelly voice rumbled. “I am proud of you, daughter.” He beamed his smile down on me.

My answering smile was weak. His opinion just… did not mean much to me anymore. I was proud of myself, and that was entirely enough. Everything felt so clear now. I did not owe this man anything.

“Are you alright,” Halfdan asked, tapping his fingers over his heart, “here?” His brows were drawn together in concern. “I know that the sight of death bothers you. And that one had to have been very hard to watch.”

He trailed off as I shook my head. “Not this time.” My moment of weakness had passed, and I was glad to be rid of it. Ivar’s queen would not show that kind of frailty again. “I feel fine, Uncle. What Ivar did was blessed by the gods. My heart sings for him, for his victory and his vengeance.”

“Did you truly see Odin?” Father asked, fervor in his voice.

I nodded, closing my eyes softly as I remembered the vision of the god. When I opened them again, my father and uncle were staring at me with slack and eager faces, waiting to hear more about my brush with the divine.

“He appeared behind Ivar at the moment of Ecbert’s death,” I said, my voice going low and rhythmic. It was like even remembering that sacred glimpse was bringing the trance back over me. “And he bade me to drink of the sacrificial blood.” I hesitated only a moment, deciding it was
absolutely to my advantage to reveal the full truth of my situation right now, in this way. “He said it would make our baby strong.”

I watched Father and Halfdan blink, first at me and then each other, as they absorbed the information. Father’s face clouded over first. “Are you telling me that you are carrying Ivar’s child, Daughter?”

I drew myself up straighter on the bed. “That is what the god told me, Father. Who am I to doubt the Allfather, and his blessing?”

Father bent his weight forward, trying to loom over me like he always did when he was frustrated. He just looked small to me, now. “I thought I told you to be more careful than that.”

I only shook my head. “It was the will of the gods.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Harald’s face showed a war between his anger and his piety.

I took advantage of his silence to keep talking. “Odin favors Ivar, Father, that is absolutely clear now. He blessed him; he blessed us. And our child. So you would be wise not to stand in our way.” I spoke it evenly, without ire. I reached out and took his hand in mine. “Can you not see now, that you have to support us?”

Father scowled and turned away from me. Perhaps I had once again pushed him too hard. “They are having a feast, in the courtyard,” he said, slipping his fingers away from mine. “We are probably already late.”

Halfdan set one hand gently on my blanketed knee. “Do you feel well enough to go?”

I thought about staying in this warm bed, alone, holding onto the divine feeling that was glowing inside me. This peaceful detachment from worldly concerns was such a relief after the storm of doubts which had been plaguing me almost constantly since I first kissed Ivar so many months ago. But then my stomach growled and I thought about keeping our baby strong with the rich foods that surely had been prepared for tonight. “Yes.”

Uncle Halfdan smiled affectionately at me, trying as always to make up for Father’s moodiness. “We found you a dress to wear,” he said as he stood up to retrieve it. “I think it belonged to the Saxon Queen.”

The heavy gown had the same strange, wide neck as the slip I had on. They told me I looked beautiful in it but I barely gave the compliments a second thought. I was entirely distracted by this strange peace I felt, even though nothing was peaceful at all about my situation. The same deadlock was before me as always, but the solution suddenly looked simple. I was sad but it was soft and round; there were no hard edges to my heartache as I realized the choice, finally, that I was destined to make.

We readied ourselves to go. I watched my father smooth his fingers through his hair, as my uncle brushed some dirt off his clothes, and thought to myself, ‘what if I never see them again?’ The thought did not cut me as hard as I thought that it should. I felt changed by what I had just been through with Ivar, by my meeting with the Allfather himself. For the babe. My father and his petty ambitions suddenly seemed brittle, almost laughable. My place was not here anymore.

Yes, I was afraid of Ivar. But the fear was becoming more theoretical. He was formidable, not to be underestimated. But I no longer felt overwhelmed by him. I had drawn a line that we both seemed
able to respect. He could be as brutal as he liked to his enemies, but he was not to lay a hand on me. I trusted him to behave differently with the people that he loved than those that he hated.

I was afraid of Ivar but I liked it that way. I wanted to stand in his darkness, and not be consumed by it. I felt I had just proved that I could do that. I did not ever intend to bring him into the light. Just to be here with him, and hold him in the dark, tend to what wounds I could. Not to try to change his very soul. I accepted today that the power and passion that I loved came from the same place as his ruthlessness, even his cruelty. But I was the mist and he was the fire, and he could not burn me up just as I could never quell him. I would stay strong and we would dance together, the light and the dark.

We arrived late to the feast. Ivar and his brothers sat at a high table covered in food, on the dais in the central area of the courtyard. Everyone was eating and making merry, and a place of honor had been saved for us near their table.

When I caught a glimpse of my love’s face I was a little shocked. I thought I was the only one drained by the sacrifice we had performed; I had been fighting with spirits when he had only fought one mostly-restrained old man. But Ivar was drawn and pale. The dark circles under his eyes matched his even blacker expression. Something else must have happened. The news of Helga’s death? Father had mentioned that Floki had found his wife dead in the chaos following the invasion, and I knew that Ivar was close to them. Or had he argued more with Björn after I left him?

Ivar’s hollow eyes were fixed on one of the dishes at the front of the table. Ecbert’s heart, I realized with a start, lay on a silver platter and already attracting a few flies. A silent reminder of his victory over his brothers. Ivar stirred when he noticed my arrival, his brooding darkness breaking with a sharp expression of concern. He moved like he was going to leave his chair and come to me, but at the same moment Björn stood and raised his glass. All I could do is give him a soft smile to communicate that I was feeling better as Björn’s voice rang out over the gathering.

“Friends! No one will ever be able to doubt what we have achieved. An army of all our peoples.” He went on, but it was hard to pay attention to what he was saying. My spirit was still sailing with the gods and their blessing. As soon as Björn was done talking I would go up to my love, take his face in my hands and kiss his brows until they released all the tension that I could see creasing them.

Ivar had other ideas. He turned to address the crowd as well, when Björn was done with his speech, and so I stayed in my seat a little longer. He had some things to say as well. “I will be here, but not to settle down and plow. Who wants to be a farmer now, hm?” The passion in my love’s face was hypnotizing as he roused the people to fight and raid once more. I could see what he was doing, seizing his last opportunity to keep the army together and bring them under his command. I could feel the crowd reacting to him too, and see the uneasiness on the faces of every one of his brothers. None of them wanted Ivar to succeed in this. I hated them all in that moment; even Ubbe who had always been so supportive was now trying to stop him.

Sigurd’s voice was like nettles against my skin when he started trading insults with Ivar. My heart was in my throat but I thought I would only embarrass my love further if I, a woman, tried to call out anything in his defense. His comment about Ivar’s manhood almost changed my mind, but Björn called the attention back to himself first. “So, who is going to stay, and farm?” he bellowed out, silencing the bickering of his brothers.

My father stood up beside me, raising his horn. “I would like to stay,” Harald Finehair announced, making certain he was first to respond to the call, “but I have other plans. Sköl.” His hand came down on my shoulder as Ivar’s hooded eyes ripped from his brother to me.
I twisted under Father’s hand, the burning question obvious in Ivar’s face. I tried to stand, ready to call out in front of everyone that I was not leaving with him, but my father held me down and I managed only to shake my head at Ivar before my uncle stood at my other side and made his own announcement.

“As for me,” he said loudly, carefully not looking at my father, “I would like to go with Björn. I want to see the Mediterranean.”

We both twisted our necks to stare at him in surprise. My father and uncle had always operated as a unit. Even when Halfdan was not at his side, he was supporting some plan or another of Father’s. For him to just abandon us like this was so surprising that my mind went blank for a moment.

Björn jumped over the high table, came down and embraced Halfdan before my father or I could think of anything to say. “Then it seems, the only thing,” he said, loud enough for all the people to hear, “that really kept the sons of Ragnar together, was the death of their father.”

He was trying to dissolve the entire gathering; I could hear that in his voice.

So could Ivar. “Or, Björn, it is you who doesn’t want to keep the army together,” he spat down from the high table. “It is you who wants to go away to sunny places. Everyone else can follow me.”

“I don’t want to follow you, Ivar,” Sigurd shouted, standing up with his glass in his hand as he did. “You are crazy. You have the mind of a child.”

The rest happened so fast. I wish now I hadn’t been so distracted, by my uncle’s announcement and by my own pretty thoughts of gods and destinies. I wish I had been ready to interrupt earlier, or that I was the kind of woman who would have spurned my father at the beginning of the feast, gone up and claimed a seat at the high table next to Ivar before all of this began. Surely my presence at his side could have made a difference in what happened next.

Instead, Sigurd only used me to make things worse. “You are letting Harald’s daughter make a fool of you,” he taunted, amidst a seemingly endless string of insults against his little brother. “She is never going to marry you, you know. You have nothing to offer her, Boneless. Everyone knows you are always playing that game with knives because you have nothing else to poke her with.”

At that disgusting lie, I finally found my tongue. “I am carrying Ivar’s child!” I shouted as I stood, pulling every eye to me. “And Odin himself blessed our babe today. Do not speak such lies about your brother. He is the one that you should follow. You and all of our people.”

“That is enough, Sigrunn,” Father growled, grabbing my arm and making to drag me away. Ivar was staring at me open-mouthed.

My outburst had derailed Ivar, but not Sigurd. “Clearly I am not the one telling lies, talking about visits from the gods,” he scoffed. “You are as full of bullshit as our Mother was.”

“Shut your mouth!” Ivar’s voice thundered, his fist crashing into the table.

I tried to shout out some defense as well, but I was too distracted struggling against my father as he tried to force me out of the courtyard.

“Good, Harald, take her away from here,” Sigurd smirked down on us, sloshing his cup as he pointed toward the exit. “If the babe’s father really is Ivar, I cannot think of a worse person to raise a child. It would be better off never even knowing him.”

My father’s crushing pressure was blocking my view of the dais. All I could hear was the heated
warning in Ubbe’s voice. “Ivar!” I ducked my head around his shoulder in time for nothing, nothing but a fruitless shout as Ivar let an axe fly across the table, right into Sigurd’s flank.

An unearthly silence fell over everyone. My father’s grip fell slack but I did not even try to twist away. We all watched Sigurd stagger over toward his brother, wrenching the weapon from his own body and holding it high in the air. Ivar looked close to panic, was barely even trying to defend himself.

Sigurd fell before he could reach him. Was he…?

I took a step toward Ivar, but only one. Ubbe and Hvitserk had run around the table, and it was clear by the way they touched Sigurd without offering any help to him, that he was dead. Ivar stared down at his brothers with a flushed, lost-looking face.

His jaw clenched, eyes hardening as he absorbed the truth. He had just killed his own brother. With the entire army as witness. And he was already retreating into a defensive, remorseless shell.

I pressed forward. I couldn’t bear to see him sitting there alone with this.

Father’s arms were like a steel cage around me. “Do not go to him,” he hissed.

I struggled but I dared not shout. Ivar wasn’t even looking for me. His world had narrowed to nothing but his brother’s body and the turmoil of his thoughts.

It felt like to force him to look up would be an intrusion. What would I even say to him, anyway? I sagged in my father’s arms and let him draw me away.

****

Kinslayer. I couldn’t think of a worse epithet. It had been a crime of passion, Ivar’s honor was at stake… but still.

“I wish you hadn’t announced to everyone that you were with child,” Father growled as he paced through the tent. We were camped roughly for the night; the army was already returning to Repton and the boats. “Or especially that the father is Ivar. We need to distance ourselves from him now, and this will make it much harder.”

“Distance ourselves?”

Father whirled to look at me. “You can’t still want to marry him, after that.”

I looked down. My thoughts had not stopped swirling since Sigurd’s death. Just when I thought I did not have to fear Ivar…

“Do you think because you are carrying his child that you are beholden to him in some way?” Father stepped closer to me, offered a calming hand on my shoulder. “You are not, Sigrunn. I will take care of you. We can provide for this baby, easily. That should not be of concern to you.”

“But he would still be a bastard,” I said bitterly, staring at the ground.

Father’s voice was soft. “Do you not think that might be better, than having to carry his true father’s name? The gods are not kind to those that commit crimes such as Ivar’s.”
“And yet, I still love him,” I said, so quietly I almost could not hear myself.

“What?”

I tried to draw myself up, sound like I meant it. It was true, after all. I wasn’t sure I could run away with Ivar after this, but I wasn’t ready to lose him either. “I love him still.”

Father’s face looked pained. He knew the struggle of love, as much as he had tried to give up on it himself. Halfdan shook his head, calling my attention to where he sat at the other side of the tent that was quickly feeling entirely too small. “You are not afraid? One day he may become angry, and what will stop him from doing something like that to you?”

“I fear it,” Father answered before I could, “and Sigrunn, you would be wise to fear it too.” I looked across forlornly at my uncle while Father kept talking. “I will not trust my only daughter to a boy that killed his own blood.” He drew himself up and marched across the tent like it was settled. “We will sail away when we reach Repton. Take Kattegat as we planned and leave the sons of Ragnar to finish tearing themselves apart.”

“Who is we?” Halfdan asked, irritation with Father plain in his voice. I had the same question.

Father rounded on his brother. “You truly wish to leave with Björn?”

Halfdan just raised his eyebrow at him.

“I don’t understand why you want to split with me. We are brothers. We belong together. We’ve always had the same dream.”

“No,” Halfdan corrected him. “It’s your dream. You want to be the King of Norway. I don’t have a dream about being the brother of the King of Norway.” He looked up at Father from under a reproachful brow.

Father stared back at him levelly, trying to hold down his own frustration. “Then what is your dream?”

“I want to travel.”

“I mean what is your ambition?”

“You have ambition enough for the both of us, Brother.” He said it with a smile, trying to cajole a laugh out of Father, to soften the blow.

Harald chuckled, but the mirth did not reach his eyes.

“I am a simple fellow. Traveling to the ends of the known world? That is enough for me.” Halfdan stood, clapped his hand heavily on his brother’s shoulder. “It is time to let me go, Harald.” He gaze fell on me, still frozen in my seat. “Sigrunn, too. Let us both be happy.”

Father’s eyes tightened. His lips moved like he might say more to his brother, then he swallowed whatever he was feeling and rounded on me. “You may go with my goodwill and blessing, Brother, but as for my only daughter, my mind remains unchanged. We can provide for the child ourselves. I will not let her recklessness force my hand.”

Halfdan scowled. “Now you are just being stubborn. You still think you will have any better options for a marriage for her now? You are just being cruel. Everyone has withdrawn their interest in her, out of fear of Ivar. No one is going to want to take her now that she has his child. Make a deal with
Ragnar’s son; don’t make this child grow up without a father out of your own pettiness. Will you really make your own grandchild a bastard for nothing but your pride?”

Harald sucked in a breath, puffing up his chest. “Pride is important. What are we without our honor? Sigrunn won’t marry a kinslayer. She may not agree with me today, but she will make the right choice.”

*****

I was startled when I heard the rustling sound of someone pulling up the back of my tent, but I was not surprised. I knew Ivar would come for me eventually. I paused with the brush still held to my hair as I turned in my seat at the disturbance. A dirty hand lifted the flap, then a head of thick black hair appeared as Ivar pulled himself easily under the edge of the heavy fabric.

I had been under guard from Father’s men for days now, as preparations were made for the journey back across the sea. But they were apparently only guarding the front of this tent. Ivar got himself all the way inside before either of us spoke. The haughty annoyance of his scowl seemed forced. “You have not tried to see me.”

My own annoyance was real, that this was the way he wanted to start our much-needed conversation. Pretending that the air was not thick with his own wrongdoings. I looked away from him, resumed brushing my hair. “How do you know I have not tried, and simply been prevented.” I spoke softly, so as to not alert the guards.

“Because, dear Sigrunn,” Ivar said, pulling himself up to sit more comfortably on the pallet that I slept in, “whenever you want a thing, you find a way to get it.”

“That sounds more like you, than me.”

“Then it is both of us.” He smiled just a little. “The point remains. I know that you have not wanted to see me.”

“If you know that, then why are you here in my tent?”

“Because I want to see you.”

I set the hairbrush down, but I still could not meet his eyes. I could not dissemble any longer. “I am not sure I am ready to talk to you yet.”

He was silent. I snuck a look at him, from the corner of my eye. I had never seen him like this. His face looked ready to shatter. “Sigrunn…”

I had never known him to be at a loss for words, either. The pain in his throat as he said my name turned my body toward his, before I had even made up my mind. “Ivar.” My voice was flat, and we both winced at how cold it sounded.

I didn’t go to him. Ivar’s face twisted into a terrible grimace as his eyes reddened and grew shiny with unshed tears. He glanced toward the edge of the tent, where he had come in.

I found I did not want him to leave. I wasn’t sure what we needed to say to each other, but I had to try. “I have been frightened,” I blurted out.
Ivar looked back at me, and I could see, plainly now, how much of the pain in his face was self-hatred. “I know.” He took a deep breath, holding my gaze with his watery eyes. “I tried to give you time. But without you, I am all alone.” His voice cracked on the last word.

It was so hard not to rush to him then, pull him to my breast and tell him I forgave him everything. But I didn’t, and so I couldn’t.

He blinked his thick, beautiful lashes and the gathered tears finally fell heavily on his cheeks. “Tell me I did not lose you too.” His jaw clenched. I saw him trying to be angry with me for not coming to him sooner, saw that anger collapse into despair.

I pressed my lips together but a whimpering sound escaped anyway. I still loved him, despite everything. I knew it for certain when I watched remorse finally wash over his face. “You did not lose me,” I cried softly as I stumbled over to him.

Ivar’s teary eyes lit up with desperate hope as I descended upon him. Our fingers interlaced, then released so we could clutch at each other’s bodies instead, rubbing sniffing noses into each other’s necks and silently weeping together. Over so many things.

I knew the answer, then. All I needed from him was remorse, true remorse. I needed the assurance that he knew he had done wrong, and then I could forgive him, and calm my fears about what he was capable of. “I do love you, Ivar,” I whispered into his hair as I squeezed him tight. “But there are things I need to hear you say.”

He burrowed himself into my chest. “I would never hurt you,” he mumbled. “I love you and I want you by my side forever. What I did -- I would never do that to you.” He slid his cheek across my dress, hands burrowing in the fabric as he clung to me.

“You have said these things before. But still I worry.” I pulled back, tried to get him to look me in the eye.

Ivar straightened. As soon as he saw my face he reached up, grasping my cheeks in both his hands. “You have nothing to worry about,” he said, eyes wide like he could force me to agree with only the heat of his gaze.

I shook my head, opened my mouth to explain but he cut me off.

“Sigurd… I regret what I did, but he brought this on himself. You heard the things he said. He has said things like that to me for my entire life.” His face grew more irate as the words kept pouring out. “You have nothing to worry about because you would never provoke me like he did, you would never say such things to me.”

I scowled in his grip. “Don’t put the responsibility for this on me.” He blinked. He did not understand. “It is not up to me to simply never make you angry.” He dropped his hands as I shook my head impatiently. “I will make you angry, Ivar. One day I will say something careless, or disappoint you in some way. One day we will both be tired and frustrated and entirely selfish. And that is the day that I fear. That is the worry that has kept me hiding in my father’s camp.”

He looked at me. The change in him struck me again, the one that made me so hopeful. He did not rush to defend himself. With wide eyes he appeared to be truly trying to understand what I was saying.

“All siblings fight. Most of them do not kill each other over it. If we are to be a family, Ivar,” – I put one hand protectively over my stomach – “I need to know you will never lose control like that again.
No matter what you hear me say, or what you think I mean.”

Ivar’s already-puffy eyes began to redden again. “He made me so angry,” he said, but his voice was soft, reflective. “What he said about our child…” He looked down, scrubbed furiously at one eye with the back of his hand. “Is he right?” Ivar’s voice was tiny now, and he would not look up from my belly. “Would the babe be better off to be raised far away from me?”

I sighed. Every time Ivar teared up I wanted to take back everything I said, just so he could feel better again. “I want this child to know its father.” Now it was my turn to take Ivar’s face in my hands, pull his gaze back up to meet mine. “I want to raise it with you, Ivar. The best version of you. The wise and passionate man that I know you can be.” My praise triggered such a vulnerable pleasure in his eyes that my vision swam for a moment, but I pressed on. “But I am to be a mother. I need to protect this babe, above all else. Keep it safe from any harm.”

Ivar’s face faltered. I could not imagine how difficult it must be for him to hear these things, without deflecting or running away. The harm I was talking about was him. He leaned forward, emitting a despairing little cry, and I opened my arms to receive him. “I wish I hadn’t done it. I lost control,” he sobbed, his voice growing thick and hard to understand. My own body shook with the strength of the emotion wrenching through him. “Sigurd… My own brother. I am sorry. I am so sorry.” He repeated the phrase a few more times as he cried like a child into my chest, and I did not think he was talking to me any longer.

Perhaps I still should have feared him. But I did not feel it anymore. What Ivar had done to Sigurd was despicable, but I was not disgusted with him. When his tears finally stilled I looked into his mournful face and found that I loved him just as much as I had before. Perhaps more, because he needed me. Because he trusted me enough to cry here in my arms, when I knew that he thought he had to stay so strong in front of his brothers, that he could not show anyone else the depths of his sorrow and regret.

“I do not know how to have more control than this.” Now that he was done weeping Ivar’s voice sounded deep, wrung-out. Older than his years.

I touched my fingertips gently to his brow. “For me, I think it is enough that you want to.” He still was not quite meeting my eyes. “I will remind you. I will help you. And you, you will remember that you love me, and our child, and you will always treat us accordingly.”

Ivar only shook his head, looked away even as his hands continued to clutch at my waist. His voice was so soft it barely sounded like him. “You should go with your father.”

“What?”

“I have never treated you well.” He scrubbed his face quickly and then his eyes finally blazed at me again. “You cannot deny that. And why should we think after this that I ever will?”

I shook my head defiantly. I was not going to follow that road. “Tell me, then.”

“What?” His brows creased.

“Tell me why. I already feel the change in you, Ivar. You tell me why you will treat me better, after this. You already know.”

He made a hollow sound, then looked away as he thought for a while. “Because I know what it is to lose, now.” The soft tone was back, no trace of the arrogance that he usually wore like a shirt of mail. “I have made a mistake that cannot be covered over, that cannot be undone. My family will
never be the same. My brothers, they will never love me like they did, now. If they ever did.”

My hand wound into his.

“I will see Sigurd’s dying face, every time I raise my hand in anger. His ghost is haunting me already.” His face twisted in another surge of grief and I clutched him hard to help him through it. “I want to turn my back on these thoughts, Sigrunn. I want to say that he deserved to die, and carry on just as before. But if I do that, I will lose your respect. And your trust. Won’t I.”

“Yes,” I breathed softly. I did not add anything else. Ivar could not be pushed into this realization.

The anguish in his eyes was almost too much for me to bear. “It is so painful, to feel this,” he all but hissed at me.

“I will help you with that part, too,” I promised. I kissed both his eyelids, then his lips, soft and chaste. “I love you, even like this. And from now on, I will always be by your side,” I whispered against his lips. “You will not have to face anything alone anymore.”

Ivar pulled back a little. “Are you saying…?”

“Yes,” I smiled, my own eyes tearing up now. “I am coming with you now. Let us marry in the sight of the gods and let no pettiness of men tear us apart.”

He smiled at me but it looked like it hurt, cracking his self-hate wide open. “How…?” he croaked. He looked down, swallowed, and tried again. “I always thought the openness of your heart was foolish; a weakness. How grateful I am for it now. That there is still room there, for you to love one such as me. I will never disparage it again.” The corners of his mouth turned up in a humble smile, pure and soft and grateful. He kissed me and our lips pressed and nipped like it had been years rather than days that we had been apart.

Ivar’s hand traveled down to my belly and paused. He nuzzled his face into my neck; his passion distracted. “I need you more than anything I can imagine, Sigrunn,” he said low into my ear. “But you are right, we have another life to think of now. I am taking the army against the Saxons again, and soon. Perhaps you should go back with your father for the baby’s sake. You would be much safer in Vestfold than here.”

I put my hand over Ivar’s. “I would not trust my father to ever let me see you again if I returned with him now.” Ivar might have been speaking sense, but that much was true, too. “You can keep us safe, Ivar. I trust you. I trust the gods. And surely these Saxons have midwives; I can have the baby here just as well. This child will know its father. And love him. As much as I do.”

The deep breath Ivar took in the crook of my neck was hitched with more emotion. His broad palm caressed my abdomen slow and reverent. We were silent for a long while. The pressure in Ivar’s moving fingers lessened until he was making absent-minded circles just under my navel.

“We have not yet spoken of what happened with Ecbert.” Ivar’s voice was flat, perhaps a little foreboding. I felt a surge of adrenaline just at the reminder. “I still owe you more apologies.”

I hadn’t been expecting that, was not sure how to respond.

“I pushed you too hard. I did not realize, until you collapsed…” he trailed off, and I could hear the guilt in his voice.

“I am fine, Ivar,” I rushed to reassure him. “I needed to rest, yes, but after I slept I felt better. Shh, it is fine.”
He did not look reassured as he pulled back to examine my face. “Did it hurt, terribly? I did not think…” He looked so guilty.

“What are you talking about?”

“You told me what would happen and I did not even think about it.” Self-recrimination stabbed through his voice. “I was too focused on my vengeance. You had just told me how much it hurt, and I asked you to help me do it anyway.” He had both my shoulders in his grip, fingers petting and clutching at the same time. “I did not even realize until after you collapsed, after your father took you away… and then I was not sure you would forgive me for it.” He searched my eyes, but I still was not sure what he was talking about. “Say something, Sigrunn. Did it hurt terribly, when Ecbert’s mara returned to you?”

Ivar did not know that the trance had protected me, that I had been able to stop it from coming into me and sharing our victim’s horrors this time. But I felt a twinge of shame myself, as I realized that he was right, I should have been angry with him for asking me to take that risk. I had been just as wrapped up in his needs as he was. I hadn’t even thought to fear it.

I still hadn’t answered him; Ivar assumed the worst and looked almost horrified. “What if the baby felt it?”

“No. Shhh, no,” I comforted him, pulling his twisted face closer to mine. “I stopped it, this time. The mara did not come into me. I did not feel Ecbert’s pain.”

Ivar looked only a little less sick as he absorbed my words. “But did you know, when you agreed to come with me? Did you know that you were going to be able to stop it coming into you?”

Slowly, I shook my head.

“Then I still wronged you.” His whole body slumped. “And you let me.”

My body felt like it was buzzing. “Ivar. Look at me.” I waited until his brilliant eyes met mine again. “It was not a light decision, to do that for you. But I am glad that I did it. It was an act of devotion. I want to support you in all of your aims in this life. I wanted to be beside you in your victory, and your vengeance. And I even found that…that I loved watching you enjoy it.” Many reactions squirmed through my belly as I remembered his rapt, bloody face, but arousal was indeed one of them.

The strength was coming back into Ivar’s face as I kept speaking. He was coming to believe that we were alright, that I could still love him after all this.

“And remember what came of it.” I smiled, proudly. “We honored the gods, Ivar. More than that, I believe we impressed them. I saw the face of Odin himself, and he smiled on me. I do not regret this. I wanted to do it for you.” Now Ivar’s perfect lips were smiling too. “If you recall, going to Ecbert was my idea. If that helps you feel less guilty for what we went through.”

He nodded, a little sheepishly, and ran his hand through the hair at the side of my face. “And you are unharmed, truly? When you collapsed, I did not know what to think. Then you were still so pale when you came to the feast.”

“I felt like the gods made me anew,” I said, remembering the feeling that had lingered when I awoke once more. “Everything unimportant was stripped away. I would not call that ‘harm.’” I smiled at him, though I was really just smiling for me. “I know my purpose in life, now. I am to be a völva. I shall serve the gods. And I am to be a mother, to one favored by the gods.”
Ivar’s eyes glittered as they flicked back and forth, searching the depths of my gaze. “And…” he asked softly, “…a wife?”

I beamed up at him. “Your wife.”

“My queen. My priestess.”

“Your pet,” I smirked, and his lips twisted in pleasure too. “Your everything.”

*****

My wedding was smaller, simpler than I had ever imagined for myself. We held the ceremony in a birch grove, surrounded by more of the blue flowers that Ivar had found. Father was not there; he was sailing down toward the sea, and Kattegat, at that very moment. But Ubbe had delivered him a chest full of treasure from Wessex as my bride-price, and Halfdan had made sure it was on one of the boats before King Harald’s fleet departed. We let him leave with his secrets. The fate of Kattegat would unfold as it may.

My uncle had convinced Björn’s boats to wait, and arrived at the ceremony announcing himself as “representing the bride’s family.” He brought a breathtaking chestnut mare with dancing feet to stand in for my dowry. I still hoped Father would come to recognize our union in time, and grant me my true inheritance, but until then I would cherish that horse as a symbol of all I still longed for. Ivar had once likened me to an unbroken mare, and this animal’s obvious spirit would remind me never to give up on my own goals as I bridled my life to his.

The ruse of this false exchange of wedding gifts was the best we could do, the marriage not being legal without these payments rendered. We hoped to make it difficult for anyone to deny the legitimacy of this union decades from now, when memories grew dim and grey. The prices were paid, we could say.

My father may not have given his permission but it seemed that all the rest of the world did, as I stood before Ivar Lothbrok under gentle sunbeams as an unusual amount of birdsong trickled down from the branches above us. I was so captivated by his radiant face that I jumped when it was suddenly spotted with sacrificial blood; there was nothing in my world that day but his shining countenance. The spots of crimson seemed deeply symbolic to me too; of who Ivar was, and of the deep faith in the gods that bonded us, had brought us to respect and understand each other. With the sacred blood he was revealed to me again, and I to him, as our fates were sealed together under the whispering trees.

Blood and pain had begun our bond, near a grove so similar to this one. Blood and pain might yet end it. But everything that held meaning in my life was bounded by these things. I did not want to live without them. Blood and pain would bring our child into the world. As Ivar slid the ring, dipped in sacrificial red, over my finger, I knew our bloody hands would carry each other through everything that the rest of this life brought to us.

Chapter End Notes
I did it. I wrote a novel-length story. I had no idea how this was going to end for most of it, but it sure was fun!

I hoped to make Ivar and Sigrunn’s relationship as healthy as I believably could by the end, but they are still short of the mark. So here I go with one last disclaimer: PLEASE do not think I am condoning emotionally abusive relationships here. These two are still not role models, even after the amount of growth I was able to give them. If you ever date a person that acts like Ivar, please do not think you can change them by being patient or by telling them off strategically. Usually, abuse, possessiveness, and violence get worse over time, not better. Someone like Ivar needs major therapy to become a partner capable of treating someone well. This shit is not romantic, and this story might still be a tragedy. Sigrunn is just a flawed human teenager who decided she wanted to embrace these risks.

Thank you endlessly to those who have commented and talked to me about this fic. You kept me writing; we would not have gotten to this point without you. Thanks endlessly to my beta readers, who have gently pointed me in better directions as needed. I think we ended up with something pretty cool here.

This was the major project of almost all my free time for the past year. Please, if you have anything kind to say about how you feel about my story, I’d love to hear it in the comments! I feel… a little empty and lost now that this is done. Fill me back up a little if you’re inclined!
deleted scenes

Chapter Summary

I've got a few deleted scenes here, plus a season 5 insert that someone prompted me on Tumblr. Thought I'd throw them on Ao3 too so everyone can enjoy them!

Deleted Scene 1: Cut from Chapter 13; a conversation with Ubbe just before the wedding.

The last person who tried to keep us apart was Ubbe, catching me alone after I left my father’s camp. “You do not know my brother like I do.”

His pale eyes showed only concern, but I was livid. “You do not know your brother like I do!” I spat back. “Do you wish to warn me of his cruelty? I spent the summer with him while you went to Paris with my Father; I know all about his cruelty, and about its limits. Is it his brutality you fear, or the way he revels in it? I held Ecbert’s head as Ivar plucked his heart from his chest. There is nothing you can say to me about Ivar that I do not already know. That I am not ready to embrace with open arms.”

“He killed Sigurd,” Ubbe said softly.

A heavy sigh escaped me. The grief and anger were still all over the older brother’s face. “I know this too.”

“He cannot be trusted, and you do not have to tie yourself to him. You do not have to take that risk.”

“We are already tied,” I said sharply. “You should respect how deeply my love for him runs. You should appreciate it. Ivar needs someone to love him. And accept him just as he is. You have cared for him, Ubbe, I have seen this. But Ivar is not just a boy in need of care now. He is a man in need of respect. And a chance to earn his name. And I have not seen you giving him these things, of late.” I shook my head, softening as I saw a trace of shame in Ubbe’s eyes. “Yes, he is dangerous. I know the risks I am taking. I choose them with open arms. I want to stand beside this brilliant and dangerous man. Ivar loves me, and I will keep myself safe. I will not allow him to treat me the way he does to others.”

“You can try.” Ubbe’s skepticism about my success was plain.

“That is all that anyone can say,” I snapped back. “Nothing is certain in this life. I know that my fate is by Ivar’s side.”

Ubbe held my eyes a moment longer, and then sighed. “Then I will welcome you into the family. But I want you to know you can come to me, if he ever hurts you. I will always help you.”

“If I thought that was likely, I would not be standing here,” I said, taking his hand in sisterly fashion, “but thank you for your support. There are bound to be times I will be glad to know I have another ally here.”

I would not admit it to Ubbe’s face, but it did still weigh on me, to leave the support of my family
behind with this choice. But Father could not be persuaded to change his mind. It was possible, though I hated to dwell on it, that one day Ivar would grow so terrible that I would need to leave, and take the children away from him. On that day, perhaps the fact that my family could call the marriage illegitimate might only help us, to escape him without any legal grounds for him to get us back.

Father had raised me to be obedient, loyal to a fault, but my heart had a new master now. Though Ivar, I would never follow blindly. I had learned too much, could never be that person again. I had come to know that I could only be beholden to myself, first and foremost. I would be strong, and vigilant, and build the life that I wanted, in Ivar’s hall and in Ivar’s heart.

Deleted Scene 2: Something I always thought would happen during the middle of Ride The Storm, before they knew they were pregnant. (before I knew they were pregnant too, honestly) It never quite fit anywhere.

A piercing scream, then a high-pitched giggle. A child runs by on awkward, fat legs, squealing in feigned terror. Sigrunn knows in an instant this tow-headed little thing is hers.

Ivar comes next, exaggerating the way his arms lumber as he drags himself in pursuit of the child. “I am going to get you!” His voice is as low as he can rumble.

The child screams again and runs straight into Sigrunn’s arms. The dream is already fading but she holds onto the sensation of tiny hands at the back of her neck, clutching so close as they both turn toward Ivar to make their own ferocious faces back at him. “Daddy not get me!” the tiny voice screeches in triumph.

Ivar ducks his head in exaggerated defeat, then looks back up at them from under his menacing brows. “Then Daddy will have to get Mommy.”

Ivar was stroking my hair. I didn’t want to let the dream go; it was so beautiful I felt hollow with longing for that future. I sighed and his hand ran down my back, over my hip, fingertips swirling and enticing.

“I was dreaming,” I said softly, voice sounding as bittersweet as I felt.

“I can do better than a dream,” Ivar rumbled, tugging at me.

I rolled onto my back so I could look him in the eyes. “I dreamed of a son,” I said. “He was beautiful, blonde like me and with your brilliant eyes.”

Ivar broke into a bright smile for a moment, but he was not ready to be dissuaded from his seduction. “This is a dream I am confident I can make come true for you,” he said with hooded eyes, leaning in to kiss me. As he pressed his hardness against my thigh and tried to separate my legs, I realized this was a serious offer.

“Ivar!” I laughed, but stopped him. “I want your children with all my heart, but if we make a child together and you try to steal me away, my father will turn all his armies against you. I will not bring your son into this world while there is still a risk that my father will take us away from you. It breaks my heart to even think about your child not knowing you. I will not let that happen.”
“Sigrunn,” Ivar said, taking my chin and looking at me deeply, “if your father took you home with him while you were carrying my child, I would bring all these armies down upon his lands. I persuaded them to come avenge my father and I would convince them to win back my son. I am telling you that whether you tried to appease your father or not, it would be war either way. I would hope that if my child stirred in your belly, you would choose to defy him, and ride out that war on my side of the lines.”

“Of course I would, my love,” I said, kissing him sweetly, but the mood was broken. We both knew I was about to get up and go back to my father’s tent, and if we made love right now Ivar’s seed would only spill into the cold ground.

****

Season Five Insert Drabble: got a prompt on Tumblr asking me about how Sigrunn's presence would derail the Ivar x Heahmund storyline. Here's a very unpolished drabble of a scene that popped into my head.

Sigrunn enters Heahmund’s cell alone, bringing water and mercy to the prisoner. She is the cleanest, shiniest thing the Bishop has seen in weeks.

She sits a little too close to him when she offers him the cup. He croaks out something surprisingly charming; Sigrunn has never seen a man do “doe eyes” and still look completely masculine, and despite herself, her stomach flutters a little. She talks to him a little more than she intended.

When he finds out she is Ivar’s wife, Heahmund has to push down a burst of outrage. He forces himself not to picture this angel in that devil’s sinful grasp. The heathen beast does not deserve her. Ivar will not listen to the word of the Lord. But perhaps, if he could convert this woman to God’s ways...

Ivar waits outside the cell. She is in there longer than they had planned. He hears his wife’s high-pitched giggle and sets his eye to the crack in the door. Heahmund is smiling at her like they are sharing a secret, and Ivar’s stomach turns at the plans he sees in the man’s eyes. Ivar cannot see Sigrunn’s face, but he doesn’t like the turn of her body. Does she know that the angle of her hips looks like an offering? Before he has even decided, he finds himself clambering through the door.

It only takes one precise strike to leave the Bishop’s head hanging cold, arms sagging against the restraints that hold him up. “Ivar,” Sigrunn scolds, confusion in her face. “Was the plan not working?”

Ivar’s full lips twitch in an irritated little scowl. “I did not like the way that he was looking at you.”

She is laughing at him with her eyes. “I thought that was the point of this.”

Sigrunn turns to stand but Ivar grabs her under the jaw, fingers digging into her cheeks as he forces her to meet his gaze. “I did not like the way you were looking at him, either.”

He watches her eyes glaze, feels the subtle ways her limbs soften, the weight of her head sagging just
a little more into his hand. He is still so in love with these signs of his wife’s submission. She has one trance for the gods and one trance for him, and it thrills him every time, how easily he can put her under.

“You need to be reminded who you belong to, don’t you.”

Sigrunn nods, only as far as his grip on her face will let her. She is afraid and eager both at once, her pupils blown black and wide already. Mirroring the way her cunt is blossoming already to receive him.

Ivar looks again at the unconscious Heahmund. He watches until he’s sure he can see the man’s dirty chest moving softly with breath. “Do you fancy this Christian?”

“He is nothing,” Sigrunn replies swiftly. “Perhaps he might tell us something useful one day, but he means nothing to me. He is no one.”

Ivar’s smile is cruel and pleased. He knows his jealousy is a bottomless cup, and he is grateful that Sigrunn never tires of trying to fill it anyway. “If he is nothing, then we are alone, and I can give you your punishment right here. And when he wakes up, ‘no one’ can watch what I do with what’s mine.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!