



**PART ONE**

THE STAG



**T**HE EYES STARING back at me in the mirror weren't my own. Sure, they were green, but a different kind of green. Not like mine. Not the color of moss and ivy but an unnaturally bright color.

They were mocking eyes with a cruel mouth and a harsh nose. Freshly made scars littered the intruder's once-pretty face.

Lydian stared back at me from the mirror with a slow, taunting smile growing on his face.

From beside me, Soren was still heavily asleep, and for that, I was glad. Perhaps if he looked in the mirror, all he would see was our own reflections, but I didn't want to risk it. Not with my worst nightmare staring back at me.

"Leave me alone," I said, knowing full well that he wouldn't.

*But you haven't answered my question. He didn't open his mouth to speak, but I heard the words in my head all the same. What happens when the serpent stops eating its tail?*

“What happens if I smash this mirror? Will you leave?”

*Oh, you should know by now I'll never leave, Janneke. Not when there's so much work to be done.*

That was it. With a flash of hot fury, I slammed the heel of my palm into the glass, causing it to shatter on the floor. The specter of Lydian disappeared with the broken glass, but his voice still lingered in my head.

*You cannot get rid of me. Not when there's still so much to do.*

“Janneke?” I whirled around, prepared to see Lydian somehow staring behind me, but it was only Soren. His long hair was disheveled and his lilac eyes blinked sleepily. “Are you okay?”

“I—I'm fine,” I stammered. “Sorry for waking you.”

He sniffed the air. “You're bleeding.”

I was silent. What was I supposed to say? That I kept seeing the apparition of his dead uncle who gave me cryptic advice, and I got tired of it so I smashed the mirror? That would go over well.

Soren sighed and took my bleeding hand, gently nipping the broken skin until it knit itself back together. “I'm not going to ask you why you smashed the mirror,” he said. “I know you'll tell me in your own time.”

“I keep having nightmares,” I said. It was true. Maybe not the reason I smashed the mirror, but it definitely was true. They plagued me every time I closed my eyes. A serpent twined around the world, waiting to devour it whole; a ship manned by the dead, made of fingernails, sailing ever closer to us; the earth crumbling in on itself and falling into oblivion; people riddled with holes and pockmarks and wounds so terrible

that all they could do was lie there and wish for the sweet release of death.

The nightmares came from stories I'd grown up on. The serpent that stretched around the world forced to bite its own tail to keep it from devouring the world was the world serpent, Jörmungandr. My father delighted in scaring all of his daughters with tales of the jaws of the great beast. And the ship made of fingernails . . . the *Naglfar*. Too terrifying to put into words, almost; I would hide under my blankets whenever he told that tale—something unbecoming of a young warrior. If you didn't die in battle, and your life wasn't bad enough solely for Hel, then the *Naglfar* is where you went. To work bone-chilling labor as your fingernails grew faster and faster, painful and debilitating, until they fell off thick as wood and long as branches. They crafted a ship with them; a ship where they would travel to fight in Ragnarök, on the side of those who'd end the world.

My father used to hold me and say they were just stories. But, considering all I'd been through, considering I'd even talked with a goddess, my faith that the horrific remained in stories was starting to waver.

But I was no longer a child. Yes, I had nightmares. But until now, they never were like this.

Part of me believed I would always have nightmares. There was so much in my past that continued to haunt me. I was safe. But I would always be haunted. My mind couldn't simply forget the horrors I'd been through. But at least those nightmares had a root, a cause. At least those nightmares made some sort of sense. I *knew* why I was having them. With these, I didn't

even know where to begin. None of it made sense. It was horror after horror flashing in my mind.

“Lydian?” Soren asked, wrapping one strong arm around me.

I leaned into the embrace. “Yes,” I said. “Among other things.”

Soren kissed the top of my head. “He’s dead. He can’t hurt you anymore. I know it takes . . . time, and you might never get over what he did to you. But you have to keep repeating that he can’t hurt you anymore.”

I glanced to the shattered mirror; a sliver of blond hair flickered in the glass before disappearing once again. *Oh, how I wished that were true.* But I couldn’t tell Soren that. I didn’t know how I’d do so without convincing him I’d gone certifiably mad, and to be honest, I was embarrassed to admit what had been going on after keeping the secret for half a year. So, instead, I continued to press into his embrace, cherishing the warmth of his body and the sound of his beating heart.

“Come back to bed,” he said, and I let him guide me back to the sleeping platform we shared, and we climbed under the furs. His arm was still around my shoulders as I curled up close to him, my head resting on his chest. His heart beat calmly, slower than a human’s and quieter, but it beat all the same. I let it lull me to sleep.

Thankfully, the nightmares didn’t come back.

