Ragnar spots his Valkyrie again the very next day. He’s still sore from the fight the day before, arms screaming at him whenever he reaches over his head, a painful hitch in chest where the Slav landed the kick whenever he tries to take a deep breath, but his Valkyrie seems utterly unaffected. He spies her down by the shore, training with a dark haired shield maiden, and stops to watch her.

He has to admit - she's very good. She moves like a cat, all coiled strength and fierce grace, all but smiling as she shifts smoothly from attack to defense, then back into a counterattack while her opponent’s sword is still ringing off her shield.

He makes no secret of the fact that he's watching her, he might even be staring, and when she takes down her opponent, sliding her bent leg behind her adversary’s and giving her knee a quick little jerk to trip her, he even claps.

His Valkyrie watches her go, lips pressed into a thin line. She raises her ocean blue eyes to his and he catches that same flicker from the day before, but it's gone when she turns away and to pour herself a cup of ale from a nearby pitcher.

“What?” he says. “Why are you angry? That was very good!”

She chuckles and looks over her shoulder, giving him a sardonic smile. “I know.”

“What is your name?”

“You don't need to know my name.”

“And why not?”

She huffs and puts down her cup, turning to look him right in the eye and speaking slowly as if to a
very small child. “Because we are going home tomorrow Ragnar Lothbrok, you on one ship and me on another, and we will probably never see each other again. There’s no point in you knowing my name.”

“But that is not fair. You already know my name.”

“It’s not my fault your father is always shouting at you.”

Ragnar grins. “How do you know that? Were you watching me again?”

His Valkyrie has nothing to say to that, but Ragnar sees a bright red flush creep up her neck and across her cheeks. She turns away again and starts gathering up her things, but before she can leave Ragnar reaches out to grab her by the shoulder, turning her around to face him, and then dodges as her arm lashes out to smack his hand away. Ragnar moves forward until they’re just a step apart, and smiles down at her, realizing for the first time how small she is. She might barely come up to his chin. She doesn't move away and he thinks that she might be doing her best to not smile back at him.

“If you will not tell me your name, then I will fight you for it.”

Her blue eyes go wide. “You will what?”

He gestures to the training field just behind her. “You heard me.”

There’s definitely a smile on her face now. “You couldn’t beat me if you tried for a hundred years.”

Ragnar’s grin gets bigger and there’s a curious tingle running over his shoulders. “I will still try. And if I win, you will tell me your name.”

“No I will not, because you will not win,” she says, joining the game.

Ragnar continues on, ignoring her interruption. “And if you win, I…I…” he casts about, searching for something she might want. “If you win, I will give you my sword.”

She laughs and the tingle zings down into his chest. “If you win, I would rather give you my sword.”

Ragnar is taken aback by that. She has a good sword, plain, but well made, of much better quality than his own. He could do a lot with a sword like that.

“Deal.” He extends his hand for her to shake, and when she takes it he notices that though her hands might be small and fine, they’re strong. Perhaps his bet wasn’t such a good idea after all.

But it’s too late now, because she’s backing away from him across the flat even ground, a blazing smile all over her face, and Ragnar has no choice but to follow her, drawing his sword as he goes. She draws her own and the sharp blade flashes silver in the sunlight - yes, he could do a lot with that sword.

“Last chance, Ragnar,” she says.

He tries to ignore the lingering pain in his ribs and the fatigue in his shoulders, and squares up to face her. “You can still walk away,” he fires back, trying to ignore the thought that this might have been a very, very bad idea. He sees her face shift, her eyes narrow, and then like a starving wolf she’s on him.

She drives him back across the sand, slinging blows at him in narrow, curving arcs, and for a while it’s all he can do to just block her. She’s so fast. He has to shift to stop her from driving him into the
water, and after he turns and manages a clumsy counter attack, he thinks she might be holding something back. His slash was awful, messy, embarrassing really - she could have easily disarmed him in a multitude of ways with the poor strike the threw, but for some reason she didn’t. Was she just playing with him? Or was there another reason she didn’t want to hit him?

He blocks another one of her blows, and takes just a second too long before he counterattacks, but again she doesn’t seize the advantage. Yes, he realizes that something is definitely off. He feels a fresh surge of energy rush up his spine, and pushes her back now, driving her back to where they started. She seems to block each of his strikes without a problem, skinny arms raising her sword again and again, but her face is different now. Gone is her cocky smirk from before, now she wears a look of intense concentration, blue eyes wide and determined.

Ragnar steps in close to her now, locking their sword hilts together, and bringing his weight down on top of her. Her arms hold him up for longer than he thought they would, but when he feels her start to tremble he pivots suddenly and drives his shoulder into her chest.

It sends her flying. Her sword falls out of her grip and she lands flat on her back a few steps away, drawing shocked gulps of air. Ragnar sheaths his sword and swaggers over. He plants one booted foot on either side of her hips, and grins down at her.

“You hesitated this time. I saw you.”

The astonished look melts off her face and she’s up in an instant, a look of cold fury on her face. She jerks her feet underneath her and springs up, shoving him away from her. She snatches her sword up from where she’d dropped it, thrusts the blade into its scabbard, and all but flings it at him.

“Here,” she says, rubbing an angry hand across her face and leaving smudges of dirt behind. “My father’s sword. I hope you’re happy.”

Her words hit Ragnar harder than she ever had with her sword, and he notices that her voice has gone cold and rough, that her hands are shaking. She seems to barely be holding herself together, but he’s not sure what to do about it now.

He tries anyway, holds out a hand to her. “Wait —You don’t—I didn’t mean—”

She cuts him off though, smacking his hand away, and he wilts back. “I said, I hope you’re happy!”

She screams at him loud enough for several passers-by to stop and stare. She runs a shaking hand over her face again before she whirls around and runs off, leaving Ragnar standing alone by the shore. He’s still holding her sword, he won fair and square, but he wonders why he feels like he lost.

It takes him hours to find her again. By the time he does night has well and truly fallen, and he can see his breath in front of his face in the moonlight. Yes, it’s a good thing they’re going home tomorrow.

Ragnar finds her sitting alone by herself, next to small fire, well apart from the rest of the camp. Her back is to a large ash tree and she’s staring deep into the flames and as he approaches he can hear her breathing in dry, shuddering sobs.

He makes sure to make noise as he approaches, stepping on a few twigs and kicking a pebble off the little path. Her head jerks up at the sounds and when she recognizes him she quickly rubs her eyes before turning her face back to the flames.

“What do you want, Ragnar Lothbrok?” she asks, her voice thick and rough. “Have you come to
gloat again?”

Ragnar shifts uncomfortably on his feet as he stands beside her and shakes his head. “No.”

She looks up at him, and he can see that her eyes are rimmed in red even in the dim firelight. “Well? What then?”

“I came to give this back,” he says, and holds out her sword.

Ragnar would have laughed at the look on her face if he hadn't been the cause of it. She looks shocked and broken and thankful and so damn tired. She slowly reaches out a small hand and takes it from him.

“Why?” She looks up at him and Ragnar thinks that he might drown in the ocean of her eyes.

He fumbles for the words. “I….I don’t need it….I’ve got mine….And I….I didn't think about what….what it would mean….taking it from you. So….I just wanted to say that I’m sorry….for taking it….for making up that stupid bet….And I guess I still haven’t thanked you for saying my life yesterday….So….yes….I’m sorry….and….and thank you.” He pulls himself together enough to give her a little smile, and to his astonishment she returns it. It’s tiny, but it’s there.

“I’ll…I’ll go then.” He starts to head out of her little clearing but her soft voice stops him.

“Lagertha.”

“What?”

“My name is Lagertha.”

Ragnar smiles softly at her, takes one last look at his Valkyrie. “Goodnight then…. Lagertha. Safe journey home.”

He leaves her there, cradling her father’s sword, and walks away with the taste of her name like warm honey on his lips.

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