



## CHAPTER 2

# BJORN

Clear skies shone overhead as we pushed the drakkar onto the beach. Every muscle in my body ached, and I felt no guilt leaving Harald's thralls to drain the vessel as I walked onto the land that was more my home than any other. We'd landed at Stormnes, the point of land that jutted into the strait on which one could see across to Skaland on a clear day. The beach was narrow and rocky, and beyond it rose mountains covered with dense forest, their tops still white with snow.

Kneeling, I took a handful of the gritty sand and squeezed it tight, relishing the feel of Nordeland even as I cursed fate for bringing me back here.

"Fate holds no claim on you, Bjorn," Harald said as he walked past me up the beach, seeming, as he often did, to know my thoughts. "You are unfated, which means you chose this path, even if you did not know where it would lead."

I'd never cared to dwell on the power of the Unfated to change the future, because it couldn't be proven. There was no way to know

whether a choice had twisted the threads the Norns had woven into another pattern or whether I'd done exactly as they predicted. Everything I'd done in recent days had been with the aim of freeing Freya from those who'd kill her or use her to further their own ambitions, yet all I'd accomplished was moving her control from one king to another. "We are here because of you, Father."

He only gave me a knowing look and continued up the beach toward the trees.

*Knowing*, because there was no denying that once my plans to spirit Freya away had been dashed, once she'd learned about my treachery, I'd hoped the truth would cause her to forgive my lies. The hope that the tantalizing glimpse of a future I'd so desperately wanted could be mine again once she understood why I'd done what I had done. The hopes of a man with weasel shit for brains, because no *truth* would temper the seething rage that burned in my Freya's heart.

*Not yours anymore*, logic whispered even as my greedy heart screamed that she'd be mine until the end of days.

Casting aside my handful of sand, I stood and followed Harald into the trees. The air was colder than it had been in Skaland, the stink of rotting seaweed mixing with the crisp scent of pine, the mossy ground spongy beneath my boots. Wind shook the boughs of the trees, the woods alive with birdsong and the scamper of small creatures. A wild place. For though the summers were mild enough, few had the mettle to survive the cruelty of Nordeland's winters.

The man who had been a father to me most of my life found a rock to his liking and sat down. Pulling off his boots, Harald shook sand from them and then tossed them aside. As I silently watched, he removed his tunic and wrung seawater from the sodden cloth, his pale skin faintly blue from the cold. Leaner than I remembered, signs of age showing in the wrinkles next to his eyes and the strands of gray in his golden-brown hair. Just a man, though there were times I'd forgotten that during my time in Skaland, as Snorri had ever painted him as a creature capable of preternatural villainy.

In Nordeland, Harald was a savior. A liberator and a champion of the weak. I'd seen with my own eyes his good deeds. Owed him my life, as did so many of those who served him. Yet he was no more a hero than he was a villain. Only a man, and no man's choices were wholly altruistic, least of all one who had clawed his way up from a small jarldom to become king.

"You sound like a Skalander again." Harald sighed and twisted the fabric of his tunic again, drops of water falling to the moss. "It reminds me of when Saga first fled to Nordeland with you delirious from the pain of the burns. Just a boy and yet you never wept, only vowed vengeance upon Snorri for what he had done. You and I would have crossed the strait together and put Snorri in his grave if not for your mother holding us back. I wanted Snorri dead more than I've ever wanted anything, and yet Saga pleaded that I stay my hand. I have ever been a slave to her wishes but now I wish I'd held firm."

"I remember." I heard Skalander in my voice but was unable to slip the accent without concerted effort. I'd adopted it to try to blend in better in Halsar, to encourage the Skalanders to forget that I'd been gone for so many years, but it hadn't worked. Always an outsider. Always a Nordelander.

Most especially in my heart.

Donning his damp garment, Harald finally looked at me. The weight of his attention was as heavy as it had always been. "Now that we are finally alone, do you care to tell me why?"

*Why.*

A question that needed no clarification, and I exhaled a long breath before I said, "Does it matter?"

Harald toyed with the gold ring that bound his beard, then shook his head. "Does it matter? Of course it matters why you chose to destroy plans a lifetime in the making. All that I have done was at your mother's bidding, at *your* bidding, and yet you seem content to spit in my face for doing exactly as you wished. These were your plans, Bjorn, not mine, and yet you treat me as your enemy."

"You aren't my enemy, Father. But things change."

"Oh yes. *Things*." Harald made a face. "Things such as the shield maiden turning out to be a woman of unparalleled beauty? It is much easier to kill the ugly ones, isn't it? If Freya had been possessed of a face like a horse's arse, I've no doubt you would have done your mother's bidding without hesitation, but here we are. Snorri alive. Freya alive. The threat against Nordeland is as much a reality as it was before because our fates are unchanged. All because of a pretty face."

"Her looks had nothing to do with it." A lie because I remembered the first time I'd set eyes upon Freya. How the sunlight had illuminated the anger on her face as she'd rescued fish after fish from Vragi's fit of temper, every part of her screaming defiance. Beautiful, yes, but it had been her ferocity that had drawn me across the fjord to speak to her. Dressed in a homespun dress with no weapon but her words, she'd been fiercer than any warrior I'd ever met on the battlefield. "Killing her felt wrong," I muttered, not able to put my reasons into words that wouldn't invite his mockery. "Why should she die for Snorri's crimes?"

"Because your mother said it was the only way to save thousands of lives," Harald answered. "Though she did not understand what made Freya so dangerous, Saga knew Freya had the power to bring destruction down upon both Nordeland and Skaland. Snorri is the villain, but the shield maiden is his weapon, and killing her would castrate his ability to do any real damage. Saga set you upon this task because you, unfated as you are, had the ability to change the future the Allfather had shown her. Yet when given the opportunity, you balked. Because *it felt wrong*." His lip curled in disgust. "Or perhaps it was because your cock was doing the thinking rather than your head."

"My mother agreed that the plan needed to change," I retorted. "When I spoke to her at Fjalltindr, she agreed that Freya might walk a different path if we liberated her from Snorri. She is not so bloodthirsty as to wish death upon an innocent woman when another solution is obvious."

Harald sighed. "Saga did not agree with you, Bjorn, she merely understood that you were enamored with Freya and would not be con-

vinced to harm her. She asked me to do it for you, but it was the plea of a mother, not the strategy of a seer. I am but a mortal man, and I hold not the power to change the future set by the Norns, which meant I was destined to fail.”

He cast a sidelong glare at me that suggested he knew my role in stymieing the attempt. Unbidden, the vision of Freya bare to the waist filled my mind’s eye, her head crowned by antlers and tilted back as I tasted her for the first time. I blinked, vanquishing the vision because the same threat I had protected her from then was a threat now. “Does my mother still wish Freya dead, then? Does she still believe that is the only way to change the future?” Because the last thing I wished to do was bring Freya deeper into Nordeland if my mother was actively seeking her death.

For the thousandth time in my life, I silently screamed, *Why can’t I just kill Snorri and be done with it?*

Silently, because my mother had long been adamant that killing Snorri was not an option, refusing to hear any argument to the contrary.

“I don’t know what Saga now thinks on the matter or if the All-father has given her more visions of the future.” Harald rested his elbows on his knees. “I’ve not seen her in long weeks, for she returned to her cabin after we left Fjalltindr. Being around so many souls exhausted her.”

No surprise, for my mother had always been desperate for isolation, the weight of seeing what were often tragic futures more than her heart could bear. I’d nearly fallen over from shock when I’d first seen her at Fjalltindr, but it hadn’t stopped me from sneaking away later to seek her counsel.

Through the trees, I caught sight of men rushing down the beach. They bore shields painted with the blue stripes of Nordeland, along with their jarl’s symbol. Warriors from Harald’s fleet who’d reached the coast before us. Which meant this brief moment to discover my father’s plans without others listening in was coming to a close.

“What do you intend for Freya?” A blunt question that needed an

answer. Harald had sought Freya's death for a long time, yet that had changed when he'd seen her use of Hel's magic. There had been no missing the delight in his gaze upon learning what she could do. I suspected his hope was for her to join his cabal of Unfated that he used to defend Nordeland's shores. He'd not cast aside a weapon as sharp as Freya unless he had no other choice.

Or unless my mother bid him to do so, which was very much a risk.

"She's dangerous." Harald's eyes moved from the approaching warriors to Freya, who stood at the water's edge under Tora's watchful gaze. "She holds not only the power to kill but the power to send souls to her godly mother in Helheim. Warriors who laugh in the face of death will run from Freya, for she has the power to deny them Valhalla. Yet that is not what terrifies me about her." He was quiet for a long moment before he added, "It is her rage."

As though hearing our words, Freya turned, and even across the stretch of the beach and through the trees, there was no mistaking the gleam of crimson in her gaze. Her pale blond hair hung loose to her waist, tangled and matted from seawater and wind. If not for the fact she had legs rather than a fish tail, I'd have compared her to the havfrue who were said to lure the unwary sailors to their deaths. Though in truth, even disarmed as she was, Freya was far more dangerous.

"Her anger is half the reason I tried to take her and run. I didn't realize that it was Hel's influence, but I saw her changing as Snorri used her in his quest to become king. Saw her becoming the monster my mother feared and I wanted to protect her from that. I . . ."

"Wanted to change her fate?"

I gave a slow nod. "Seems foolish now given it's Hel who makes her feel like this, not Snorri. Running would have changed nothing."

Harald burst into laughter, and I scowled at him.

"Oh, to be young and stupid again," he finally said, wiping at his eyes. "Remember your stories, Bjorn, or I shall sit you down with Steinunn and have her teach you like a small child. Hel is the goddess of death and mistress of Helheim, but she is no villain set upon destruc-

tion. She is . . . *covetous*, for lack of a better word. She *wants*. Which makes me wonder what Freya wants. Makes me wonder what has been denied to her that makes rage burn so hot in her heart that her eyes turn to flame. Blame not Hel, for the anger you see is Freya's and Freya's alone."

There were countless reasons I could think of for Freya to be angry—knew I was certainly one of them—and yet my instincts told me that I could not begin to comprehend why her wrath was so fierce.

"Discover what it is Freya wants," Harald said. "That is the key to tempering her and, in doing so, changing the dark fate your mother foresees."

I frowned at his choice of word. *Tempering*. It sounded too much like *changing*, and there was nothing about Freya that I wished to change. Yet all I said was, "She wants the truth."

"Then take her to Saga so that she might know the whole of it." My father gripped my shoulder. "I forgive you, Bjorn. I forgive you because I understand that you acted out of love for Freya, not out of malice toward me or Nordeland. The gods know, I have made questionable choices for the sake of your mother, so I cannot judge you harshly. Women wield their beauty like a weapon, and none are more beautiful than Saga."

I cast my eyes skyward. "Spare me your lovesick poetry about my mother. There are things in life I'm better off not knowing, and that is one of them."

Harald laughed, but then his gaze sharpened. "Do you remember the vision your mother foresaw of Freya after you came to Nordeland?"

As though I could ever forget my mother falling to her knees before me, eyes rolled back in her head. A voice not her own whispering from her lips that the shield maiden would unite Skaland, but that thousands would be left dead in her wake. That the shield maiden would walk upon the ground like a plague, pitting friend against friend, brother against brother, and that all would fear her. "You know I remember."

Harald gave a slow nod. "Long has your life's purpose been not only

to deny Snorri the fate your mother foresaw, but also to prevent the bloody toll that his rule would have upon our lands with the shield maiden as his weapon. You believed stealing Freya away would forestall that dark future, but I think it clear that she can't run from the fate Saga foresaw. She must fight it. The question you must ask is if you are willing to fight it alongside her."

That was no question. I had Freya's back to the gates of Valhalla and beyond.

Though I'd said nothing, Harald gave a small nod of approval. "Your path is as it has always been, Bjorn: to prevent Snorri from controlling Skaland. To deny him the power of destruction. How that is best achieved, I do not know. We can only hope that your mother has answers."

"If she claims that Freya's death is the only option, what will you do?" I asked, because he hadn't answered my question the first time.

Wind howled through the forest, the sound haunting and filling me with foreboding as Harald's pale gray eyes searched mine. Then he said, "Let us both pray it does not come to that."

The approaching warriors had been intercepted by Skade, and she now led them in our direction. We'd been raised by Harald as siblings, yet Skade and I had always been at each other's throats. Her mother had abandoned her, and Skade's bitterness over it had turned her against all women, most especially those she perceived as weak. She'd terrorized the servants mercilessly until Harald had punished her for it, but that had only driven her to be more clever in her pursuits. I'd never seen Skade actually kill a woman for weakness until I saw her murder Freya's mother, but in hindsight, I should have seen it coming. Kelda had embodied everything that she loathed.

Skade glared at me as though sensing my thoughts, but I ignored her as one of the warriors spoke.

"My king." He bowed low. "We are relieved to see you well. When the skies grew dark in our wake and your drakkar did not reach shore with the fleet, we feared the worst."



Harald waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing but a bit of weather."

I scoffed. "Says the man who still stinks like vomit."

"There is a difference between discomfort and danger," Harald replied. "The shield maiden was never at risk of being lost to a rogue wave, and I clung to that truth. Are all other vessels accounted for?"

"Yes, my king." The warrior adjusted the shield hanging on his back. "Most have returned to their holds and halls, as was your order. The rest have ventured to the mouth of the Rimstrom, but we waited to ensure your safe return."

"Yes, yes," Skade interrupted, then she reached into the group of warriors and tugged a small man forward. I recognized Guthrum immediately. Skinny as a spear shaft with tangled brown hair and an unkempt beard, Guthrum preferred living in the wilds as far from people as possible. He was entirely unchanged by the years we'd been apart, but the merlin perched on his shoulders was new.

"My king." Guthrum bowed low, the merlin ruffling her feathers and then mimicking the gesture. "I bring fell news. Or rather, Kaja does."

"Where is your fox?" I asked, because a small red fox had been his familiar when I'd left, and foxes couldn't cross *fucking* seas.

Guthrum's brown eyes met mine. "Wolves. Two winters past. I rescued Kaja as a fledgling and Jord saw fit to connect our minds."

My stomach sank, because that meant for almost two years, Harald had a spy in the skies of Skaland. Guthrum was a child of Jord, which meant that he was capable of speaking mind to mind with his familiar. Worse, he was capable of seeing through his familiar's eyes, and Guthrum was nothing if not loyal. He'd have relayed everything to Harald.

"What has Kaja seen?" Harald demanded. "Has she had eyes on Snorri?"

Guthrum's throat moved, his eyes skipping to me and then back over his shoulder to where Freya stood with Tora, both watching.

"The Skalanders searched the base of the falls for their bodies as soon as you departed," he said. "They also searched the Torne itself, and

fishing boats now comb the coast. Snorri is convinced that the shield maiden and Bjorn yet live and has set a reward for anyone who has information of where they are.”

My teeth ground together as I remembered how I’d been so certain that everyone would believe Freya and me dead, bodies caught in the endless churn of the falls. It now felt like the purest form of idiocy, and my hands fisted with anger at myself because we’d fooled no one.

Harald tugged on his beard, seeming neither surprised nor concerned. “Does he suspect Freya and Bjorn are with us in Nordeland?”

Guthrum gave a slight nod. “He believes you retreated too easily. Believes that you found them immediately after they went over the falls. He argues to Ylva that if you’d found them dead, you’d have made it known, and so they must be living.”

“Snorri, my old friend, you are no fool,” Harald said under his breath, but then shook his head. “It is inevitable that he’d discover you and Freya lived, Bjorn. Too many have seen your faces and while I might wish that all my warriors were loyal, all it takes is one to be tempted by the prospects of wealth and the ruse is up. We need to head inland to the safety of Hrafnheim.”

My heart skipped at the mention of the fortress where I’d been raised. My home, for my mother had insisted that I remain with Harald so that I might be trained as a warrior. My friends were there, as was the family I’d forged out of bonds as strong as blood.

Freya’s voice tore me from my thoughts. “I didn’t agree to go to Hrafnheim, only to see Saga, whom Tora has told me resides elsewhere.” She’d come up silently. Tora stood behind her, a hand resting on the hilt of her sword. My sister and friend. Or at least, she had once been. Much had changed.

“You must pass Hrafnheim to reach Saga’s cabin,” Harald answered. “You will need horses and supplies, all of which can be had in the town.”

“The town which is your fortress,” Freya crossed her arms. So beautiful and fierce that my chest ached, no part of that feeling diminishing as she cast a murderous glare my way.

“You think I’m going to willingly walk into your stronghold?” she demanded. “Even in little fishing villages in Skaland we heard about Hrafnheim, most notably that no one who is not a Nordelander has ever seen the inside of it and come out to tell the tale. Who is to say that you don’t intend to lock me in a prison for the rest of my days?”

Harald wasn’t the sort of man to lock people in prisons. He preferred other forms of punishment, and my eyes flicked to his thralls—his Nameless—who all knelt in the sand wearing their black hoods.

“You have my word that I have no intention of locking you in my prison.” Harald adjusted the blades belted at his waist. “I don’t even have a prison in Hrafnheim.”

Freya snorted. “Your word is worth less to me than piss in a pot. I’m not going to Hrafnheim. Give me a guide and I will make my own way to Saga.” Her eyes fixed on me again. “A guide who is not *Bjorn*.”

That her words were expected did not ease the sharpness with which they cut.

“I did not volunteer.” Picking a piece of seaweed off my sleeve, I cast it aside. “Walk if you must, Born-in-Fire. I shall sail up the Rimstrom to Hrafnheim, choose myself a fast horse, and make it to my mother’s cabin a full fortnight before you. I’ll make sure to have a cup of mead waiting, for you’re sure to be thirsty from the long journey.”

Freya said nothing but the ground quivered, everyone starting with alarm. I only stared her down. “Go ahead,” I said. “Curse me to Helheim. Bid your godly mother to rob me of my place in Valhalla. It did not work last time, but perhaps this time will be different.”

“The Allfather will thank me for sparing him your voice,” she snapped. “A true punishment would be to put you somewhere alone where you’ll have only yourself to annoy.”

Harald sighed and rubbed at his temples. “Tell me where this place is, for it sounds peaceful in comparison to being caught between you two. Freya, the choice is yours. By ship or by foot.”

Her jaw worked from side to side, but behind the stubbornness was the trace of fear. Freya was alone in a nation that was enemy to her homeland, and guilt bit at my insides for needling her. “No one will

stop you from going to see my mother to seek your truths,” I said. “You have my word.”

The red of her eyes seemed to boil as she hissed, “Fuck your word, Bjorn. It means even less than your king’s.”

Turning, she strode toward the drakkar with Tora at her heels.

Harald exhaled, then waved the warriors away before giving Skade the order to make ready to sail. Then he turned to me and extracted an arm ring from his pocket. The band of silver was deeply familiar, for it had been given to me by him long ago, and then given back for safe-keeping when I went to Skaland in search of the shield maiden and vengeance.

“Freya is the key to Snorri achieving his fate as king,” Harald said. “He will not give her up without a fight, and the moment he has certainty that she is here, he will come in pursuit. He will go to war against Nordeland to win her back. I know you will die to defend her, but will you still fight to defend your homeland? Are you still a Nordelander, my son?”

I took the band of silver, the metal cool against my palm, remembering how much it had meant when he’d first gifted it to me. When he’d named me a defender of the people who’d taken me in and treated me with kindness when it had felt as though I’d lost everything.

“Forever a Nordelander.” I slid it up my arm to its familiar place above my elbow. “It’s good to be home, Father.”