

Chapter 9

Catherine shows up at the hut, ready to walk me home as she had previously. After the bleeding had stopped, they helped me bathe again, and I combed through my hair with the gift from Anders. The women had all smiled a knowing smile at me as I did, probably all realizing how precious the comb is to me. No one has ever really given me anything, aside from my father. I know he doesn't have much here, but he traded what he had for it. It was a sacrifice he made, and he made it for me.

"Anders has come by and asked me about how women are treated where we're from," she says as we walk down the path back to the farm. It's a beautiful day, with a bright blue sky and the sun shining so brightly, kissing my skin with its warmth. "He's quite upset. I suspect you should live a very nice life."

I giggle at that. "He is very kind, isn't he?"

"Very," she agrees. "Even more than the men here. It's better than back home, but nothing like that. I'm still just property, but it's because I'm a slave. I wish someone would look at me the way that he looks at you. He's been worried about you. The midwife wouldn't let him back in to see you. She only let him in then because you were so scared."

"I didn't realize," I tell her, looking at the owers that are opening up as the weather gets warmer. "It's so beautiful here."

She nods, looking around. "It is," she agrees as we reach the fence around the farm.

"Do you know what happened to your family?" she asks me softly, and I pause, not wanting to talk about it in front of Anders.

"My Father was killed," I tell her, swallowing down the pain of seeing him on the oor. "He was all that I had. It was so quiet when we left. I hoped that everyone had run, maybe hid, but I'm sure they are all dead."

She nods, looking down at the ground. "When they attacked my village they were with another group. My sister was taken by the others. It's hard to not know how she is."

"I'm really sorry," I tell her, pulling her into a hug.

I lead her down the path to the barn, unsure if he will be here, but I'm pleasantly surprised to find him helping move planks of wood in the bottom of the barn with the men. It's warmer than it has been, and he's working with his shirt off, sweat glistening on his skin.

I bite my lip, slightly uncomfortable to see him like this, but unwilling to turn away from him. "Anders," I call softly, and he immediately turns to me, a huge smile on his face. He says something to the men and walks out past us.

We follow him as he moves towards the pen where a cow stands, chewing on some grass, and he leans against the fence, looking at the creature. The muscles of his back ex as he leans forward, the sweat shimmering in the spring sun. He turns and looks at Catherine, who is doing her best to look anywhere but at his strong chest, and says something to her. She looks surprised and after a few moments of conversation, she nods and turns to me.

"He was separated from his village during a storm at sea," she begins. "He doesn't know if anyone made it, but he has left messages where he went with my village for them to find him here. If they show up looking for him while he is away, he wants you to go with them."

"I can't go without him," I tell her, shaking my head.

"He said you must," she tells me. "He said the Norns have brought you together once, and if you go with them, he will find you again."

I shake my head, but before I can respond, she speaks up. "He wants me to teach you the language and, in exchange, I can come to his village when they come for him. He says I won't be a slave there."

"Do you want to come with us?" I ask her and she shrugs, but I can see in her eyes that she very much does.

"I wouldn't be a slave," she says softly and I realize just how much this means to her. She's trusting him as much as I am because if he's lying, she's teaching me for free.

"How will they know that I'm with him?" I ask, seeing many eyes in his plan.

He grabs the band on his wrist, running his finger along it carefully. "He'll leave his band. He says they will recognize it and know that it belongs to him. His village carries a blue bag with a wolf."

A nod. I had noticed the bags here, but I did not realize each village had its own. A blue bag with a wolf, and he will leave his band with me. I sigh, feeling uneasy at the thought of leaving with strange men without him with me.

Anders says something else to her and she nods, looking back at me. "He wants you to work with the midwife and learn everything that you can if you want to. He said his village needs someone to help mothers."

"I want to," I tell him. She tells him what I've said and he smiles and nods, placing his hand on my arm and says something to me.

"He wants to marry you when he returns if you're agreeable," Catherine tells me.

I look up at his hopeful, blue eyes and smile. He truly does care, even if we can't understand what the other says, we understand each other enough. "Why can't we marry before?"

She smiles and tells him what I've said, but his eyes never leave mine. "He says he can't afford a wedding."

"What is a wedding like here?" I ask, not caring which of them gives me an answer.

"It's a feast, with both families," she tells me. "Gifts are exchanged between the families."

I smile up at him, placing my hand on his chest. "We don't have families here," I tell him. "And I don't need a gift. I just want you."

Chapter 10

"His band seems to mean a lot to him," I say to Catherine as we walk back towards the village.

She nods. "Most men have one," she tells me. "The Jarl usually gives it to them when they are old enough to pledge to him. It may be different in another village, but there must be something special for him to be sure they would recognize it's his."

I nod, thinking about his plan. He would only agree to marry me before he leaves if I promised to go to his village if they came. I was hesitant but finally agreed to it. Anders went back to work with the men in the barn and I came with Catherine so she could begin to teach me the language here.

"Can women even earn money here?" I ask as we get close to the barn. "Gifts seemed important to him, but I have nothing to trade."

"Some of the older people will trade to have people do the jobs that are more difficult while the men are on the raids," she tells me. "Cleaning clothes is a big one."

"I can do that," I tell her. "Maybe he would understand if I gave him a gift when he came back."

She shrugs as we walk back to the hut to talk to the midwife. "Probably. He seems quite excited to just have you."

I smile, knowing that she's right because I feel the same way. I knew the second that our eyes met that I would be his. I didn't know how agreeable I would be to it, or how good it would feel, but I knew before he ever even took me to the boat.

We walk inside the hut and she speaks with the midwife. The midwife looks over her shoulder at me and nods once. Catherine comes back, but there's a frown on her face.

"She wants to teach you, but you have to stay here," she says grimly. "I told her that you and Anders are getting married before he leaves. She said for you to come once he is gone."

"Tell her yes," I say and she turns back, telling her my reply.

She nods and comes up, taking my face in her hands and looking deep into my eyes. She says something and then places a kiss in the middle of my forehead before releasing me and turning back to tend to the rest.

We leave, walking down the path back to the barn so Catherine can complete the chores she still has today. "Helga likes you," she tells me. "She said that you're blessed by Frigga, but she called you a daughter of Freyja."

"I don't know what that means," I tell her.

"They're goddesses," she tells me as we enter the barn. "It's good. It means she thinks you are favored among the Gods. Anders likely is, too, since he survived the shipwreck."

She's right, I realize. I haven't put much thought into it, but it's amazing that he was able to survive such an ordeal. I wonder what his friends were like. Did they all die? Or did they make it to safety somewhere else? My heart hurts for the man who has taken such good care of me since we found each other. He's all alone, too.

Well, he was, until he found me. Deciding to marry him was impulsive, but what other choice do I have? If I declined, I would likely become a slave here. There's no chance I can go back to my home and I doubt there's even a home left. No, marrying him is the best decision, and I'm sure that my Father would agree. Knowing in my heart that my father would approve of him brings me an immense amount of comfort.

"Are you alright?" Catherine asks me.

"Yeah," I tell her with a smile. "Just thinking. I think my Father would have liked Anders."

"Probably," she agrees as she begins to shovel the droppings left by the animals. "He will care for you."

I nod, knowing that she's right. He really will.

"Now," she says with a smile. "Time to learn the language."

We had dinner in the big house with Olga and her family before making our way back to our little corner of the barn. A young woman from yesterday had helped up to me and handed me her son again while she helped to prepare the food. The baby smiled and giggled at me and as I played with him, I could see Anders look at me in a way that made butterflies form in my stomach. Someday, I thought, looking at the man who had saved me. Someday.

I sit on the hay and unwrap the comb from an unused dress and begin to comb through the ends of my hair. Anders surprises me as he moves to sit behind me, taking the comb from my hand and gently does it himself. He takes his time, making sure that every strand is properly combed through before he wraps it back up in my dress and places it back.

Laying in what has become our bed, he puts the fur of what I believe to be a fox under my head as he always does to keep the scratchy hay off my face and pulls me to him. I happily comply, feeling more comfortable with the closeness between us each day. At home, it was improper for a man to even so much as touch your hand if unmarried, but here... here it is different. No one seems to care that he holds my hand, or that we stay together at night. They even let him into the hut and smiled as he combed my hair for me. It's so different, but I find that I like it.

Anders pushes a curl back from my face, his fingers rough from work grazing against my skin so gently. "Minn," he says, his eyes never leaving mine.

I asked Catherine today what it meant. He says it to me often when we're alone, and I really wanted to know. "Mine," she told me with a smile. "It means that you're his."

"Ost M n," I say to him, having learned the local phrase for "my love" earlier.

His face lights up and he leans in, kissing me softly. "Ost M n," he whispers softly into the night. "Minn."

I lean forward, placing my hand gently on his strong jaw, and place my lips on his. His hand lands on my hip, pulling me to him as he pulls his lips back with a small smile. He wraps his arms around me tightly, tucking me into him as his chin rests on the top of my head leaving me to feel safe and secure in his loving arms.