The Fox and The Maiden Fair

by CeridwenofWales

Summary

ON HIATUS!!!

Ivar the Boneless is a powerful King in Dublin. Emer is an Irish Princess, daughter of the High King Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid. Ivar met Emer when she is trying to convince her uncle and Ivar's ally, Cerball mac Dúnlainge, to let go of his ambitions to overthrow her father. Ivar is immediately enchanted by her wisdom, beauty and bravery. Is it possible that love can flourish between enemies?

Ivar took a dagger and started crawling to bed. Everything about him was telling her to run away; from the way his muscles were contracting with his effort to move, to the...
predatory stare and then the wicked grin that was showing his perfect teeth. Emer was sure she should run, but she couldn’t. Emer was frozen.

Notes

I've decided to take the theory that Ivar has founded the dynasty of Uí Ímair.

I think the fact that Ímar disappears from the Irish Annals in 864, and does not reappear until 870 matches with the period in which Ivar the Boneless was leading The Great Heathen Army.

"Downham concludes he is identical to Ivar the Boneless, a Viking leader who was active in England during this period as a commander of the Great Heathen Army. [...] Ó Corráin argues that the ‘evidence in favour of the identification of Ímar and Inguar consists of three points: the identity of the names, the absence of any mention of Ímar in the Irish annals between 864 and the Irish account of the siege of Dumbarton in 870, and the subsequent close connections between the dynasties of Dublin and York’. Forte, Oram, and Pedersen note that Ivar is not mentioned in any English source after 870, when Ímar reappears in the Irish annals."

Ímar

"Some historians believe Ímar and Ivar the Boneless to be identical, others claim they are two different individuals. According to Irish annals, Ímar was the son of Gofraid (also Goffríd, Gothfríðr or Guðrøðr), who was the king of Lochlann. The Norwegians at this point were often referred to as Lochlanns by the Irish. Lochlann was widely accepted among scholars as being identical to Norway, recently however this has been questioned, among others by Donnchadh Ó Corráin. His and others' theory is that Lochlann was the "viking Scotland" (Norse/Norwegian settlements on the Scottish islands and northern mainland). Whether the Irish annals referred to Lochlann as Norway or to the Norse settlements in Scotland is still a matter of debate, however by the 11th century the term had come to mean Norway."

Uí Ímair
Later Ireland in general, and intermarriage
A glimpse into the future
Prologue

A raven was flying through the sky, carrying a snake. Suddenly the snake reacted, biting the magnificent bird. It started falling, until it reached the cold ground.

Emer woke up feeling that she should warn her husband that his family needed him. Yet, he was sleeping so peacefully that she chose to wait until the morning. In those moments, she found it hard to believe that he was the mighty warrior that brought carnage upon her land and people.

She had no doubt that the sagas would never say how he was like a husband and father, the stories would only tell about his conquests. The world would only know the warrior, the king, the great strategist. A Viking. Ivar the Boneless.

Emer felt like she held some kind of power because she was the only one who had access to a hidden part of his personality. Not that he was the gentlest of men. The life with him was a daily challenge. She would always remember how hard she worked to win his trust, and even the slightest doubt could ruin everything, like a storm shaking the threes.

Emer knew that as soon as he knew about her dream, she would not see her husband for a long time. So, she took the few hours before the dawn to look at him and pray for his safety, even though she was sure his safety meant the death of others.

Ivar woke up with his wife staring at him, “You never sleep. What are you worried about?” Emer felt her cheeks heating because of his sleepy, hoarse voice. She wondered if one day, she wouldn't be affected by him. She hoped it would never happen.
She cupped his face, saying, “We must talk!”

Ivar replied with a smug smile on his plump lips, “Nothing good comes when you start a conversation with those words.”
When the Winter meets the Spring

Chapter Summary

Princess Emer rides to a meeting with Ivar and her uncle, Cerball. She tries to negotiate terms for a truce, but Ivar's mind is divided between analyzing her words and beauty. Cerball feels threatened by Ivar's interest in his niece.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
For months the Vikings led by Ivar and Olaf were fighting against king Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid. Emer saw the people were starving and disease started spreading among them. She knew something should be done. Her people were not cowards. The Romans have conquered almost all the known world, but they have never dared to settle in Éirinn. If they had managed to avoid the Romans, they could prevail and win the Dubh Ghaill.

With this in mind, Emer was riding to a meeting with the Viking leaders to make an agreement. She was not going alone, she had Morann, a Brehon, with her. Some of her father’s warriors were guarding them as well. Yet, she knew they couldn’t do anything if the Vikings decided to kill them all. Her father wanted to go, but Emer thought he shouldn’t risk his life and legacy. She had volunteered to go instead.

They heard that her uncle was allied to the foreigners to overthrow her father. It was not a complete surprise. She knew Cerball, her mother’s brother, was ambitious. But, she had never thought he would join forces with the heathens. Her father, the High King, had married Cerball’s sister, Princess Land as part of a truce. But the animosity between them never ceased. Emer had a feeling that peace would never last in Éirinn.
They were sitting at the same table. Emer was doing her best not to show her revulsion at her uncle's actions, but with the foreigner gazing at her so openly, Emer felt blood rushing to her cheeks. Cerball started the conversation, “It’s a pleasure to see you my dear niece.”

Emer replied with a grimace, “I would be more pleased if we were not fighting on opposite sides, uncle.”

Ivar was watching them attentively. He had never seen a woman with eyes as green as the rich forest of this new land. And she looked angry at his ally. Her uncle.

Cerball yelled, “It’s you father’s fault!”, Emer's lips curled up in disdain. Cerball lowered his voice, but his tone grew steely, "He wants all glory, and thinks that I’m his servant. I’ll prove him wrong. But, don’t worry, your mother and you will be safe, under my protection.”

Emer smirked, tilting her head, “What kind of protection, uncle?”

Cerball smiled back, “We should forget the reasons that brought you here, then you would live in my lands, among my family... your family.”

Emer scowled and tried to raise doubts about her uncle's honor, “I see. All you ask is for me to betray my father. I wonder how they...” The Princess glanced at Ivar and back to her uncle, "I mean your allies, can trust you. You’re betraying your blood. What could stop you from killing them as soon as they are not helpful?” Emer watched how Ivar's fingertips trailed over his chin as his eyes persistently inspected hers.

Ivar liked her way of thinking. He could see Cerball was unnerved by her words. Ivar didn’t trust the man.

“I’m curious to know the answer to your niece’s question.” Ivar insisted, his nostrils flaring.

Cerball's hands were sweating and trembling on his lap. With great effort he managed to speak, “She is just a child. Her father sent her because he doesn’t take you seriously.”

Ivar looked at her face with an expression Emer couldn’t name, “She doesn’t look like a child.”
Emer gulped, shifting on her seat and Ivar noticed she was uncomfortable.

Emer revealed her proposal to change the subject, “I’m here to say that father is willing to give you Osraige back. No more battles!”

Morann reinforced what Emer just said, “The Princess is telling the truth. The High King is giving this option. You should take it.”

Cerball burst into laughter, “Why should I take it? He is so desperate that he sent a child to represent him. I won’t stop until he is on his knees. He won’t be High King for long. It’s time for a new era. The Cholmáin clan will soon be dead!” His smirk turned into a scowl as Cerball stared at his niece.

She was shocked with her uncle’s behaviour, “Be careful uncle! The higher you will fly, the harder you will fall. I see that you are not taking my advice seriously. So I should go back to my father telling that you are still wanting war instead of peace.”

Emer stood up to leave when Ivar interrupted her, “Finish your meal, Princess! The conversation is not over. Your uncle is not the only who can make decisions here.”

Emer was unsure about what to do. She was paralyzed, staring down at his beautiful face, into his eyes that were so bright and penetrating. Does he want to negotiate? Emer thought perplexed.

Chapter End Notes

"Dubh Ghaill from the Irish Gaelic words meaning ‘Dark/Evil Foreigner’; and this is just what the indigenous Celts called the Danish Vikings who started settling in Ireland and Scotland more than 1,000 years ago."

"Although the Viking political power declined after the battle of Clontarf on April 23 1014 AD, as a people the Vikings were soon thoroughly absorbed into the religious and political life of the country, adopting the Irish language and the Irish customs, intermarrying and intermingling. To them also Ireland owes all of the earliest towns in the country. Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick all began as Viking settlements, and, even after their absorption into the Gaelic culture, the commercial interests of the newcomers kept them centred in these areas."

Clan Macdougall

"The name Dubhghaill is made up of the words ‘dubh’ which means ‘black’ and ‘gall’ which means ‘stranger’." 

Clan Doyle
"The Norse Vikings were active along the southern and eastern coast of Ireland while the Danes travelled further in land. The Irish differentiated between the two by hair colour. They called the Norse Vikings Fionn Ghaill, which meant ‘fair foreigner’ and the Danes were known as Dubh Ghaill, meaning ‘black foreigner’.

**Vikings arrive in Ireland**

I decided to make Emer a daughter of the High king of Ivar's era in Ireland, Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruaanaid.

**Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruaanaid**

By the Annals of Ulster, he was High King of all Ireland between 846–862. He married Cerball's sister, princess Land ingen Dúngaile of Osraige, and Cerball married one of Máel's daughters of his first marriage. However, the family bonds didn't prevent them to go to war against each other.

According to The Annals of Innisfallen, an expedition led by Cerball with allies from Munster was launched against Máel Sechnaill in 859, which is said to have reached as far north as Armagh. The Annals of Ulster however, states that Cerball entered Mide with a great army, supported by Norse allies, Amlaib and Ivar.

**The Annals of Ulster**
**Annals of Inisfallen**

"In Ireland a judge was called a Brehon, whence the native Irish law is commonly known as the "Brehon Law"; but its proper designation is Fénechas, i.e. the law of the Féine or Féne, or free land-tillers. The brehons had absolutely in their hands the interpretation of the laws and the application of them to individual cases. They were therefore a very influential class of men; and those attached to chiefs had free lands for their maintenance, which, like the profession itself, remained in the same family for generations."

**The Brehon Laws**
We stayed still for a few moments, staring at each other until I sighed and took a seat on Ivar's left side, opposite to my uncle. Morann sat next to me, his forehead wrinkled in a frown. Cerball kept glaring at me and I felt challenged to return his scowl. I wondered if I had my bow here, I would shoot him in cold blood. Out of the corner of my eye I could notice Ivar watching me as an eagle and my mouth dried with the thought he was reading intentions I didn't even realized I had.

Ivar cleared his throat and I turned in my seat to glare at him, only to find him eyeing me up and down, a single eyebrow arched on his forehead. His fingers, settled on the table.

"Are you hungry, Princess?" The intensity of his gaze was making me uneasy. *Am I angry?*

My eyelids were fluttering and I opened my mouth to answer, when he gave an approving pat on my hand. I had no idea what to think of it. Met his eyes with uncertainty, instantly hypnotized by the bright, blue shine of them. Ivar merely smiled. It appeared authentic, eyes lit up as he leaned forward and dangerously closer to me, almost like he was anticipating more of my reaction to his inappropriate touch.

"Are you hungry?" His smile turned into a smirk and I recoiled my hand, placing my sweaty palm on my lap, pouting.

"I guess I have my answer." Ivar tilted his head, licking softly on his lower lip.

“If you have any proposal to solve this quarrel, I would like to know?” I couldn't allow this man to make me forget my purpose. With a great effort I kept my voice steady as I questioned him.

Ivar laughed, “I’m not in a rush. We can eat in peace...” He glanced at my lips as if he was considering something of crucial importance and added, "for now.”
I didn’t like that he was making me wait. It was clear that he was playing with me. Of course it was an intelligent strategy, to make me nervous and gain advantage to negotiate.

I watched Ivar eating, and wondered how a man whose bones were easily broken was able to lead so many warriors to victory. He should be very clever.

When we finished the meal, I was eager to know what Ivar had in mind.

“Now that we have finished, we must talk about your father’s offering.” Ivar announced and I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

I nodded as I silently prayed that God would interced on our favor. I spared a glance to my uncle and by the way his jaw was clenching, I could tell he was worried the Northman would change sides. If he dared, I was sure Cerball would try to kill him.

“My father is willing to stop spilling blood, but you both should be reasonable as well. We won’t give my uncle the title of High King.” I emphasized looking from Ivar to Cerball. Morann nodded his approval.

Ivar replied coldly, “I’m not worried about spilling blood, Princess.” His voice was gruff, and his brows were drawn together in a frown... and yet the blue eyes twinkled with humor.

A tremble coursed its way through my body. I was terrified hearing Ivar talking about killing my people. I should think about something quickly. I sucked in a breath and started reasoning with him.

“I don’t understand why you are my uncle’s ally. What do you gain by that? You’ve been fighting my father for a year and you gained nothing.” I said in a whisper fearing that he would be offended with the reminder of his defeats.

Ivar smiled at me as if he knew something I didn't. Blood rushed to my cheeks and I could only hope he hadn’t notice it.

“One day we will win. Odin is on our side.” The confidence in his husky voice was infuriating.
“My father also say that our God is on our side. As well as his countless allies. You can’t win.” He scowled, his nostrils flaring. I feared I had gone too far, but he said nothing.

"Why waste your warrior’s lives?” I pursed my lips, waiting for an insult that never came. It seemed I caught him by surprise. His jaw dropped, but he soon regained his composure and the smug smile was back.

I can't doubt the Gods. I must make them look at me. Being brave is my duty.

I could see my action affected her somehow, but I wanted to push her further, “We are not afraid to die, Princess. As soon as your people realize this, they will see we have nothing to lose, only to gain.”

I was feasting my eyes on her every slightest motion, amazed that a woman so young could make a man as Cerball tremble under her scrutiny, “We are not afraid to die either, but we fear living dishonourably," She turned to me and my heart skipped a beat. "I think honor is something important to you and your people, huh?” I grinned at her, still bewitched by the way her full lips kept moving.

"My uncle attended a feast to celebrate my mother’s wedding some years ago, and now he is fighting against his own family. What is left when honor is lost?” Her eyes traveled to Cerball and I felt fury rising, making my fingers curl into fists.

I was impressed by her courage to challenge Cerball. I didn’t trust the man. But I was even more fascinated that she was questioning me. A stranger. A Demon as they liked to call me. I thought she would be either disgusted or afraid. But none of these possibilities seemed to apply as Emer was demonstrating, what I would dare to say, admiration for my people. I wanted to know if she was true, or using her charm to gain something from me as everyone. Is it possible to find someone who has nothing to hide?
Cerball was furious with Emer. He thought he could convince her to ally with him. His belief was that everyone had a price. *How does she dare to humiliate me this way, and in front of this foreigner?* Cerball thought standing up, and rising his hand to slap his niece.

Ivar yelled, startling both, “Don’t you dare! You have no right to beat her. Especially in my domains.”

Emer was shocked that her father’s enemy had defended her. Cerball’s face was flushed with anger, not only his niece thought she could dishonour him. But also his ally was telling him what to do. They would regret that.

Ivar was looking at Emer with interest, “I admire how bravely you defend your family. Don’t you want to be Queen one day? One day you could be married to a High King instead of defending one that uses you for his interests.” His eyes darted over her face, “Someone who wouldn't hesitate to send you away to a nunnery.” Emer could notice the disgust when he mentioned the nunnery.

Emer was astonished. It was not uncommon. She knew about many marriages between women from her people and foreigners. But she has never thought she would be one of them.

Cerball didn’t like Ivar’s interest in Emer. It could ruin his plans.

Emer asked warily, “What do you want to say?”

“You know what I said.” His voice was thick, “I have no wife, I would like to know if you want to marry me.” Ivar allowed himself to scour every inch of her face as he pleased, analyzing her reaction.

She wished he was not looking at her, so she could think straight.

She demanded with doe eyes, “Will you keep fighting against my father if I marry you?”

Ivar stopped for a moment, watching Emer breathing heavily. He couldn’t deny he was looking forward to conquering Munster. It would be a personal conquest. He felt challenged by Mael Sechnaill’s strength.
Ivar finished his offer, “If we are family, I see no reasons to keep fighting your father. If he agrees with my proposal and doesn’t interfere in my kingdom, I won’t threaten him anymore.”

"Do you promise?" Emer inquired hesitantly, her eyes narrowing.

“It is a promise. If your father allow me to marry you, we are allies.” His smile was wolfish, with teeth bared as he waited for a wise remark.

Cerball's palm smacked loudly on the table, “You gave me your word that you would help me to conquer Munster and take back Osraige. It seems that you have no honor.”

Ivar stood up from his chair with a grimace. He was holding on to the edge of the table, his knuckles white as it was a monumental effort to hold his weight on his arms alone. His warriors were holding their swords as well.

Emer could hear the impatience in his voice, and Ivar annunciated his words slowly as if talking to a child, “I didn’t promise such a thing. Our deal was to take back Osraige for you, Munster should be mine. And this is my kingdom, I give the orders here, not you.”

Emer cleared her throat, “I think it’s time for me to leave, I must tell my father of your offer.” Ivar turned to face her and Emer could see his fury dissolving quickly as he offered her a half smile.

Emer walked away with Morann, unaware of Ivar's gaze following her.

Cerball was watching Ivar breathing heavily and thinking about his next step. He was taken aback when Ivar turned his face to him.

“I advise you not to raise your voice again in my domains. I’m King here.” Ivar grunted and Cerball could only nod.

"I’ll honor my word to you. We will take back Osraige as you wish. Her father will never allow her to marry me.” Ivar looked at the door as if he was deep in thoughts.
After riding for hours, I finally arrive home. I'm on a rush to talk to my parents about Ivar’s offer.

*Is that possible that I can save my people only by marrying Ivar?* If it that's the price to pay, I will do it gladly. I wonder how it would be to be married to Ivar. He seemed to be a cunning man. *Can Ivar be a loving husband as well?* I shake my head at my foolishness. I can't be unrealistic to think Ivar offered marriage because he felt something when he saw me.

I found my father talking to his advisors about how to protect Tara. It is always a fundamental concern, because it is the symbolic seating of the High Kings of Éirinn. if he doesn't prove himself able to protect it, he will lose his title. My father can't be seen as weak because we are surrounded by enemies that play a dangerous game. Foreigners allying with Éirinn’s Kings to overthrow another Kings, then they fight against one another and the cycle goes on. I wait at the door until my father notices my presence. A smile brightens his face and he gestures with his hand for me to come closer. I walk to him and he stands up to embrace me.

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He loved his little girl. Not so little anymore. Máel noticed she was a woman, who received some marriage proposals. Yet, he was not prepared to let her go nor risk his position if his daughter marries a man with intention to replace him as High King, so he has been delaying her marriage. He tells everyone to leave the room, except for his wife and daughter. Emer takes a seat on her father’s left.
“Tell us how it went the talk with your uncle,” Máel looked at Land with furrowed eyebrows, earning a glare from his wife, "and that pagan he associated himself with!" Máel declared, mouth twisting on the word pagan. His disdain was making Emer uncomfortable. She was almost ready to defend Ivar as fiercely as he protected her from her uncle's slap, but she realized her father was right. Ivar was a pagan indeed, and he wouldn't feel offended to be called so.

Pressing her lips tightly together, Emer was afraid to understand why she felt the urge to defend Ivar, “Uncle was there. He doesn’t want to negotiate. He wants to overthrow you.”

Land hissed through clenched teeth, “That bastard. I can’t believe I’m his sister.”

Máel shouted looking from his wife to Emer, “If he wants to keep the war, this is exactly what I’ll give him. I’m not a coward. I have allies to support my desire to put him down. I’ll love watching Cerball drowning in a pool of his own blood.” Emer felt sympathy for her father, for the people that died during the battles against Cerball and Ivar, but this reaction was beyond that. A creeping sense of horror. Are the tales about my father murdering one of his brothers true? Is it possible his thirsty for power is more powerful than the bond that should unite family? She took a deep breath and pushed the thought to the side.

Emer felt her heart racing. She wanted her uncle's defeat. But, she would never be happy with his death, “There’s something else, father.” Emer whispered and Máel noticed her hesitation.

“What?” His impatient tone doesn't pass unnoticed by Emer or Land.

Emer is still insecure about her father's reaction. She looks at her feet, proceeding carefully, unsure where this is leading. “His ally said something.”
Emer’s father couldn’t be more curious about what this strange man offered.

Máel doesn’t hide his repugnance when his nose wrinkles and he barks, “The heathen? What did he say?” Emer looked up at her father with a pout. But took a deep breath when she realized she shouldn’t be offended in Ivar’s behalf.

Emer was nervous to tell her father what Ivar had proposed. “He... He said...”

Máel shouts making Emer practically jump, “WHAT? Tell it for once!”

Emer breathes deeply through her mouth then mutters, “He proposed marriage.”

Máel burst into laughter, clapping his hands and throwing his head back dramatically; unable to stop until he noticed his daughter and wife were not following his amusement, “To whom? Everyone knows he doesn't like women.” He said in a wheezing voice, holding his aching belly, face still contorted with laughter.

Emer bit her lower lip and Land watched her reaction. Land understood what Emer was implying.

“He wants to marry me.” Emer searched for her mother's eyes to find strength to speak. Land smiled, walking from her seat to place her hand over Emer’s shoulder, kissing her forehead.

“Impossible.” Máel snorted and Emer’s jaw dropped, “I’ll never allow it. It’s an offense to think I
would marry my last daughter to a monster.” Máel grunted, the little muscle in his cheek straining as he stared at his daughter.

“Well, you allowed your first daughter to marry Cerball. Maybe, it's a good option, father.” Emer straightened her shoulders to make her determination clear. She raised her eyebrows, daring an uninhibited stare at her father.

His mandible slackened momentarily with Emer's rebellion. Máel couldn’t regret more about his decision to marry his eldest daughter to a man that would come to be his enemy. “Never. Only if I die. Can you imagine the terrible things he could do to you? They are not trustworthy. We must get rid of those pagans!” Máel bellowed and Emer tried a new approach.

“You might be right that we can't trust them.” Emer reached for his hand, smiling softly, ”Yet, the only monster I saw there was my uncle. He tried to slap me.” Emer noticed her father's nostrils flaring with fury as he squeezed her fingers.

"I'll kill him! I'll kill them all!” Máel leaned forward, taking Emer's face on his hands.

"Ivar didn't allow it.” Emer leaned on Máel's touch, holding his wrists.

Landa was quiet, watching her daughter speaking. She was surprised that Emer was defending the Northman from her father’s wrath.

“So now you call the foreigner by his name. What happened there?” Máel was taken aback by Emer's passion to defend the stranger. He removed his hands from her face, straightening his back against the chair.
“Nothing. I just thought that it would be a good way to solve the problem. And it wouldn’t be the first time one of our people would marry one of them.” Máel looked at her through narrowed eyes, resenting her willingness to marry a pagan.

Máel stopped for a moment to think about a better way to solve the situation. It seemed his daughter has already made up her mind.

“Are you willing to be a pagan? If you marry him, you’ll be no longer a Christian. It will be expected that you follow his customs.” Landa questioned Emer, keeping an eye on the King.

“If that is what I need to do to save my family and people, I won’t regret that. What is more Christian than sacrifice yourself for the ones you love the most?” Emer cocked her head smiling at her father.

Landa kissed Emer's cheek, while Máel was still thinking. An answering spark glinted in his eyes as the women looked at him expectantly, “I think we can use his offer to solve this for once.” The way Máel said the words slowly followed by a smirk, made Emer shiver. But she dismissed the impression. Her father would never risk her safety or happiness.

Chapter End Notes

O'DUGAN in his Topography says:

"Let us travel around Fodhla (Ireland),
Let men proceed to proclaim these tidings;
From the lands where we now are,
The five provinces we shall investigate.

"We give the pre-eminence to Tara,
Before all the melodious mirthful Gael,
To all its chieftains and its tribes,
And to its just and rightful laws."
"The princes of Tara I here record:
The Royal O'Hart, and likewise O'Regan;
The host who purchased the harbours
Were the O'Kellys and O'Connollys."

The "harbours" here mentioned were those of the river Shannon, bordering on the ancient Kingdom of Meath.

**The Kingdom of Meath**

"The Hill of Tara, located near the River Boyne, is an archaeological complex that runs between Navan and Dunshaughlin in County Meath, Ireland. It contains a number of ancient monuments and, according to tradition, was the seat of the High King of Ireland."

**Hill of Tara**

"The Hill of Tara, known as Temair in gaeilge, was once the ancient seat of power in Ireland – 142 kings are said to have reigned there in prehistoric and historic times. In ancient Irish religion and mythology Temair was the sacred place of dwelling for the gods, and was the entrance to the otherworld. Saint Patrick is said to have come to Tara to confront the ancient religion of the pagans at its most powerful site."

"One interpretation of the name Tara says that it means a "place of great prospect" and indeed on a clear day it is claimed that features in half the counties of Ireland can be seen from atop Tara. In the distance to the northwest can be seen the brilliant white quartz front of Newgrange and further north lies the Hill of Slane, where according to legend St. Patrick lit his Pascal fire prior to his visit to Tara in 433 AD."

**Tara: Temair**

"Medieval and early modern Irish literature portrays an almost unbroken sequence of High Kings, ruling from the Hill of Tara over a hierarchy of lesser kings, stretching back thousands of years. Modern historians believe this scheme is artificial, constructed in the 8th century from the various genealogical traditions of politically powerful groups, and intended to justify the current status of those groups by projecting it back into the remote past."

**High King of Ireland**

"Niall Noigiallach (of the Nine Hostages) established himself as King of Midhe (Meath) at Tara around 400 A.D. This kingship was followed by many of his descendants, thereafter referred to as the Ui Neill. The Ui Neill dynasty divided into two in the 400’s, the Northern Ui Neill (Cenel nEoghain and Cenel Conaill) remained in the north while the Southern Ui Neill moved to Meath and the eastern midlands - they took it in turns to be Kings of Tara and, later, High-Kings of Ireland. [...]For over 500 years, beginning with Niall of the Nine Hostages in 445 A.D., the Southern Ui Neill held the kingship at Tara, giving the title-holder the Kingship of Ireland as well."

"Mide (Midhe), "the middle kingdom," consisted of the present Counties of Meath and Westmeath, with parts of Cavan and Longford. It was one of the five early provinces of Ireland, and by 400-500 A.D. it comprised much of the territory of the Southern Ui
Neill with its capital at the royal site of Tara, Ireland's first capital."

Old Irish Kingdoms and Clans
A New Journey

Chapter Summary

Ivar and Cerball are planning an attack against Mide, Máel's lands until some revelations change the plans on both sides. Emer faces a choice that brings hope and might change her life forever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After Emer's departure, Ivar and Cerball kept planning an attack to Mide, Máel’s heartlands. Frustration had Ivar's body positively vibrating. He knew his proposal allowed them more time to plan an invasion. He wondered if he would get to see Emer again.

Cerball said, “I thought you were going to betray me? I didn’t understand why have you made an offer of marriage.”

Ivar just shrugged, “Do you really think your brother-in-law would allow your niece to marry me?”

“Why not? Because of the rumours?” Cerball mentioned and regretted immediately, the thrill of fear Ivar inspired paralyzed him.

Ivar asked, voice still dangerously light. “Which rumours?”

“Nothing, just rumours.” Cerball muttered, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. His mind was spinning as Cerball tried to think about something to distract Ivar from the subject, but he was like a predator trying to keep track of one particular prey.

Ivar demanded that Cerball should speak. His sharp teeth flashed as he bit off each word, “Tell me now! What is being said about me?”

Cerball babbled excuses, “We all know they are all lies. Some people find strange that a man of your status, success and wealth is not married.”
Ivar cut him off. There was the barest hint of a twinkle in his eye as he asked, “So?”

Cerball didn’t want to keep talking. He knew how sensitive the Norsemen could be about their honor and fame. “Nothing. We must prepare the invasion...”

Ivar was using the table to help him to come closer to Cerball, in one hand he was holding a dagger.

“Of course we must prepare the invasion. But first, I really want to know what is being said about me.”

Cerball’s voice was as trembling as the hands he hid under the table, “You shouldn’t worry. They know nothing.”

Ivar insisted, voice dripping with haughty mockery, “Yet, I’m still demanding an answer to my question.”

Cerball noticed that he had no other choice but to reveal the gossip, “Some people say you don’t like women. That some of your men are used to rape when they are raiding, but no one has ever seen you with a woman.”

Ivar’s face was distorted with anger. As quick as he was enraged, he started smiling mischievously.

Cerball had no idea about Ivar’s plans. But, he was sure he wouldn’t like them. Cerball feared the idea of Ivar marrying Emer. If Máel and his line were dead, Cerball could be the High King, he even married Máel’s eldest daughter, Áine. Nothing would stop him now.

This cripple won’t be an obstacle. Cerball lied that he only wanted Osraige. He wanted everything. As soon as Ivar helped him to achieve his purpose, Cerball would get rid of him.

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Máel sent word to Ivar that he would allow Emer to marry him, if he brought Cerball’s head to the feast. Ivar couldn’t take back his word on the agreement. And he knew that as soon as he delivered Cerball’s head, Máel or his wife could demand justice, to avenge his death. He was trapped.
After some months of preparation they finally invaded Mide. Even though the combined forces of Ivar, Cerball and Amlaíb were numerous, Máel managed to make them retreat.

Cerball realized his treachery wouldn't help him, he was more willing to hear Máel. An assembly was called to put an end to their dispute.

Máel agreed to give Osraige back to Cerball. Yet, he didn't trust the ambitious man would be satisfied before taking the seat of High King. This way, he also agreed to give Emer's hand to Ivar. He was trying to establish an alliance with Ivar, neutralizing Cerball’s chance to conspire with the Vikings and against him once more.

Emer was happy that her father wouldn't go to war against her uncle. But she felt she couldn't tell the same about Cerball’s former allies. They wouldn't give up easily.

The marriage negotiations were not going so well. Máel didn’t want to meet Ivar to negotiate. Emer felt insulted and betrayed by her father’s behaviour. He was acting like he was selling a cow instead of planning her future. And, more important, he also stated that Emer’s family wouldn’t attend the wedding. His words still echoing in her ears and aching in her heart.

“I will not be there to feast with those beasts. And I won’t allow your mother to attend either." The obstinate set to his jaw showed Emer her father's stubborn pride was not letting her soothing words sink in, "I can’t trust they will not kill us all as soon as we arrive in the hall. This way he would guarantee the conquest of Munster.”

She felt abandoned by them, as if her safety meant nothing. She grew up aware that her happiness in a marriage would not be a priority. She was a Princess after all, her marriage would be a political one. But, she had never expected to be married to a Viking and put aside by her family. She wondered if her sister felt the same way when she married Cerball. Emer has not seen her in years, since Cerball and Máel were involved in this war. Even after their marriage, their visits were uncommon.

Áine was close in age to Emer's mother. As Emer was born after Áine left to live with Cerball, they didn't have the chance to have an intimate relationship. Yet, in the rare occasions they could join the family, Emer felt loved. Áine has always treated her like a daughter. Emer wished she could talk to her sister to share her worries. Yet, she didn't know if Áine would be trustworthy now that Cerball has gone to war against their father. Emer felt that she would soon discover how it was to be married to her family's enemy.

She had her mother, Land, by her side. Still, she couldn't feel more lonely. She was going to a
strange place, surrounded by foreigners. However, she would be the foreigner there. The success of this marriage could prevent more blood feud, or be the beginning of an endless war. The weight was unbearable to her shoulders alone.

Ivar insisted that he wanted one-third of Máel’s lands for his own use and profit as Emer’s dowry. Máel would give Emer a large portion of gold as a dowry. He thought this could satisfy Ivar's ambition for a while.

In the set date to her journey to her new life, it was raining. Emer had not slept. The woman had mixed feelings about her situation. She wanted to save her people. She was willing to make a sacrifice to placate the Viking wrath, but her family didn't think they should be part of the ceremony. She had to walk alone now. It was like she was no longer Máel’s daughter.

The sky was tar-black. Large clouds were moving towards Emer as the comitíve sent by Ivar approached to take the bride with them. She thought the rain would be useful to hide her tears. She made an titanic effort to swallow her sorrow to leave her loved ones behind.

She embraced her mother, "Take care of yourself my daughter. You're so brave, I'm proud of you. I'll be praying for your safety. Always."

Land gave Emer an old cross, making her daughter gasp. Without asking, Land moved behind Emer and brushed her hair over the shoulder. Drawing the necklace around her neck, she fastened the clasp.

Emer looked Land in the eyes, "I will be safe, mháthair. Take care of athair."

She looked at her father, it was clear he has cried at night. His eyes were bloodshot and swollen. By the way his jaw was clenching, Máel was trying to avoid a new wave of tears.

"At last, it seems that mo cailín will walk away from beneath my wings."

She gulped after hearing such sweet words from the man she loved the most until now. Emer was disappointed with his manners, but it was impossible to hate him.

“Tá mo chroí istigh ionat, athair.”
Máel pulled Emer to him in a tight embrace and she felt like he wanted to meld with her. She strained to look up at him, being rewarded with a rare smile and a kiss on her forehead. When she was ready to go, her father called one of the servants. He was carrying a big chest. Máel opened, revealing a sword.

"I've heard that in a Viking wedding, the bride must give a sword from her family to her husband. So...here it is."

Emer was speechless. Máel grinned and gathered her in his arms once more. His muscular arms were like a steel cage around her, as if he wanted to keep her and forget the agreement.

One of Ivar’s warriors approached to call Emer. They should left immediately to avoid travelling at night.

He nodded to Máel and Emer, taking the heavy chest from the servant. Emer walked behind him, avoiding looking back. The girl was sure that if she looked back, she would run to her parents’ embrace. She had no time to regret.

Chapter End Notes

"Mide" is the Old Irish term for Meath. The Viking attack is recorded in the Annals of Ulster.

"Amlaíb and Ímar and Cerball led a great army into Mide in 859AD."

"In the same year, a royal conference was held at Ráith Aeda Meic Bric of the nobles of Ireland, including Mael Sechnaill, king of Temair, and Fethgna, successor of Patrick, and Suairlech, successor of Finnia, to make peace and amity between the men of Ireland, and as a result of that meeting Cerball, king of Osraige, gave his full dues to Patrick's congregation and his successor, and the Osraige were alienated to Leth Cuinn, and Mael Guala, king of Munu, warranted the alienation."

The Annals of Ulster

In 858 Ímar, allied with Cerball, King of Ossory, routed a force of Norse-Irish at Araid Tíre (east of Lough Derg and the Shannon in modern-day County Tipperary).[34] Ossory was a small kingdom wedged between the larger realms of Munster and Leinster. At the beginning of his reign in the 840s, Cerball's allegiance was pledged to the over-king of Munster, but as that kingdom grew weaker Ossory's strategic location allowed opportunities for his advancement.[35] Cerball had previously fought against the Vikings, but he allied with them to challenge the supremacy of Máel Sechnaill and his Norse-Irish allies.[36] The following year Amlaíb, Ímar and Cerball conducted a raid
on Máel Sechnaill's heartlands in Meath,[nb 6] and in consequence a royal conference was held at Rathugh (modern-day County Westmeath).[38] Following this meeting Cerball shed his allegiance to the Vikings and formally submitted to Máel Sechnaill in order to "make peace and amity between the men of Ireland".[39]

"With their ally (Cerball) turned against them, Ímar and Amlaíb sought a new alliance with Áed Findliath, overking of the Northern Uí Néill, and rival of Máel Sechnaill. In 860 Máel Sechnaill and Cerball led a large army of men from Munster, Leinster, Connacht and the Southern Uí Néill into the lands of Áed Findliath near Armagh. While the southern forces were encamped there, Áed launched a night attack, killing some of the southern men, but his forces took many casualties and were forced to retreat. In retaliation for this invasion Amlaíb and Áed led raids into Meath in 861 and 862, but they were driven off both times. According to the Fragmentary Annals this alliance had been cemented by a political marriage:
'Áed son of Niall and his son-in-law Amlaíb (Áed's daughter was Amlaíb's wife) went with great armies of Irish and Norwegians to the plain of Mide, and they plundered it and killed many freemen.'"

Ímar: War with Máel Sechnaill

Here we have the meaning of Emer's sister name: "Possibly derived from Old Irish ét "jealousy". In Irish mythology she was a sun and horse goddess who was the lover of Midir."

Áine

I used some words in (what I think it is) Irish Gaelic.

Tá mo chroí istigh ionat = I love you (literally "my heart is within you") I love you in Irish Gaelic
mhéathair = Mother Mother in Irish Gaelic
athair = Father Father in Irish Gaelic
mo cailín = My girl
The Princess and The Vikings

Chapter Summary

Emer travels to the unknown, facing danger and doubts. She gets to know a little more about her future husband's culture.

Chapter Notes

Old Norse Tongue
I took the narrative of Loki's punishment from Gylfaginning by Snorri Sturluson. The Gylfaginning deals with the creation and destruction of the world of the Norse gods, and many other aspects of Norse mythology. Gylfaginning

More about Sigyn and Loki here and here

Þakka - Thanks
Sof þú vel - Good night! (sleep well)
Velkominn - Welcome! (when addressing one male)

More about Loki's punishment Baldr's death and Loki's punishment

"Loki ran far away from Asgard. At the peak of a high mountain, he built for himself a house with four doors so that he could watch for his pursuers from all directions. By day he turned himself into a salmon and hid beneath a nearby waterfall. By night he sat by his fire and weaved a net for fishing for his food."

"The far-seeing Odin perceived where Loki now dwelt, and the gods went after him. When Loki saw his former friends approaching, he threw the net in the fire and hid himself in the stream in his salmon form so as to leave no traces of himself or his activities. When the gods arrived and saw the net smoldering in the fire, they surmised that the wily shapeshifter had changed himself into the likeness of those he intended to catch for himself. The gods took up the twine Loki had been using and crafted their own net, then made their way to the stream. Several times they cast their net into the stream, and each time the salmon barely eluded them. At last, the fish made a bold leap
downstream to swim to the sea, and while in the air he was caught by Thor. The salmon writhed in the war-god’s grasp, but Thor held him fast by his tail fins. This is why, to this day, the salmon has a slender tail."

"Loki was then taken, in his regular form, to a cave. The gods then brought in Loki’s two sons and turned one into a wolf, who promptly killed his brother, strewing his entrails across the cave floor. Loki was then fastened to three rocks in the cave with the entrails of his slain son, which the gods had turned into iron chains. Skadi placed a poisonous snake on a rock above his head, where it dripped venom onto his face. But Loki’s faithful wife, Sigyn, sat by his side with a bowl that she held up to the snake’s mouth to catch the poison. But every so often, the bowl became full, and Sigyn would have to leave her husband’s side to dispose of its contents, at which point the drops that fell onto the unrepentant god’s face would cause him to shake violently, which brought about earthquakes in Midgard, the world of humanity. And this was the lot of Loki and Sigyn until, as destined, Loki broke free from his chains at Ragnarok to assist the giants in destroying the cosmos."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Emer didn’t know if she could talk to a man that was not her husband. She knew so little about their culture. But, she was glad the blond man was friendly. She was walking alone to her destiny, it felt better that she could have a conversation to help her not to think about how her life was changing.

Sigvard was impressed that she was interested in knowing more about his people. She looked like a smart woman, “How did you learn my language?”

Emer replied with a shy smile, “Well, you are not the first of your people to arrive here. At home, we have some servants that are of Norse origin. I’ve learned a little with them.”

Sigvard was embarrassed to correct her, but he thought that it would be better if she knew her former home was no longer hers.

“In a few days, we are arriving at your household. Your husband would not like to hear you referring to your father’s domains as your home.” Sigvard’s face seemed pained. His lips moved like he might say more, but hesitated.
Emer’s intentions to avoid the subject of her new life came to an end. Sooner than she considered it would be, “I’m sorry. It’s hard to leave everything behind so fast.” Emer said so quietly she almost could not hear herself, "I'll grow used to my new life. How long will it take for us to arrive?"

Sigvard liked her. He thought she could make Ivar less angry, “Two or three days. It depends.”

Emer looked at him in confusion, “Depending on what?”

Sigvard replied in amusement, “It depends on how long and fast you can ride your horse, Princess.”

Emer laughed, “I may be a Princess, but I’m not made of glass. I can keep up with your pace.”

The men around the fire laughed as they have heard the funniest of jokes. What made Emer feel challenged. They ate and one of them, Bragi, took a panpipe to sing a ballad. It was not so different from the meals in her father's lands. The man started reciting a poem about the punishment of the god Loki and the role of his loyal wife, Sigyn.

Emer was impressed that the tale was so much like one that she has heard as a child. About how a common salmon ate nine hazelnuts that fell into the Well of Wisdom. What has made the fish gain all knowledge. The first person to eat of its flesh would conquer this wisdom.

In Loki’s story, he fled from Asgard due his role in Baldr’s death. By day he turned himself into a salmon and hid beneath a nearby waterfall. By night he sat by his fire and weaved a net for fishing for his food.
Bragi stopped his tale, taking a sip from his horn. “What happens? Will Odin find out about Loki’s schemes?” Emer was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, leaning forward as if she could drink in Bragi’s story.

Sigvard laughed at her interest, “He found out, Princess. When Loki saw his former friends approaching, he threw the net in the fire and hid himself in the stream in his salmon form.”

*just like Gwion did to hide from the Goddess Ceridwen!* Emer thought with a smirk.

Bragi kept narrating about how the Gods tried to capture Loki with a net, and each time the salmon barely eluded them.

Emer was questioning Sigvard each time Bragi stopped to drink, “So... Does Loki flee from the Gods’ wrath?”

Sigvard thought the woman was as curious as his son, Harald, “We must wait to find out.”

Emer was impatient, *Why does he stop that much to drink?*

Bragi continued the story. Emer was now aware that, at last, the fish was caught by Thor.

When Emer saw that the man has stopped, *once again*, she sighed. It was like the story would never end. She was tired, and wanted to sleep. They have challenged her to make the journey in two days.
She should rest to gain strength to beat them in their own game.

“I think I’m going to sleep. We have a long journey tomorrow, Sigvard.” She yawned, making them laugh.

He grinned at her, “But you will miss the best part of the story.”

Emer looked at him through furrowed eyebrows, “I know what you and your friends are trying to do. I’m not innocent.”

Sigvard pretended to be offended, “I would never think you are naive.”

Emer giggled, walking to her tent. She didn’t know if she should remove her gown. She didn’t trust the men outside. And she didn’t want to spend much time changing clothes at the morning. She wanted to show them she could be fierce too. She decided to sleep wearing her gown. It was Spring, so she didn’t need to use much furs.

She woke up with the men laughing about something. Emer felt that she needed to sleep more. Emer felt like she was the reason of their laughter. She washed her face with water from a bowl, and tried to fix her hair without wasting more time. They would see they could not test a woman from Éirinn.

They stopped laughing when Emer stepped out of her tent.

Bragi whispered to Sigvard, “It seems our plan didn’t work.” Sigvard nodded.
Emer asked with a smug smile, lifting her chin, “What do we have to eat?”

She made a big effort to swallow the brown liquid made up of boiled lamb bones, and to eat the piece of bread that it seemed baked weeks before. She could see they were watching her, so she pretended not to be bothered by the quality of the food.

After some minutes, they dismantled the camp and were ready to proceed. They rode all day, stopping only to eat something when the sun was high in the sky.

Their entourage was composed by six men riding in front and five behind. Emer, Bragi and Sigvard were riding side by side.

At night, Bragi kept telling the story of Loki’s punishment. Emer wanted to know the end of the narrative.

Bragi stopped to drink less than the night before.

“Nú var Loki tekinn greðalauss ok farit með hann í helli nökkvorn. Þá tóku þeir þrjár hellur ok settu á egg ok lustu
rauf á hellunni hverri. Þá váru tekir synir Loka, Váli ok Nari eða Narfi.
Brúgðu æsir Válak í vargrliti ok reif hann í [sundr] Narfa,
bróður sinn. Þá tóku æsir þarma hans ok bundu Loka med yfir þá þrjá [egg]steina,
einn undir herðum, annarr undir lendum, þriði undir knésfótum, ok urðu þau bönd at járni.”
Emer was shocked that the Gods used Loki’s own sons to punish him. She wondered if she was chosen as a punishment for her father’s sins. Máel has made clear that she was alone now. Emer was deep in her thoughts that didn’t notice Sigvard and Bragi looking at her.

Sigvard teased her, “Our princess won’t want to know the rest of the story, huh?”

Emer could not stop her eyebrows from flitting in surprise at the friendliness in Sigvard’s voice. “I’m sorry! Of course, I can’t wait to know the end. Please, Bragi tell us what happens after Loki is imprisoned.”

Bragi loved telling stories. Knowing that the foreigner Princess enjoyed his narrative was a tremendous compliment. He nodded and kept telling the story.

"Þá tók Skaði eitorm ok festi upp yfir hann svá at eitrit skyldi drjúpa ór orminum í andlit honum. En Sigyn kona hans stendr hjá honum ok heldr mundlaugu undir eitrdropa, en þá er full er munnlaugin, þá gengr hon ok sker út eitrinu, en meðan drýpr eitrit í andlit honum. Þá kippisk hann svá hart við at jörð óll skelfr. Þat kallið þér landskjálpta. Þar liggr hann í böndum til ragnarökrs."

Emer was touched by Sigyn’s fidelity to her husband. Even though one of her sons died because of Loki’s actions, and the other was turned into a beast, she was still by his side. She always thought women bore heavy burdens, with this narrative Emer felt it was true.

To show her appreciation to Bragi’s story, she offered him a ring in silver. Bragi was impressed with her generosity.
He thanked and wished her a good night, “Þakka. Sofðú vel”.

Emer replied, "Velkominn".

Emer was so tired, it felt like she fainted instead of sleeping. Sigvard had to call her from outside the tent. She grunted, thinking it was too early. Dawn was breaking over the horizon, shell pink and faintly gold. After eating, they were ready for the final day of their journey. It all happened so fast, they were talking when an arrow hit Bragi on his knee and another on his side. Sigvard and the others took their shields, swords and axes, making a shield wall to protect Emer and Bragi. Emer was trying to drag Bragi to her tent. The man was heavy.

“Bragi, you must help me! Try to use your feet.” She begged, breathless.

Bragi was in so much pain that he was clenching his teeth. But, he followed Emer’s advice.

Once in the tent, he watched the woman opening a chest and taking a bow and arrows. He was impressed. He would never guess the woman knew archery.

“Stay here, Bragi! I’ll help the others.” She exclaimed, concern on her face.

“I have nowhere to go. Be careful. If you die, Ivar won’t be satisfied.” Bragi managed to smile at her.
Emer laughed, “I have no intention to die.”

When Emer left the tent, she saw Sigvard and the others were trapped. The attackers didn’t stop shooting arrows, so they couldn’t attack, only defend themselves. Emer saw a shield on the ground and used to protect herself, although, the aggressors haven’t seen her. She climbed a tree to have a better spot to shoot. She started shooting as faster as she could. Sigvard looked back and saw where she was hiding. He was astounded, he shouted to his men to kill their enemies.

Emer was still shooting her arrows from where she was hiding, and didn’t notice when a man approached. He grabbed her feet and pulled her from the tree. She tried to escape, but the man was faster. He rose his sword to kill her. She placed her arms in front of her, closing her eyes. Emer waited for the blow and pain, but none of those things came. When she opened her eyes, she saw that Sigvard had thrust his sword into the man’s throat. Blood was spurting from the wound; the man’s eyes were wide open. Emer’s dress was soaking with his blood.

She couldn't move, he knew that man.

Chapter End Notes

The tale Emer was remembering is about an ordinary salmon, that by eating nine hazelnuts that fell into the Well of Wisdom gained all the world's knowledge. The first person to eat of its flesh would in turn gain this knowledge.

"The poet Finegas spent seven years fishing for this salmon. One day Finegas caught Fintan and gave the fish to Fionn, his servant and son of Cumhaill, with instructions not to eat it. Fionn cooked the salmon, turning it over and over, but when Fionn touched the fish with his thumb to see if it was cooked, he burnt his finger on a drop of hot cooking fish fat. Fionn sucked on his burned finger to ease the pain. Little did Fionn know that all of Fintan's wisdom had been concentrated into that one drop of fish fat. When he brought the cooked meal to Finnegas, his master saw that the boy's eyes shone with a previously unseen wisdom. Finnegas asked Fionn if he had eaten any of the salmon. Answering no, the boy explained what had happened. Finnegas realized that Fionn had received the wisdom of the salmon, so gave him the rest of the fish to eat. Fionn ate the salmon and in so doing gained all the knowledge of the world. Throughout the rest of his life, Fionn could draw upon this knowledge merely by biting his thumb. The deep knowledge and wisdom gained from Fintan, the Salmon of Knowledge, allowed Fionn to become the leader of the Fianna, the famed heroes of Irish myth." Salmon of Knowledge
"The story begins with the death of Fionn's father Cumhal, leader of the Fianna, at the hands of Goll mac Morna. Cumhal's wife Muirne was pregnant at the time and eventually gave birth to their son, called Demne in his youth. Fearing for his safety, she sends the boy to be raised by Cumhal's sister, the druidess Bodhmall, and her companion Liath Luachra. The two warrior women raise him and accompany him on several adventures, including one in which he receives his nickname, Fionn (the fair; the pale). As he grows, his exploits attract increasing attention, and finally his foster mothers send him away for fear that Goll's men will find him. Subsequent episodes depict his service to the king of Bantry, his recovery of Cumhal's treasures by slaying Liath Luachra (a different character than his caretaker), and his meeting with the aged and dispossessed Fianna who had fought with his father."

"Another famous episode recounts how Fionn inadvertently eats the Salmon of Wisdom, which would grant universal knowledge to whoever consumed it." The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn

In Welsh mythology, the story of how the poet Taliesin received his wisdom follows a similar pattern.

"According to the late medieval Tale of Taliesin, included in some modern editions of the Mabinogion, Ceridwen's son, Morfran (also called Afagddu), was hideously ugly, so Ceridwen sought to make him wise in compensation. She made a potion in her magical cauldron to grant the gift of wisdom and poetic inspiration, also called Awen."

"The mixture had to be boiled for a year and a day. She set Morda, a blind man, to tend the fire beneath the cauldron, while Gwion Bach, a young boy, stirred the concoction. The first three drops of liquid from this potion gave wisdom; the rest was a fatal poison. Three hot drops spilled onto Gwion's thumb as he stirred, burning him. He instinctively put his thumb in his mouth, and gained the wisdom and knowledge Ceridwen had intended for her son. Realising that Ceridwen would be angry, Gwion fled. Ceridwen chased him. Using the powers of the potion he turned himself into a hare. She became a greyhound. He became a fish and jumped into a river. She transformed into an otter. He turned into a bird; she became a hawk. Finally, he turned into a single grain of corn. She then became a hen and, being a goddess (or enchantress, depending on the version of the tale), she found and ate him without trouble. But because of the potion he was not destroyed. When Ceridwen became pregnant, she knew it was Gwion and resolved to kill the child when he was born. However, when he was born, he was so beautiful that she could not do it. She threw him in the ocean instead, sewing him inside a leather-skin bag. The child was rescued on a Welsh shore and grew as the legendary bard Taliesin."
Sigvard was worried. Emer was so quiet since they killed those men. He saw this kind of behavior before. Young warriors going on their first raids, some of them would never be the same after witnessing blood being spilled, especially blood of loved ones.

They burnt the bodies of their attackers and Sigvard brought water to Emer's tent so she could clean herself. Yet he commanded that she should rush. Whoever ordered the attack could send more men to finish the task.

Emer couldn't believe. She wanted to be mistaken, but it was almost impossible. She felt numb, while cleaning the blood from her body in an automatic manner. It was like she was assisting another person in the task, not washing her body. She changed her dress and left her tent. She saw that Sigvard was helping the others to remove the arrows from Bragi. The scene helped Emer to wake from her trance. She approached them and saw that the man was losing too much blood from the wound on his knee. She ran to one of her arks and took some bottles and linens with her.

“Here, Sigvard. Put a plaster on it so that he doesn't get fever. It will help to stop the bleeding as well.”

Sigvard was not sure if he could trust her. Yet, she had no reason to poison Bragi. If she wanted the man dead, she had only to wait for him to die from blood loss.

He did as she said and then she used linens to close the wound.
Sigvard wanted to burn the wound. Emer didn't agree.

“We don’t know if the arrows were poisoned. The herbs I gave him will help if he was poisoned. We must wait to see if he has fever. He can't ride. He must travel aboard the wagon with my dowry. We can get rid of one of the chests with clothes.”

“Don't worry about the dresses. When we come home you will love your new clothes.”, Sigvard tried to reassure her.

Emer replied. ”I'm not worried about it. All that matters if for us to arrive safe with Bragi.”

Bragi was telling a joke. “You won't be naked, princess. Even though I think Ivar would appreciate the vision.”

Sigvard replied angrily. “I think if you are well enough to tell jokes about your queen, you should ride your horse. Don't let Ivar hear you being so intimate or you won't have a tongue for much longer.”

Sigvard told she was their queen. Was she one of them now?

They proceeded the travel as fast as they could with an injured Bragi. Emer was worried because he had a little fever. Every now and then, she checked the wound, she was satisfied the wound had not much pus.
At night, when they were ready to sleep, and had agreed about who would keep guard first. Sigvard heard horses approaching. The men quickly took their weapons and were ready to defend themselves. Emer was with her bow as well. Sigvard ordered his group to calm down. They were more of Ivar's men.

Emer thought to herself. “Good. More of them.”

Leading the group was Gunnar. Sigvard’s brother.

They embraced and Gunnar told that Ivar ordered them to find Emer's entourage and escort them back. When Gunnar heard of the attack he was suspicious.

He looked at her saying. “How appropriate that you were attacked as soon as you left your father's court.”

Emer was red in anger. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe your father has changed his mind, and wanted the dowry back. It would be a good reason to unite your people's clans to avenge the death of their dearest princess. He could say you were killed by us.”

Emer was shocked. Máel would never do it. Would he?

“Those men were not from my father's domains. They were not following his orders. They were my uncle’s warriors. He has all reasons to desire war between your people and my father. If we destroy
ourselves, he won't have opposition to take the position of High King. It would be easier for him to gain control of both reigns”.

Sigvard was angry. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was not sure. But the man that tried to kill me was a constant presence in my uncle's lands.”

Sigvard tried to be reasonable. The girl was frightened. Her own uncle ordered her death. Her life was changing dramatically.

Gunnar would be the first to make the guard with some of his men. Emer found out that she missed Bragi telling his stories. It was something that would help to put her mind at ease.

Waking up on the last day of their journey, Emer was worried about Bragi. He was still having fever, she prayed he would recover. The woman was now traveling beside him, in the wagon, to look after him. Emer was feeling guilty. She has made her father accept this marriage, if she hadn’t done this, she wouldn’t be traveling with them, and Bragi would not have been wounded.

Gunnar was talking to Sigvard at distance. She knew they were suspicious. By the end of the day, they were almost arriving. Bragi’s fever was starting to fade. Emer couldn’t be happier, he would live.

Standing on the top of a hill, she could see an enormous fortress, in a circular form. They were
finally in Ivar’s lands. Emer was conflicted. She was happy that they finally arrived, after all the danger. But, she feared what was about to come.

Ivar was nervous, he didn’t know why. It’s been two days since he sent the second group of men to bring his bride and no news of the group arrived yet. If this was a trap from Máel he would pay.

A noise brought him back from his thoughts. One of the slaves arrived to tell him the náttmál would be served soon. He was so angry that he threw the cup of ale he was drinking in the slave’s direction. The girl ran with fear.

After a few hours, Ivar received the information that Gunnar’s group was arriving at the gates with the first entourage. Emer was with them. Ivar couldn’t help but smile. He would set his eyes upon that fiery woman again. It's been almost a year since their last meeting. With the help of a crutch and metal braces he walked to meet them.

Emer was impressed, when they passed through one of the four gates of the fortress she saw lots of houses with oval sides, many poles at the sides, supporting the walls and the roof. It seemed the wood used was oak.

With the help of some men, Gunnar took Bragi with him to lead the injured man to be tended by a healer.
Some of the inhabitants were outside to watch her. They were curious about the princess that would be their queen. She could see some of them were cautious. A small girl ran from her mother and stopped in front of Emer. The Princess smiled at her. The girl saw this as a sign to investigate further. She took Emer’s hand on her own and was dazzled by the softness of her skin. Emer found the girl fascinating as well, with grey and curious eyes. The girl’s mother didn’t know what to do. She was fearing being offensive and wake up Ivar's wrath.

Sigvard approached and whispered to Emer. “Ivar is out there, watching us.”

Emer blushed, after almost a year, she was seeing that man. Not only this, she was marrying him. She looked at Ivar’s direction. A little smile playing on his mouth, but suddenly the smile disappeared and he was looking angry. The girl has gone with her mother and Emer started walking to Ivar, flanked by the brothers, Sigvard and Gunnar.

Emer didn’t know how to greet him. Should she bow?

She had not to think much about it. Ivar looked at her from head to toe.

He asked Sigvard. “Did her father checked the mundr?”

Sigvard nodded negatively. Emer was ashamed. They were discussing about the payment.

Ivar’s face was showing a kind of emotion Emer couldn't name. Was he angry? Frustrated?

He smiled in mockery and turned to walk away with a slightly grimace. Emer was embarrassed, aware her appearance was not the most charming after such a tough travel, and unsure if she should follow him. Sigvard walked past Emer, giving her a reassuring smile and nodding his head for her to follow inside.
Once inside, Emer saw that Ivar was sitting, leaning forward and looking at her in amusement. It was like he was enjoying her confusion. She was angry that after such a long journey he had not spoken a word yet. All she wanted was to have a bath and eat something fresh. Not the old bread from when they were on the road.

He was tilting his head to the side, as if he was studying Emer, while the woman was looking at him fiercely. At last, he nodded saying, “I imagine you are tired of the travel and wish for a bath and food. Is that true?”

Emer raised her eyebrows and nodded her head affirmatively. Ivar gestured to two slaves.

“They will help you to bath and then we can eat together. I want to know why took you so long to arrive.”

Emer swallowed in fear. If he thought she knew about the attack she would be in trouble.

The warmth of the water was helping to tame the tension from her muscles. To be free of the dust from the road was comforting too. She could almost sleep in the bathtub. The laughter from the slaves startled Emer. When she looked at them, they became frightened. She didn’t know the reason.

The girls, whose names Emer found out to be Dagmar and Eydis, helped her to dress and were accompanying her to the hall for the náttmál. Once there, Emer saw Sigvard sitting at a table, with
two women on each side of him. One with the hair that remind Emer of honey. The fact she was smiling widely matched the sensation she was sweet like the color of her hair. It seemed she was on her twenties. The other woman had curly and dark hair. She seemed older. Maybe the same age as Sigvard. Around her thirties. Emer could say her mind was clouded. The blonde woman smiled at her and Emer smiled back.

Gunnar was there as well. Face cold, as warmth and tenderness were dead in him. She feared what he could have said to Ivar about her.

Ivar gestured for Emer to take the place beside him. She walked slowly and sat. Not knowing what to do with her hands and to not show her anxiety, she placed them in her lap.

Ivar cleared his throat, starting the conversation. “So, I’ve heard that the travel took that much time because you were attacked.”

Emer nodded, looking at her hands.

Gunnar coughed and was looking angrily at Emer while Ivar watched them with interest. It seemed Gunnar didn’t trust her.

“I don’t remember you being so quiet the first time we met.” Ivar grunted and Emer looked up at him, her face flushed.

“I don’t know what do you want to hear from me.” She whispered and took a deep breath.
He glowered at her cautiously, “What about the truth? Don’t be afraid”

Emer replied, holding her chin up, “I’m not afraid.”

Gunnar hissed through clenched teeth, “You should be afraid since you and your family planned a trap for us.”

Ivar hit the table furiously, startling Emer. “You shouldn’t talk before I allow you to.”

Gunnar looked at the table.

Emer blinked and started talking, “Cerball is no longer my family. He betrayed my father once, nothing will make me think he wouldn’t do it again. I believe he planned the attack, the man that… that…”

Ivar was impatient and shouted, making Emer’s heart beat faster, “Tell for once, woman.”

Emer did her best not to stutter and sound confident, “The man that tried to kill me, he was one of my uncle’s guards.”

Ivar always felt that he shouldn’t have trusted the man. To think Cerball ordered the death of his own niece was enough to turn even Ivar’s stomach. The first duty of a man was to protect his family.
“He will pay for it. Now we must eat and rest. Tomorrow is Frigga’s day.”

Emer feared what Ivar meant by this. Her face gave her emotions away.

Thora answered her silent question. “It’s your wedding day. I can’t wait. Borghild and I have made a dress for you.”

Borghild nodded. Emer could say she was more discreet than the other woman.

Emer smiled at them. “Takk”

They ate in silence while Emer tried not to acknowledge Ivar’s gaze on her. Gunnar was watching her every move too.

After the meal, Emer thought she thought she was going to be alone with Ivar. The moment she feared the most.

Ivar noticed her discomfort. “I won’t disrespect you. You will be my wife. Until then, you will be hosted by Sigvard’s family.”

Borghild said. “It will be an honor to have you.”
Emer smiled gratefully. “Góða nótt Ivar!”

They walked to Sigvard’s house, Borghild and Thora linking arms with Sigvard. Emer was quiet, paying attention to their conversation.

Thora said. “Harald missed you so much.”

“I missed our son too. And you both as well.”

Borghild kissed him. Then Thora did the same. Emer was speechless.

Thora laughed, noticing her discomfort.

“He is our husband, princess.”

“How is that possible? I mean, being married to both of you?” Emer was looking at them through narrowed eyes, her jaw slackening.

Borghild was serious. “I couldn’t have sons of my own, and we needed help with the farm, before Sigvard joined Ivar’s men, we had to manage the farm by ourselves. Now, with the success of the raids, we have slaves to do this. Anyway, Thora is a good companion.”
Emer blushed.

Was it possible that this could happen to her as well?

They walked into Sigvard’s house. A boy that seemed to be six or seven years old, and whose features were so much like those of Sigvard, ran into his arms. He lifted the boy upon his shoulders and started running through the house. Emer laughed.

Sigvard’s son, Harald, was curious about their guest, “Who is this, faðir?”

Sigvard answered the boy, “She will be our Queen.”

Harald was in awe. He had never seen a Queen before.

Emer smiled sweetly, saying, “It’s an honor to meet you.”

Emer studied the inside of the longhouse. An open hearth with a big cauldron was in the centre, with a hole in the roof above to allow smoke to get out. She saw hanging lamps made from stone. The lamps had wicks and burned oil to provide light. It made the house a smoky place to live in. She saw some tapestries on the walls too. Emer noticed a big loom in one of the corners of the house.

Two women and three man, poorly dressed, that she thought to be slaves were there as well, Borghild walked to talk to them. After the quick conversation, they walked to a separate section of the house. Maybe to sleep.
Running down the length of the home on both sides were low wooden benches. The Princess thought they were useful as a surface for sitting, eating, working, and sleeping.

Borghild walked Emer and Harald to a room in corner of the house. “You may be tired. Get some rest. Tomorrow we have much to do.”

Harald didn’t want to sleep, “Mōðir…”

Borghild replied with confidence. “No more talk. It’s time to rest. I want you to guard the Princess. You are almost a man now.”

The woman glanced at Emer with a smile that meant they were sharing a secret.

Emer helped her to convince the boy, yawning. "I'm so tired! I think we should sleep."

He grumbled under his breath, but followed Borghild’s orders, laying down next to Emer.

"Góða nótt, Princess!" Borghild murmured.

"Góða nótt, Borghild. Thank you for your hospitality!"
Emer was taken by the beauty of the hand carved headboard of her bed. It was an exquisite design. *So beautiful.* She touched the wood, feeling the texture.

She was trying to put her worries aside to get some rest. After almost an hour, she was fast asleep. Then a strange noise startled her. It was coming from where, she presumed, Sigvard’s and his wives were sleeping. She was so affected by the attack during their travel, that she feared they would be in danger. She touched Harald’s shoulder to wake the boy.

She asked him, “Do you hear this noise?”

Harald laughed. “Of course, they are having sex.”

He shut his eyes and went back to sleep. Emer was embarrassed. It seemed the boy knew better.

In the morning, Emer was still tired. It took time to ignore the moaning coming from the other room. She washed her face in a basin and tried to comb her hair.

Sigvard’s family was already eating.

Thora asked her, “Did you sleep well?”
Emer blushed immediately, “Yes. Takk”

Harald said, “We just woke up because of the noise you were making.”

Emer was mortified. Thora was blushing as well while Sigvard glared at the boy. After Harald’s indiscretion, they ate in silence.

They had a lamb stew from the night before, bread and buttermilk. Sigvard left to help with the final details of the wedding ceremony.

Borghild asked for Emer’s forgiveness. “I’m sorry about the noise. We didn’t mean to trouble your sleep.”

Emer replied shyly. “Don’t worry. I understand you both missed your husband.”

Thora replied boldly. “You will understand this matter soon.”

Borghild was looking daggers at Thora. The tall blonde woman was silence now.

Borghild started speaking. “We must rush to the bathhouse to prepare you for the ceremony.”
Depending on the materials available and the location of thinking of the different groups of Vikings, there was some variety to the type of houses constructed in the Viking era. In lands with limited wood supply, stone or peat houses were common. These houses were typically dug into the ground deeper to reduce the amount of materials needed to construct the walls.

In this home or Viking longhouse many things would occur, cooking, sleeping, daily chores and much more. A fire was the heart of the Viking home, important for the already mentioned cooking and also for heat and warmth in a cold Scandinavian winter. There might be animals too should they not be able to live outside in the cold winters. The Viking home was really a place for all.

Longhouses could be build below ground level, perhaps to ensure that wind and cold would enter the home. The length of the longhouse could be up to 30 metres in length which is around 90 feet. The width of the Viking home would be typically up to 2 metres, or around 5 feet, hence the name longhouse.

Viking longhouses were one storey tall homes, although with the roof as well the height could be over 3 metres or 12 feet tall. Inside however there was only one floor and the pitched roof would make it easy for rain to wash over the house.

The biggest longhouses found have been during excavations are rather large. In Denmark many example of longhouses have been found measuring up to 50 metres long, which is around 150 feet. In Norway even bigger longhouses have been found, with one in Lofoten measuring up to 83 metres in length, a staggering 249 feet.

The home itself was typically one room only, but in some cases there would be separate areas for humans and animals, as it was quite common for the Viking to keep animals indoors sometimes. Sometimes the slaves would be kept in separate sections too, and n some of the wealthier homes, there were often more than one room.

Running down the length of the home on both sides were low wooden benches. These benches would be used to sit or to sleep on, providing a weary Viking with a place to rest his head.

More information Viking Houses and Homes
Vikings Daily Life
Longhouses in the Viking Age
The Vikings customarily ate two meals each day. The first, dagmál or "day-meal" was eaten in the morning, approximately two hours after the day's work was started (7 AM to 8 AM or so), while the second, nátmál or "night meal" was consumed at the end of the day's labor (7 PM to 8 PM or so). These times would vary seasonally, depending on the hours of daylight.

The Vikings grew wheat, barley, grew apples, plums, rye and they gathered wild berries. They made bread and porridge. Sometimes peas were added to the porridge to make it go further. They also ate cabbages, onions and leeks and they used herbs like dill and coriander.

Fish was an important part of the Viking diet and they ate cod and herring. They also raised pigs, cattle, sheep and goats. (Sheep and goats were used for milk). Vikings also kept geese and chickens. However the Vikings could not grow enough food to keep much livestock through the winter. So in autumn they killed many animals and salted or smoked the meat to preserve it.

The Vikings were fond of pork and beef but they also ate horse meat and goat meat and they hunted deer for venison. The Vikings also hunted whales and seals.

Meat was roasted on a spit. Viking women also boiled food in an iron cauldron. Mead (a drink made from honey, water and yeast), beer and (if they could afford it) wine were appreciated.

The Vikings ate from wooden bowls and dishes. Spoons were made of horn or (for the well off) metal. The Vikings also ate with knives but there were no forks. They often drank from hollow horns called drinking horns.

Bread was typically made from unleavened barley flour ground in stone querns. The handle of the quern was used to rotate the top stone over the bottom stone, grinding the grain between the stones. In Iceland, lava querns were used, which produced finer flour. Stone chips from querns have been found in recovered flour, so the bread must have made for a gritty repast.
Emer, Borghild and Thora walked to the bathhouse. The women placed rocks in the center of the room, they were heated by a fire beneath. Water is poured over them to produce steam. Emer is already sweating and watching their actions with curiosity.

Thora looked at her. “Why are you still dressed?”

Emer proceeded to undress herself. Borghild helped her.

“When you have a daughter, she can wear those beautiful dresses you brought with you, they are for a maiden, you’re going to be a woman now. Thora and I helped Ivar to choose a lot of clothes and furs for you. You will love it.”

Emer blushed with the thought of being a mother. She no longer had her mother by her side to help her in the task. The hardship of motherhood. Even this symbolic bath should be performed by her female relatives. Yet, she was sharing an intimate moment with strangers. She was no longer Land’s daughter. She would be Ivar’s wife and it seemed that one role didn’t match with the other.

They take off their clothes too. They help one another to wash their hair.

Thora said. “Your hair is so pretty. I’ve seen maidens with bright red hair before, but it is not common.”

Borghild was caressing Emer’s scalp with such delicacy that the bride was almost sleeping. Thora’s laughter startled the redhaired woman.

“If you are so affected by this simple touch, I can only imagine how you will react on your wedding night, with your husband.”

Emer is concerned, she knows what is expected from a couple on their first night together. But she doesn’t know if Ivar will want something different. After all, he is not a Christian man.
Emer is immerse in a wooden tub filled with warm water. The women wash her with soap scented with herbs. The smell is wonderful. The sensation of being cared is everything Emer needed, after so many troubles in too little time. Once they finish with Emer, they proceed to wash themselves and settle in the sauna. They explained the heat and sweat would help to clean their bodies of impurities, Emer is leaving her maiden status behind.

She is glad that none of them is talking, Emer feels like the silence is something she needs more than ever. Her happiness is short-lived, as Borghild starts asking personal questions. “What do you know about your responsibilities as a wife?” Borghild asks.

Emer is not comfortable talking about it with almost complete strangers. Yet, she doesn’t want to be rude. They have been treating her kindly. “My mother said that women’s virginity is prized before marriage and fidelity is expected during the marriage. I have to manage the household, servants, stock up food for the Winter.”

Borghild smiles. “It seems your mother’s customs are not so different from ours.”

Thora said. “Your beauty and purity have already conquered Ivar. But he might expect something bolder on your wedding night.”

Emer stared at them and spoke calmly. “I know I have to consummate the marriage, bearing children and looking after them.”

Thora replied. “Yes. But, do you know how you find yourself with child?”

Borghild stared at Thora. “They will know what to do, Thora. Ivar will help.”

Thora blushed after Borghild's statement, Emer didn't know why, since the blonde didn't seem shy.

After the symbolic bath, the women started dressing. Emer is wearing a dress in golden color, knots patterns around the collar of her dress. The apron is green. Thora fastened a golden belt around Emer’s small waist. Golden brooches at her shoulders, with golden beads across her chest.
Thora hands something to Emer, it’s wrapped in cloth. The princess unwraps it to reveal a beautiful beaded necklace with green stones.

Borghild says. “We wanted to give you something. After we helped to choose the dress we saw this necklace and it has the same color as your eyes.”

“It’s lovely. I value your kindness to me. You both have been so generous and patient. But, how did you know the color of my eyes before we meet?”

Thora laughed. “We were hiding to watch you when you came to talk to Ivar and Cerball. We travelled with Sigvard for the meeting.”

Thora placed the beaded necklace around Emer’s neck and Borghild adjusted the bridal crown over her outspread hair. “You are the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

Borghild carefully wrapped a green cloak around her shoulders. Sigvard knocks and as soon as Borghild opens the door, Harald is running around Emer, making her laugh.

Sigvard is looking at her smiling. “Can I escort you?”

She replies sadly. “Yes.”

She thinks about how much she needed her family to witness the moment she would be no longer a maiden.

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They walk to the center of the fortress, where the ceremony will take place. Sigvard led the way, carrying the sword Emer received from Máel, that is meant to be a gift for Ivar. Emer feels tears forming behind her eyes, but she will not be a coward now. It’s her choice.

She stops for a moment to breathe, it seems everyone is there in a half circle. Everyone except for her
family. All eyes on her, she can’t fail, she won’t. She is so nervous now that it’s like all the faces are blurred.

At the end of the crowd, Emer sees Ivar sitting on a chair. He is wearing a grey tunic. The tunic is embroidered. An axe hanging from his belt.

She is almost sure that when she looks attentively he will be showing that characteristic grin. To her surprise, he seems as nervous as she is. His jaw is clenched, he is serious.

Emer swallows and keeps walking after Sigvard.

When Emer is near Ivar, he takes his crutch to stand up. He was putting in so much effort. It seemed like he wanted to do this as any other man would. Emer was sad that he was going through so much pain thinking it was the only way to be respected. She could only imagine the cramps he was feeling in the leg he used the brace.

The woman performing the ceremony makes Emer thinks about the Brehons back home. The woman raises her voice.

“We are here to watch our leader, the great Ivar Ragnarsson, to join this woman in marriage. May the Gods join us to bless this union. For by this, our people will be blessed too.”

Her words echoing in Emer's memory. Not so different from the marriages she had seen.

“Who gives this woman to her husband?” The priestess asks.

Emer is almost crying. It was her father’s duty to gives her away to Ivar. She keeps her head down staring at the ground. She doesn’t want to be pitied.

Sigvard finally raises his voice. “I give this woman to her husband, as she has been under my family’s care until now.”

A stranger raises his voice, “No, you won’t do that. I will. She is my niece. I’m the most entitled to give her away to her husband.”
Everyone is staring at the man that just arrived. Emer lifts her head and runs to Lorcán, Máel’s younger brother. The man smiles affectionately, wrapping his arms around Emer.

Ivar shouts with a wicked smile, “I just hope that you are not like her other uncle. The one that ordered her death.”

Lorcán looks at Emer in confusion.

“It’s true. Cerball ordered an attack against my entourage.” She

“I’m nothing like that piece of shit. Even though I was not invited, I’m here to see my little niece becoming a married woman.” Lorcán leans down to kiss her temple. Ivar keeps watching them, nostrils flaring and clenched fists.

The gyðja replies, “If your only wish is to witness the blessing of the couple, you’re welcome.”

Lorcán takes Emer’s hand, giving her a reassuring stare. They walk together to the place near the altar, Lorcán places her hands in Ivar’s. She blushes immediately, looking at their linked hands. Her skin is delicate and fair. His hands are big, warm, darker and calloused. It’s an impressive contrast. The ceremony goes on.

Some animals are led to a big altar, where everyone can see, the priestess is carrying a big dagger, with a carved ivory handle. It’s beautiful and mortal. Emer’s heart skips a beat.

On a small altar, she sees a large wooden bowl, a giant sword, its pommel and grip have an intricate pattern in gold and two rings.

The gyðja picks up the dagger. “I summon the attention of the Gods upon us. May them accept our sacrifice, and bless this man and this woman, that are here to be tied in marriage.”

With a summary motion of the dagger, she slits the goat’s throat. The wooden bowl is placed bellow the animal to collect its blood. When the bowl is filled, the animal is taken away. “Hail to Thor!”
The gyðja takes the bundle of fir branches and plunges it in the blood. With sharp gestures, she moves the bundle over the couple, small drops of blood splashing against their faces. Emer watches Ivar’s expression. He seems so absorbed by the ritual. His face is beautiful, his eyes are closed and he seems calm, the jaw is relaxed now. She wonders how the carrier of such an attractive face could be a dangerous man. As if her thoughts were heard, Ivar opens his eyes, looking at Emer. She is taken by surprise. And stops looking at him, fixing her eyes on the ground again.

The priestess approaches a pig, cutting its throat as well. “Hail to Freyja!”

She does the same that she did with the goat, this time she splashes the blood upon the witnesses too. A beautiful horse is led to the woman after all. Emer wants to look away, but she fears that this action might offend the people and her husband.

The woman in charge of the ceremony says. “Hail Freyr!”

The agonizing sound the animal makes it’s almost unbearable. Emer is looking at Ivar again, the man is watching the sacrifice with devotion. Her eyes travel to the people around them, it’s like no one is affected by the sacrifice as she is. Her uncle is watching the ceremony with a harsh expression. She fears the reason behind his visit. She doesn’t want more blood being spilled.

The gyðja addresses him. “It is the duty of the husband to protect his wife and family, defending her honor. How do you intend to do it?”

Ivar walks with the help of his crutch to the altar, taking the sword with him. Emer notices the tension in his shoulders and how he is wincing slightly.

His voice is husky. “I offer you my protection. Under my roof everything that is mine will be yours, this sword included. I ask you to keep it safe to build a future for our family”.

Tears are rolling down her face. It seems that the only way to build a future it’s by the sword. She tries to avoid the thought of the blood that was, and will be, spilled by this weapon. With trembling hands, Emer takes the sword. She doesn’t know how, but she manages to sustain a modulated voice. She knows the meaning of her vows. Yet, she feels that it’s just right to say them out loud.

“I accept this sword as I accept you. Where you go, I’ll go. I will keep this sword for our family” She can’t look away from his indigo eyes.
The gyðja speaks to Emer. “What have you brought for your husband?”

Sigvard approaches and proudly offers the sword to me. Emer takes it from him, offering it to Ivar.

After the exchanging of swords, it is time for the rings. The woman moves to the altar and gather the two rings. She holds them above her head, saying the words.

“I summon Vár to hear your vows, and make them unbreakable. Let this ring forever symbolize and be a reminder to all of the bond you have sealed here today.”

She gives one ring to Ivar, who places it on his sword hilt and holds it out to Emer. She picks the ring. The ring is made of silver and engraved with scripture Emer doesn’t know the meaning. She put it onto a finger on her left hand, then offers Ivar his ring, mirroring his actions.

The woman asks Ivar if it is his desire to marry Emer. “Ivar, do you swear with the Gods as your witnesses that you want to marry this woman? Do you promise to care for her, defending her life and honor?”

Emer is studying him, trying to figure out if he truly means what he is about to say. Ivar is looking back. She feels blood rushing to her cheeks, but she must be sure. She wants to know.

“I do swear”.

“Emer, do you swear by the Gods that you want to marry this man? Promising to be loyal to him, to care for him, and to honor him?”

Emer is looking at Ivar. “I swear it.”

“This way the Gods, and the people assembled here recognize you as husband and wife. May the Gods bless you with children and happiness!”

Ivar is serious now. Emer notices that he is deep in his thoughts. When he feels that she is watching him, he approaches giving Emer a kiss. Different from his hands, his lips are soft.
Emer is smiling hearing the cheers of the crowd.

They walk into the hall for the wedding feast, their arms are linked. She can see that he is pain to walk such a long distance. She keeps up with his pace, not wanting to inflict more pain upon him. When they reach the door, Ivar blocks her entrance into the house with his newly bared sword laid across the entry-way. Seeing her confusion, he gives her his hand, helping Emer into the hall, and then taking the sword back.

Borghild approaches whispering. “It is of great importance that you don’t fall while passing the door, it represents bad luck.”

Sigvard approaches, helping Ivar to sit on a shield. Emer doesn’t understand what is happening. Ropes are tied to the shield, its endings are thrown to the roof, reaching its main pillar. Sigvard and Gunnar take the ropes and start pulling them, what makes Ivar being suspended in the air. Emer gasps in fear. If he falls, he will surely break his bones.

Thora and Borghild are by her side.

Thora tries to calm her. "Don't worry. They planned this all day long by what Sigvard told me."

Emer gave her a perplexed look. "Why?"

Borghild replied. "Because it's required that the groom must plunge his new sword into the pillar of the house to test the luck of the marriage by the depth of the scar he makes. If it's deep, it symbolizes that you will have a long marriage."

Emer can’t stop looking at the ceiling, fearing that Ivar will fall. He finally reaches the ceiling, giving a loud grunt, Ivar buries the sword into the pillar. The crowd is applauding. Emer gives a sigh. Sigvard and Gunnar start pulling Ivar back to the ground. Emer doesn’t notice she is holding her breath, until Ivar reaches the floor safe, winking at her. She glares to censure him, what amuses him even more and he grins.

Gunnar helps Ivar to his feet, as Sigvard hands him the crutch. Ivar leads the way to the main table. The sacrificed goat is roasting on a spit above the hearth.
The hall is decorated with strands of flowers garlanded around the pillars and draped in the beams. The main table is covered with a white tablecloth. On the table is a gold chalice. Emer was instructed earlier by Sigvard's wives that it was her duty to fill it with honeyed mead. With both hands, she holds the chalice to Ivar.

He takes it from her, their hands brushing in the process. He consecrates the ale to Thor by making the sign of a hammer over it, he takes a drink, making a toast to Odin. He passes the chalice back to Emer. She tastes the ale, it's sweet.

They take their seats at the table. Sigvard, Thora, Borghild, Harald, Gunnar and his family and Lorcán are sitting with them as well.

The gyðja remains standing. She is holding a hammer, the symbolic Mjölnir.

“May the hammer bless the bride! Lay Mjolnir on the maiden’s lap! In Thor and Frigga’s name, consecrate their union!”

She was told the hammer was a symbol of fertility during wedding festivities.

Ivar takes the hammer from the woman, placing it in Emer’s lap. He looks at her with an indecipherable expression. If it was anyone else she would think he wanted to know what she is thinking or feeling. She was told the hammer was a symbol of fertility during wedding festivities.

No. I’m wrong, he doesn’t care about how I feel!

The servants and slaves start serving the feast. Emer had never seen people eating as avidly as them.

The wedding feast goes into the night. There is much laughter and fun. Bragi appears to recite a poem he created for the newly married couple, much of it is about the danger they faced on the road and Ivar’s conquests. The poem makes the story sound like a great saga, where the brave princess helps the warriors to defeat the evil men that tried to steal the fair maiden from her destined warrior husband. It’s a lovely work, even though it’s a little exaggerated.

“What is a warrior without his dreams about Valkyries?
I thought that I would see a Valkyrie and feast with the Gods in the same day.
I would reach Valhalla to be reunited with the fiercest of warriors;
I would wake up as an Einherjar;
Drink mead from carved horns;
Rising again when the time of Ragnarök comes.

To my sorrow, I saw a Valkyrie;
Sorrow because instead of taking me to Valhalla, she saved my life;
She was a strange Valkyrie, my friends.”

Everyone is laughing, Ivar is watching Emer. She is blushing because she knows she is the female warrior the man is talking about.

Bragi keeps reciting the poem.

“Lords from my kin are to be jealous;
high-born and hardy, which my heart gladdens;
because the fair maiden won't give mead for another;
than the mightiest of warriors;
Such a fierce lady deserves a famous warrior by husband.”

“As the reluctant maiden Alfhild, the strange Valkyrie disguised herself;
not as a warrior to test her suitor's skills;
As a princess she was dressed, but with the strength of a warrior;
she carried the wounded man not to Valhalla, but to a place of healing he was taken.

Then the princess revealed herself;
as Vali, she took her arrows to avenge a grave offense;
helping the men fighting in the shield wall;
As the loyal Siggy she wouldn't allow being taken away from her destiny."

Her destiny was with a brave man;
that offered his people a fruitful and green land;
in which they could live and grow roots;
as strong as those of Yggdrasil.”

Emer and Ivar show their gratitude to Bragi, rewarding him with a silver goblet of mead.

Finally, Sigvard stands, saying out loud, over the noise from the guests. “It is time for the bedding!”

Cries of excitement and laughter are filling the hall. The warm feeling provided by the ale goes away from Emer instantly. Ivar's expression is stern.
She is nervous about the wedding night. She knows Ivar has expectations. She just doesn't know if she can fulfil the role. Emer recalls the noise when she was sleeping in Sigvard's house as well as Thora's teasing that very morning.

*What if he doesn't like me? Will Ivar send me back to my father?* She dreads this possibility. She would be ashamed, a pariah. Touched and tossed aside by her father's enemy.

She should be brave, if this man has the intention to hurt her, taking revenge upon her body because of her father’s actions, she would not show any sign of pain. She wonders if she would be as nervous as she was now if her mother was by her side.

Endless couples have faced a wedding night. Her mother, sister, Thora, Borghild, all the married women in Ivar's village. Now her time has come. It was the natural order. She would not be a maiden forever. As her mother became a woman, and her grandmother, until the beginning of times.

Accompanied by Thora and Borghild, she goes to the bridal room to prepare for her wedding night. The bed is enormous, the headboard is beautifully carved. The sheets are part of the dowry she brought with her. Furs on top of them. On a table, she sees two gold goblets and a tankard of mead.

She asks her attendants. "More drink?"

The women laughed. "It is tradition that the couple drinks mead each night for the next month. It is considered unlucky to run out of mead before the end of the month."

A gentle rain is pouring outside.

Borghild says joyfully. “Thor is blessing you. The rain is always a sign of fertility, as we need the water to grow the crops.”

Thora added. “May Thor, Freyja and Frigga bless you with a child tonight.”

Borghil helps Emer to remove her dress and change into a white shift.
When they are finishing, the door opens. Ivar enters. Six people behind him. The witnesses.

Thora gives her a hug, whispering. “Everything will be fine. Don’t be afraid!”.

The women leave the room. Ivar and Emer are alone now. He comes forward, looking at her from head to toe.

Chapter End Notes

I took the details for the wedding ceremony from numerous sources.

12 Highly Symbolic and Kind of Outlandish Viking Wedding Traditions and Rituals
Ritual – Engagements & Weddings

"As a prelude to marriage the family of the groom sent the groom and several delegates to the bride's family to propose. Then the date of the betrothal was set. This was the first legally binding step between the families, and the occasion was used to negotiate the inheritance and property relations of the couple as well as the dowry (heimanfylgja) and wedding present (mundr) from the groom's family. Those were the personal property of the bride. The dowry was an investment by the bride's family that made it possible for her to marry into a more powerful family. When an agreement on these matters had been reached, the deal was sealed at a feast.

The wedding (brudlaup) was the most important single ritual in the process. It was the first public gathering of the two families and consisted of a feast that lasted for several days. Anything less than three days was considered paltry. The guests witnessed that the process had been followed correctly. The sources tell very little about how a wedding was related to the gods. It is known that the goddess Vár witnessed the couple's vows, that a depiction of Mjolnir could be placed in the lap of the bride asking Thor to bless her, and that Freyr and Freyja were often called upon in matters of love and marriage, but there is no suggestion of a worship ritual. From legal sources we know that leading the couple to the bridal couch was one of the central rituals. On the first night the couple was led to bed by witnesses carrying torches, which marked the difference between legal marital relations and a secret extra-marital relationship."

Norse Rituals

"A typical dowry for an Icelandic wedding was in the region of Eight ounces of Silver, while the Norwegian Viking’s set the figure at Twelve. The minimum figure of Twelve ounces of Silver was known as the " poor man's price". For a wedding to be legal and the children to be classed as legitimate, the dowry must have been paid."
"The symbolism of the bath included the washing away of the maiden status, and a purification to prepare her for the religious ritual to follow. While bathing in the steam, the new bride’s attendants would instruct her on the duties of a wife. The final step would be to plunge into cool water to cool the bather and close the pores, completing the cleansing. The cool water usually had flowers or herbs added to it to add magical potency for fertility. The final preparation for the bride would be dressing for the ceremony in which the bride wore a blue spruce colored cloak. The bride’s hair would be down and outspread because the feast would be the last time when she would wear her hair unbound and uncovered. To replace the kransen, she wore a bridal crown that would have been passed on to her by previous generations to be worn only during the wedding festivities."

Norse Marriage Rituals
Marriages, Dowries and Divorce in the Viking Age
Viking Romance: Courtship, Marriage and Divorce

An interesting aspect of Courtship:

"The prohibitions against love poetry help to explain why courtships were little practiced in the Viking period. While the goddess Freyja was the patroness of mansongar, and delighted in love poetry, mortal women had to be more cautious. Love poems were viewed in law as a distinct slur upon a woman's reputation, suggesting that the poet had had a more intimate knowledge of his beloved than was considered seemly (Foote and Wilson, p. 112). The reputation of a woman reflected upon the honor of her family: if her honor was tarnished, so was that of her father, brothers, uncles, cousins and sons. Any dalliance with a woman's reputation would bring down the wrath of her entire lineage upon the hapless suitor!"

We can say that Bragi was in real danger by reciting those verses, hahaha.

Courtship, Love and Marriage in Viking Scandinavia
The Wedding Night

She didn’t know what to do. His gaze was fixed on her. It was like he had some power over Emer. She couldn’t move. Ivar passed Emer, sitting on the bed. He started taking off his belt, and then his tunic. Emer looked at his thick and dark hair, it was shiny and inviting. She wondered how it would feel to run her fingers through his locks. It was impossible not to look at his broad naked chest. His torso was decorated with dark patterns she didn’t know the meaning. Ivar’s arms were something extraordinary too, so muscular, she imagined it was due his constant effort to carry himself without putting his weight on his legs. Her eyes traveled to his stomach, it was flat and well-defined as his chest and arms. He had distinct cheekbones and an angular and strong jaw, his pale skin made him look devilishly handsome.

His jaw was tense while he was working to take his brace off. She came closer, kneeling to help him.

Ivar yelled, scaring her. “Don’t!”

Emer looked at him in confusion.

“I don’t want your help!”, he added.

Emer replied. “But I want to help you. It’s my duty!”

He laughed in mockery, but Emer saw pain in his eyes. “Duty? What other duties do you have? To lay on your back, allowing me to place my crippled body between your thighs?”

She was on her knees, almost crying from the humiliation. But, she would not give him the pleasure of seeing her pain. She walked to the table to drink more mead. If this night was going to be this difficult, she’d rather be drunk.

Before she could realize, Ivar was standing behind her. His only free hand running through her hair as if she was made of glass. It was the first time she was so close to an almost naked man. Emer was embarrassed. She didn’t want to look at him, she was sure her face would give away what she was really feeling. His smell was not helping her to think straight. He smelled like pine, mead and leather. Her head was spinning. She wanted to blame the mead she had had. Yet, Emer knew it was not the case. He bent forward, smelling her hair. She had never expected a man of his reputation to act in a gentle manner. Maybe, this was part of his dangerous nature. You wouldn’t expect the violence, wrath and cruelty until it was too late.
She was lost in her thoughts, until she heard his command. “Look at me!”

Emer complied, turning around. She was now facing him. This close, she could see he had strong arched brows and thick eyelashes. And then his eyes. They were deep and catastrophic, a vivid blue. As if he was born to have a close bond with the sea. After all, he came from the fogs of the sea to torment her.

Ivar leaned over her, and for a moment, she thought he would kiss her. Instead he pressed his nose to the delicate skin of her neck, his hot breath provoking strange sensations on her. With a finger from his free hand, he started caressing her opposite arm, Emer closed her eyes, drowning in the reactions Ivar’s actions was drawing from her. His hand was coming up, running his finger along the skin at her neck. Emer felt his gaze upon her and was afraid to open her eyes. Her body tensed while Ivar’s breathing was upon her face. He studied her intently, blue eyes roaming over every feature of her face, as if he was trying to memorize every detail, as if she was going to vanish in the air at any moment. Emer leaned her head back, exposing her jaw to Ivar’s touches. The need to watch his actions took over, and Emer finally opened her eyes. What she saw was surprising. It was like Ivar was unsure. She didn’t know why. For sure, he had had many women throughout his life. A fear hit her. Maybe, she was not pleasing him. She should do something. Emer couldn’t risk the allegiance. But, she was too afraid to be bolder. Emer’s heartbeat was fast.

As to avoid her curious eyes, Ivar buries his face on the side of her neck, gently sucked on the delicate skin until her breathing was as erratic as her heart. He was pressing himself against her. His warm skin against the fabric of her dress, she felt something hard touching her thighs. Ivar kept torturing Emer. His tongue along her velvety skin, making tiny circles over her sensitive flesh, then Emer felt his teeth. She gasped and Ivar stopped. Looking at her as if he was in pain, his features were like a scowl. Has she done something wrong?

He let go of her, clenching his fingers. “To bed!”.

She sat down on the bed and pushed her back against the headboard. Ivar joined her, looking at her for a moment. Then he laid down, his back facing Emer. She felt humiliated and stayed still for a while. Then she heard his voice. “Sleep! It was a tiring day!”

She laid down, facing the ceiling. Emer kept thinking of she had done something to displease him. If so, her people would be in danger.

She only slept when it was almost morning. The sound of Ivar washing his face startled her from her dreams. She rose her head and saw Ivar, bare-chested and sitting on a chair covered in furs. Blood running to her cheeks.
Ivar took a dagger and started crawling to bed. Emer couldn’t move or look away, her breath trapped in her throat. The way his muscles were contracting by his effort, how he was looking at her, a predatory stare. She was sure she should run, but she couldn’t. Emer was frozen.

After what seemed an eternity, she found her voice. “What are you doing?”

Ivar replied, a sardonic smile on his lips. “What it seems that I’m doing?”

Emer was looking from him to the dagger. “I don’t know. Did I do something wrong?”

Ivar looked at her with a pained expression. But it was only for a moment. The mocking man was back. “You’re surprising.”

He used the dagger, carving a line on his palm. The blood was flowing from the newly made wound. Ivar placed his bloody hand on the sheets. Emer realized what he was doing. He had no intention to make her his wife. It was a grave offense. She was not able to attract her husband to her bed. What will he do next? Send her away, back to her father?

“Get ready! I want to show you something before breakfast.”

She nodded. He put his tunic on and left the room. Borghild and Thora entered the room. Their eyes fixed on the blood on the sheets, then they exchanged a surprised look.

Emer asked. “Does any of you know what my husband wants to show me?”

Thora replied. “I’m not sure. Maybe, it’s your morning gift. Since you’re truly his wife now. So, how it feels?”

Borghild interrupted her. “Ivar asked us to make her ready as soon as possible, not to make questions.”

Thora winked to Emer as a promise that her questions would stop only for a moment. They were
almost finishing dressing her, when a loud knock on the door startled them.

“I don’t have all day to wait for you. Are you finally ready?”

Emer was angry, she walked to the door and opened it with full force. “Shall we?”

Emer walked alongside him. He led her to enter a small cabin. It was dark and the smell was terrible. It seemed a prison. Was she a prisoner now? Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, when she captured something that made her heart sank. Lorcán was in chains, blood falling from his broken nose. Yet, he was not showing fear. When he noticed Emer’s presence, he smiled at her.

She asked Ivar. “Why my uncle is prisoner?”

Ivar approached her with a devious smile. “Don’t pretend to be innocent. I know everything about your plan.”

He grabbed her wrist, Lorcán shouted. “Let go of my niece, your monster.”

Emer didn’t know what was happening. “What plan? What are you talking about?”

Ivar was furious. He started squeezing her wrist, leaving red marks on her skin. “Don’t take me by a fool. I wouldn’t be here if I was stupid.”

Emer tried to get free of his hold, she ran to her uncle, engulfing him in a loving embrace. Ivar was looking at them with interest. He wondered if one day she would defend him so fiercely. Nonsense. It was not going to happen. She betrayed him, and she would pay for it. No one makes him a fool.

Lorcán said. “She is innocent. Emer knows nothing about my intentions here.”

Emer step back to look at Lorcán. “What plans? What have you done?”
Lorcán replied shyly. “I arrived here to take you with me. To free you from this forced marriage. Your father was wrong.”

Emer replied. “It was not my father’s decisions. I wanted the marriage.”

Lorcán looked at Emer. “Really?”

“That’s true, uncle. I’m here by my will.”

Ivar scowled at him saying. “Of course, you thought I forced myself on her. Who would want to marry a cripple, hmm?”

Emer looked at Ivar pleadingly. “He knows the truth. Release him. I beg you.”

Ivar looked at them, Emer embracing her uncle in a protective way. Different emotions inside of him. Envy, anger, jealousy.
The Morning Gift

Chapter Notes

This chapter gave me trouble, hahaha. I hope you girls, and maybe guys, like it. It starts with Ivar's perspective of their wedding night and then we have the continuation of the last chapter. I hope it is not confusing this way. Enjoy and let me know your opinions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He walked into the bedroom, his gaze immediately fell upon her. He didn’t pay attention to the two women who were there too. She was wearing a white nightgown. A perfect contrast with her red hair. He couldn’t look away. In fact, he wanted to run his fingers through the softness of her hair, feeling the sweet scent that he was sure belonged only to her. Maybe she would smell like the yellow flowers her people say that brings good luck.

He started walking in her direction, it was possible to see she was nervous, breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling with each gasp. Of course, she was afraid or disgusted. While Ivar was removing his belt and tunic, he wondered if she would be so frightened him being a common man. He would never know, the dreams of being an ordinary man have died long time ago. He dreamed of building himself as a legend, a man worthy of sagas, songs. Someone who would be remembered ages after his death. He had no time to think about childish desires.

His chest was exposed and Ivar felt Emer looking at him, but he didn’t want to raise his head to see the disappointment in her face. He would lose all determination immediately. He reached down to remove his boots, the task more difficult than usual. Then he felt her presence in front of him, she was kneeling to help him. He felt useless, it was their wedding night and she was already seeing him as a weak man. He reacted immediately, scaring her. It seems it was the only thing he was good at. Then her answer came to remember him why she was there. Duty. What other motivation she could have? He wouldn’t show that she was affecting him. He used one of his best abilities, humiliation.

Her reaction was not satisfying as when he used to humiliate those who mocked him. He saw that his words affected her, yet she didn’t reply, didn’t try to hurt him back. She walked away. Another thing he was used to. He watched her taking a goblet of mead. He laughed bitterly, thinking with himself that she wouldn’t want to remember this night. Being touched by a monster would terrify her for the rest of her life. But, he wanted to try. He had given up the idea of marriage and a family long time ago. Those dreams were not for him, his legs were useless as well as the possibility of him being capable to build a family, a loving wife, children running around the hall. He would never run after his sons and daughters. He would never have little warriors and maidens to carry on his legacy. Children with the eyes of a woman he loved.

Then she came to his life, bringing back the old dreams. Daring, smart, with a beauty to make even
Freyja envy. Her face was oval. The fire in her hair matching the fire she woke up inside of him, her smart and vivid green eyes, like a fruitful forest, full of mysteries. A skin so fair that he feared she was from another world and would vanish if he dared to touch. Pink lips that begged to be touched, kissed, bitten, sucked. He was sure her lips would be sweeter than the mead itself. Emer’s delicate nose and cheeks were decorated with small brown spots.

He spent too much time lost in his thoughts about when he first met her. Now he had her so close. She was his to touch as he pleased. Her back turned to him, with her hair down her waist. He needed to touch her, to test himself, to test her. Was she loyal? He asked himself how much she knew about her uncle’s scheme.

He was decided not to let her be away from him, even if she was disloyal, he would make her suffer. No one would dare to defy him, not even her. He would kill her uncle before her, he would break her. If she couldn’t love or respect him, she would fear him. He shifted on his crutch and walked to where she was standing.

He started stroking her hair, thinking she would walk away or be scared by his closeness. She closed her eyes instead, her cheeks red in what would be embarrassment. Ivar smiled to himself that he could make her feel this way. He needed more. So, he leaned lowered his head, smelling her hair, what made his head spin. Her hair's fragrance like the flowers from her homeland.

Of course he would be attracted to her, as he was to conquer the rich meadows of this strange land. His satisfaction didn’t last much. He started thinking she could be involved in a plot to kill him. He wanted to look at her, and wanted Emer to look at him too. He was craving for the truth. He gave the command and she complied. As anyone else would do.

She looked in his eyes, the red in her cheeks deepening and her outstanding green eyes sparkling dangerously. From his perspective, she looked like a rose in full bloom, her parted lips red and filled with promises. He fought the desire to kiss her, he couldn’t look at her anymore, she didn’t seem guilty. But, he wouldn’t be fooled by her beauty like Skaði was tricked by Njörðr’s attractive feet.

Ivar leaned over her to taste the skin of her neck, he could see she had closed her eyes. Her scent was intoxicant like the sweetest fruit from the lands he had raided. His free hand was calling for her skin, and he was longing to see how far they could go. He didn’t stop his moves and was in awe when the woman exposed her jaw to him. She trusted him. Maybe not completely, since she opened her eyes to watch his moves. Her eyes communicating something he had never seen. Desire? It was impossible, he wouldn’t let her elude him. Burying his head on the side of her neck, he started sucking the skin that it was like the velvet they plundered for. The thought of the battles made him harder, his hips moving on their own, trying to find her. As if it was the right place to be. He should stop, but it was so difficult.
“I must stop!”, he thought to himself. He couldn’t bear the mockery it would come because of his performance. He bit her neck and she gasped. He looked at her, clenching his finger until he felt pain to match his emotions.

“To bed”, he said.

He knew he went too far. She had seen his weakness. It would be the last time. Ivar joined her in the bed, looking once more to the beauty. He thought about the few servants he tried to win over. No, he was wrong. And he hated being wrong. She was a princess.

“Sleep! It was a tiring day!”, he said wanting to hear from that alluring mouth. “I don’t want to sleep!” He was bewitched, it would be the only explanation to his foolishness. No woman would be consumed with a longing for him. Certainly, not one so godlessly beautiful.

He woke up first, watching her face twisted in worry, even in her sleep. He felt himself hardening and wanting to wake her with bites and wet kisses, like any normal husband would do in their first morning as a husband and wife. But, he was not an ordinary man. He moved to a chair to wash his face. Maybe the freezing water would help to extinguish his desire for her. He felt her gaze and crawled to bed, dagger in hand. He thought she would run. Ivar was impressed by her bravery. A guilty woman would have run.

Her sleepy voice made Ivar want to cradle her in his arms, never releasing her. “Did I do something wrong?”, she asked him.

Of course he would mock her innocence. Something he praised, it attracted him. A characteristic he would want to destroy in others. But it fits her perfectly.

He cut himself and painted the sheets with his blood. Her face was a mask of panic. He wondered if she would show the same surprise seeing her uncle in chains.

Ivar threatened them. “Maybe I should behead your dear uncle with his brother’s sword.”

Emer begged, tears in her eyes. “Please, don’t. He didn't know the truth.”

Ivar asked. “Now he can die knowing the truth.”
Emer didn't want to say who led Lorcán to believe she was forced to marry Ivar.

“He supposed it was against my will because you've been fighting against my father.”

“I don’t care about what he thought. Follow me! I selected some presents for you to choose as your morning gift.”

Emer was shocked and desperate, watching Ivar’s moves, and embracing Lorcán’s neck as if he would vanish as soon as she set him free.

“I don’t have all day to spend here.”, Ivar rushed her.

Emer was still crying. Her brain working in high speed.

Her eyes started travelling, then she saw something that could help her. Emer asked Ivar, “Can I really choose what I want as my morning gift?”

Ivar laughed. Everyone has a price. “Yes. It's your choice”

Emer needed to be sure he meant what he was saying. Otherwise her plan wouldn’t work. “Do you promise, husband? By your honor and place in Valhalla?”

He has never thought someone would call him husband. It was like a skald telling of his feats and ensuring his legacy would live on. Ivar was impatient. He couldn’t wait any longer to kill the man. “Yes, woman”.

“I want just what I can cover with an ox hide. To do as I please.”

Her wish made Ivar laugh. She should be stupid. After so many years, he had married a naive woman. He watched her actions with curiosity.
She released Lorcán’s neck and walked to take an ox hide that was hanging on the wall. She walked to Lorcán and covered him with the leather.

Ivar was astonished. She managed to elude him. It was more than what he could say about everyone around him.

“My uncle's life belongs to me, to do as I please”

Ivar started angering with his lack of control. Emer was in charge now. And of course, she would save the man. Even though he came to the wedding to take Ivar's wife away from him, killing him in the process, if necessary. He wondered if one day she would risk that much for him.

Even with the fact Ivar has made a promise, Emer was not so sure if he would be true to his word. She was looking at him. She shouldn’t show her insecurity.

“Well then. I’ve made a promise, I suppose I must keep it. Yet, as my wife you should honor my household. This man might be your uncle, but he dishonored us. It's a grave fault to kill your host. I trust you will make the wise decision to order his death.”

Emer didn't want to start their married life offending her husband. But she had no other option.

“I trust you can forgive me. I can't order the death of an innocent man. His actions were motivated by false information. He didn't mean to offend.”

Ivar was furious that he couldn't convince her. He could not remember the last time he had failed to persuade someone. He looked at Sigvard that could barely hide his smile.

“Sigvard, lead this man to his horse!”

Emer smiled at Ivar embracing her uncle one last time.

Ivar said, in a commanding voice. “Follow me!”
They walked back to Ivar’s hall, entering in one of the rooms. On a table, she saw almost endless items of household, such as sewing needles, jars, goblets made of gold and silver, she wondered how much blood has been spilled for these things. On the floor, chest with clothes in Norse fashion, velvet, linen, silk, furs of different kind of animals. It was so colorful. Red, green, purple and blue as his eyes, all colors destined to royalty. She should stop thinking about those eyes. She was dazzled seeing these things. She didn't notice when Ivar ordered one of his men to bring another chest filled with jewelry of all kinds, necklaces, brooches, rings. Four people arrived there as well.

“These are your slaves.”, Ivar said pointing to two young women and two men.

Emer was not so shocked because in her father’s domains slavery was a common habit. She looked at them, nodding in acknowledgment. Ivar dismissed everyone.

While Emer was caressing some furs, Ivar said. “What do you think about these gifts?”

Emer blushed almost instantly. “They are beautiful. You have excellent taste.”

Ivar laughed. “You have no idea.”

She replied to change the subject of the conversation. “But you gave me my morning gift already. I will never be grateful enough that you allowed my uncle to live. I want nothing more.”

Ivar laughed mischievously. “I had little to do about it. You fooled me.”

Emer was embarrassed. “You're not a fool. It takes much bravery to forgive those who offend us.”

Ivar replied playfully. “Forgive? You must take me by an idiot. In my world, we never forgive. I’ve made you a promise. That's all. If your precious uncle stand in my way again, he will die slowly and agonizingly.”

Emer swallowed. “He will not be a problem.”

Ivar approached her, raising his hand and touching her cheek. “I love when you blush. It is easier to read when you are lying. We both know your family will always be a problem.”
Emer felt shivers down her spine. What if he thought she was lying to him? She knew that her uncle was following her father's advice.

Ivar kept saying. “You should better remember who is your master now.”

Emer was furious. He was not her master, she didn't belong to him. She was not one of his men, not even the horse which pulls his chariot to attend his orders.

“I see that you don't like the idea of having a master. Sometimes it’s better not to be in control, allowing others to be in charge for you.”

Emer looked away. Ivar was now caressing her lips. He moved his hand to her jaw and then to her neck. The rhythm of her heartbeat was so loud in her ears that she asked herself if Ivar could hear it too. The rhythmic drumming accompanied each breath she took trying to calm herself and stay focused. Yet, it was almost impossible to think coherently with Ivar so close. She knew he was dangerous. Emer just didn't know if the shivers down her spine were due his wicked smile or something else.

He moved her head to make her face him. He was moving even closer. It was possible to feel the warmth of their bodies, as if they were not wearing clothes. Her face a bright red mask of embarrassment. They have shared a bed. Yet, they were not intimate as they should be. She asked herself if she would be so flustered if he had touched her, as a husband is supposed to do.

She was wide-eyed, trying to breathe through her parted lips. He glued his lips on her ear and whispered. "I know your father is responsible for this. Don't fear! I won't miss the chance to have your father's head as I've lost his brother's."

The hair on the back of her neck stood up. She moved her head to his side, his eyes were like a tormented sea. She didn't know for how long she could prevent drowning.

Chapter End Notes

Here we have informations about the goddess Skaði and her choice of husband, as Ivar described Skaði.

Viking Age Hairstyles, Haircare, and Personal Grooming
The clothes and jewellery of the Vikings

Clothing in the Viking Age

Clothes In Viking Age

A Quick and Dirty Look at Viking Women's Garb in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries
Viking Women's Garb in Art and Archaeology

What did people wear in Viking-Age Ireland

Slaves in Medieval Ireland

The Viking slave trade: entrepreneurs or heathen slavers?

Slavery in Medieval Ireland

Medieval Irish merchants traded in slaves in Tunisia and Iceland

I almost forgot to mention the flowers Ivar is talking about. The Hawthorn. Sceach Gheal.
"The Hawthorn is known by a variety of different names, The May Tree, The Beltaine Tree, The May Blossom, The Whitethorn, The Quick etc. In Irish it is Sceach Gael but we also know it as the Faerie Tree for it is said to guard the entrance to the faerie realm and it is still considered bad luck to harm one. You may however collect sprigs of flowers during the month of May to place in and around the home to banish evil spirits or misfortune (always ask the guardians of the tree first)."

"The Hawthorn has long been associated with fertility and at Beltaine (May 1st) young women would take a sprig of blossom and keep it close as a way of attracting a husband."

"On the morning of Beltaine (dawn), men and women would bathe in the morning dew of the Hawthorn blossom to increase wealth, health, luck, good fortune, and beauty. Women would become more beautiful and men by washing their hands in the dew would become skilled craftsmen. Today it is still practiced and it is one of the woods used in the Hand fastening ritual as it will ensure a lasting relationship."
Folklore of the hedgerow.
Ivar takes Emer to a small journey, she is surprised that he wants to give her a big farm. She gets to know the people there and their struggles. Ivar is balanced that she cares about them. One woman
gives her clothes for a baby, wishing good luck. She is embarrassed knowing that Ivar didn't touch her.

After receiving her morning gift, Emer walked to the hall to eat. The dagmál was composed of a porridge made of wheat flour, crushed hazelnuts and barley kernels. Emer could notice that they used honey as well. She couldn’t eat thinking about Ivar’s threat. She was not sure if her uncle was released and was afraid to imagine what Ivar could do to her father, once he put his hands on him.

She was so lost in her worries that she didn’t notice Ivar looking at her the whole time. His warm and calloused hand touching hers were enough to wake her.

“I think it’s better if you eat. We will ride today. You will need your strength.”

Emer replied. “I’m not hungry.”

Ivar grunted in disapproval. “If you fall from your horse during the journey, I will let you on the ground.”

Emer thought that she should eat to avoid angering him even more. She started eating the porridge, she didn’t regret it. It was heavenly and sweet. She sighed in satisfaction. From her peripheral vision, she saw Ivar’s cocky smile. After she finished her porridge, Ivar offered her some strawberries and raspberries. They were inviting and their smell was rich. Before she could pick up one of the berries, Ivar took the bowl away from her reach. Emer opened her mouth to protest, but he held a strawberry to her mouth. She was taken by surprise, his intense gaze was commanding, she closed her mouth around the fruit, tasting the sweetness of the strawberry. Its juice started flowing to her lips, Ivar used his thumb to clean her lips, she swallowed hard. He was so concentrated. Emer imagined if he acted this way while in battle, absorbed by the destruction he was inflicting upon others.

His fingers toying with her lower lip, she didn’t know what to do, afraid that even the slightest movement could make him stop. She let out a heavy breath, an odd warmth running through her. Her noise made Ivar look deep into her green eyes, he raised his hand, liking the juice from his thumb, with his glaring eyes still fixed upon her. Those indigo darts using her as a target. She was helpless. Looking into her husband’s eyes, Emer could hear the waves crashing against the shore, see the foam flying into the air. His eyes were blue like the sky right before the sun disappears.

He kept doing his ministrations with a thoughtful expression. She wondered if one day she would decipher the man in front of her.
The noise of Sigvard’s arrival interrupted Ivar’s actions.

“It’s time for us to leave, or we will have to spend the night there.”

Ivar’s lips were forming a straight line, disapproving look on his features and clenched fist to match.

Ivar looked from Sigvard to Emer. “I hope you can ride faster than you eat, since we are late.”

She signed in frustration. They were late because of him.

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They were preparing for the departure. Emer didn’t know where they were going to. She had asked them many times, without an answer. They only glanced at each other, with a playful smile. Emer was curious and, at the same time, afraid about what Ivar had planned.

They walked to the stables, Sigvard left them alone saying he would gather the rest of the group. Ivar had the finest horses. Emer loved animals, she was distracted caressing the neck of one of the mares. The dappled pony was so docile, its dark grey coat was so shiny and soft. The mare’s head was broad between the kind eyes, its cheekbones well defined. Differently from its apparent delicate eyes, the loins and back seemed strong as well as its short legs.

Ivar’s voice made Emer look away from the animal, “What do you think about the pony?”

Emer looked back at the pony, its ears slightly turned back in a relaxed manner. When the pony lowered its head to grab Emer’s cloak with its teeth, she couldn’t help her laugh. Emer had her answer to Ivar’s question.

“It’s a curious one.” Emer giggled.

Ivar smiled cockily. “I think you two will be friends.”

Emer looked at Ivar, a silent question in her eyes.
“It’s another part of your morning gift. How do you expect to travel when it’s necessary?”

Emer looked at him, her right hand caressing the mare’s neck. “It’s an impressive companion. I’m grateful…” Emer was tilting her head, her free hand going to her neck, a feeling of warmth rushed through her. “…But, I didn’t know you expected me to travel. And you’ve been so generous already.”

Ivar laughed in mockery. “I wouldn’t use the word generous to describe myself.”

Emer looked away in embarrassment, with cheeks almost crimson. Ivar drew himself closer, touching the mare’s neck. He felt like Emer was a doe he was trying to hunt with his longbow. The last thing he wanted was a frightened prey. Emer’s eyes were panicked, her tongue licking her lower lip and pressing it together lightly. He fought to keep a leash on his hunger. He adverted his eyes to look at the mare, his hand traveling to meet Emer’s. When their fingers touched, Ivar felt something odd. As the curious man he was, he wanted to explore more, he placed it above Emer’s hand. The softness and warmth of her delicate skin being the reason why his heart started racing. At the same time, he felt a tingling in his stomach.

They were looking at their joined hands. Emer didn’t understand him. He had touched and avoided her on their wedding night. Ivar threatened Emer and her family. But, at the same time, the man had given her wonderful gifts, touched her lips during their meal. Treating her with a cold distance, but suddenly seeking an opportunity to be closer. She feared it was all part of the cunning nature he was famous for. His calloused hand, just that one simple touch sending a searing heat through her, at the same time, shivers traveling down her spine.

She took advantage of the fact he was not looking at her face, to study his features. She was resolute to unveil his secrets. How a man of his fame could touch her in such a gentle manner? Why a gentle touch was capable to provoke violent reactions from her body? He seemed focused, his pupils so dilated and almost hiding the indigo blue color. He raised his head, looking at her, what caused Emer to tremble, a feeling of weakness in her legs.

The mare that until that moment was calm under their touch, seemed willing to save Emer from the mortification, raised its head between them. Sigvard approached right away too. Ivar’s right-hand man had a smug smile on his face, what only added to Emer’s embarrassment. She pushed the feeling away. She shouldn’t be ashamed of touching and being touched by her husband. Yet, why she felt like she was caught doing something wrong? She tried to stop thinking about her confused feelings. It was time to go to the mysterious place Ivar wanted to take her.
Ivar felt her eyes upon him, her hand was sweating. He thought she was disgusted by his touch. Why didn't she take her hand away from him? She was fearing he could hurt her, for sure. After what felt like an eternity, Ivar lifted his eyes to investigate his wife's forest green eyes. What he saw was surprising. Her emerald eyes seemed darker than ever, Emer's mouth was partially open, her chest raising and falling with her heavy breathing. He didn't have time to inspect her further. The daring mare raised its head between them. Ivar groaned in annoyance. Sigvard entered the stables a few moments later. The man looked from Ivar to Emer with a suggestive smile on his lips. Ivar let go of her hand.

Ivar cleared his throat, “We shall go now.”

They rode until after the midday, Emer was starving, but didn't want to show any sign of weakness before them. If they were not complaining, she wouldn't either.

Sigvard approached Emer asking her if she was hungry.

“How long it will take?”

Sigvard opened his mouth to answer her, being interrupted by Ivar. “Are you anxious, wife?”

Emer was exhausted, annoyed, starving and curious. A dangerous combination. “What do you think? You drag me from home to an unknown place, telling me nothing about our destination, not even your plans. How do you think I feel?”

Ivar laughed. “It seems that you're feeling hungry. We should stop for a moment to eat.”

Emer let out a frustrated sigh. It seems he was not going to tell her were they were going to. After eating a bread and a dried and salted fish, they started mounting the horses to go. She looked at Ivar out of the corner of her eye. He was drawing his chariot alongside her pony.

“Whoa”

His command made Emer rolls her eyes, she was still trying not to look directly at him. It was hard when he was holding the reins in a hypnotizing way, it was like a caress, loosening the reins just a
little, so the horse should think it was free, when in truth the control was with Ivar. She was still angry that he didn’t reveal their destination. Ivar’s arm outstretched, with some fruits in his hand. Emer didn’t want to look at him.

“I noticed that you liked these fruits. So, I brought some with me.”

She didn’t want to stand her hand to pick one of the fruits, fearing he would repeat the same actions from the morning. Ivar noticed her hesitation.

Ivar teased her with a self-assured smile, “I think you prefer the fruits when they are served in your mouth.”

If looks could kill, Ivar would be a dead man at that moment. Emer was glaring at him, a clenched jaw. Ivar’s smile never fading only helped to increase her fury. He took of the berries into his mouth, eyes never leaving her. For Emer, it was like no one else was there, just her and the object of her fury, her husband. When he finished eating the fruit, he licked his lips.

“You don’t want the berries? Your lost. They are delicious.”

Emer sighed in frustration, his fingers were coming closer to her face. She thought he would mirror his early ministrations during the dagmál. She was mistaken.

“Don’t be so angry! We are almost arriving.”, he told her, bopping her nose with his finger and giving Emer a quick smile that crinkled his face in all the right places.

Chapter End Notes

"In mythology, strawberries are connected to the Norse goddess of love, Freyja. The spirits of children would enter the afterlife by hiding in strawberries that are taken to heaven by Frigga."

Berries as symbols and in folklore
Raspberry History, Folklore, Myth, and Magic
A brief history of horses in early Ireland
History of the Horse in Britain until the Norman Conquest
About Emer's horse:
"The Connemara region in County Galway in western Ireland, where the breed first became recognized as a distinct type, is a very harsh landscape, thus giving rise to a pony breed of hardy, strong individuals. Some believe that the Connemara developed from Scandinavian ponies that the Vikings first brought to Ireland."

Connemara Pony

The horse in Early Ireland
"Horses were put to the same uses as at present:—riding, drawing chariots, racing; and more rarely ploughing, drawing carts, and as pack-animals: all which uses are mentioned in our old literature. The horse is known by various names. Ech signifies any horse of a superior kind: cognate with Latin equus, and Greek hippos. Marc, another word for horse, is explained 'a steed or mare': hence the common word marcach, 'a horseman.' Capall, meaning a horse of any kind—a term existing in varied forms in several European languages—is the word now used among Irish-speakers. Garrán, a hack-horse, in the modern form garron, is in general use at the present day in Ireland among speakers of English to denote a heavily-worked half-broken-down old horse.
"From many passages in the Brehon Laws and other old writings, it appears that horses were often imported, and that those from Wales and France were especially prized. In the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, those Irish horses called hobbies were known all over Europe "and held in great esteem for their easy amble: . . . from this kind of horse the Irish light-armed bodies of horse were called hobellers" (Ware).
Giraldus Cambrensis tells us that in his time the Irish used no saddles in riding, and the custom must have been very general at a still later time, for laws were made to compel the Irish and Anglo-Irish to ride like with saddles. Yet this custom prevailed among the English themselves in early times, as well as among the ancient Britons, Gauls, and Romans. But from the earliest times, the higher classes of the Irish used a thick cloth called dillat, between them and the horse; which occasionally covered the whole animal."

A Smaller Social History of Ancient Ireland: Horse-riding
"There were also performers of horsemanship, who delighted their audiences with feats of activity and skill on horseback, such as we see in modern circuses. Prizes were awarded to the best performers; and at the close of the proceedings the coveted trophy was publicly presented by some important person, such as a king, a queen, or a chief."

The Great Conventions and Fairs
"Cavalry did not form an important feature of the ancient Irish military system: we do not find cavalry mentioned at all in the Battle of Clontarf, either as used by the Irish or Danes. But kings kept in their service small bodies of horse-soldiers, commonly called in Irish "horse-host." The chief men, too, often rode in battle, and the leaders fought on horseback. After the Anglo-Norman invasion cavalry came into general use."

Irish Military Formation
Chapter Summary

The second part, and explanation, of their journey. It's a gift for my birthday sister @underthenorthstar. May all your dreams come true darling. ^^

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Now they had reached their destination. It was a huge farm located on the low side of a cliff, with a
gentle slope ending on a beach. It was high enough to avoid the highest waves to reach the land, with a perfect view of the sea. Emer could see the waves gently lapping onto the shore. Horses, pigs, sheep, goats, cattle, geese and chickens. It was one of the most beautiful things Emer had ever seen. She was speechless. Some houses were standing next to a bigger one, Emer supposed it belonged to a wealthy warlord. Maybe one of Ivar's men. She just didn't know why he brought her there on their first morning as a couple.

Sigvard approached Ivar, whispering something. Then he took Emer's pony and his own horse to the stables. Emer didn't understand why he did this, yet she didn't mind walking. It was a breathtaking landscape.

Emer started wandering, completely absorbed by the beauty and wilderness of the place.

She could hear Ivar's chariot behind her. Emer didn't want to look at him. She was still angry. All she desired was to walk away from all the problems, melting into the ocean. The endless blue waves that didn't care about humanity’s problems, it was like an immortal deity. She wondered how many stories it had witnessed. Lovers whose hearts were broken, mothers that lost their children by the terrible hand of war. Maybe the sea was made from their tears. What would be an explanation for why humans were so fascinated by the deep waters. It was like they were searching for the sorrow. Attracted by the suffering. Or maybe, they were all selkies, trying to get back to their origins in the bottom of the ocean.

They said if a woman shed seven tears into the sea, a male selkie would contact her. Emer had cried more than enough tears, but she didn't want any other man in her life. It seemed to her they were the cause of her pain. Maybe she was not an unhappy woman in search of love from a being from another world. She might be a creature from the sea herself. She might have forgotten. Who stole my skin in this case? Forcing me to live among humans. Who stole me from myself? These questions didn’t leave her mind.

She longed to be one with the ocean she had never known. Her legs seemed to move of their own accord, they were leading her to the edge. Only this way she could be free.

Emer was in the edge, watching the waves crashing onto the shore, a lonely tear running down her cheek.

Ivar's voice taking her away from her thoughts, “Come here, Emer. Let's see the rest of the farm.”

She didn't want to face him. He would know she was weak. A stupid and crying woman. Emer raised her hand to her face, cleaning her tears.
She looked back at him. He was offering his hand as an invitation. An almost kind smile playing on his lips. She thought he seemed even more gorgeous when he was relaxed.

She asked herself, “Why couldn't it be always this way?”

“There is no space for me!”, she replied referring to his chariot. But, her question had a hidden meaning.

“Of course, it has enough space for you. Don't be naive.”

She took his hand shyly. He commanded her to sit in front of him, between his legs, her back pressed against his muscular chest. She shouldn't be so shy about it. But it was not an ordinary marriage.

He closed his arms around her, taking control of the reins. She felt suffocating. The movement of the chariot only increasing her discomfort. She was holding onto the edge trying not to touch him more than what was necessary. The landscape didn't help to avoid contact, the irregular ground was shaking the chariot. His hot breath on her neck was making her feel shivering. After what seemed like hours they were back at the gates of the farm. Emer didn't notice she had walked for so long. She didn't know why Ivar didn't say anything to stop her.

Sigvard was waiting for them outside, with something in his hands. He helped Emer to jump from the chariot. The man approached Ivar and Emer could see what was in his hands. It was like metal legs, he helped Ivar to put in the device. Emer was watching cautiously. Not wanting to make Ivar aware. It was obvious he trusted Sigvard to help him. But, when she tried to help him on their wedding night, he pushed her away. She thought that with time he would come to trust her too.

They walked inside the fortification. There were some people waiting for them. They looked like simple farmers. But they were pleased to see Ivar, Sigvard and Emer. One of them approached with some children and a pregnant woman, Emer presumed they were a family.

“The crops are growing fast. We will have plenty of food for the Winter.”

Ivar smiled warmly to the man, “It's good to know, Siegfried. Especially because you are going to have one more mouth to feed.”, the man laughed, caressing his wife’s belly. “How long until the little one is in your arms?”, Ivar asked the woman.
She replied smiling, “As soon as Winter starts, I believe.”

Emer looked at her belly, they looked like a happy family. She asked herself if she would be happier as the daughter of a farmer. She would never know.

Ivar introduced Emer, “This is my wife, Emer.”

Siegfried smiled at her. “I'm honored. This is my wife, Astrid, and our children. Ragnald, Birger and Bjarni.”

Emer was impressed with such a big family. The kids seemed to be the same age.

Ivar asked him, “Do you have a comfortable place for us to spend the night? The journey took more time than I imagined.”

Emer was happy they would not travel at night. After the attack on the road, she felt insecure to ride at night. Siegfried said something that startled her, “Of course, your house is kept in order for when you want to come. I'll never be grateful enough that you let us live here.”

Ivar laughed. “I suppose I wouldn't be of much help as a farmer.”

Siegfried replied smiling, “I'm not a warrior either. I would only fight to protect and fed my family.”

Emer was surprised. It was Ivar's property.

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It was almost nightfall when they started the náttmál. A pleasant meal. Emer felt relaxed for the first time. With mead, ale and even wine, mutton, lamb, goat and pork. Emer thought they wanted to please their guests. Since the Winter was almost upon them, and they had slaughtered even the pigs, that were so supposed to die later. Astrid brought all kind of berries to the table, explaining they were good for women because of fertility.
Emer blushed thinking about Ivar feeding her.

The hall was small compared with Ivar’s property in Duiblinn, but it was filled with the joy of the kids running through the benches, the men laughing and sharing old stories of when they were young.

Emer was sitting at Ivar's side, distracted watching the kids playing. Ivar’s voice came to her ears, “Are you not hungry? They will be offended if you don't eat more. They want to please their mistress. Or maybe you prefer when I feed you.”

“What are you talking about? Are we going to live here now?”, Emer asked worried.

“No. This farm is yours now. The last part of your morning gift. Siegfried is your tenant now. Tomorrow you should ask him about the running of the farm, the slaves and servants, the repairs that are needed, the number the heads of cattle, pigs...” Emer gasped, interrupting his speech.

Her heart skipped a beat. It looked like he wanted her to live there then. She had no further explanation. “Do you want me to live here, away from you?”

Ivar was looking at her, studying her features, “Do you want to live here?”

Emer replied, “No. My place is with you. We are married.”

Ivar smiled at her. She could say it was one of his rare and genuine smiles.

“So we have nothing more to discuss. They will report about the farm for you from now on. The profits are yours now.”

“I don't understand. Why are you doing this? You don't have to.”

“It’s the right thing. Even though your father didn't check the bride price, I'm true to my word. If you
find out that you want the divorce, you don't have to go to your father's lands. You will have your own household.", he explained watching her every move. He wanted to know what she was thinking.

“You're giving me choice, freedom.”, the realization came as a warm feeling. She knew now he was not a Selkie whose skin was stolen. She had a choice.

Emer smiled at Ivar, taking his hands. “Þakka. It's much more than anyone had ever given me before."

Emer saw Ivar blushing for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to include some legend in the story. So I saw a post on Tumblr from @laure-demonetety. It is the legend of creatures that are very similar to mermaids. The Selkies. What I loved the most is that their legend is present in both Irish and Icelandic folklore.

"Male selkies are described as being very handsome in their human form, and having great seductive powers over human women. They typically seek those who are dissatisfied with their lives, such as married women waiting for their fishermen husbands. If a woman wishes to make contact with a selkie male, she must shed seven tears into the sea. If a man steals a female selkie's skin she is in his power and is forced to become his wife. Female selkies are said to make excellent wives, but because their true home is the sea, they will often be seen gazing longingly at the ocean. If she finds her skin she will immediately return to her true home, and sometimes to her selkie husband, in the sea. Sometimes, a selkie maiden is taken as a wife by a human man and she has several children by him. In these stories, it is one of her children who discovers her sealskin (often unwitting of its significance) and she soon returns to the sea. The selkie woman usually avoids seeing her human husband again but is sometimes shown visiting her children and playing with them in the waves.

Stories concerning selkies are generally romantic tragedies. Sometimes the human will not know that their lover is a selkie, and wakes to find them returned to their seal form. In other stories the human will hide the selkie's skin, thus preventing the selkie from returning to its seal form. A selkie can only make contact with one human for a short amount of time before the selkie must return to the sea. The selkie is unable to make contact with that human again for seven years, unless the human steals their selkie skin and hides it or burns it."
Dreams

Emer memorized everything about her farm, impressing Ivar. The names of her tenants, their families. Even the stories they shared during the feast in their honor, and the breakfast in the morning of their departure.

Emer inquired Siegfried about attacks, “I imagine that the farm standing by the coast makes you all vulnerable to raids. How do you manage it?”

Siegfried looked confused, as if what Emer just said was unthinkable.

“We were attacked just once. When Ivar was still living here. Since then, his banners are more than enough to scare any Viking sailing through our coast. They usually prefer having a peaceful port to make negotiations and to take supplies for their journey.”

Emer was relieved that they were safe. She felt attached to them already.

Ragnald, Birger and Bjarni - Siegfried and Astrid’s sons - were playing with Emer on the beach after dagmál. It was the first time she was relaxed since her marriage. The kids did not care about her different roots. They just wanted someone to play. Emer started thinking about the story of the Selkies again. Emer thought if she were a Selkie, with a human family, she could not abandon her children to go back to the ocean. It was unthinkable for her. She smiled bitterly. Children were not in her future. It looked like she would never hold a baby from her flesh and blood.

Ragnald was the youngest, only four years old, when his brothers left him and Emer behind, searching for shells, he kept himself busy trying to braid Emer’s hair. He found the colour was fascinating. The little boy had already conquered Emer with his curiosity and kindness. When Ragnald was tired of playing with her hair, he started following his brothers. Emer kept watching them. Siegfried came to take the boys and to warn Emer it was time to leave. Ivar was waiting for her.

Astrid made sure Emer was taking some food to face the journey. They presented her with a beautiful dress as well. Emer blushed deeply.

Emer hugged Astrid, making a promise, “I will be back after Winter, to meet the little one, and to play with your sons. Your family is truly blessed.”
When they were ready to leave, Ragnald came running. Something hidden in his small hands. Emer dismounted to see what the boy wanted. He placed a beautiful and colorful shell in her hands, giving her a tight hug. Emer felt emotional. Ragnald met her the day before, but he already was special. Astrid laughed with the gesture of her son.

They rode all the afternoon, arriving at the dawn. Ivar bathed while Emer instructed the servants about the meal. Thora and Borghild helped Emer to bath before dinner. She wanted to wear her new dress right away.

When she was finished dressing, Ivar requested her presence. His hair was still wet.

He questioned her, “Could you cut my hair and beard?”

Emer blushed, but nodded affirmatively. She had seen her mother doing the same for her father. Sometimes she even did it herself for her brother. She would finally touch his hair. The realization making her nervous.

She was running her hands through his hair to untangle any knot that could be there. Even when it was not necessary, she kept massaging his scalp. She was right to presume his hair was like silk. The smell was intoxicating too. Rosemary and something more. Something she could not name.

Ivar was almost regretting his request. Her fingertips touching his face, fingers caressing his head. Her warm and sweet breath was burning him alive. He was watching her every move, not because he was afraid she would hurt him with the scissors. He was afraid she would hurt him in the worst way. By being disgusted of touching him.

Her eyes were so focused on the task, her hands touching him so gently that it was like the breeze. Her scent was like flowers and honey. He wondered if her skin would taste like this too. The thought sent blood rushing to his groin. To have her beneath him, willing to his desire. Touching her lazily, his tongue traveling through her body, making her moan, whimper and gasp for air. Until his hips would meet hers, she would open herself to receive him, embracing him with her arms and legs, digging her nails into his back when the rhythm of his trusts were unbearable. She would scream his name as if she was drowning in pleasure and he was the only who could save her. Wasted dreams. He would never be capable to please her. She would scream his name. But in terror if he wanted to force himself on her.
“Ivar? Ivar?”, Emer’s green eyes were questioning him.

“What?”, he did not know what she was asking.

“I said that I finished. We should eat. I'm hungry.”, she explained with a suspicious face.

“What he was thinking of. It was like Ivar was lost in a dream.”, she thought.

“We should. Thank you for cutting my hair.”

She smiled, “I used to cut my brother's hair or help mother with father's hair.”

He knew it was ridiculous, but the thought of his wife touching other men, made him jealous. Men that she loved, that she will always love.

She brought his crutch and waited for him to go to the hall.

Emer was laughing, “I'm so hungry.”

Ivar smiled mischievously. Little she knew, but he was thirsty.
The Healer
After their return from the farm, Ivar started sleeping in another room. She was confused with his decision. Just when she thought they would be closer.

Emer was sleeping when she heard screams. The sound was coming from Ivar's quarters.

She ran to see what was happening.

Two warriors were guarding the door and didn't want to let her in. She was frustrated. It was like they didn't know she was his wife. Or if they didn't care.

Agnar said. “You're not allowed in.”

She tried to stay calm in order to think about what to do. But she wanted to scream that she was daughter of Máel Sechnaill. No one could command her or tell Emer where was her place.

“I’m your leader’s wife. How do you think he will react knowing that you were disrespectful with his wife? I’m sure he won't take it lightly.”

Agnar didn’t know if it was a trick, but he was not brave, or stupid, enough to risk facing Ivar's wrath. He allowed her in.

When she entered his chambers, Emer saw that he was in pain. His jaw was tense, yet he was howling curses.

Sigvard was there trying to hold him. It seemed his pain was so unbearable that Ivar was writhing in
agon. When he noticed Emer's presence he yelled at her to leave.

“How did you come in?”

Emer ignored his questions and commands. Instead she asked Sigvard what was happening to her husband.

“Why is he in pain?”

“I won't tell you! Get out before you get hurt.”

“I won't leave before you answer my question.” Emer was seething. But it was better not to show her anger, it wouldn't help Ivar.

Ivar answered her question before they could notice his pain had decreased momentarily.

“My bones are aching. Now you can go and tell your people that I’m weak. I’m sure they will be satisfied knowing that I suffer.”

Emer didn't know what to say at first.

“I would never...”

He interruped her. His expression was still showing signs that he was in pain.

“I don't believe you. I can't...”

Sigvard was watching their discussion. He wondered if she was telling the truth. The man decided she was being sincere. Emer has never given them a reason to doubt her.

He started shaking in pain again. Emer hurried to his side taking his hands. She checked if he had
fever.

“Everything will be okay. I’ll give you something to ease your pain.”

Pain felt like a sharp-toothed creature eating him from the inside. He thought he would get used to it with time, he was wrong.

She left the room for a few minutes and went back carrying some herbs, oils and hot water. She asked Sigvard to undress Ivar. Emer used the oil on her hand to massage Ivar’s legs. It was working to ease his pain, but he was not comfortable with the woman touching his skin.

She looked him in the eye, covering Ivar with the furs to keep him warm. She proceeded with her work. Now boiling another herbs for him to drink.

Ivar was suspicious when she approached with the hot beverage in hands. Yet, nothing could be worse than the excruciating sensation inside of him. Ivar noticed that his legs felt better after her massage, so he took the chance. She helped him to drink, their fingers were touching. None of them noticed that Sigvard was not there anymore.

After drinking what his wife has given him, Ivar felt better and entered in a peaceful sleep.

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In the morning he felt renewed. The light woke him up. When he was ready to leave the bed, he noticed he was not alone.

Emer was sleeping in a chair. Her hair was partially covering her face. Ivar didn’t know what to do. He thought, "Should I wake her up or let her sleep?" She was clearly uncomfortable sleeping.

His legs were no longer aching. From where he was lying, it was possible to touch her. She was disheveled. The fact that he would be the only man to see her this way was a revelation. Something about the way the sunshine was capable to make her hair looks like if it was on fire made Ivar move his hand. He tried to put her locks away from her face without waking her.

He started caressing the delicate skin of her face. Emer's lips were partially open. Trembling fingertips traced the outline of her lips, trailing to her jaw. Ivar started moving downward. He looked
down to where her chest was rising and falling with her breathing. She was still wearing her
nightgown. Emer had forgotten to change her clothes. Ivar thought it was too revealing. He
wondered if his men have seen her this way. Ivar felt his blood boil just to think about them gazing at
her body.

He remembered their wedding night. Like in that night he felt himself hardening, but he knew it
wouldn't last. At the time, he smelled her neck. Now he was fighting not to do the same. Without
success. He felt attracted to her neck like the fox who must kill its prey quick to feed. It was stronger
than him. He wanted to know if she was still smelling like in that night. Ivar wanted to place kisses
down her jaw, neck, breasts and feel Emer melting because of his actions. He wanted to do what he
know normal couple do at night.

Emer was feeling something tickling her. Was she dreaming? She could say it was morning. The
sound of the servants was obvious. Normally, she wakes up early. But, after the emotions of the last
night she was too tired to open her eyes at the usual hour.

The tickling sensation didn't stop, so Emer realized it was not a dream. To her surprise, it was her
husband. It seemed that she had fallen asleep in his chambers. It was comprehensible. She was
worried his pain would come back, this way she decided she should stay there a little longer to keep
an eye on him. Emer supposed she was too tired to watch his sleep all night. The only thing she
didn't know was why Ivar was so close to her.
As soon as he noticed she was awake, he drew his body away from her.

He knew disgust was the only emotion he could make her feel. Such a beautiful woman would never
feel anything else for him. Ivar heard her asking.

“I’m sorry. I fell asleep. Are you feeling better?”

Ivar was taken by surprise. He was not expecting she would be worried.

“As if you were concerned...”

“Of course I am concerned. You’re my husband. Even tough you don’t treat me as your wife. Your
men didn't want to allow me in. It was humiliating.”

He didn't answer her complains. “You should go now. Make yourself ready to breakfast.”
Emer was disappointed. She thought he would change his mind after seeing that she wanted to help him. She would not betray him. She stood up quickly and left the room without a word.

Ivar didn't understand why she was angry. She should be grateful he didn't want to make her share his bed. He knew she would be nauseated to be bedded by a cripple.
Guilty

Chapter Summary

Ivar and Emer receive a guest, what leads to dramatic events. They come to an important decision in their marriage.

Warning: Violence and attempted rape scene.

Chapter Notes

I want to warn that I wrote an attempted rape scene. It’s not graphic. But the last thing I want is to hurt my readers. I know how frustrating is when you’re reading a story that doesn’t have this topic and, later on, it appears.

So, if you don’t want to risk reading this, I’ll totally understand and I’m already thinking about an alternative chapter.

Feel free to call me inbox or by chat if you have any doubt.

They received the visit of Erik, an Earl, and his crew. They were going to raid Cerball’s domains. They stopped by Ivar’s hall to pay their respects. Ivar and Emer ordered a feast to be served. Ivar was jubilant that they were going to destroy Cerball’s legacy.

Ivar was so excited with the prospect of Cerball’s destruction that he didn’t notice Erik watching Emer.

“I’ve been thinking about an incursion in King Máel’s lands as well. I’ve heard that the women there are as beautiful as Freyja.”

Emer was terrified that those men would hurt her people. To add to her desperation, Ivar replied, “I would like to help you if you are really going to raid in Munster.”, he could see Emer shooting daggers at him.

Erik laughed, “I’ve heard that your wife is from Máel’s lands. Is that true?”
Ivar nodded affirmatively, “Not only from his lands, from his blood. She is his daughter.”

Erik laughed, “So, you raid Máel’s lands every night, hmmm?”

Emer could not stand this conversation anymore. She wished a goodnight leaving the hall.

Ivar watched her walking away, looking at Erik when she was out of sight, “Never speak of my wife this way again. Not if you are not eager to drink ale in Valhalla’s hall.”

Erik replied, “I’m sorry. I didn't mean to offend. I was trying to praise your conquest. She is a princess.”

Ivar was furious, but he should show hospitality, “She is not a princess, Emer is my queen.”

Erik spent the rest of the feast flattering Ivar, trying to win his favor. After some time, they retired to sleep. Erik’s men were pleased with the way they were being treated. Ivar looked like a fair man.

He needed to see her. Watching her sleeping was his new habit, observing her during the meals was not enough. He craved for more. It would be simple if they shared the bed. But he was not an ordinary man. He refused the warmth of her body as soon as they returned from the farm. Ivar did not want Emer seeing the pain that eventually took over his senses, and neither he wanted to feel pressured by her doubtful eyes. With the silent question: Why he was not a normal man?

There he was again, crawling to her bed to watch in bliss her cheeks flushed pink, her delicate lips parted. The hair as leaves in Autumn spread out over the pillows. The sweet murmurs she would make during a dream. He wanted to know the content of her dreams.

When he was almost reaching her bed, Ivar heard muffled noises. She was not alone. The thought of someone touching her was like a sharp knife ripping his heart. Emer had lost patience. Finding love and desire in other's embrace. He could not blame her. She married a useless man. At the same time, he felt anger rising. The image of a man making her gasp in pleasure, moaning a name that it was not his was unbearable. He wanted to kill the whoever it was enjoying her body, reminding him of what
he was not capable of. He would kill her too. Because of the conflicted feelings she was making Ivar feel.

Then he saw she was not enjoying the touch of this man. It was Erik trying to force himself on her. His hand on her mouth, tears flowing from her eyes.

He grabbed his axe that was leaning against the wall and shouted, “Let go of my wife!”

Emer was staring at Ivar with eyes wide open. Erik raised to his feet, smiling with mockery.

“Our wife? I’ve heard differently. It is said she is still a maiden. I was only trying to show her how it feels to be touched by a real man. You don’t deserve such a fair woman to mount, not that you could do it anyway. I’ll take your hall and your wife. She will make a good concubine.”

Ivar grunted angrily, “You can try if you want. But the Gods are on my side. You show no respect to your host. They don’t approve such a treachery. I hope you’re ready to die!”

Erik took his sword and was ready to deliver the first blow. Emer grabbed his arm, “NO! STOP IT!”

“The whore has some fire beyond her hair.”, he slapped Emer, making her fall on the bed. A small amount of blood at the corner of her mouth.

Ivar groaned and crawled towards Erik faster than Emer could register. Before the man could raise his sword to protect himself, Ivar slammed his axe against Erik’s leg. The wound making the man fall on his knees to face Emer’s husband.

Ivar took his sword from him, who started screaming, “Give me my sword. I won’t beg you. Be a man and give it to me!”

Ivar was smiling, his face covered in blood, “You don’t deserve Valhalla. You’re nothing more than a coward.”, this said he took his axe from name’s leg raising it again. Blood flowing from his leg like a waterfall.

Ivar could not stop delivering blows, his hatred making it impossible to stop hitting the corpse. His
arm was sore with the effort, but his heart was aching with guilt. He did not protect his wife. She was hurt because of him. Emer was almost raped because of him. His face was covered in blood, tears of sorrow, fury and frustration running down his cheeks. It was like it was only him and this corpse in the world. His blows were like an attack against the terrible feeling of being useless. Then he heard a whisper.

“Ivar? Please, stop it! He is dead!”, Emer’s voice was as trembling as herself. The blood had spilled on her too. Contaminating the purity of the white shift. Ivar felt that if she stayed with him, blood and death would follow her.
“She is afraid of me! Who would not be? I'm a monster! I'll let her go. She could be happy away from me”

Ivar stopped, looking at her in the expectation she would run from him. He was shocked when she fell on her knees, embracing him. She didn't fight the tears anymore, grabbing his tunic as if it was her salvation.

Sigvard came, sword in hands. He was paralyzed, looking at the deadly scene.

“What happened here?”, he inquired.

Ivar was holding Emer tight, looking from over her shoulder he answered, “This bastard tried to rape my wife.”

Sigvard was shocked with the information, “I'll check his crew with our men. See if they knew of his intentions.”

“I'll go with you!” Ivar nodded and crawled to take his crutches. He would need two, for he didn't want to waste time, putting on his brace. If he was going to face those men, he would do this standing and looking in their eyes.

Sigvard added, “What are we going to do with the corpse?”

“Remove this worm from my sight. I'll make an example of him in the morning.”, Ivar replied.

Sigvard called Gunnar and together they removed the body. Thora and Borghild helped Emer to bath, while Ivar was inquiring Erik’s men with Sigvard. They knew nothing about their leader’s
One of them said, “He has always admired your accomplishments, but I never thought he would commit a crime against you. I'm ashamed to have called him my Earl.”

The others nodded. Somehow Ivar believed them. He felt they were telling the truth. They pledged allegiance to Ivar, his army growing strong.

After cleaning himself from the blood, Ivar walked to Emer. To check if she was sleeping. She was sitting and surrounded by Thora and Borghild. Silently staring at the ground, at the exactly place where Erik died.

“It could be Ivar's blood.”, Emer thought. She almost lost her husband. Without telling him what she needed the most.

“Borghild and Thora, I want to express my gratitude for your help tonight. Could you call the slaves to remove the blood of this bastard?”

Borghild and Thora nodded affirmatively. They kissed Emer on the cheeks, startling her. She smiled sadly at them.

The slaves removed the earth wet with the blood. It was not possible to guess this was the place of a carnage afterwards.

Ivar was leaning against the wall. When everyone left, he walked to Emer. Before he could start speaking, “I'm ashamed that… I...I'll understand if you… if you want the divorce. I should not have…”

It was Ivar's turn to interrupt, “I'm sorry that I did not protect you! You did nothing wrong. It's my fault!”. 
Emer looked at him surprised, “I want… I don't want…”

Ivar was looking at her confused, “I think you should try to sleep now.”

Emer stood up near the bed, when Ivar turned around to leave, she said with a brittle voice, “I don't want you to leave. I don't want to be alone.”

Ivar looked at her again, her eyes pleading. He nodded and walked to bed, leaving his crutches on the side of her bed, their bed. He did not know which side of the bed he should take. He just proceeded like they did on their wedding night. Emer was watching him cautiously. She would not hide anymore. The words that just left her mouth felt so right. They were married. She didn't want to be away from him.

They settled to sleep, but it was hard to close their eyes. Emer was with her back turned to Ivar. His fists closed to fight the urge to embrace her again.

She turned to face him. They stared at each other for a long time. None of them daring to move any further and scare the other. Emer made the first move and cupped his face with her hands.

“Thank you for saving me.”

Ivar's heart started beating fast. Her fingertips were so gentle against his skin. He closed his eyes enjoying her touch. Then he felt something that only happened the day of their marriage. Her lips were brushing against his. It was so soft and innocent. Ivar melted in the kiss, his hands traveling to her hair, caressing her locks as if he was trying to calm a crying child. Then Ivar tasted something more than the sweetness of her lips, it was warm and salty. She was crying again. Not the desperate cry from earlier. It was different. They separated their lips. Emer was red with embarrassment. Ivar started kissing her tears away. She smiled shyly snuggling against his chest. He embraced her and they were finally relaxed to sleep.
Ivar though she was even more beautiful with the light of the morning. Her head lying on his shoulder, arm wrapped around his torso, the small hand resting upon his heart. He was holding her close even with his arm aching. The scent of her hair invading his nostrils, the smell of her skin mixed with his own fragrance. Her lips were parted and bruised because of Erik’s aggression. He wanted the man to be alive. So, he could kill him once more. The big eyelashes were trembling because of the sunshine. Emer would soon be awake.

The smile that invaded his features faded as soon as she woke up. Emer pushed him screaming, “Let me go! Help!”

She ran to one corner, curling her body and hiding her face with her knees. She was trembling. He understood that she was remembering the events of the night. Ivar was disappointed that she mistook him by that dishonored man, but he understood it was not her fault. He started crawling to her, “Emer? It's me. Nothing will hurt you anymore. I promise!”

She raised her head slowly, her eyes red because of the tears. Her hair tangled around her face. “I'm sorry!”

He raised his hand slowly, trying not to scare her. She didn't try to run from him. Ivar touched her face, cleaning the tears and removing the hair from her face.

“I won't hurt you!”, he tried to reassure her.

“I know!”, Emer replied.

Ivar smiled at her and they were going to start a new phase of their lives.
The Moon and The Sun
They entered in a kind of routine. Emer would wake up early to give instructions to the servants and slaves. When the night was filled with pain, Ivar would wake up after and share the dagmál with her. Emer would be busy sewing and weaving, while Ivar spent the mornings in the training yard with Gunnar and Sigvard to command the men. It seemed he wanted them always ready to combat. It was a perpetual war.

One day, Ivar came back with a proposal, “Horik brought some slaves from his last raid in Alba. Do you want to check if any of them would be useful?”

Emer nodded. If she could save at least one of them from worse treatment by the hands of another owner, she would be jubilant.
A tall man was showing a few maidens with a look of hunger in his eyes. The same look Erik gave her that night. As if they were only a piece of meat to be ravaged. It revolved her stomach. One of the girls was standing taller than the others. A look of pure hatred flashed across her face, her left eye had a purple mark. She had been beaten. The woman didn't look like someone who would accept her fate. She would suffer by the hands of a less patient owner. She decided. Touching Ivar's arm, she pointed to the girl with her chin. Ivar smiled at her, aware of the reason for her choice.

After the negotiations, Emer approached the girl, speaking Gaelic, “My name is Emer, I'll take you with me. What's your name?”

She looked away, not answering. Emer noticed she was looking at another captive, a younger blonde girl. She saw some similarities in their features. “The girl must be her sister.”, Emer thought.

Emer could only imagine what she was feeling. Being dragged from her home and family, maybe even being raped or watching her people being slaughtered. She had all reasons to wish the death of her captors. Little by little Emer would show her that she would be respected and treated well.

When Horik noticed the girl was not answering Emer's questions, he slapped her, making her fall on her knees, “The Queen is talking to you. Show some respect and be aware of your place.”

Emer was furious, but she saw it as a chance to help more. Breathing deeply, “I appreciate your attempt to teach the girl to respect me. But, tell me, what happens to a man that harm the slave from others? This slave is already mine, you can't slap her anymore!”

Horik swallowed in terror. Ivar would make him pay. Maybe even forbid him to negotiate there. He looked at Ivar, who was smirking in amusement.

“I'm sorry, my queen. I only wanted to show the girl her place.”

Emer was helping the girl to rise to her feet, “My husband and I are her owners from now on. We decide her place, not you.”

Ivar was quiet, only nodding in agreement with Emer's words, who was watching the line of slaves in display.
“I'll make amends. Would like some jewelry? We have some new brooches, rings…”

“I appreciate your offer. But I want this girl as well.”, Emer interrupted him, pointing to the frightened blonde girl.

“But, she is too valuable…”

“Don't you think King Ivar deserves a valuable slave, to forgive your mistake?”, Emer inquired, one of her eyebrows raising.

“Sure, my queen. I'm sorry for my offense.”, Horik agreed.

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Once they arrived home, Emer ordered a warm bath for the girls. The eldest was Sorcha, and the younger was Rhona.

Rhona had vivid blue eyes, mid-back blonde hair length, fair skin. Sorcha was exactly the opposite, curly and dark hair, her skin complemented her hair; an olive complexion which shone like burnished gold. The dark eyes looked mysterious. The sisters looked like the sun and the moon.

Rhona looked pleased with Emer's treatment and didn't stop talking. She was the one who revealed her sister’s name and a little of their story. Their mother had died of a disease, years before their capture. As the eldest, Sorcha assumed the position of raising her sister.

Emer remembered her own sister while watching Sorcha and Rhona. She could see Sorcha was annoyed by the constant talk of her younger sister. Yet, a discreet smile appeared from time to time on her lips. Sorcha was satisfied her sister was beside her. Emer wondered how many times she had annoyed Áine. She was far away from her sister now, they were in opposite sides in a war that didn't look like it would end any time soon. At least she could prevent the same destiny for these women. For this she was glad.
Emer inspected the ministrations and Sorcha was given clean clothes once she finished bathing.

Emer asked everyone to leave. Rhona followed one of the servants to eat. Emer started talking to Sorcha, “I'm sorry for what you've been through. I promise that here will be different.”

“Can I go home?”, Sorcha asked in mockery.

Emer's eyes fell to the ground for a moment, when she raised her face to look at Sorcha, they both knew the answer.

“Where are you from?”, Emer was curious about the girl. Feeling the urge to protect her. “I'm from Strathclyde.”

“Do you still have family there, besides your sister?”, Emer inquired, already fearing the answer.

Sorcha’s voice was trembling, she didn't want to cry in front of those people. Even though Emer has been kind to her, she was still her master. She only moved her head in negative. What she saw in Emer’s face broke her last defensive wall. Emer was crying.

Sorcha looked at her in confusion, Emer’s next action startled her. She embraced Sorcha. An affectionate embrace, like the ones Rhona used to give her, or their mother. Now her mother was as dead as her father, who was slaughtered trying to defend them. Sorcha was glad her mother had died peacefully, before the demons came to torment them. God spared her of this suffering. Sorcha had nothing but her sister now, and she could do nothing to protect Rhona if their masters decided to harm her.

For a moment, she didn't reciprocate the embrace, her arms resting on her sides. But she didn't know, until now, that she needed a touch that was not meant to humiliate and break her. They stayed like this for some minutes, until a raspy voice woke them.

“You better teach her duty.”, Ivar stated after watching the surprising scene.

Emer nodded, cleaning her tears and smiling to Sorcha.
After Ivar had left, Emer said, “He is a little moody, but he has a good heart. Don't believe everything you hear.”

Sorcha nodded and they started talking about the daily chores.

A month passed, Sorcha and Emer were closer. In every feast, Emer noticed some of Ivar's warriors gazing at Rhona, lust in their eyes. The girl looked pleased with the attention, always smiling at them. Emer noticed that only another man, besides Ivar and Sigvard, didn't pay any mind to Rhona. Gunnar was always busy watching Sorcha’s every move. He was not used to drink much, but when Sorcha was serving mead, he would always swallow the drink quickly, in order to have her near him to fill his cup.

One night, Ivar started observing the scene too. He touched Emer's hand, “It seems like Gunnar is interested in our slave.”

Emer smiled at him, their hands still linked, “Sorcha is beautiful. I can't blame him. It's the first time I see Gunnar so bewitched.”, Emer laughed.

Ivar was looking at her, his eyes hiding something. Emer was always embarrassed when he looked at her this way, she didn't know what he was thinking.

“Do you think he would marry her? I mean... he is still single. She could give him children…”, Emer stopped thinking she might have offended Ivar with her statement, “…and take care of the house.”

Ivar removed his hand and was serious. Emer regretted her question, missing the warmth of his skin. Talking about children could have been too much. They were sleeping in the same bed since Erik’s incident, but there was no other indication they would be more intimate than this. She was used to wonder how it would be to have children with Ivar. Would they have dark hair and blue eyes, like Ivar? Or green eyes? She wanted them to look like him. Eyes like the sea. A stubborn little girl just like her husband. Or a cunning boy, with a sharp mind and embarrassing questions.
“She is a slave. Even if we set her free, she would be only a concubine.”, he said whispered.

“I think it doesn't matter how people will call her if he treats her with respect. She is only a slave because her people were defeated. If you had defeated my father, I would be a slave too? Would you make me your concubine or slave, instead of your wife?”, Emer needed to know.

Ivar was deep in his thoughts, “I think we will never know how things could have been if I had defeated Maèl.”, he replied finally.

Emer looked away, feeling something heavy in her chest. It was hard to breath. She wanted to believe Ivar would want her not for the political reasons or her rank. Emer announced she was tired and was going to sleep. Ivar was confused with Emer's behavior. What did he say that offended her? He said the truth. Ivar didn't know if they would even meet if Maèl was defeated. The possibilities were too many. She could have been killed, enslaved, fled, taken by another man. The thought of another man having her was like being tortured. Even if it was only a hypothetical situation. Ivar didn't know if he would be attracted to Emer if her father was defeated either. Would he feel the same as when he first laid his eyes on her? All brave, wise and talking to him and her uncle as an equal.

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Once Emer was alone, she bended her knees and praying for an answer about her purpose in life. Sorcha inquired if she could enter, Emer replied she was praying.

“Can I pray with you?”, Sorcha tried.

“Sure. We need all the faith we can get.”, Emer replied cleaning her tears to hide her suffering.

Sorcha started praying at Emer's side.

“I see you're not in peace.”, Sorcha inquired.
“Is it possible to have peace in this world? I wonder this every day. What is my purpose in life? I married Ivar to bring peace to my people and family, yet Ivar wants to kill my father and the other way around. How could I live aware that Ivar killed my father? Or that my father slaughtered my husband and the people that I learned to love? I'm divided between duty and heart. And for what? My husband…”, Emer's voice started trembling, she didn't know if she could trust this woman. She was a fool to cry in front of her. Emer could not risk rumors about her marriage. Ivar would be humiliated and his name dragged through the mud. She couldn't allow it.

Sorcha didn't need to hear more. She heard the whispers of the other slaves, about how after their wedding night, Ivar started sleeping away from Emer, returning to her only when a man tried to rape her. Sorcha was sympathetic with her suffering.

“Your husband loves you.”, Sorcha tried to make Emer see what she noticed the first moment she saw the couple. Ivar's eyes were shining with pride and love, watching Emer negotiating with Haakon.

Emer laughed bitterly.

“It's true. When you're not looking, he is watching you with devotion in his eyes. I've only seen this kind of gaze when a man is in love.”, Sorcha reassured her.

Emer was absorbed in her thoughts when an idea came, “Let's stop talking about me. What about you and Gunnar?”

Sorcha blushed immediately, “There is no such a thing like Gunnar and I.”

“Are you sure? You say my husband looks at me with love, but have you noticed how Gunnar looks at you? As if you were Freyja.”, Emer teased her.
“Sometimes he helps me to carry some heavy buckets of water, when no one is around. That's all. Who is Freyja? His wife?”, the questions leaving an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

Emer laughed, “Gunnar doesn't have a wife…Yet. Freyja is their goddess of fertility and love. It's said she is the prettiest of the goddesses.”, Emer winked.

“I'm not the prettiest woman here.”, Sorcha was suspicious.
“He can't see the others. Only you. I've never seen Gunnar drinking too much. But when you're serving the mead, he swallows like he was thirsty for days. Always requiring another more.”, Emer pointed out.

Sorcha started thinking about it. It was true that every time she passed by Gunnar, he asked more ale. Brushing their fingers in every chance. But he had not tried anything. Always respectful, not like the way the others used to look at her sister. Lust in their eyes. She thought it was out of respect for Ivar. After all, she was his leader's slave, Ivar's property. She knew if a man tried to harm, seduce or steal another's slave, he had to pay for his offense. It was like Emer granted her the happiness to have her sister by her side.

Emer was watching Sorcha’s reaction. It looked like she was thinking about what she said. “I should help you to get ready to bed.”, Sorcha tried to change the subject.

Emer smiled, “I can change my clothes. You should not worry about me. Go back to that hall and pay attention to your admirer.”

Sorcha replied, “I should look after my sister instead of dreaming awake. It's not like I'm a free woman, who can marry him.”

Emer smiled sadly at her.

“Don't be sad. I'm happy here. I have my sister. We are treated well. You kept your promise, a promise you were not obliged to make in first place. I'll always be in your debt.”, Sorcha smiled with affection.

Emer replied, “Who knows what the future holds? Let's pray and hand our worries to God.”

When Sorcha went back to the hall, Gunnar had already left. She felt somehow disappointed.

It looked like disappointment was the word of the day. Ivar went to their room to sleep, finding Emer already sound asleep.

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Emer heard Ivar entering the room. She didn't want to talk to him. If she did, she would cry.

When he sat on the bed, she could feel his gaze upon her. So Emer pretended to be sleeping.
Jealousy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
In the morning, Emer and Sorcha decided to go to the market with some servants. Rhona insisted in staying to prepare the meal.

During the walk, Emer was ashamed of her discussion with Ivar, “How could he know what could have been?”. They shouldn’t be trapped in the past, only walking to what is ahead.

Emer saw fruits from distant places, berries, silks and furs. She couldn't help remembering her first morning as Ivar's wife. She felt like every time they walked two steps ahead, something pushed them three steps back. She was tired and news of Maël’s intention to attack didn't help either. She wanted to hate Ivar, to help her father to kill him taking their ancestral lands back. But the thought of Ivar lying cold on the ground always made her heart skip a beat. As when he killed Erik, defending her. The vision of blood didn't scare her, but imagining it could be her husband’s blood was unbearable.
Emer realized she loved Ivar. It was not only admiration, respect or fear. It happened little by little, in every gentle gesture towards her, or his people. Seeing he was generous with his men and their families. She was not naive to deny the violence that was part of him, the constant anger and pain. His darkness would consume him, if the gentleness of his heart with the ones that accepted him was not present. She would reveal her feelings.

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When they entered the hall, Rhona was nowhere to be seen. Emer and the other servants helped Sorcha to organize the items they brought from the market.

Emer walked to their room. Her hands were sweating with apprehension. What would Ivar do after being aware of her love for him? Would he reject her? Would he reciprocate her feelings? She couldn't wait to see him.

When she was almost there, Emer saw Rhona leaving, followed by Ivar. Her hair was a mess, marks of fingers on her neck. Rhona smirked when she saw Emer, who was frozen looking from Ivar to the slave.

She was pressing her lips not to cry in front of them. She was Maël’s and Land’s daughter, she would never cry in front of them. When Rhona walked away, Emer found the strength to say, “You must be starving. Sorcha is preparing the food.”

This said, Emer passed by him. Entering the room to search for her bow. Ivar was still at the door watching her.

“Emer?” his tone was almost pleading – or at least as close to pleading as she imagined this man ever got.

Her heart twisting painfully in her chest, wishing she could tell him why she was acting this way. She didn't look at him, to avoid a breakdown.

“Don't wait for me! I'll do some practice, I'll be back by the evening. Maybe.” Emer stated.
“Let's eat, then I can go with you. I would love seeing you with your bow for the first time. Bragi even composed a song praising your skills” Ivar tried.

Emer remembered their wedding, when Bragi had sung about their adventure, praising her talent with the bow and Ivar's fame.

Her jaw started trembling, a tear running down her cheek, when she thought about how they made no advance. With a crack voice, Emer replied, “I don't think you want to see me with a bow in hands right now.” she walked to the kitchen, cleaning her tears.

When Emer arrived there, she caught Rhona laughing. Sorcha was deadly serious and shaking her sister, “Shut your mouth, show some dignity!” Sorcha yelled.

Emer silently packed some bread, ale and meat. Her hand almost touching the berries, when images of Ivar's fingers touching her lips invaded her mind. He just touched Rhona with those same fingers. They shared the bed that it was meant for Emer. Images of Ivar and Rhona’s sweaty bodies united, moving together, sharing kisses and whispering love words was too much. She retreated her hands in a fist, shaking her head to make the memories disappear.

Sorcha said, “The meal is almost finished.”

“Good. I'll be doing some target practice. Serve king Ivar. I believe I'll be back by the evening.” Emer replied touching Sorcha’s shoulder.

As soon as Emer left the longhouse, Sorcha yelled at Rhona, “Finish the cooking as it was your duty.”

Rhona asked, “Where are you going?”

“I'm saving your neck, you silly girl. If something happens to our Queen, Ivar will rip you apart.” Sorcha stated furiously.

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Gunnar was practicing sword fighting with another man when an urgent and melodious voice startled him. It was Sorcha.

“Lord Gunnar. May I speak to you?” Sorcha was sweating and her cheeks reddened by her running.

“He is not a Lord, woman.” the other warrior said in mockery.

Gunnar pushed him away, “Go to your wife!”

The man laughed saying in Norse, “I'll go to my wife, leaving you with your lady.”

Sorcha cocked her head, not understanding what the man said. A gesture Gunnar found adorable.

He was walking to her with his sword in hands. When he saw she was wide-eyed, Gunnar dropped sword not to scare her.

Sorcha felt her knees began to weaken and more blood rushing to her face watching him walking to her. His tunic wet with sweat, making his broad chest and well-defined abdomen more noticeable.

“What happened, Sorcha?” Gunnar asked, surprising her by saying her name.

“The Queen saw my sister leaving her room with King Ivar, and she left to practice with her bow. I fear for her safety…I came to…I need to…” Sorcha didn't know how to ask Gunnar to follow their queen, securing her safe return. Sorcha only knew she should go to him, now she was seeing the boundaries she was trespassing to ask something of a free man. She was looking at her feet now.

Gunnar touched her hand to encourage Sorcha, “Tell me!” the softness in his voice making Sorcha rise her head, Gunnar searched for her eyes.

“You will think I'm stupid…” Sorcha started.

“You're smart and brave. I would never censure your worries.” Gunnar reassured her.
“I fear Emer might be in danger. She was hurt, thinking her husband betrayed her. I just wanted to ask if you could follow her, to protect her if it's needed. I know it's not my place to ask for anything, but I didn't know with whom to share this.” Sorcha confessed.

Gunnar smiled at her, “You did well, I'll search for her. I'm glad you trusted me. We know how Ivar would react if something happens to his Queen.” Gunnar winked.

Sorcha smiled at him, “Thank you!”

It was easy to find her. She was smart not to wander far from Ivar's fortress. Gunnar had noticed at least once a week, Emer would ride to a part of the forest. He didn't know what she used to do there. He could hear the hiss of arrows flying right into the targets.

Emer was standing upright breathing slowly. Gunnar could see her shoulders were not relaxed. Sorcha was right. Emer was hurt. With her feet apart and perpendicularly to the target. Slowly, she nocked an arrow, and started raising her bow to aim at the target. Using her delicate fingers to lightly hold the arrow on the string. Gunnar doubted that in her state of anger, her arrow could find the target, he couldn't wait to see if Bragi’s song was true.

She drew the string hand towards the corner of her mouth, relaxing her fingers to release the arrow. His jaw dropped when her set found the center of a target.

Emer put an arrow on the string drawing it back. Suddenly she changed her position. Looking directly at the place he was hiding.

“You better show up if you don't want an arrow in your head.” Emer threatened.

Gunnar shouted, “It's me, Gunnar! I came to make sure you're safe.” this said Gunnar started walking to her.
“Thanks for your concern. I needed to clear my mind.” Emer said looking away from him.

“Sorcha said…” Gunnar started saying.

“I'm sorry, but I don't want to talk about this.” Emer interrupted him.

Gunnar didn't try to bring the topic back. They spent the afternoon talking while Emer impressed Gunnar with her sharp mind and kind nature. That moment he saw Emer was a queen fit to Ivar, and knew why his leader was attracted to her since they first met. He regretted being so suspicious of her. She was loyal and generous.

“So, what is happening between Sorcha and you?” Emer inquired with a smile.

“N-nothing.” Gunnar was taken by surprise with Emer's question.

“You're not so discreet. I noticed you've been gazing at her. Are you interested?” Emer inquired once more.

“She is a beautiful woman. But she doesn't belong to me.” Gunnar said fearing Ivar would think he was trying to seduce his slave.

“Would you marry her if she was a free woman?” Emer was curious to see the depth of his feelings.

“Does she talk about me?” Gunnar's face was expectant.

“She is too shy. But when I asked her about you, she mentioned you have been helping her with some tasks. Other man would feel ashamed to help a slave, or even address one by her name.” Emer pointed out.

“I'm not ashamed of her. She is fierce.” he praised Sorcha with a smile on his lips.

“I'll help you.” Emer decided.
It was darkening when they entered through the gates. Emer walked to the hall, while Gunnar took their horses to the stables.

She saw an annoyed Ivar sitting and waiting for her, “Where have you been?” his tone was accusatory.

Emer didn't want to talk to him. Raising her eyebrows, she answered, “I told you where I was going.”

“But you forgot to mention Gunnar was going with you, dear wife” his sarcasm was obvious.

“That's because I hadn't planned anything. He followed me to see if I was safe. A loyal man, you should respect him. And respect me as well.” Emer stated in a taut tone.

“Don't take me by a fool. I won't allow it.” Ivar's voice was low and threatening.

“I know you're not a fool. I preserve your reputation. While people have been whispering about you and a slave, I keep what I have left of my dignity.” Emer accused.

“Nothing happened…” Ivar started explaining

She looked at him in disbelief, “I'm tired. It's you that are taking me by a fool. I know what I saw.” Emer's was trembling, her hands in a fist.

“Tell me what you saw! A slave being taught her place. She was scorned. That's all.” Ivar held on his crutch, and tried to reach her.

“I really want to believe you. But I don't know if it will make any difference.” A tear almost running down her cheek.
Emer turned around to go to their room, hiding her tears. She didn't want to show he had hurt her.

“Wait!” Ivar was supplicating.

“I…c-can't.” her back was to him, but by her tone, Ivar was sure Emer was crying.

He started following her, when she noticed this, Emer started walking faster. She felt she was being cruel. But she didn't want to be weak. Showing Ivar he had the power to upset her was something she wanted to avoid at all costs. She couldn't do anything if it was his choice to bed a slave and deny her as his wife, but it would be her choice to endure this with decency.

Locking herself inside their bedroom, Emer cleaned herself and changed her clothes to eat.

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When she opened the door, Ivar was waiting for her leaning against the wall. She was going to pass by him, when he grabbed her arm.

“I'm your husband! You don't give me your back when I'm talking.” Ivar swallowed his anger, “Emer…you must… you have to believe me. Nothing happened.” he was trying to look at her.

Emer's lips were forming a thin line, “I'm sorry but I stop listening to you after you said I must. I must nothing! I realized that it doesn't matter. You wouldn't be the first to take a concubine.” Emer was looking at him with disdain.

Ivar pulled her next to him, Emer held in his chest to regain her balance. Blushing immediately, she tried to look away. Ivar whispered, “It does matter to me.” his hand releasing her arm from his soft but firm grip. His thumb caressing her chin, going to her cheek, “it matters to you too. Otherwise you wouldn't be blushing right now. You know that I love this about you. You can't lie to me. I can't lie to you as well. You can trust me, I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Emer laughed bitterly, “It seems that I have made a mistake. You made a mistake as well, to think you hurt me.” she distanced herself, going to the hall to eat.
They ate in silence. Sorcha served the meal alone. Emer wondered where Rhona was. When they finished, Emer walked to the servants’ quarters to see if they were well. It was her habit to check on them, wishing a good night.

When she arrived, Rhona was with her back to the door, talking to one of the slaves. Despite the fear in the other woman's eyes, she kept talking, “There is something wrong with him. A normal man wouldn't reject me.” Rhona was laughing now.

“Who are you talking about?” Emer inquired.

Rhona turned to face Emer, her face pale in terror, “No one.”

Emer laughed sarcastically, “Don't play with me! I've heard what you said and you will answer me with the truth.”

Rhona smiled in mockery, “I think you know about who I'm talking about.”

Emer was furious, but controlling herself. She would not let the girl's insolence get under her skin, “You have two choices. Or you answer me, or you will answer my husband. I think he might be interested in what kind of gossip you've been spreading.”

The other slave was frightened, “Can I go to the hall, while you speak to her?”

“No! Don't worry! As long as you are not spreading her lies, you're safe under my roof.” Emer reassured her.

The woman nodded.

“You pretend to be good. You're not different from them. We are still your slaves…” Rhona started accusing.

Emer interrupted, “It seems the truth is coming after all. All I want is to make things less difficult for those under my protection. I can't change everything, but I can treat you with decency and respect. I think I deserve the same treatment.”
Rhona laughed mischievously, “I’ve heard you talking about freeing my sister, to marry Gunnar. What about me? I had to try something to change my situation. But the rumors were right, your husband is not a real man. He rejected me. I bet you’re still a maiden. At least if you hadn’t tried the touch of one of his men.” Rhona raised her eyebrows suggestively.

“My husband is not a normal man. You’re totally right! He is extraordinary. Sharp mind and generous heart. He rejected you because he doesn’t like women throwing themselves in his arms. Yet you’re wrong about one point. I’m his wife in all senses.” Emer smiled.

“In all senses? I doubt it. Why you are not pregnant yet? If he takes you as a husband is supposed to do, you should be with child by now” Rhona pointed out.

Emer blushed, “What do you know of life? God will eventually bless us with children. But I own you no explanation.”

Ivar entered the room furiously, “Shut your mouth, whore! I’ve been too patient with you, because my wife likes your sister. It’s over now! You don't ruin the reputation of a man and stay alive.” he was holding a dagger in his hands.

Emer walked to him calmly, “Killing her is not the solution.” she touched his arm, “If we punish her with death, it will look like we fear the lies she has been telling.” Emer was searching for his eyes, making Ivar see a different solution.

Rhona was crying now, “Please, please master Ivar.”

“You're too soft with the slaves, wife. She thought she could talk about us freely.” Ivar started accusing.
“You might be right. But understand that we have another way to solve the problem. It doesn't have to end with blood.” Emer was calm.

Sorcha appeared to beg in her sister’s behalf, “She is too young. She will learn. Please, don't kill her.”

Ivar was looking at Emer, his jaw clenching and knuckles white, “She can’t stay!”
Emer held his hand tight, smiling sweetly.

“What do you suggest?” Ivar was serious.

“She could join a nunnery.” Emer suggested.

“I think she should go with Horik. He is creative with slaves that don’t obey their masters.” Ivar snarled with his jaw clenching and nostrils flaring in anger.

Rhona turned cold, she knew the blood had run from her face, “Please, don’t!” she begged.

Ivar laughed in mockery, “Begging won’t change what you have done.”

Sorcha could hear her pulse banging in her ears and there was sweat dripping down her back. Her sister had sealed her fate trying to change her situation. She felt helpless, not able to do anything to help Rhona.
Emer cupped Ivar’s face, whispering, “You are entitled to do as you please. But I don’t want to hurt her sister. Send her to a nunnery, it will be punishment enough.”

Ivar blinked, “I hope you don’t regret this.”

Emer smiled, “I won’t, husband.”

Chapter End Notes

About Archery in Early Medieval Ireland:

"The bow is by far the most frequently represented weapon in the archaeological record and unlike other weapons it tends to occur in datable contexts on excavated sites. The bow was used in Ireland in the Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods, but the practice of archery seems to have declined in the later prehistoric period. [...] The Vikings, it seems, must be credited with the reintroduction of the bow and arrow to Ireland. During the Viking period, the bow was widely used both in Scandinavia itself and among Scandinavian settlers in many parts of Europe. The use of the bow by the Vikings in Ireland is attested above all by bows and hundreds of arrowheads discovered during recent excavations in Dublin, Waterford and Limerick, in contexts of the 10th to 12th
centuries. Indeed, the Irish word for a bow, *bogha*, is a Norse loan-word (although curiously enough the word for an arrow, *saiget*, may be an earlier borrowing from the Latin *sagitta*). References to Viking archery first occur in 9th century annalistic entries, and Irish narratives texts also provide evidence for Norse archery.

**Military Archery in Medieval Ireland**

During prehistory, Irish archery was most likely used for hunting (although there was a famous prehistoric human bone found in Poulnabrone Dolmen with an arrow embedded in it). As the world became more civilised and sophisticated, it was only a matter of time before people came up with the idea of using this new technology to kill each other. The Egyptians are credited with first using longbows in battle. The Assyrians invented the compound bow so they could shoot from moving chariots. Even back then, trick shots were always popular in archery. Strangely, the Irish appeared to stop using the bow and arrow from the early Bronze Age until about the 10th century. No one knows why. It just disappeared out of the archaeological record until the Vikings and Normans arrived. Of course, Boyne Valley Activities wasn’t around back then.

The Vikings were big into anything that could inflict damage. Viking towns like Dublin, Waterford and Limerick are full of bits of bows and arrowheads and the vast majority of styles were of a particular type that were designed to pierce chainmail and armour. These were definitely not used for hunting rabbits and pigeon. The annals that tell of the Battle of Clontarf mention the use of bows and arrows by the Vikings, but at heart, they were an axe-loving people.

**Archery in Ireland**, more [here](#)
The Threat

They were feasting in the hall when Sorcha approached Emer and whispered something in her ear.

“IT can't be! Are you sure?” Emer murmured back afraid Ivar would hear them.

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She was walking as fast as her legs could carry her through the dark alleys of Ivar's fortress. From time to time she could see warriors walking during their watch. She knew Ivar was right to be cautious.

At last, Emer was in the stables facing a man she had never expected to see again.

“Good evening, Morann! I'm so happy to see you.” Emer said embracing him

She felt he was tense even though he reciprocated her embrace.

Emer saw a shadow of worry in the face of the man that watched her growing and taught her almost everything she knew.

“I think you won't be so happy when I say what brought me here.” Morann confessed.

The grave tone in his voice alarmed her and Emer wondered when she would see people from her past without something terrible happening.

“Tell me, please!” she whispered looking back over her shoulder to check if she has been followed.

“Your father is planning an invasion. He ordered me to come here to take you back home.” Morann revealed.
Emer felt blood rushing to her face, “Tell my father I'm not going anywhere. Munster is not my home anymore. Ivar is my husband and that's our home. He better accept it and let us live in peace.”

Morann’s smile was a mix of sadness and pride, “I wouldn't expect any less from you. You make me proud! I'll send your message. How are you treated here?”

“With love and respect. They are not the monsters some people paint them. They are human just like you and I.” Emer smiled.

“I wish you could feast with us, but it wouldn't be wise.” Emer leaned forward embracing him.

“It wouldn't be. I have to go now.” Morann muttered.

“Before you go... How is my mother?” Emer felt tears threatening to fall.

“She misses you.” Morann looked at Emer and noticed her teary eyes, “Queen Land prays for you every day. She is proud of you.” He sympathized.

“Tell her that I pray for them, that I wish for us to be safe and in peace,” Emer felt a tear running down her cheek and used the back of her hand to clean it, “have a safe journey back home.” Emer embraced him once more and walked back to the hall.

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The feasting-hall was hot from fires where pork and lamb stags were roasting on spits, from the torches used for light and the sheer accumulation of people. The noisy atmosphere matched Emer’s mind working at full speed. She was shaking in fear for the people she learned to love. They were her people now. She sat at the high table and watched Gunnar flirting with Sorcha; Sigvard, Borghild and Thora were drinking and laughing. Emer couldn't help the smile in her face remembering how they cared for her since her arrival, her cheeks flushed with the memory of when the women revealed they were in love with the same man. Their kid, Harald, was almost of age to receive his arm ring and plead his loyalty to Ivar. Bragi singing and playing the lute, always the happiest among them. Emer laughed remembering the song he played during her wedding feast. He believed she was a Valkyrie, and Emer prayed none of them would see a Valkyrie taking them to Valhalla any time soon. She clasped her shaking hands together in her lap hoping Ivar wouldn't notice her anxiety.
“You are so quiet!” Ivar observed while sitting by her side.

Emer looked up at him with a little smile, “I’m appreciating everything we have.”

Ivar kept watching Emer in silence.

When they were ready to sleep, Emer felt the urge to confess the visit she received.

“Ivar?” She touched his shoulder fearing he was sleeping.

“What?” Ivar returned with an annoyed tone.

“We need to talk!” Emer added.

Ivar sighed turning to face her, “Then talk!” his voice was raspy and Emer swallowed fearing how he would react.

“I-I saw someone tonight. We need to prepare for what is to come. My father...” Emer tried to keep her voice steady looking at his face in the dark. She didn’t know if it was difficult to concentrate because of his striking beauty or the danger she knew they were facing.

“Your father?” Ivar interrupted her gruffly, “Who could think your father is causing problems? Tell me what is to come.” His eyebrows were furrowed and Emer was quivering and feeling goosebumps in her belly.

“He is planning an invasion.” Emer whispered and tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths.

“Of course he is. He wants to kill all the heathens.” Ivar laughed in mockery making Emer gulp because of the self-deprecation present in his words.
“Ivar...” her fingers started stroking his beard.

“Enough! I know he has been planning something. I saw you talking to Morann. Maël would never settle down with his daughter being taken by a dirty pagan...” Ivar hissed and Emer could feel his jaw clenching beneath her fingers.

“Don't say those things...” she was closer to him, their noses touching and breathing the same air.

“If he knew...” Ivar's hand started stroking her hair and traveling to her neck, collarbone, breasts, belly and then holding onto her waist bringing her closer to his body, “if he knew you married a useless man...”

Emer was shaking against him and it was never so difficult to bring enough air into her lungs to say the words she held true to her heart. The words she knew would make Ivar know the depth of her love, “You're the best man I know, you're true to your word...” She moaned feeling Ivar's erection against her thighs, his hand going to her ass and giving her a squeeze.

Ivar chuckled, “Don't say this! I might believe you!”

Emer started moving her hand to his neck and then to the strong arms, pausing at his heart, she could feel his pulse increasing and the warmth of his skin.

“It's true. I wanted to be able to avoid this war.” The sensation of defeat was heavy in her chest, “Please, prepare your men! Train them harder!” Emer advised feeling her hands shaking out of fear for the slaughter that she knew was certain. Her father wouldn’t give up and neither would Ivar.

“I will. Are you not afraid I might kill your father?” Ivar raised his eyebrow licking his lower lip.

“Of course I am. I pray everyday that we will have peace. That we will learn to live as a family.” Her mind was going to a perfect image of her father playing with his grandsons and granddaughters. Children she wanted to give Ivar. It was not time to think about dreams. Shaking her head, she told Ivar about the root of her conflict, “I can't choose between the two of you. I want both to be safe. Am I wrong to think this way?” Emer sobbed through her tears.
“You're not wrong, minn hjärta.” Ivar whispered softly bringing her to his chest and feeling the wetness of her tears rolling down his bare chest.

He cradled her in his arms and they slept in peace for now.
Chapter Summary

Emer endures the cramps from her period while Ivar tries to overcome his insecurities and share his secrets with his wife.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Defeated once more. It was like she was feeling. Pain all over her body, as if she had fought in a battle. At least it was like Emer imagined the warrior’s muscles would ache. A dull pressure on her lower back, and, of course, the blood that was soaking the cloth she placed between her legs.

If at least she was passing through pain to bring a new life to the world, she would gladly endure. But another cycle of moon had passed and another opportunity to do her duty was wasted. Emer didn’t understand why Ivar had never touched her. Sometimes she caught him staring at her, but he never said a thing.

"What is on his mind?" It was a constant and silent and disturbing question she didn't know if one day would be answered.

If he was not satisfied with her, it would be expected to take a concubine or a slave. But he never did, and for this she was grateful, Emer knew it was his right to do so, but it would feel like a knife being twisted in her heart if Ivar touched another woman. Not only because people would whisper she was an useless wife, after all those months not showing any sign of pregnancy. But because she wanted all of him. His blue eyes swallowing her to the darkness that she knew lived within. Emer wouldn't mind being dragged to the shadows if it meant she would not be alone. She would be with him. _Truly with him._
Ivar was worried, when he woke up, she was still sleeping and hadn’t come to the hall yet. He couldn’t bring himself to eat if she was not there. Everything he tried to put in his mouth was tasteless, and so Ivar kept glancing at the back of the house, waiting for Emer to walk in.

“Where is my wife? Is she awake?” Ivar inquired one of the servants, who shook her head.

Ivar sighed, propping himself with the help of his crutches. He was going to see for himself.

Lying on her stomach she was trying to muffle her crying and the pain. She heard some priests saying that women deserved the pain because of Eve’s original sin. Emer doubted it.

She knew that men spilled blood in the world with hunting and war while women gave blood. Through the healing crimson wave of the moon’s birth the body was cleansed from the last month’s death, preparing her womb to receive the gift of life, restoring the death men inflict upon the world. The knowledge that men wanted to keep for themselves that life comes from between women’s legs, and that life costs blood. Some men might think women are afraid of blood in a battlefield. If they knew that women more than any other living being, were aware of the high price of life and death. For they suffered to bring life to the world and grieved the loss and waste of blood.

Emer felt a hand on her back, “Are you ill?” Ivar asked.

Emer raised her head slowly, “No, it’s only… my…” she felt embarrassed to tell him.

Ivar tilted his head and frowned, looking at her with curiosity, she mentioned she was not sick. But why she doesn’t say what she is feeling, “Tell me.” he insisted softly, caressing her hair.

Emer closed her eyes, savoring the gentleness, “I’ll be fine. Have you eaten yet?”
“Yes, I have. But you should. I’ll ask Sorcha to bring you something.” Ivar lied, removing his hand from her hair.

Emer immediately missed the warmth of his touch, but nodded.

He wished he could carry the food to his wife, “Sorcha?”

“Yes. What can I do? Is Emer awake?”

“She is awake, but she is not feeling well. I want you to serve her food in bed.” Ivar requested.

Sorcha smiled, “I’ll prepare everything.”

Ivar was pressing his lips, unsure about how to question Sorcha, his voice was quieter now, “Do you know what is happening to her?”

Sorcha smiled blushing, “It must be her moon blood.”

“Oh!” Ivar muttered, feeling stupid.

“I’ll never be able to eat everything you brought.” Emer laughed at Sorcha, sitting against the headboard.
“You won’t eat alone.” Ivar entered.

Sorcha smiled, leaving the room.

“But…” Emer stammered.

“I lied, I couldn’t eat alone.” Ivar confessed.

“You should be training with the men. Father…” Emer couldn’t help thinking about her father’s threat.

“Let’s not talk about your father now.” Ivar rasped, making Emer wince at the dryness of his tone.

“Ooh! You’re welcome to share my food.” Emer watched Ivar smiling back at her and sitting by her side, “Sorcha is exaggerating. It’s like she believes I’m with child.” Emer said without thinking.

"I'm sorry..." Ivar stuttered, averting his eyes and pressing his lips into a thin line.

Emer sighed, “I shouldn’t have said that. Forgive me.”

“You’re right.” Ivar looked at her.

“I just wish… I want… I don’t understand. Sometimes I feel like you want me, but when I want to get closer…” Emer was touching his hand and searching for his eyes, “you push me away and I think you are disgusted. I just don’t know what I’m doing wrong.” Emer felt warm tears running down her cheeks. It was the first time she cried in front of him in a long time.

She sniffed, feeling his warm hand wiping away her tears. A solemn, pained expression clouded his face, “You’re doing nothing wrong. You’re perfect. I’m not a proper husband and I don’t deserve you…” Ivar started trying to explain his reasons, being interrupted by Emer
“Stop it! I couldn’t have asked for more than what you’re giving me. I just wish you could open up to me. So, I could help you, if you need and want.” Emer was caressing his free hand and trying to read his face.

“I tried it once...when I was younger...” Ivar looked away.

Emer smiled, glad that he was trusting her at last.

“I tried to be with a woman before. But it didn’t work... I hurt her, and it was over...” Ivar confessed in a voice barely distinguishable from a growl, his lips trembling.

“Have you not tried it again?” Emer whispered, still holding his hands.

He couldn’t speak, only shook his head from side to side.

“But, when...during our wedding night...I felt...” Emer tried.

Ivar locked his eyes on hers, Emer’s breath caught in her throat.

“It doesn’t last, Emer. I wanted to try, but I was afraid to hurt and disappoint you. And I couldn’t trust you with this secret. If the others know, or our enemies...” he closed his eyes for a moment.

“I know. I’ll never judge you. We can try when... and if you want. I’m not afraid of pain. You could never disappoint me, you have been keeping your word with every promise you made.” Emer released his hand to cup his face.

“I won’t force you to endure me.” Ivar tried to look away in embarrassment.

“Don’t do this. Please. You’re not forcing me, you never did. And I trust you will never do. I have more freedom that I could ever imagine. Yet, I don’t want this freedom. I want nothing more than to be bound to you.” Emer admitted, feeling her stomach fluttering.

Ivar blinked some tears, “Truly? You don’t...”
Emer’s thumb started caressing his lower lip, while she was licking her own, “May I?”

Ivar nodded in approval, closing his eyes and lowering his head. Emer was watching him, her heart racing then he stopped with his lips mere inch from hers, breath caressing each other’s face. She could see his lips were trembling and a few beads of sweat were forming on his forehead. She tilted her head to the right and tasted tentatively with her tongue as she traced it across the bottom of Ivar’s lips. One hand on his cheek and the other going to his thick and shiny hair. Her delicate fingers ruffling his hair. They opened their mouths in synchrony. To avoid scaring him, Emer kept a slow pace. It was painful for her not to succumb to the smoothness of his lips.

Ivar didn’t know what to do with his hands, so he kept them on his lap at first. But when she licked his lower lip, Ivar wanted nothing more than to bring her closer. His left hand going to her hair, mimicking her caresses. Her fingers ruffling his hair felt like the warm breeze of Summer. Ivar noticed she was going slow, her tongue plunging into his mouth, swirling along his. The warmth of her skin was melting his insecurities and his right hand started drawing her body closer by the waist. The sweet sound of a moaning leaving her lips made Ivar smile.

As the kiss deepened Ivar couldn’t help thinking about their future. He wondered if Emer could forgive him, if Ivar defeated her father. If she would feel the same way about him. And above all things, *How long will she mourn me, if I die?*

The thought of walking to death never felt so scaring. He had never feared death before. In fact, he longed to make himself a legend, dying with glory to be worth of Valhalla. But now, with the warmth of her body against him, her scent invading his nostrils and hearing her gasping for air, those dreams seemed vain. If he was going to die fighting her father, he would make this moment a memory to follow him to Odin’s hall, as he knew that she wouldn’t join him there. She was a Christian and a different kind of warrior. His fierce wife. Ivar smiled against her lips.

They were thirsty, but had to stop to breathe. Both panting, but none of them wanted to lose contact. Their noses were rubbing, hands stroking each other’s face, eyes still closed and a smile on their faces.

Ivar felt the fluttering of her eyelids against his skin when she opened her eyes. Following her actions, he was rewarded with an inviting smile from her.
“I told you I would be fine” Emer laughed.

Ivar chuckled and embraced her, kissing her forehead. She held on his waist and smiled feeling loved and desired by him for the first time.

Her stomach growled and they laughed, “It seems I have Hati or Fenrir in my bed.” Ivar teased her.

Emer slapped his shoulder playfully.

“Ouch!” Ivar pretended to be hurt and then his stomach started making noises too.

“It seems I have Sköll in my bed. Should we eat or wait for you to swallow the sun?” Emer raised her eyebrows in sarcasm.

“Sorcha would be disappointed if we waste the food she prepared.” Ivar winked.

Chapter End Notes

Sköll In Norse mythology, Sköll (Old Norse “Treachery” is a warg that chases the horses Árvakr and Alsviðr, that drag the chariot which contains the sun (Sól) through the sky every day, trying to eat her. Sköll has a sister (sometimes referred also like brother for a wrong English translation made in 15th century ), Hati, who chases Máni, the moon.

At Ragnarök, both Sköll and Hati will succeed in their quests. Sköll, in certain circumstances, is used as a deiti to refer indirectly to the father (Fenrir) and not the son. This ambiguity works in the other direction also, for example in Vafþrúðnismál, where confusion exists in stanza 46 where Fenrir is given the sun-chasing attributes of his son Sköll. This can mostly be accounted for by the use of Hróðvitnir and Hróðvitnisson to refer to both Fenrir and his sons. Until Sköll is successful in his mission, the Fremennik believe him to be responsible for causing the extreme heat of summer. Sköll is said to be stronger and more agile than his sister/brother, drawing strength from the strong northern winds.

MYTHS

It was probably raised in Járnviðr, together with the other wolves, the old witch who lives there. He runs in the sky behind the chariot of Sól. At the end of time, it is destined
to devour the sun (but others say it will Fenrir to do so).

ETYMOLOGY Skoll / Skǫll, “[One who] lie”? The term, provided in two alternative forms Skoll and Skǫll, has no a precise etymology. Maybe it comes from the verb skolla “lie.” The word also means “stealth”. Note that Skolli is also the nickname of the fox, “[one who] moves stealthy.”

Sköll & Häti
It was the night before Ivar's army departure, they had decided to march before Maël could get too close to Ivar's fortress and surprise Emer's father. She was against this plan. They could be safe behind the walls, there was no need to take this risk. A sacrifice was being prepared to ask for the Gods’ protection and success in the battle to come.

Ivar approached Emer with a shy smile and she knew he wanted something, “Do you want to help me with the sacrifice?” Ivar asked whispering in her ear, “it’s necessary to protect the warriors and to ask for victory.” He explained noticing her hesitation.

“I'm not the right person to do this. I don't think the Gods will hear me.” Emer tried to avoid his gaze and the disappointment she feared to see on his face.

“You're the Queen! I can't think of anyone more fitting to do this, but I won't force you.” Ivar looked down at his hands and with the help of his crutch he walked to the platform where the sacrifice would take place.

As in her wedding ceremony, animals were led to the platform. She was holding her breath watching Ivar altering his stance, holding his weight with his crutch. With his free hand he swung the axe beheading a stallion with a single blow. Emer was transfixed by the way his eyes were shining and the demonstration of strength. The blood was collected in a big bowl. Ivar shouted, “May Odin provide the strength to put our enemies down. Odin will grant our horses the speed of Sleipnir. The victory is with us.”

The sacrifice went on, with a boar being offered to Freya, "May Freya grant our shields the protection against our adversaries." Ivar's voice was solemn and Emer was proud watching how their people were fascinated by Ivar's words.

The last animal was a bull. It was an offer to both Thor and Tyr, "May great Thor crush our opponents with his strong arms and mighty hammer. The fair Tyr will be present on the battlefield, allowing us to prevail over those who defy us against all that is right and just.

Emer could notice Ivar was using all his force to precede the sacrifice. She felt guilty to put him in this position, but she was not ready to give up God. He seemed marvelling by the vision of the blood and Emer thought if he would be the most ruthless warrior if he could engage in the battlefield. The image of Ivar standing and using his strong muscles was making her skin tingle she couldn't distinguish if were of terror or arousal.
During the feast Emer could feel the tension in the air become thicker, heavier, until she had a hard time even breathing it in. The ale, and the food were being served as always. The sounds of chattering and songs filling the air, but she knew that they were afraid to die before being worth of Valhalla, leaving their families and lands unprotected.

Ivar was beside her trying to keep their morale high. Shouting words of encouragement and telling jokes. Emer tried to laugh, but it felt like she shouldn't be there. It was her fault. Her father was the cause of this.

Ivar was sitting on the bed and taking off his clothes to sleep, Emer approached to help him feeling the same heat going from her cheeks to her toes. Sitting by his side, she started caressing his chest and praying God would keep his heart, her heart beating for the many years she wanted to come.

She felt his gaze on her and was breathing through her mouth watching the bulge in his breeches growing.

“I asked Sigvard and Gunnar to take you home if we are defeated. There is no point in you staying among my people if...” Ivar held her hand and started kissing her knuckles.

“Home? Where is home? It's not Munster anymore. My home is here, my people live here. I promised I would share a life with you, the sweet mead and the pain. I'm not taking back my words.” Emer protested.

“A life, Emer. Not death. If I die, you can go back to your father and tell him the truth. He will marry you to a proper Christian Prince...” Ivar looked at his lap, his lips twisting only with the thought of another man touching her.
"Proper? I'm your wife and I don't picture myself married to anyone else." Emer leaned forward to kiss him tangling her fingers in his hair.

Ivar granted her free passage, they were tasting each other's mouth with the despair that only lovers who doubt the future could feel. He held her waist possessively making Emer gasp against him. She broke the kiss straddling him and lifting her dress. Ivar howled feeling her against his thighs and took hold of her butt to keep her in place.

Emer smiled at him and buried her face in the crook of his neck. She loved his scent. It reminded her of the sea and the forest, both mysterious, dangerous and ancient. She wished he could grow old with her.

Ivar was caressing her thigh and grabbing her ass with the other hand. The fragrance of her hair was driving him insane. She smelled of flowers and he pictured her as the most wanted season, his Spring. She came to give meaning to his life. More than raids, fame or glory.

Her hot breathing against his neck was reviving images he has always wanted to happen. Emer gasping, sweating and smiling beneath him.

Emer started kissing and licking his neck as he once did to her during their wedding night. It was like a lifetime before, and she felt her heart pounding as soon as she noticed he was not pushing her away.

Her caresses became bolder and her tongue traveled to his jaw, intercalating kisses and bites. When Ivar's hands found her breasts, she moaned. Ivar groaned overwhelmed by the sensations she was causing him. Emer saw his reaction as a motivation to proceed, and started removing her nightgown.

"No!" Ivar was panting and gripped her hands.

"Why? Don't you want me?" Emer looked at him with her jaw clenching.

"Of course I desire you. But I shouldn't. I'm not good for you. You know I can't do this..." Emer sniffed in, ashamed of herself, and Ivar reached over with his thumb and wiped the tear.
“You're more than enough to me. I want to be truly yours. You say you want me, but I've been sleeping feeling unwanted for too long. We don't need to go farther than you feel prepared to. Just touch me. If tonight is everything we will have, give me memories that I can live for.” She begged.

Ivar was cupping her face as if she were the most fragile thing in the world. He smiled at her making her lie down and surprisingly quickly his body was hovering over her. Emer started caressing his chest and Ivar let out a grunt. When Emer looked up at him, she had the evidence of his love for her. His striking blue eyes were almost entirely engulfed by the black of his pupils and on his lips she saw one of his rare smiles.

“Minn vif.” Ivar grunted possessing her mouth in a desperate kiss.

Emer circled his neck with her arms enjoying the feeling of being so close to him. Ivar was trembling above her, holding his weight with his elbow. His free hand was exploring the sensitive skin of her collarbone. When Emer whined against his lips, Ivar broke the kiss. Looking deep in her eyes, he started removing her nightgown, Emer was in a rush to help him.

Ivar was thirsty for her and Emer was so caught up in the moment and longing to melt against him that didn't care about her nakedness. His eyes traveled through her body and Ivar was breathing heavily while licking his lower lip. It was the only place they wanted to be, not thinking about what was coming, but being absolutely content.

“I don't want to enrage Freyja, but you're as beautiful as her.” Ivar whispered.

Emer giggled and Ivar captured her lips once more. She opened her legs and felt he was hard for her.

Ivar's lips descended to her collarbone, his hot breathing and beard tickling Emer. She placed her hands around his waist and her thighs were shaking when he took one of her nipples between his lips. Ivar looked up at her and grinned noticing she was jerking her head back, eyes closed and breathing through her mouth. He started gentle, only kissing and licking the sensitive nipples, but his excitement took over when he felt Emer squealing and one of her hands left his waist to tangle in his hair. He could please a woman. He could please her. It was a discovery far more important than sailing to new lands.

He was now nibbling one of her nipples and rolling the other with his finger. She gasped digging her nails into the flesh of his waist. His ministrations were affecting her and Emer sensed she was growing wet and impatient. She felt tears running down her cheeks by the frustration accumulated all those months and the fear it would be their first and last time as one.
Ivar heard her sobbing and looked at her worried.

“Am I hurting you?” he muttered crawling up to kiss her cheeks.

“No, my love!” Emer wailed, “These are tears of happiness.” She concluded giving him a little smile.

He tilted his head and Emer took his face between her trembling hands, “I'm ready.” she raised her head pressing a light kiss on his lips.

*Valhalla is when she kisses me. The Gods are blessing me.* Ivar thought and hoped his blessings would last and he could get back to her.

He nodded and started removing his breeches with one hand. He was shaking with excitement and fear. Emer sat to help him, lying back and bringing him with her once they were completely naked.

*I can't disappoint her faith in me*, he thought.

Holding his weight with his hand on each side of her head, he looked down at her. She was smiling to urge him on and Ivar complied sinking into her with one hard thrust. He closed his eyes enjoying the odd sensation of shrivers on his lower back.

Emer was biting her lower lip not to scream due the sharp pain. Ivar felt she was suffering because she locked her legs around him.

“I'm sorry!” Ivar croaked with his jaw trembling.

“Kiss me, Ivar” Emer mumbled.

Ivar tried to move, but it felt as if his body were tied down to Emer. He was afraid to hurt her even more.
Emer raised her hand to caress his face and bring him closer. Her kiss was reassuring and Ivar started moving his hips slowly against her, she gasped each time he pushed back in and sighed when he was withdrawing. Their lips were brushing and Ivar was impressed by the enticing image of Emer beneath him.

The discomfort ebbed, and she could feel the depth, the warmth, the velvet of his manhood, and the slow, sure rhythm of his thrusts. Fire sparkled inside of her, flames lapping at her skin, heating Emer's blood. They grew within her with every stroke of his body.

The pain gave in and Emer started moving with him. Her hips meeting his thrusts while they were sucking on each other's tongue.

She was tired and tense because of all the preparation for the battle, the place between her legs was sore but she didn’t care. She didn’t want to waste more of their precious time. She wanted the ache. She wanted Ivar inside of her, protected by her embrace. Emer was happy with his weight on top of her making her feel claimed. Emer wanted to watch his face distorted in pleasure and be aware it was her doing. Their doing. She couldn’t really believe it; they were one. She twined her legs around his waist and rocked her hips slowly against his. Ivar felt deeper into Emer.

“I’ll never forget it.” She whimpered against his hair.

Even though he was on top of her, she was not overwhelmed; they were working together and he liked it was her desire to be his.

Ivar was grunting and before she realized he rolled them and she was on top.

He had never thought he would see her like this, sweating and disheveled on top of him. Ivar was in awe. Her hair was framing her face and covering her breasts. Sweat beads all over her skin.

Emer couldn’t get enough of him. Watching the admiration he was looking at her was making her feel like Freya being worshipped. But Emer was not longing for crowds of followers; she could be happier if they could live alone in a distant mountain. With Ivar's eyes being the only ones to hold her gaze. She ran her hands down his arms to his hands and then raised their joined hands up to her breasts. Ivar's hips bucked instinctively towards her, burying himself in her sweet heat. It was like he was splitting her in two. Emer moaned jerking her head back and pushed down. There was no end to it, no end to the new things they were learning. They kept copying each other's moves.
Ivar couldn't think straight. They had each other, for a few moments it didn't matter if he would die. He wanted to register the way her face was sweating and her body squirming. She was riding in a slow pace, back and forth. Ivar held her hips as if she would disappear in a fog and started encouraging her to go faster. Emer was moving her hips in a circular motion, making Ivar reach every spot inside of her, and the friction was making her feel like she had had too much mead.

He pulled himself to a sitting position, claiming her breasts with kisses, licks and bites while his hands were gripping her ass cheeks. Emer was arching her back and his actions were like a boost to her rhythm, the sweating of their bodies made it easier to slide on his lap. The smell of their sex and sweat was rapturously delicious with every inhalation and gasp she made. Ivar started trailing his tongue up to her neck, jaw and finally to her mouth. He started sucking her lower lip and Emer inhaled sharply granting him passage and their tongues started swirling around each other and plunged in and out.

He rolled her over and he was on top again. She wailed when he thrusted back in, wrapping her legs around his waist to force more of him into her.

Ivar was held up by a feeling of dizzying suspension, like the ones he had in dreams where he couldn't walk but fly. He opened his mouth crying out his release and trembling.

Emer's mind was filled with fog, and the sounds disappeared. There were black spots dancing before her eyes. She closed them and held her breath, the only thing that mattered was the two of them. When Emer finally opened her eyes, she found him watching her with precaution, Ivar pressed his forehead against her while they were waiting for their pleasure to subside. She held him against her chest as if she were consoling a child.

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It feels as if years have passed when morning light finally begins to trickle into the chamber, bathing my skin with warmth. Beneath my cheek, my husband's skin is heated, his breaths are still slow and steady, and I envy that he can sleep so deeply.

I want to get up and pray, but I won't disturb Ivar. Cradled in his muscular arms, I am trapped against his chest, my face resting on the bronze expanse of his shoulder. I can feel the pulse of his heart beneath me, strong and constant. I remember how last night I felt his heart beating fast for me.

“Please, God. Let him live!” I whisper in hope God will hear my pray.
Warmth floods across my cheeks. The sunlight grows brighter as time passes, and I watch as Ivar squints his eyes and wrinkles his nose. He grunts quietly, and then his lashes flutter, and his eyes are staring into mine, wide and mesmerizingly blue.

"Kona." His hand reaches out and tenderly grasps my chin, pulling my face closer to his.

His lips touch mine. My eyes drift closed, all of the thoughts that plagued my mind suddenly fading into silence. Carefully, he begins to shift, turning so that I am lying amongst the furs once more, and he is hovering above me. His hand moves to the fullness of my breast, and I realize that he intends to take me once again.

My body still aches, the soreness is a reminder that I'm his. I wish to feel the tenderness until he comes back to me. My husband wishes for me, and I'm longing to feel his passion again, to discover new ways to please him. Unfortunately, the reality knocks at our door.

“Ivar? We must prepare the departure!” Sigvard’s voice is excited and I wonder if I'm the only one dreading the battle.

I smile at the frustrated groan that leaves Ivar's mouth, “When you get back, my love.” I hope my words hold truth.

Chapter End Notes

Viking warriors themselves also engaged in magical battle practices. Consultation of omens and ritual preparations were carefully followed to ensure success in battle. Weapons were marked with symbols for luck, strength, and courage in battle and sacrifices were made. The boar, bull and stallion were the sacrificial animals associated with battle magic.

There seems to be a difference of opinion between scholars as to who performed important religious rituals such as those held at Old Uppsala. Some scholars think there was a class of professional cult leaders (or “priests”) but others scholars state the evidence shows that religious rites were performed by the local ruler, either a king or an earl. Literary accounts mention the ruler blessing the sacrificial food and reciting ritual toasts to the gods. Other accounts tell the story of rulers who refused to perform the customary sacrificial rites. One tale of a Christian Swedish king tells how he was deposed when he refused to perform a sacrifice. That fact that kings were required to participate in religious rituals leads some scholars to theorize that the Vikings followed the practice of ‘sacral kingship.’ This concept implied that kingship was a divine right.
and the king possessed supernatural powers and the ability to bring prosperity to his people. While the idea of Viking sacral kingship is just a theory there is no doubt that the king or local earl played an integral part in religious rituals.

**Viking Religion and Burial**

The sacrificial rituals of the Vikings ranged from great festivals in magnate’s halls to offerings of weapons, jewellery and tools in lakes. Humans and animals were also hung from the trees in holy groves, according to written sources. The Vikings repeatedly used certain sacrificial sites, because they believed that there was particularly strong contact with the gods at these locations. From the accounts of the Christian missionaries we know that the Vikings sacrificed to statues, which stood out in natural surroundings or in cult buildings.

It is believed that there were four fixed blót sacrifices a year at the following times: winter solstice, spring equinox, summer solstice and autumn equinox. The Vikings also held additional blót sacrifices, for example, if a crisis arose that required help from the gods.

The Arabic traveller al-Tartuchi describes how the Viking town of Hedeby celebrated the winter solstice. “They celebrate a festival, at which all come to worship the god and to eat and drink. The one who slaughters a sacrificial animal erects stakes at the entrance to his farmyard and puts the sacrificial animal on them. This is so that people know that he is sacrificing in honour of his god.” The sacrifices might be followed by a communal blót feast – a feast at which the participants ate and drank together. Sacrifices of animals were not the norm, but were primarily associated with magnates and kings.

**The Viking blót sacrifices**

When Adam of Bremen wrote about Scandinavia around the year 1070, he was told that the Vikings offered sacrifices to Odin when war was expected. Sacrifices were also made to Odin for victory in expeditions or wars. Archaeological finds and reports both support a theory that human sacrifices were also offered to Odin in such circumstances. Odin had a special place in the ideology of war. People believed that Odin was invisibly present on the battlefield, and that he decided which fighters should die and which side should win. Before a battle started, the field of battle was dedicated to Odin with the cry, ‘Odin á ydr alla’ – ‘Odin owns you all’. […] The most important thing for a warrior’s posthumous reputation was not necessarily victory or defeat, but how he had acquitted himself at the end.

In addition to Valhalla, there was another ‘warrior’s heaven’ in Folkvang with Freya. When the Valkyries brought the warriors killed in battle to Odin, Freya had the right to choose half of them for herself. The ones chosen by Freya were generally more modest and less bloodthirsty than the ones who were taken to Valhalla. It is not clear why that was so, but perhaps as they were to serve a woman, they needed to know how to behave. (Vikings at War, p.34)

Books: Nordic Religions in the Viking Age by Thomas DuBois
Vikings: A History of the Norse People by Martin J Dougherty
Vikings at War by Kim Hjardar and Vegard Vike
The Viking Warrior: The Norse Raiders who Terrorized Medieval Europe by Ben Hubbard
Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes by Gro Steinsland
Grief

Chapter Summary

Emer looks back at her decisions and the consequences of her choices. Ivar's army is back after the battle against Máel's forces.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry the delay to update. It's been more than 4 months and I truly missed writing Emer, but I have this annoying habit of starting a lot of things. I'll try to give Emer priority since she is my first pairing for Ivar.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It has been like ages and I am almost tearing out my hair in worry. I can only live my days as my world is not falling apart. I walk through my routine as a caged animal, it’s all I can do as news of Ivar's advances against my father do not come. Whenever I am alone in our chambers, I kneel to pray until tears wash over my face. Sorcha prays with me sometimes and I know she is thinking about Gunnar.

How terrible is to long for someone you can’t reach. How terrible is to taste happiness only to be taken away.

We are preparing the dagmál when a horseman arrives with news. I run as fast as my legs can carry me.

“Ivar was defeated!” Erik dismounts and comes closer to me. He is breathing heavily and sweating on the verge of collapsing at my feet because of the exhaustion. I imagine his effort to arrive before the army and allow us time to prepare. I just don’t know for what.

I feel my heart skipping a beat and my knees are trembling. I do not care if Ivar was defeated. I must know if he is alive. With Sorcha’s help, I hold Erick, bringing him to the hall so his wounds can be tended to. I order everyone to help with food and warn any healer I know to be ready. I do not know the extent of the defeat and the wounded will need all the help to survive for another battle. I am sure I will live this nightmare many times.

While Sorcha runs to bring the man some food, I ask him about the battle, “Did you see Ivar? Is he alive?”
I want to shake Erik when he does not answer me right away. He looks at me with pity in his eyes and I start to tremble until he drinks some ale and answer my question, “He is alive! Wounded, but the last time I saw him he was still breathing.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding and smile at Erik, “Thank you.”

I leave him alone to help with the reception of the bathed warriors as every hand is needed. I run around making sure we have benches, herbs, clean cloths and water to help the wounded.

After the longest hours of my life, I hear horses approaching. The gates open and I see the anger and shame in the eyes of the warriors that walked to the battle with squared shoulders and straight backs. I can’t hear the confident laughter or songs anymore. Only the silence left by those who fell on the battlefield, the ones who are on the gates to Valhalla or ashamed to be alive.

The desperate wives and children run to find their loved ones while I search for his chariot. I see the terror in the eyes of the children that can’t find their fathers and the terrible understanding that twist the face of their mothers in a mask of desolation. It fades fast as the women lean down to whisper to their little ones, ‘He must be in the back of the army! There are so many people. That’s why we can’t see him.’

I finally see Gunnar riding in my direction. His expression shifting from one of alarm to wariness. Before he can reach me, I see Ivar's chariot and it is not my husband commanding the horse. It is Siegfried. I whimper and hot tears stream down my face. I lift my trembling hand to my mouth to stop the sobs.

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I slowly cut my way through the crowd. My legs feel so heavy and it's like the sounds around me are muffled. Only my heart pounding in my ears and my heavy breathing surround me. It's like my lungs are burning with every intake of air until I'm finally in front of Siegfried and terrified of what I’ll found on the back of the chariot.

“Go to him, my Queen!” he nods and hold my skirts not to fall as I climb on the chariot and I see Ivar with an arrow so close to his chest that I must bite my lips not to scream.
His eyelids flutter and I do not know if he is seeing me. I kiss his lips and whisper softly, “I will take care of you, my love.”

Siegfried and Gunnar bring Ivar to our bed, while I run to gather the things I will need to heal him.

They hold Ivar, so I can remove the arrow without causing more damage. Knowing my father is the cause of his pain is an extra weight on my shoulders.

During the procedure, Ivar’s mind floats between unconsciousness and agony. He is constantly clenching his teeth in pain and grunting, but it seems he can’t hear when I try to talk to him. He faints while I clean and stitch the wound. The arrow didn't pierce any organ, my only hope is that Ivar won't have to fight against fever.

Sorcha brings soup and helps me to lift Ivar’s torso. We prop him up against the pillows, so I can pour some soup into in his mouth. I dismiss Siegfried to go to his family, but Gunnar insists to stay if I need him. I tell him to follow Sorcha to the hall, so she can tend to his injuries.

I need a moment with my husband for I do not know if he will survive. Every shallow breath he takes looks like a new battle, and I feel my eyes burning due the tears. I hold his hand and remember the tenderness with which he touched me the last time we saw each other. My throat tightens, and I cannot bring myself to say anything. I can only caress his face and squeeze his hand as I wait for any sign he will stay with me. But I cannot remain oblivious to what happened in this battle. While Ivar recovers, I must take care of our people. I press my lips to his forehead and walk to the hall. I need to talk to Gunnar.

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Gunnar is sitting with Sorcha on a bench while she cleans his wounds. The loving look in his eyes while Sorcha is inspecting his torso makes me envy. I am happy for them, but I wanted to see Ivar's eyes looking at me the same way too. My jaw trembles as I consider I might not see his indigo eyes shining for me again. I clear my throat as I approach them.

“Gunnar? I know you must be drained, but we need to talk.” I look between Sorcha and Gunnar, noticing their discomfort.
“I’ll bring some food.” Sorcha dismiss herself.

“What happened? An ambush? Ivar was not supposed to go to the battlefield…” the thought of Ivar as a target makes my heart skip a beat, “How?”

“You father was leading the army and started throwing insults until Ivar lost control and charged. We had the advantage. Our army was at the top of a hill.” I notice Gunnar shaking his head maybe in disapproval of Ivar’s decision, “But... It does not matter now. We lived to fight another day.” Gunnar looks at Sorcha who hands him a bowl with bread and salted fish and a cup of mead. I smile grateful that he came back to her. But I must know what made Ivar lose control and be defeated by my father.

“Insults? What did my father do to make Ivar lose control?” Gunnar swallows and I feel his hands forming fists.

“It is not important... The only thing that matters is to recover...” Sorcha looks at me and I can see her lips trembling.

“It is important to me, Gunnar. Do not be embarrassed.” I assure him that words cannot hurt me now. Not when my husband fights for life.

“Your father doubted your marriage. He said that...” He adverts his eyes and I nod in encouragement, “Máel shouted that you were probably still a virgin if you ended up pregnant it would not be by Ivar’s doing. He yelled that he wanted you back before Ivar whored you to have an heir.” Gunnar cannot look me in the eye and I hold his hand.

“Thanks for telling me the truth. So, Ivar was blinded by Máel’s insults and charged?” I feel my hands sweating to think he let go of a certain victory to defend our honor.

As much as I want to be furious, I can’t help thinking that it was more than pride for Ivar. I feel this is a turning point in our lives. My father did not hesitate to use me, to bring me shame as a way to reach Ivar. I cannot call him father. At least not now.

“Yes, and we followed him. He challenged Máel to single combat and your father agreed. Both would fight seated and the first to drop the sword or bleed would lose. Ivar reasoned to him that you would be horrified if he killed him.” All I see is Gunnar’s lips moving, but none of his words reach me. Ivar considered my feelings about my father. My happiness is short-lived, and I wish he hadn’t. That’s why he is unconscious now.
“Ivar was winning. I can tell you Máel was exhausted and would drop his sword soon. But an arrow whizzed with a whistling that we thought it was the wind, and landed on Ivar.” I gulp thinking about the despair and confusion that I’m sure took place after my father’s coward act.

“Before another arrow came, our men held their shields above Ivar. Your father ran to lead a new attack against us while we removed Ivar to his chariot. It was chaos, Emer.” Gunnar looks down at his plate, but I see he is hungry for revenge and not food.

“I’ll be forever in your debt, Gunnar.” Hot tears spill from the corners of my eyes, washing down my cheeks.

“It was my duty.” Gunnar smiles looking up at me, “He will recover. You’ll see.” I press my lips together not to sob in front of him.

“Where is Bragi? I haven’t seen him…” I ask about the only man that could distract from the underlying tension. His shy smile fades completely and Gunnar doesn’t need to say anything.

I stiffen immediately, shaking my head the slightest, mumbling a hushed ‘no’ against the palm I place over my mouth.

I walk to my chambers and I see Ivar is still unconscious. The weight of defeat crushes me. I married him to avoid war and yet, here we were. Is it a sign God doesn’t approve my decision? A message that our union can only bring pain?

Would the results be the same if I had performed the sacrifice Ivar asked me to make? I don’t even know if his Gods are real and if they are – Would they listen to my pleads? The aftermath might be pushing me to a decision. Will I be the Queen Ivar needs by his side?

I love him against my faith and family, against peace and hope, against all discouragement that could tear us apart, but I wonder when the pile of corpses growing around us will make our love stink and be contaminated.
Daily Meals

The Vikings customarily ate two meals each day. The first, dagmál or "day-meal" was eaten in the morning, approximately two hours after the day's work was started (7 AM to 8 AM or so), while the second, náttmál or "night meal" was consumed at the end of the day's labor (7 PM to 8 PM or so). These times would vary seasonally, depending on the hours of daylight.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Emer faces the consequences of the battles with some people questioning her authority as she watches other dying and suffering. She must make sure they have supplies for the Winter, especially with the arrival of an unexpected entourage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I want to lie down holding his hand forever, afraid that even the slightest move can make Ivar fade away. But I have a duty. As his Queen, I must look after the people while he is incapacitated. It would be easy to send slaves and servants to help with the wounded warriors, but the people must see they still have leadership, feel that Ivar’s presence is still around through me. The people must see they can rely on us or they will look the other way. I must protect Ivar’s legacy.

I leave Sorcha watching over Ivar and with orders to call for me if something happens. I just wish my presence will be requested with news he woke up. Dressed in a simple dress, I walk to the yard where tents were erected to assist an overflow of wounded warriors.

The first thing that hits me is the overwhelming and noxious odor of bodily fluids. The smell of blood is thick in the air, along with the stench of vomit, putrefying flesh and shit. But I hold my head high. I won’t falter now, they need me to show courage.

The next thing my mind registers is the sound. The cries of pain and grief tighten my throat.

I had helped my mother when my father was back from his campaigns, but I have never seen something to this degree, or maybe I’m more sensitive because I feel responsible. I didn’t wield the swords or shot the arrows, but my father did.

Compassion damages those who embrace it. Being connected to both sides, makes me feel responsible for everything, and I can’t turn away. I wonder if I must learn to carry the weight of the guilt or be crushed by it. I must be strong enough to love my people, but empty to walk through the worst horrors. Horrors perpetrated by my father’s army.

The tears of the families will be lost because of my father’s pride and greedy. Humans crave and ruin, and the cycle continues. I enter the first tent and I see a woman pressing a wet cloth on a restrained
man’s mouth. His leg is smelling terrible and I imagine she is trying to ease his pain for the necessary amputation to come. She looks up at me and her eyes are a mix of annoyance and concentration.

“Are you going to watch or help me?” She glares at me with furrowed eyebrows and I walk closer to the bench the man is lying on.

“How can I help? What do you want me to do?” I whisper, wrinkling my nose due the nasty scent coming from the man’s wounds.

“As I remove the decaying flesh, you place these wet cloths to stop the bleeding and ease the pain.” Her voice is stern, and I feel she has seen these kind of injuries so often that she can be collected.

The healer cuts off his leg from knee down. The man grunts less than what I expected, and I wonder what she gave him to relieve the pain. I must keep my hand on my mouth not to throw up as the smell of blood and putrid flesh reach my nostrils.

She shakes her head in disapproval when she hears me gasping. She looks at me through narrowed eyes until something hits her.

“I’m sorry, Queen Emer. I didn’t know it was you. I thought you would be looking after your husband.” She stutters, trying to apologize for something I deserved.

“Don’t worry. I’m here to help and not to pass out, huh? King Ivar is healing faster,” I know my words are more a way to reassure myself than to inform her. I hope my words prove to be true, “Forgive me, I don’t think I remember your name.” I smile at the woman that reminds me so much of my mother with her soft voice and silver strands mixing among the black hair. But by the way her tongue forms the words, I notice she is not from Erinn. Her eyes are dark as a night without stars and her skin is tanned with a beautiful golden glow.

I wonder if my mother is dealing with the consequences of this battle as well. Is my father injured too?

“My name is Aisha. I came with Horik’s ship when he was negotiating slaves in Cordoba. I was the personal physician in the court of the Abd ar-Rahman II, Emir of Córdoba.” She says proudly, and I can’t understand why she left the prestigious and wealth court.

“I’m curious about what brought you here, but we don’t have time to talk now, huh?” Aisha nods, applying salve on the man’s wounds, “We are blessed to have you in such a difficult moment.
Everything you need, you just have to ask, and I’ll try to provide.”

I walk out of this tent and see some of the men in better condition carrying a body. I look at the face of the dead man and all I can see is wasted youth. It's difficult to recognize him, for the blow that killed him, damaged his face severely. I’m sure he hadn’t seen many battles, for he doesn’t seem old enough to have swore allegiance to Ivar a long time ago. My mouth is dry while I think about his family.

*Does he have a wife already? Parents?*

I don’t have to think much when a woman approaches me with her eyes inflamed from crying and hatred, “What are you doing here? Didn’t your kin have enough? My only boy is dead out there and I will die alone. At least it will be quickly as I don’t have anyone to work the field.” She barks, shaking with a new wave of crying. I’m torn between embracing her or waiting for her to calm down. I try to remember her name, but my emotions are making my head spin.

“Are you Aldif, right?” She nods, wiping her tears with the back of her hand, and I sigh relieved that I could remember her name. What means that the boy that died is Einar. I remember little about him, only that he was always smiling while training. So happy swinging a sword.

“I can’t bring your son back and I can only pray that you find some comfort in the fact that your son fought bravely, even though I know you would prefer if he was alive. But I can send some of my servants to work your fields.” Aldif swallows with an audible gulp and I walk closer to her, taking her hands. Aldiff is almost collapsing at my feet, sobbing. I gather her in my arms, feeling her body trembling and her head resting in the crook of my neck.

Gunnar approaches followed by a tall man I don’t recognize, “I’ll never replace your son, Aldif. But if you accept me, I can work on your fields before the Winter.”

Aldif nods sadly, following the men that were carrying her son’s body. My eyes follow her, burning with unshed tears. The burden of being a mother without a son for whom to live must be something terrible. Knowing that you will not live past your existence must be like having no purpose.

My thoughts are interrupted by Gunnar clearing his throat, “This is Olaf, Emer.”

The man with whom Ivar shares the command of Dublin. After all those months, I finally meet Ivar’s ally, “I’m sorry that you arrived to witness such a terrible situation. We just faced a huge defeat.”
“I’ve heard about it.” He looks at me from head to toe with an enigmatic expression. I don’t know what to expect from him. I’m afraid that, as Aldif, he blames me for what happened.

“Where is Ivar?” He nods, walking closer and I feel unnerved. I don’t know if I can trust this man while Ivar is so vulnerable.

“He is resting.” I wonder if Olaf can feel the anxiety and insecurity in my voice.

“I suppose he is not badly injured, huh?” Olaf tilts his head closer and his breath wash over my face with an inappropriate intimacy.

“He is recovering.” I take a step back, holding my chin high. Olaf smirks, straightening his back as if amused by my reaction.

“You must be exhausted of the journey. I must arrange food and…” I start walking to the hall to help Sorcha preparing a meal for them.

“I think you have more important things with which to worry about. We brought some slaves from Alba that can help with the injured and the cooking.” He insists looking around.

“I appreciate and welcome all the help.” Olaf smiles at me and it seems genuine, his brown eyes shining, “but what impression will you have of me if don’t show hospitality?” I smile shyly at him and Olaf presses his lips together, I suppose not to laugh at my insistence.

“I will give the command for the slaves to stay here and help.” Olaf walks to his crew and I notice how they run to follow his orders. I wonder if this man inspires fear or loyalty.

*Does Ivar trust him to share power?*

Olaf comes back to where I’m watching him, and I wonder if he noticed I was staring at him.

“Shall we?” I mutter, trying to organize my thoughts.
Aisha Means "alive" in Arabic. This was the name of Muhammad's third wife, the daughter of Abu Bakr. Some time after Muhammad's death she went to war against Ali, the fourth caliph, but was defeated. This name is used more by Sunni Muslims and less by Shias. Aisha

The Emir Aisha referred to Abd ar-Rahman II

Towns and Trading in the Viking Age
Trade during the Viking Age
From Raiders to Traders: The Viking-Arab Trade Exchange
Viking trade

Raiders or Traders?
Vikings as traders
A Tale of Two Civilisations: The Viking and the Muslim Civilisation
I researched about medical care during Viking Age and the Arab tradition in Medicine. This link has really graphic images. Proceed with caution. The realities of War

"Arrows and spears would obviously blind even if they failed to penetrate the skull. [...] In the days before crano-maxillary surgery the social effects of a sword in the chops would have been terminal in the long or short term and very nasty. Teeth and jaw being smashed would be very painful and likely to lead to infection and slow death. Many skulls have been found from ancient times with horrible facial injuries. Many references in histories tell of armoured men felled by an arrow or blow into the undefended face."

"The oldest medical writings describe surgical, medical and herbal treatments. The Assyrians herbal contained: Belladonna, Cannabis and Mandragora. The Ancient Egyptians used opium poppy and influenced the Greek medicine. [...] Arabic translation of the Greek medicine helped to make Islamic physicians supreme in the middle Ages. Baghdad became the world's leading medical and drug center. With the skill of the Arab Alchemists, the art of drug making began to evolve into the science of Pharmacology. Western physicians emerging from the Middle Ages found the Arab pharmacopoeia (based on the Greek and enriched by Arab herbiest), in which a list of medicinal plants composed the anesthetic armamentarium of our forefathers. Ibn al Nafis (1208-1288) the Arabic scholar who descried the pulmonary circulation, mentioned in his book Al Shamel a paragraph on how patient could be restrained during surgery and his remarks do not mention anesthesia. The reason may be that he worked as ophthalmologist. His pupil Ibn Al Koff (1232-1286 AD) wrote a complete chapter on pain relief in his book "Al Omdah Fi Sinaat Al Jirahah". He differentiated between true and non-true pain relief considering non-true pain relief the "Anesthetic" which the surgeon may use for treatment of pain or to be able to institute the surgical treatment."

Surgical, medical and anesthesia in the Middle East

"The Arabs were familiar with surgery and practiced several procedures. Surgeons administered sedative-analgesic mixtures before surgical operation. Anaesthetic sponge was an Arabic contribution, seemingly so, the radical. Avicenna indicated that a patient who wants to have an amputation of one of his limbs must have a drink prepared from a mixture of mandragora and other sleeping drugs."

more here and here
To write the surgery performed by Aisha, I’ve read the description of an amputation from the book A History of Medicine: Byzantine and Islamic medicine by Plinio Prioreschi.
Emer tries to find out what are Olaf's true intentions as they are forced to forge an alliance to face a new challenge. Aisha offers some hope about Ivar's recovery.

Olaf keeps watching me warily during the meal. I don't know if I should be grateful or afraid of his silence. I wish Ivar was by my side, so I could understand this stranger and his intentions. I will have to guide myself in the dark, using only my instinct.

“How is married life? I find it strange that your father agreed to marry you and then marched against us.” He tilts his head, pressing his lips into a thin line.

“We are happy despite Máel’s treachery…” I hold my chin high, looking directly into his brown eyes.

“Máel and not father?” He scoffs, interrupting me and I feel blood rushing to my face. I wish he had stayed in Alba. I keep my hands folded in my lap, under the table, trying not to slap the smirk from his lips.

“How can I still call him father when my husband lays wounded in our bed because of him?” I say through clenched teeth. The thought of Ivar never waking up terrifies me and I feel my throat tightening.

“It seems you love him and is loyal. He is a lucky man.” Olaf smiles, placing his hand on his heart as if he is being genuine in his admiration.

“Why are you here after all this time?” I ask, tired of pleasantries and going straight to the point.

“As you must know, I share the command of Dublin with Ivar,” he stares at me, thoughtfully, “I've been raiding and now I'm here to know how Ivar has been ruling our stronghold.” Something about
the way he pronounces the words makes me uneasy.

*What if he thinks Ivar has been an ineffective ruler?*

“How long are you staying with us?” I take a sip of my mead, watching him over the rim of my cup.

“My intention was only to replenish the ships and sail farther… to the East,” his eyes shine with what I suppose is the excitement for new lands, “but now that I see I'm needed here, I'll stay a little more.” Olaf holds his cup against his lips, raising his eyebrows at me.

I try not to show my frustration and fear, “That's good! We will need all hands. And besides…” I avert my eyes, curling my fingers into fists on the table.

“You can trust me!” he places his hand over mine, interrupting my thoughts and I feel embarrassed at his sudden touch.

“We will need warriors.” I recoil my hand from his, folding my fingers in my lap.

“Why?” if he noticed my discomfort, his expression doesn't give away.

“Máel will take advantage of the defeat and strike again as we recover. He won't show mercy,” the thought of a siege sends shivers down my spine, “he may be marching as we speak.”

Olaf smirks, clearly thirsty for a battle, “Let him come!”

“We must be prepared for a siege…” I whisper, feeling a lump in my throat.

“I'll see the defenses and train the warriors.” Olaf drinks the rest of his mead in one gulp, rising to his feet.

“Now?” I exclaim, my jaw dropping in perplexity.
Olaf burst into laughter, throwing his head back, “The part of the training will be tomorrow morning, but I must tell my men to wake up early, huh?” He winks at me, walking to the door.

After the meal, I walk to my quarters. Sorcha is watching over Ivar’s sleep.

“He is having fever!” she walks closer to me and I feel my legs trembling.

“You can go now!” I whisper, approaching to sit next to Ivar.

I use a spoon to give him some water and wipe away the sweat off his forehead with a wet cloth. The tears I’ve been holding during the day are running down my cheeks as I caress his hair. Ivar grunts and trembles during his delirium and I kneel at the foot of our bed, holding his hand. I hope God will have mercy on us.

“Please, let Ivar allow himself to be soft! I know you made him with molten steel running through his veins and wolf’s teeth. I know you made him to be a warrior, a conqueror. But even steel can warp and even wolf’s teeth can decay, and I do not want to watch, powerless, as he breaks.” I lean my head forward, pressing a kiss to his hand. I know it won’t be easy for him to wake up and face our people after this defeat, but we will have one another. We won’t be alone.

“I do not want to see his true self fade into oblivion, swallowed by the ambition of being a legend. All legends die young.” A strangled sob leaves my mouth and I bite my lips, looking at his face. It seems his sleep is less troubled now. At least the grunts have stopped.

“I know that you will tell me that the world needs him. His enemies need him to be the scourge of the world, so they can paint themselves as the heroes. His people, our people need his courage, faith, strength, fury and in the end... his blood.” My jaw clenches as I imagine how satisfied my father may be with the success of his treachery. He must be celebrating a victory he should be ashamed of.

Will the future generations say Máel was a brave king that cast out the Northmen?
“The world needs anything he will give them. Damned be the world and anyone that ever asked anything of him. Damned be anyone that ever took anything from him, or ever prayed for his defeat.” I don’t know God’s plan for us, but I doubt he would allow Ivar to survive this long if his life did not serve a purpose.

“You know that Ivar will give them everything, until there is nothing left of him but the imprint of dust where his feet once trod.” I swallow a lump in my throat to finish my prayers. I can't picture myself alone in this world. Without Ivar, I have nothing left.

“Oh, God! You can have your selection of heroes and villains, but Ivar is all I have. Let him stay with me.” I know he will wake up with a broken pride, but I'm positive our love can overcome this. We defeated the mistrust that stood between us in the beginning. We will rise again, as one.

The following morning, I wake up feeling exhausted and unable to eat. It seems the memories of the wounded warriors are still affecting me.

Ivar is still with fever, but no longer affected by tremors or deliriums.

“Where's Olaf?” I look over my shoulder to Sorcha, who is braiding my hair.

“He woke up earlier, ate and left to inspect the walls.” Sorcha helps me to dress and insists that I must eat something before leaving to help Aisha. I'm sitting by Ivar's side, holding his hand when she enters with a piece of bread.

I leave them, walking to the tents, in hope Aisha has some different medicine that will help Ivar.
“Good morning, Aisha!” I enter the tent, finding Aisha changing the bandages of the man whose leg was removed the day before.

I watch her working, thinking about how I will ask for her help when she is already so busy with men that may be in worse conditions than Ivar. I fear she will point out I'm being selfish to consider Ivar deserves her immediate attention instead of the others.

Aisha finishes her work and I stand before her as she washes her hands. I shift my weight from one foot to the other. I press my lips together, taking deep breaths to gather courage to ask for her help.

“What is disturbing you, Queen Emer?” Aisha looks up, surprising me with her soft voice.

“My husband.” I stutter and Aisha smiles, tilting her head.

“Is he awake then?” Aisha reaches for a cloth to dry her hands.

“No. He is still with fever…” I look down and Aisha shifts closer, taking my hands.

“I'll see him!” I stare at her, hands suddenly shaking with emotion.

“I know you have many responsibilities here and I don't want to be a burden…” Aisha cups my face tenderly.

“It's not wrong to ask on his behalf. I can see you love him and it's understandable that you put your husband before the others.” I nod shyly.

“But I'm not a common woman. My duty comes first.” I feel my chest tightening with the thought that Aisha may not be able to save Ivar.

“You're not neglecting your responsibilities as you worry about your husband. I can only imagine how it hurts you to leave him under other's care as you deal with the burdens of a ruler.” Aisha walks to a table, taking a small chest.
“Let’s see your husband!” She heads to the tent’s opening and I follow her, feeling my heart less heavy.

Aisha checks Ivar's wound and murmurs something to herself. I press my lips together nervously. Sorcha notices my gesture, touching my shoulder reassuringly.

“The fever is a sign his body is fighting. You tended to the wound the better you could. Now I'll give you some herbs to boil and give him.” She opens the chest, searching through her belongings. Aisha hands me a bottle with some ointment and a small bag with dried herbs.

“Someone must apply the ointment daily and remove the pus the following day. He must drink water as well. With the help of the herbs, he will be fine in a few days.” The certainty in her voice gives me hope Ivar will open his eyes soon.

“I'll do it!” Sorcha exclaims, smiling at me. I wait for her to leave us alone, so I can ask Aisha about something that can bring Ivar some relief.

“Have you noticed his bones?” I’m curious to know if Aisha would have something to help with Ivar's constant pain.

“I did. I've heard about this condition, but I've never seen someone affected so closely. When he wakes up, we can talk about it.” Aisha nods, walking to the door and I don't dare to take more of her time.

The following days pass as a blur while Olaf proves himself to be an important ally while we prepare for a new battle. It seems my worst nightmare will come true when news of my father’s advance towards us reach the hall. The people look at me warily. I’m sure they think I’m a spy for my father and that I will welcome him with open gates.
“That’s surprising!” Olaf chuckles as I tell him I want to lead the archers stationed on top of the walls.

“I don’t see why.” I cross my arms over my chest, lifting my eyebrows in challenge.

“Emer is right. She is a skilled archer and saved us from her uncle’s schemes when we were travelling from Máel’s lands.” Sigvard defends my claim and Olaf’s smirk dies on his lips. Gunnar is distracted, watching Sorcha serving us.

“I don’t think Ivar will approve if I risk your life…” Olaf hesitates, and I interrupt him.

“That’s not your decision to make. This is my home as much as it’s yours and it’s my duty to defend it.” The words are pouring so fast from my mouth, that it passes almost unnoticed how everyone stares at me.

“I think she is decided to have her way.” Gunnar’s eyes meet mine, mouth twisting up at me in a conspiratorial smile.

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