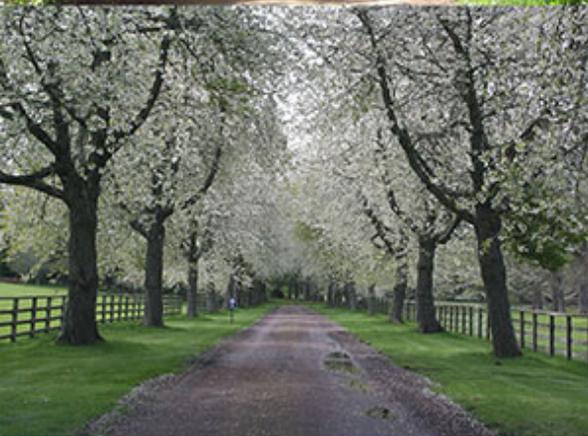
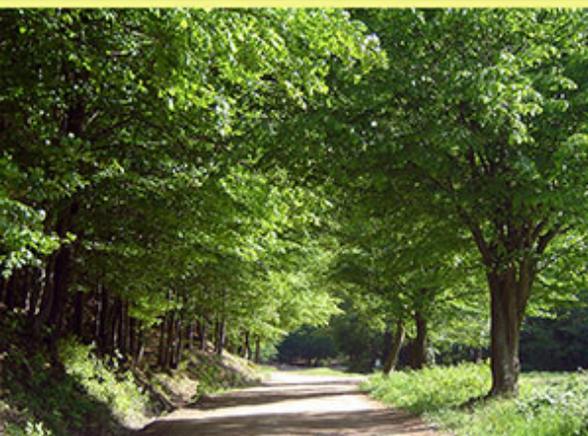


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

# ATLE'S SAGA

**Kit Edwards**

## **Table of Contents**

Love is an Open Road.....	3
Atle’s Saga – Information.....	6
Atle’s Saga.....	7
Prologue.....	8
Chapter One.....	13
Chapter Two.....	21
Chapter Three.....	25
Chapter Four.....	34
Chapter Five.....	45
Chapter Six.....	53
Chapter Seven.....	57
Chapter Eight.....	61
Chapter Nine.....	68
Chapter Ten.....	73
Chapter Eleven.....	82
Author Bio.....	85

# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## ATLE'S SAGA

**By Kit Edwards**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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# ATLE'S SAGA

By Kit Edwards

## Photo Description

A Celtic warrior stands in a room of what looks like the sacked remains of a country estate. His well-muscled arms are crossed over his chest and he is holding a double-headed axe. He is wearing Celtic dress (kilt, tunic) and he has shoulder-length red hair and a red beard. His determined gaze is focused on something in the distance.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I would love to read a story set in pre-Christian Northern Europe (Germanic, Celtic, Slavic, etc) with a red-headed warrior MC. I enjoy reading about characters in difficult situations, so a plot that involves some kind of danger (be it because of a power struggle or war) would be very much appreciated. Will it be about two warriors from opposing clans falling in love? A warrior on a mission falling in love in someone from a completely different walk of life? Something else altogether?*

Please, add a passionate love affair that involves hot sex, and I'll be a very happy prompter :)

Please, no titillating non-con and MC death.

*Sincerely,*

*Agnes*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical, alternate universe

**Tags:** archaic attitudes, enemies to lovers, Vikings, warriors

**Content Warnings:** human sacrifice/hanging scene

**Word Count:** 28,072

# **ATLE'S SAGA**

**By Kit Edwards**

## Prologue

The messenger warily approached King Sigurd's Hall, hoping for divine intervention to prevent him from having to relay the latest news to the court. It was always hazardous to be the bringer of bad tidings. Much too soon, he reached the king's hall. Two men guarding the entrance crossed their spears in front of him, as he knew they would.

"State your business!" came a disembodied voice from the hall.

"News from the land, Your Majesty!" the messenger called back.

"Enter."

The guards uncrossed their spears, reassuming their positions flanking the entrance. The messenger looked up at their young faces, but there wasn't a hint of emotion showing there. They had been well trained.

The king was seated on his throne, a raised chair covered in red silk—the only silk in the land, as far as the messenger knew. It had been big news when the town merchants brought it back from their journeys to the east.

"Your Majesty," the messenger said, bowing before the rotund middle-aged man in the chair.

"Stand," the king replied.

The messenger stood, looking at the three men who sat in front of him. The king in the centre, of course; on his right was the young prince and on his left, the dreaded bishop. He felt a slight tremble through his limbs. The hall was cold, but it wasn't that. He had related bad news to the king before, and the last time the king had thrown a gold chalice at him, nearly costing him his left eye. If the king decided to throw something at you, it was a gamble with your life to move out of the way. Making the king look bad amounted to treason.

"Well?" King Sigurd prompted.

"Bad news, I'm afraid, Your Majesty," the messenger began. He glanced briefly at young Prince Olof, who looked at him with a sort of compassionate interest. If he would live to see that young man become king, he was certain that things would change drastically.

"Well?" King Sigurd had to repeat, as the messenger drifted off.

“Sorry, Your Majesty. Ulf the lame found the king’s men when looking for doves. Almost all of them were dead, but Steinulf, the commander, was on his last breath, sending for a messenger. Ulf the lame went to find me, and Steinulf told me to relate that their mission against Atle Týrsson and his men failed. Atle and his men... Well, they cut the heads off the others, but let Steinulf live so that he could let you know what had happened. He was, however, mortally wounded, and died shortly after telling me this message.”

The messenger lowered his gaze to the floor, waiting for the king to react to the news. He didn’t have to wait for long. With a frustrated scream, the king got up from his throne and started pacing back and forth on the raised dais.

“That Atle Týrsson,” King Sigurd shouted. “A curse over him and his house! How many men has he cost me? Huh?! And for what? That shoddy piece of land he still controls, though it’s rightfully mine? Or for his superstition? Something needs to be done about it, and something needs to be done now! Atle Týrsson needs to learn his place. Messenger?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“You’re free to leave. Don’t tell of this embarrassment though. The people needn’t know.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The messenger scurried off as quickly as he could without raising suspicion, quite unbelieving that he had managed to bring such infuriating news and yet get away from the king with all his body parts intact. With a couple of coins in his pocket, he went straight for the inn to celebrate with a good few drinks. Strolling through the streets, he was feeling relieved beyond words. He even bent down to pet a stray pig in his good mood.

The inn was a hot, dark place. It was as if the heat from the wintertime fires were ingrained in the very walls of the place. The messenger looked around, seeing the usual scruffy men and the women who were only there because they wanted to get paid. Although, if there were ever a time to celebrate with a woman, it was now. He sat down on a bench sticky with mead and ordered his drink. When he got it, he downed it almost at once; feeling full like only a cup of mead could make you feel. He burped loudly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and took a better look around. Maybe there was a girl for him somewhere? There was a group of women sitting a table across, and he glanced at them eagerly. But then he started picking up on their chatter.

"I hear he can cut the head of a man in only one strike. Like this, swoosh!" the woman said excitedly, motioning a single cut through the air with an imaginary sword.

"Oh, he can, he can! My brother has seen it for himself! Well, not a man. A boar. He chanced upon him in the forest one day when he was hunting. Couldn't believe his eyes. It was him! He was sitting there with a group of his men, and just as my brother peeked at them from behind a tree, he cut the throat of the boar, collecting all the blood in a bucket. He was standing there, bent over the animal, his hands and arms all bloody, when he looked up at my brother. My brother, of course, thought it would be his turn next. He started saying his prayers, shaking in fear. You know what Atle did though?"

The messenger's ears pricked up as he heard that name. Atle, again.

"No? What? What?" the group of women asked of the one telling the story.

"He said, 'You look hungry, my friend, come here and eat with us'."

The woman smiled, in that way only a woman with more information than her peers can smile. The reaction amongst the rest can't have been a disappointment for her. They were ooh-ing and aah-ing, fanning their hot, red faces with their hands.

One of them finally piped up. "And did he? Your brother, I mean? Did he eat with him?"

"He did!" the woman said, looking prouder still. "Said it was the best meal he'd ever had. And the men were good company, as well. My brother came home that night, full like a friar and drunk like one, too! And he told us all these stories that Atle and his men had told him."

There was more ooh-ing and aah-ing. The messenger rolled his eyes. It was all and well when Atle was offering boar meat to stray men, but when he was cutting the heads off the king's soldiers... The gallows was too good for men like him. The messenger ordered another cup of mead.

"You know..." another of the women started. Her tone was clearly intended as quiet and confidential, but the messenger could still hear her every word without even trying. "Milady has seen him."

"No!" the others said, covering their mouths and making wide eyes.

"Yes! She had been visiting her sister in Sightuna and was on her way back through the forest when they were stopped by a gang of maybe fifteen men.

Their leader introduced himself as Atle, and said that because the king had been interfering with his trade, he had no other choice than taking her jewellery. Milady said she could spare it, and anyway, that he was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on!”

The other women looked like they were going to faint. “How does he look?” one asked, whilst the others nodded, impatient for details.

“She said he was tall, much taller than milord, and he had blue eyes and long, red hair.”

“Long hair?”

“That’s what milady said.”

The women started fanning themselves with their hands again. The messenger had had enough. He put his cup down on the table so hard that the froth spilled out over it, floating out over the grained wooden surface, then turned to the ladies.

“I don’t believe you,” he accused. “The man *robs* your lady and you all swoon over him?! He slaughters his enemies like they’re lowly animals! Only just now I come from the court having told the king how Atle and his men slit the throats of the king’s soldiers, and—” He came to an abrupt halt, remembering too late that the king had told him not to talk about it.

“Oh, *that*,” one of the women said, disdainfully. She waved her hand in the air as if to say that the messenger brought old news. “You’re talking about Steinulf’s men? What I heard is they attacked Atle, so what do they expect? Our king is a good king, but he should leave Atle alone. And Steinulf had it coming to him. I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but good riddance! Atle did us all a favour. That Steinulf was a bully and a rapist!”

The other women made their consent heard. The messenger’s mouth fell open.

“I’ve only come from the king just *now*,” he said again. “And I went straight there from Steinulf himself. How do you know about this?”

“Oh, Ulf the Lamé was here,” a blonde woman told him. “He told us all about it. Saw the whole thing, apparently. He was impressed with Atle too. Said he’s never seen men fight like that. Like gods.”

“Huh.”

There was clearly nothing that the messenger could say that would make the women change their minds about Atle. Deciding that this wasn't the day for celebration and women after all, the messenger downed the contents of his cup and left.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter One

Olof took a deep breath, his chest heaving, the scent of sweat and dust in his nostrils, and charged again. Sword raised, its blade catching the spring sun in its polished steel, he sliced the air and was surprised at the lack of impact. Erik had managed to step aside so swiftly that Olof didn't notice until he was past him. He felt the tip of Erik's sword against his back, a sharp if gentle reminder that if this were anything other than sparring between friends, Olof could be dead. He held up a hand to Erik to signal the end of their sparring session. He sheathed his sword and stretched his arms and fingers.

"Not at my best today," he said to Erik and offered an apologetic smile.

"Preoccupied?" Erik asked, coming up to Olof and slinging his arm over Olof's shoulders.

Olof grunted in agreement. The side of Erik's bare torso was warm and damp against his own. He could feel the tuft of hair under Erik's arm tickling his shoulder. They both stank. Thankfully there was a bath waiting for them in the bathhouse. Another few days with sun like today and they would be able to comfortably wash in the river. Not yet though.

"Is it true, then?" Erik asked.

"Is what true?"

"Gaetes at our doorstep?"

Olof sighed. Anyone else, and he would have waited for the king to announce the news, but Erik was on the king's council anyway. He could tell Erik now or wait for him to hear the news after their bath.

"Worse," Olof said, gently disentangling himself from Erik's heavy arm. "If reports are true, King Styrbjörn is sailing up the river with a fleet of Danes." He thought of the ashen colour of his father's face as they had learnt the news from one of the inland scouts.

"God help us," Erik sighed.

Olof crossed himself, by way of agreement.

"What is King Sigurd going to do about it?" Erik asked.

"I don't know yet," Olof said. But he knew his father; King Sigurd would not just sit around and wait for Gaetes to invade his hard-earned kingdom. He didn't have to say that, though. Erik knew the king as well.

“We’ll find out at council,” Erik said, putting a hand on Olof’s shoulder. “Now, let’s bathe.”

They went into the small bathhouse, put their weapons and clothes on a near-by bench, and climbed into the bath. The water wasn’t warm, not like it would be in the winter, but it was nice and refreshing after the exercise. Olof ran a hand over the hair on his chest, under his arms, between his legs, feeling the itchy sweat wash away.

“Here...” Erik moved slowly through the green water, more a physical presence than a visible one in the dark bathhouse. They hadn’t bothered to light any candles. The only light came from the small window up by the ceiling. Enough to see by, but only just. “I’ll help you.”

Olof didn’t object when Erik rubbed the soap against his back and his arms. The arms he could’ve done himself, he supposed, but his muscles were tired and it was nice to have someone else do it. He let his eyes drift closed, listening to the sound of the water moving as Erik did.

“I was surprised I managed to get one up on you today,” Erik mumbled behind his back. His voice sounded strange and distracted. “You’re strong. Bigger than me, these days.” Erik’s breath ghosted over Olof’s shoulders as he let out a quiet laugh. “A couple of years ago and I could’ve bested you any day.”

“Mhm...” Olof knew it was true but was disinclined to admit it. Two years ago he had been seventeen and still slender like a boy. Then overnight, he had started filling out. He grew tall and wide, his chest now as broad as his father’s had ever been, his arms and legs heavy with muscle. Erik had always been big for his age, but right about the time that Olof started growing, it was like Erik stopped. Nowadays they were the same height, but Olof was half again as broad as Erik was.

It took Olof a while to realise that Erik was no longer holding the soap, but rubbing his muscles with his bare hands. He wasn’t sure exactly why it made him feel urgently like he had to get away, but he did.

“Here. Give me the soap and I’ll wash your back,” Olof said, breaking the weird spell that had suddenly fallen upon them.

Erik reached around him and placed the soap in his hand. Water sloshed over the sides of the tub as they turned around. Olof let the soap slide over Erik’s back, over the bumps of shoulder blades and spine, over muscles and tanned skin. Erik had much more of a pronounced waist than Olof himself did.

Almost like a girl. Olof moved away from Erik to get a good look at him. No, no girl had shoulders like Erik did, not even those who worked hard, but Erik's waist and round arse would probably be the envy of any girl.

"Are you going to wash me or just look at me?" Erik asked, looking at Olof over his shoulder, a smile pulling at his lips.

"I think I'm done," Olof said, putting down the soap and dipping his head under water, rinsing the last of the sweat and sand from his dark brown curls. "Let's get up," he said and stood, water dripping from his hair into his eyes and down his back and chest.

Erik looked at him without making a move to get up. Again, Olof had that feeling that something was happening that he wasn't quite aware of and that he needed to distance himself from it. Olof quickly got out of the water, dried off, and dressed.

"Are you coming?" Olof lingered by the door to the bathhouse, looking at Erik who was still submerged in the dark water.

"Yeah. Throw me a towel. I'll catch up with you."

Olof handed Erik a towel and decided to wait outside.

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King Sigurd was sitting at the head of a heavy oak table when Olof and Erik walked into the Great Hall. There was a fire burning in the central hearth, despite it being midday. Olof and Erik were last to arrive to the meeting. The bishop was already sitting by the table, as well as Bodvarg the general and a few other men who Olof knew were mostly military.

"Sit down," King Sigurd told Olof and Erik.

Olof took his seat on the king's right, opposite the bishop. There was a nervous sort of energy in the hall, gazes flickering between faces, rings being twisted around fingers. They had engaged in conflicts with various groups on a regular basis, but it had been a long time since anything had stirred the town quite like this.

"It seems we are soon to be under attack from Styrbjörn of the Gaetes along with a fleet of several Dane vessels. The scout couldn't give us an exact figure, wanting to get word back as soon as possible. However, he suggested that we are heavily outnumbered." Sigurd looked around the table. Olof had to fight the impulse to cower under his gaze. In his youth, Sigurd had been formidable.

Now he was old, but still as fierce as a bear. Olof, despite his size and his years, always felt like a small boy in his father's presence.

"What are we going to do, Father?" Olof asked, forcing himself to bring the conversation forward when none of the others seemed inclined to do so.

"There is negotiation," the bishop piped up. "If we are so outnumbered that it's bound to be a bloodbath, perhaps we could negotiate with Styrbjörn, to—"

"And roll over without as much as a fight?" One of the military men further down the table sounded completely unbelieving.

"That can't possibly be our first option," Erik said, leaning forward over the table. In that moment Olof really admired his courage. "I mean no disrespect to the bishop, but he's not a fighting man. Never has been. If we just roll over, it might placate the enemy, but our own men won't stand for it. No. I say, if we are outnumbered, we look for allies."

"And quick, since the Gaetes and Danes are on their way as we speak," Olof said.

"Allies?" The king raised his eyebrows. "There are none. There is no time to look for allies up north and there is no other kingdom between this one and the cursed Gaetes!"

The king's voice rose on the last few words, making Olof worry that he would throw something at Erik or simply throw him out of the room. The king was known for his inability to control his temper. Erik, however, stood his ground.

"There is one," he said.

There was a confused murmur around the table. Olof looked at Erik, frowning. The king was right. There were no other kingdoms between Funir and the Gaetes. Between Funir and Gaeteland was only wilderness and...

"You can't be serious!" Olof exclaimed, throwing himself back in his chair. "Erik, are you suggesting we turn to Atle Týrsson and his band of thieves?!"

There was the sound of outrage from everyone around the table.

"Hear me out!" Erik pleaded, standing, hands placed on the rough wood. "Your Majesty?"

Sigurd looked unimpressed but nodded for Erik to continue. With a wave of his hand, he brought the table to a strange kind of offended silence.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Erik said. “If Styrbjörn is coming up the rivers, he will have to pass through Atle’s land before he arrives here. If Atle even knows that they’re coming, he must be worried about it. If we’re few, they’re even fewer. Band of thieves they might be...” Erik nodded at Olof. “But they have women and children there. Presumably they want to defend them.”

That earned Erik a few assenting grunts.

“Furthermore,” Erik continued, clearly invigorated now that he could sense the men around the table warming to his suggestion, “Atle and his men have a lot of experience of both the sea and of river battles. They are brutish, but we know that they are good fighters. If we can get Atle to join his men to ours, we might just stand a chance.”

Discussion broke out around the table, some clearly giving the idea some serious consideration; others pointedly refusing to even think about it.

“But they’re *pagans*,” the bishop said, as if he couldn’t believe Erik had had the audacity to even suggest it. “*Heathens!*”

“They are. But they are also our closest neighbours,” Erik said. The smile he sent the bishop’s way was one Olof recognised as his placating, convincing smile. The sort of smile that had gained him a reputation with the town’s girls. “And think of it as an opportunity to do missionary work at home, eh? Maybe Atle or some of his men are interested in getting baptised?”

“Oh, I don’t think—” the bishop started, voice quivering with indignation.

“And if not,” the king said, sounding thoughtful, “a temporary alliance with Atle would have the added benefit of bringing them close to us. It’s a good opportunity to... renegotiate some other borders.”

“Or simply kill them,” muttered one of the military men. The remark was met with cheers and a smile on the king’s lips that chilled Olof to the bone.

“But Father,” Olof said. His voice brought the table to silence. “We have spent years trying to gain Atle’s land, which has cost both him and us a lot of blood. He might not be so easily persuaded to join us and we’re running out of time.”

“Let’s hope that he feels sufficiently worried about that silly little patch of land of his to see the necessity of fighting with us.”

“Of course,” Olof said, sitting down. He didn’t believe in premonition, but something about this idea gave Olof a sense of dread. It felt like the beginning of the end. He didn’t like it.

“It’s decided then,” the king announced. “Send an envoy to Atle and propose a temporary alliance. Make sure the messenger who reported the sighting of the fleet goes as well, to convince that heathen that the threat is true. Bodvarg, see to it.”

The general nodded and left immediately.

\*\*\*\*

Whether or not Atle would agree to an alliance, he had at least agreed to bring his men to King Sigurd for discussion. Their arrival was preceded by a buzz unlike any Olof had ever known in the town. As he walked down the streets, he heard people talking about Atle’s imminent arrival. And it wasn’t the aghast tones he would expect people to use when discussing bringing heathens into their midst. No, these tones were excited, positive, approving.

The North was little more than a vast stretch of dense forest; a few small mercantile towns dotted along the coastline and an episcopal see that struggled to keep the still instinctively pagan Northerners on the right path. They answered to Rome, of course, but the pope knew little of the wild Northerners, and most of the Northerners knew very little of the pope. He was a half-mythical existence in a faraway country, whose messengers in the North did what they could to make the people obey the One True God and drop all the others.

Olof knew that most people were reluctant—or at best, pragmatic—converts to Christendom. The belief in One True God didn’t quite seem to take. Only those with some blood connection to the South seemed to really accept the new religion. Like Olof, whose mother—now long dead—had hailed from a country far south where they had been Christians for centuries. Where, so his mother had liked to tell him, they had accepted the gospel from Paul and Peter themselves. Up in the North, Christendom was still new and it was difficult to get people to give up their superstition. There had been several instances where missionaries from the South had had to be sent for to reinforce the True Faith. Atle and his superstition spoke to these people. Olof had known that this was a complicated idea. To see the townspeople now, you’d think they were expecting a king. Atle was no king. He was the leader of a band of robbers at most.

Sigurd had wanted them to receive Atle and his men in the Great Hall, but Olof wanted to see the people’s reaction to the heathens’ arrival. In the end, Sigurd and Olof were both meeting Atle and his men in the courtyard. If Sigurd picked up on the excitement amongst the people, he didn’t show it.

Suddenly there was a rush of hushed voices, like the wind sweeping a leaf-covered forest floor. Erik, who stood to Olof's left, leaned in and whispered, "Here we go."

Olof didn't reply. He watched as the townspeople parted to let through a band of men on horseback. They didn't look vastly different from Funir's army, though they were perhaps less uniform. And most of them had long hair, something the bishop's predecessor had banned since it was feminised vanity for a man to grow his hair. The sun caught their axes and the metal details on their shields and leather armour. Even in Funir as friends, they were a terrible sight.

Two men led the others. One with dark-brown hair in a thick braid down his back, dark, deep-set eyes, and a firmly set mouth with a scar that Olof could see even from a distance. He looked like the veteran he likely was. The other man, though, looked like one of their pagan gods. His red, shoulder-length hair was let out, gleaming like fire in the sun. His face was covered by a tidy red beard, fiery like the rest of the man's hair. His eyes were light. Olof couldn't tell if they were blue, grey, or green, but they seemed simultaneously kind and stern as the man perused the crowd. He looked as fearsome as the pagan god Thor. The axe was wrong on him, Olof thought. He ought to have a hammer. Olof thought of what the monks and bishop had said about how long hair on men was an abomination. That it was against a man's nature; that it feminised him. Looking at the red-haired man whose hair fell in unruly locks over his shoulders, Olof thought that the monks and bishop had no idea what they were talking about. This was the most masculine man he had ever seen.

Eventually, the men stopped in front of King Sigurd and Olof.

"Atle Týrsson," Sigurd said, spreading his arms in a magnanimous gesture of welcome. "Welcome to Funir."

"Thank you," the red-headed warrior said, dismounting. He gestured to the man with the thick braid. "Brandr Ulvsson. My second-in-command."

"Welcome, Brandr Ulvsson," Sigurd said, shaking the man's hand. "My son, Olof Sigurdsson."

Olof stepped forward, oddly ill at ease to move so close to the two men. Brandr looked him up and down as if he were evaluating a new recruit. Olof couldn't stop his impulse to square his shoulders and make himself as wide as possible as he reached out his hand to shake the scarred hand Brandr offered. When it was time to greet Atle, Olof's impulse to impress was even stronger. It

mattered to him suddenly what this heathen warrior thought of him. He took care to hold that light gaze firmly as they shook hands.

“Let’s go inside,” King Sigurd said, leading the way into the Great Hall. Olof was relieved to break eye contact with Atle and follow.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

After years of defending his land and his people against King Sigurd's attacks, Atle had not expected an envoy from Funir to turn up and ask for help against the Gaetes. At first it had seemed like an unusually clumsy and cynical plot to lure Atle to Funir, but the poor messenger the envoy had brought along swore that he had seen a fleet of Gaetes and Danes making their way towards Funir via the inland rivers. Not that a stuttering messenger and a smarmy envoy were enough to convince Atle of anything, let alone marching himself and his men straight into enemy land, but he had heard rumours of Styrbjörn the Gaete mobilising southern forces. If rumours were true, Atle needed extra men as well. As unlikely as King Sigurd was as an ally, Atle supposed it was better than having to bend over for Styrbjörn.

And now here he was. Stepping into the Great Hall of Funir. It was no bigger than his own hall, but full of the sort of finery that people seemed to take to when they took to the new religion. Many years ago, Atle had travelled to the Holy City of this new religion and finery seemed to be an integral part of worshipping this Christ-God of theirs.

Brandr came up to stand beside him, hand on hilt, untrusting. Atle didn't blame him. He didn't trust Sigurd either. Sigurd, his son Olof, and a bloated man who Atle gathered was one of their priests took their seats at the head of the table. King Sigurd sat in the middle, fat and well past fighting age. The priest sat to the king's left, looking at Atle like he was some sort of demon. To the right sat the prince, Olof. There was a family resemblance between Sigurd and Olof, but the prince was much darker of skin and hair. And whereas the king carried too many years and too much weight, the prince was still young and fit. Young enough that he had puffed up his chest like a rooster when he was introduced to them. The prince was big enough without that ridiculous display, but clearly, he was still trapped in that space between boyhood and manhood that was full of insecurity.

"Let us talk first, Atle Týrsson," Sigurd said and gestured for Atle and Brandr to sit. Atle nodded to a couple of his closest men to take the remaining available seats. "Then we will feast." He turned to a woman standing nearby. "Have Atle's men set up in the soldiers' hall." She nodded and disappeared quietly.

“Very well,” Atle said. “We’ll talk.”

King Sigurd smiled at him, an ingratiating smile that made the hairs at the back of Atle’s neck stand up. Atle cracked his knuckles, trying his best not to let negotiations break down before they had even started.

“Now,” King Sigurd said once the last servant girl had left the room, “I know we’ve not always seen eye to eye, Atle. We’ve stopped you from sailing out onto the Austmarr Ocean; you’ve stopped us from getting past Granbyr on the River Feyrna. We’re both frustrated by this, I imagine.”

Atle nodded for the king to continue, not wanting to point out that in addition to a simple blockade, Sigurd regularly sent parties to try to convince him to give up his land to Funir. Nor did he need to point out that those parties were usually killed by Atle’s men.

“I hope working together can make us friends,” the king continued, “or at least that we can be friends until the inevitable fight with the Gaetes is over.”

“This is an alliance born of necessity, not goodwill,” Atle replied, making a point of looking straight at the king. What he saw in the king’s eyes wasn’t promising for any friendship past the point of this war. “All the same, you have a responsibility to your people as I do to mine, and for that reason, we are willing to cooperate.”

The king’s mouth twisted into a smooth smile. “Very well. It’s settled then. We’ll—”

“If I can stop you for a moment, King Sigurd,” Atle said. The bishop looked like he had never experienced such petulance in his life as Atle interrupting the king; he was huffing and puffing like an indignant animal. “It’s not settled until we’ve divided responsibilities. If we’re to form an alliance with you, I want highest military command.”

“Granted,” the king said easily, to the apparent reluctance of the prince and a young man standing right behind him.

“That means commanding the Funir forces as well as my own, expecting them to take my orders as they would yours.”

“I expect His Majesty knows what—” The bishop started talking but was interrupted by the king raising his hand.

“Let’s not be coy, Atle Týrsson,” the king said. “I’m past fighting age and fighting shape. I am happy for you to have military command, as long as you confer with General Bodvarg, Prince Olof, and Erik Gudmundrson.”

Atle knew who the prince was of course. Erik Gudmundrson was the young man standing behind the prince—a good-looking if slender lad of about the prince's age. The general sat next to the prince, and Atle would have picked him out as a warrior in a crowd of hundreds. Something about the way he carried himself and the way he was scarred. No civilians ever had scars like that.

Once the terms were agreed, Sigurd snapped his fingers and suddenly food and drink seemed to appear out of thin air. The soldiers, both Atle's men and the Funir men, filed into the hall, along with people from the town. Men, women, children. The place was suddenly cramped and much more familiar to Atle than the cold and empty hall with its New Religion finery had been. As Sigurd clearly depended upon the Granbyr men, they were perfectly safe for now. No reason not to indulge a little.

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The mead was sweeter than what Atle was used to and far too easy to drink. When he looked around the hall, he noticed that he wasn't the only one who thought so. The men seemed to get drunker a lot quicker than they did at home. If not for the fact that they were all noticeably drinking from the same barrels, Atle might have been prone to suspicion. A servant girl refilled his cup. Atle managed to catch the eye of the prince and raised his cup with a small nod and a wry crook of his eyebrow. The prince raised his cup in return but quickly lowered his gaze. Interesting.

A woman suddenly appearing at his side stopped him from watching the prince any further.

"Is it true that you still believe in the old gods?" she asked, leaning in closer than necessary.

"Never had the need for new ones," Atle answered, scooting over a little to give her room to sit down on the bench.

"I've heard stories about pagan men."

"Oh yeah? What have you heard?"

"That you fuck like demons."

Atle laughed out loud. He was under no illusion that the girl was there because she particularly fancied him. She was either ordered or encouraged by Sigurd. Nonetheless, the straightforwardness was pretty refreshing.

“Come now, dear,” Sigurd said leaning towards Atle and putting an arm around the girl in the process. “If that’s true, then you’ll be well matched with this one,” he added with a mock-conspiratorial nod at the girl.

Atle noticed even the bishop seemed occupied with a girl. He knew the priests of the new religion weren’t supposed to touch women and wondered what else went on at this court that shouldn’t.

“I’m not sure I’d be a match for such a young girl,” Atle said to the king. “I’m not a teenager anymore.”

“Oh, you’re still young. What are you, thirty?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Still. Our bishop over there is in his fifties, and he can still get it up with the best of them.”

Atle offered a polite smile as the girl ran a hand down his chest. Why shouldn’t he enjoy a girl if he wanted to? It was just that seeing the prince trying to look as big as he could in the courtyard earlier had put him in the mood for something else.

“Yeah, he looks very virile,” Atle agreed, looking over at the bishop who had a hand up the girl’s skirt. She was probably young enough to be his granddaughter.

“It’s the Funir girls who do it,” the king said. “They’re more beautiful than any girls in the land and they know how to treat a man.”

“I’m sure they do,” Atle said.

“You’ll find this one to your liking. What’s your name, dear?”

“Siri,” the girl said, either unbothered by the king’s lechery or clever enough not to show it if she was.

“Beautiful name, beautiful girl, huh?” The king laughed. “You make sure you show Atle a good time, Siri.”

Like as not, the girl was under instruction to report back to the king on Atle’s performance, so he supposed he might as well. Still, it was nice to get out of the hall and away from the king, even if it meant leading a slender girl to a spot of shielding darkness when Atle would much rather have led a broad boy there.

## Chapter Three

He was only going to empty his bladder. Leaving the hall hot on the heels of Atle and a girl that Olof didn't recognise, but whom he had seen being not so subtly thrust at Atle by his father earlier in the evening had nothing to do with that restless feeling in his core whenever he looked at Atle.

Atle, steady on his legs despite all the mead he had been drinking, was leading the girl somewhere with one of his thick arms around her shoulders. From what he deemed to be a safe distance, Olof watched as Atle bent his head and whispered something in the girl's ear. Judging by her laugh—loud and startled—it had been pretty outrageous. Olof found himself provoked by that laughter. Annoyed.

Atle and his companion took off down towards the water. It was a moonlit night, and Olof had to take care if he didn't want to be seen. He made sure to stick close to the house walls or trees until he saw Atle and the girl disappearing into a small grove, removing themselves from sight.

He had to be careful. He was no longer on the smooth ground of the town but walking over grass and blueberry bushes. The snap of a twig would alert Atle to his presence. And then what would Olof do? Run back to the hall like a child?

The moon disappeared behind a cloud and he could no longer see Atle and his companion, but the sound of the girl's laugh alerted him to their whereabouts. Closer than he had expected.

He heard the girl say, "Here, let me," before there was the sound of clothes and vegetation moving. What was she doing? Kneeling before Atle? Lying down?

The moon came out from behind the clouds, casting the area in its pale light. Olof looked around a tree and saw Atle and the girl only a short distance away. He watched, transfixed, as Atle pulled up the girl's skirts and fumbled with the belt around his breeches. Olof clearly heard their sighs as Atle finally found home. Olof could well imagine that burning wet heat and how it would feel to stab into it, but his focus was on Atle and the movement of his hips, the quiet panting and the way he was holding one of the girl's legs up. Olof imagined he could see the veins of the hand, the individual hairs on the back of it, as Atle was holding that pale, slim thigh. The realisation that he was hard,

straining against his own breeches, was sudden. Olof nearly reached his own peak as he listened to Atle and the girl approaching theirs. Neither of them was loud, but something in the quality of their voices changed. The moon disappeared again, and then reappeared just as Atle pulled away from the girl, spilling on the ground. Olof couldn't see the man's cock in any great detail, but what he saw as Atle leaned back, hand around himself, made him hot and cold all over.

"What are you doing?" the girl asked him breathlessly, readjusting her skirts about her. "Did you not want to...?"

"I've been married," Atle said. Olof imagined he could hear the smile in the man's voice. "I know how to avoid children."

"Oh!" The girl laughed, sounding relieved. "Not married anymore?"

"Divorced."

Olof watched Atle fasten his belt before he put his arm around the girl's shoulders again and led her back towards the hall. Once they were out of sight, Olof took a deep breath, and after a few moments of trying to think of other things than what had just transpired, he managed to accomplish what he'd come out here for.

When he returned to the hall, the feast was winding down. Some of the men had taken the party into the street and were drinking and laughing everywhere. Unwilling to admit it even to himself, Olof looked around for Atle but couldn't see him. As a foreign commander, Atle would have been given private quarters in the soldiers' hall, but it seemed most of his men were still out and about so it wasn't strange to think that maybe Atle was as well.

Ignoring those who were still lingering in the Great Hall, Olof went into his own room, pulling the door shut behind him. He could still hear laughing and talking, arguing, the voices of men swearing to the pagan gods, even the sounds of sex if he strained his ears, but he didn't care. He lay down on the wolfskin bed, and when he closed his eyes he saw that moonlit moment again and again: Atle pulling out of that girl, hand around himself, spilling on the ground. Olof groaned and put the heel of his hand against the hardness in his breeches. What was it about that movement that made him throb? The girl wasn't even part of it—and at any rate, she had been mostly dressed. He hadn't been able to see much. But Atle, and Atle with that big strong hand around his hard flesh... Olof made an involuntary movement with his hips before pushing his breeches down

enough to be able to take hold of himself. With that scene playing over and over in his mind, he wasn't a moment before he spent. He pulled his tunic up just in time to avoid soiling it, and afterwards he lay there: breeches around his knees, tunic around his chest, hand on his softening flesh, and the traces of his sin in pearly white drops on his skin.

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Olof woke in the morning to the merciless sunshine coming through the window by the ceiling. He was still as he had fallen asleep, in that shameful state of undress. He could only hope that no one had had cause to open the door to his room during the night and seen him. He hurriedly pulled his breeches up and his tunic down before quickly getting out of bed. When he got outside and noticed that the streets that had been so busy last night were practically deserted, he realised that it was still early. Getting closer to the river, he heard voices of bathers. When he got close enough to see the men, he realised they were mostly pagan. Or were they? No. Getting a little closer still, Olof saw that it was a mix. Grown men washing a night of sin and overindulgence from their bodies while splashing around like little boys. He noticed Brandr standing in the water, his severe braid wet against an impressive back. None of the men in the river had long red hair though.

Unwilling to spend too much time looking around for Atle, Olof continued to the bathhouse. He was hoping for a bit of time to himself, so hopefully neither his father nor Erik or the bishop would be there yet. The bishop wasn't likely to be there at all, Olof thought. The bishop had southern habits and didn't wash very often.

Olof opened the door to the bathhouse and at first didn't manage to make sense of the scene. A candle was lit, casting a golden glow around the small dark space—a startling contrast to the bleak morning light outside. And there he was: his back had been turned to the door as he was putting his clothes on a stool, but at the sound of the door opening and closing, he turned around. Warrior's reflexes, Olof thought. Never let anyone sneak up on you.

At the sight of Olof, Atle smiled. A small, gentle smile. As if he were trying to reassure Olof, somehow. It took Olof a moment to realise that he was returning that smile. If Atle had been glorious in the hall last night, it was nothing compared to the way he looked in a candlelit bathhouse. His very skin seemed golden. His long hair like rays of sunlight. Like a divine apparition. Olof stopped himself from looking down the man's body, but he caught sight of

the Mjölfnir pendant around Atle's neck. A clear and horrible reminder. Not of the God.

"Good morning, Olof," Atle said, stepping into the bath. One long, strong leg at a time. Olof looked away, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Good morning."

"As much as I love that river, I fancied a hot bath this morning. King Sigurd said to use his bathhouse." Atle sighed as he lowered himself into the water. Olof could see it in his peripheral vision as he was trying to look elsewhere. "Will your father be joining us?"

"Probably not. Although this is his bathhouse, he has a private bath in the hall. He very rarely uses this one."

"I see. And will you be joining me?"

At that, Olof looked up and into those light eyes. Blue, Olof decided. Perhaps grey. Not green, at least. The colour of an early morning. The colour of this morning: cool and pale, even with the sun shining. Those were Atle's eyes. Cool and pale, even in this candlelit darkness.

Olof gave a curt nod and pulled his tunic over his chest. He had scratched the dried remains of his sin off his stomach earlier. There was no evidence. Not that it mattered to this pagan anyway. The pagans had no concept of sin. Olof felt Atle's eyes on him as he loosened the band of his breeches and pulled them off as well. Naked now. Exposed. Tumescant, curse it, just from the unholy sight of the hammer of Thor against a broad, hairy chest.

"One of your lovely maids warmed the water for us." Atle said it like he had asked a maid to warm the water specifically for his and Olof's pleasure.

Olof wanted to ask him if it was that maid from last night, the one Atle hadn't wanted to get pregnant, but he just nodded again and climbed into the bath. He had been in this bath a thousand times with Erik and even despite Erik's way of always touching him, it had never felt like this. Olof wasn't naïve. He had felt attraction before. To girls. Women. Even boys, back when they used to play around in the woods in the summer. But not like this. Not to someone like this.

Olof suddenly understood what had confused him so when he was watching Atle with that girl. Watching them, Olof had thought that he knew what it felt like to be in Atle's place. It wasn't until now he realised that he had wanted to

be in the girl's place. He wanted Atle to push aside *his* clothing, for Atle to find his pleasure in *him*. Olof closed his eyes, not wanting to find out whether the water was dark enough to hide his shame.

"Will you be fighting with us?" Atle asked.

Olof opened his eyes, meeting Atle's winter-morning gaze.

"Of course I will."

"Your father didn't mention it, and Funir does have a general."

"I've fought before." Again this incessant need to let Atle know that he was more than a puppet. More than a boy who had learnt to swing a sword at practice with men who wouldn't ever risk hurting him.

"Oh yeah?"

Atle rested his arms on the side of the bath, making his already broad chest look even more impressive. The Mjölfnir pendant caught the light from the candle, gleaming against golden skin and firelight hair. Olof's gaze was again drawn to it.

"I fought at Kungahälla."

"Hm." Atle touched his pendant, twirling it between his fingers. "Do you know what this is?"

"What?" Olof lifted his gaze from Mjölfnir to Atle's eyes.

"This." Atle put his hand against his breastbone so that the pendant rested against the back of his hand. "You seem intrigued by it."

"Mjölfnir," Olof answered. "Thor's hammer. Your pagan god."

"He's strong though, Thor." Atle moved his arm back to the side of the bath, again on display. "A warrior. Does it make you worried? That we have a warrior god on our side?"

"We're on the same side, are we not?"

Atle moved over to Olof's side of the bath, putting a strong, heavy arm over Olof's shoulders. Nothing that Erik hadn't done a million times, but yet so very different.

"We will fight with you because we will otherwise certainly lose our land to the Gaetes. But not so long ago it was your father who wanted our land. Once

the Gaetes are defeated, your father will want our land again. I wouldn't be surprised if he's already planning how he'll kill me once this is finished."

"He might be open to an alliance."

"But at what cost? No, I don't think so. Not with Sigurd. If I attempted an alliance with Sigurd, my people would replace me." Atle grinned, as if it was all a bit of a joke to him.

Olof didn't know what to say to that. He was aware of his father's reputation as a hot-headed ruler. Sigurd was feared, not loved. Sometimes Olof wondered if that was true for his own relationship with his father as well. Did he truly love his father, or was he afraid of the consequences of not living up to expectations? Oh well. It didn't *really* matter, because he was the only son. Once Sigurd was dead, Funir would be Olof's. And then what?

"You're very loose-tongued, Atle Týrsson."

"I'm not saying anything that you or your father do not already know."

Olof managed not to jump when he felt Atle's fingers on his upper arm. Was that intention or accident?

"And I trust you, Olof," Atle said. "You're a good man, I can see that. Are you married?"

"What? No. I'm only nineteen."

"Old enough to be a veteran, but not old enough to marry, is that what you're saying?"

"I'm just saying it's too early still."

"And your father is holding out for a good enough bride."

"Probably." Olof sighed. "Are you married?"

"You know I'm not. Not anymore."

"Do I?"

"Do you not? Did you not hear me say so to the girl yesterday?"

"What girl?"

"Oh, come now, Olof. I would've been killed a thousand times over by now if I couldn't tell when a man followed me on a moonlit night."

Olof looked down into the murky water, blushing furiously. Somewhere at the back of his mind lurked the idea that the fact that Atle had known he was there and still done what he did made the whole thing even more intriguing.

"I'm sorry," Olof said eventually. "I didn't mean to spy on you. I only went out for a piss and saw you and I don't know..."

"It's alright. I could've stopped you if I wanted to."

"Why didn't you?"

"Would you rather I had?"

Olof felt like he was burning up. If the sight of Atle and that girl had bothered him, he could have left. He did not. He stayed until their completion, and then went back to his room for his own pleasure.

"Your father was bragging about the Funir girls," Atle continued when Olof couldn't think of anything else to say.

"And did she not live up to expectation?" Olof asked, trying to make light of things. "You looked like you enjoyed yourself."

"I did, did I? Yeah, I suppose. Girls are much the same wherever you are, I find." Atle paused and let his hands float on the surface of the water. "As are boys."

Olof's blood was thrumming in his veins, trying to think what to say or how to react to that last bit of information. He imagined a boy in place of the girl he'd seen Atle with last night, he imagined Atle lifting the leg of a boy and thrusting into a boy's body, and he had to stop himself from groaning.

"Are they?" Olof sighed at his own inane answer. Had Atle said that because he'd seen something in Olof? Could he see through the green water to where Olof's cock stood hard and proud just at the thought of Atle with a boy? The thought of Atle with *him*?

Atle chuckled. "They are. And shall I tell you something else? Girls and boys are not so different from each other either. You know the way a girl looks away and pretends she doesn't know you're watching her? When you can tell that although her eyes are on something, anything else, her mind is only on you?"

"Yeah?"

"Boys do the exact same thing."

Olof thought of how he had looked away from Atle at dinner last night. Even before Olof had watched Atle in the forest, he had clearly given something away. He couldn't meet Atle's eyes now, lest he burn up.

“As do men,” Atle added. “And it’s beautiful.”

“I don’t... I mean, I didn’t...”

“Never said you did. I was just saying that whatever goes on between men and women sometimes goes on between men. Probably between women too, though I wouldn’t know.”

“It’s *ergi* though,” Olof said. “To want that from a man. It makes you a woman.”

“If you ask me, it doesn’t make you a woman if you *want* it. If—”

Atle fell silent as the door opened. Olof felt more frustrated than he had in his entire life, but quickly moved as far away from Atle as he could. He needed to know what Atle was going to say. Was there a way to want a man to take you without it making you unmanly?

“Olof?”

Erik’s voice, and then the man himself stepped into the dark bathhouse. Olof froze, suddenly feeling sick with worry that Erik would somehow be able to guess what he and Atle had been talking about. The candle that had seemed perfectly reasonable just a second ago now seemed like it was put there to create a scene of seduction.

Olof cleared his throat.

“Yes?”

Erik looked between Olof and Atle, as if he knew that something had been going on.

“The king wants you. Actually, he wants both of you.” Erik nodded at Atle, and then gave Olof a look that seemed to say that he knew all of Olof’s secrets. The door closing behind him was like the gates to heaven closing with Olof on the wrong side.

“What’s the matter?” Atle asked, sliding back towards him through the now lukewarm water. “What’s worrying you?”

Olof took a deep breath, unsure how to proceed.

“Did you not see the way he looked at me?”

“How did he look at you?” Atle brushed away Olof’s short, wet hair. His gaze followed what his hand was doing.

“Like he suspected something was going on.”

“Nothing’s going on. We were just having a conversation.”

“Yeah, but he...”

“But nothing. Olof, we were sitting opposite one another in a bath. What do you think he’ll do? Tell your bishop that we were bathing? I hear he’s not too fond of that.”

Olof laughed despite himself. “The bishop thinks taking regular baths is a way to lead our women to sin. That they won’t be able to resist a sweet-smelling man.”

Atle grinned again, that mischievous grin that made him look like the world’s jester.

“Well, it *is* hard to resist a sweet-smelling man,” Atle said, putting his nose to Olof’s hair. “So maybe your bishop has a point.”

Olof looked away when Atle stepped out of the bath and dried off.

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## Chapter Four

After breakfast, Atle went to a clearing by the stream where the men—his own and King Sigurd's—were busy exercising together. They were well matched, much better than Atle had expected. But then it seemed a lot of things were happening in Funir that he hadn't expected. The prince, for one thing. Atle smiled to himself.

It was Olof's pride that made Atle's blood hot in the best possible way. Atle had fucked other men—thralls and freemen both—but none that had been so protective of their pride and still so willing. Either they were not in a position to refuse him, or they were the sort of men who might as well have been women. The sort who feared marriage and who were happy to play the woman in bed without thinking twice about it. Not that Atle objected if it meant he could have a man that way, but Prince Olof was something else. An intriguing blend of being defiant and being eager to please. Atle was not interested in letting anyone into his bed who didn't come willingly, but the way Olof really *wanted*... It was lovely.

"I think Sigurd's men are already more loyal to you than to him," Brandr said, putting a heavy hand on Atle's shoulder. "He's not very well liked, the king."

"No, he isn't. And he knows nothing of fighting, as far as I can gather. The diplomacy of it, yes, but the strategy, no. He's attended a few battles where he was watching on horseback from a safe distance." Atle spat on the ground, unimpressed. Life wasn't *all* about the gods, but he was wondering whether Sigurd's weakness had something to do with the way their Christ-God had just given up when faced with the enemy. Thor would have killed them all, if soldiers came to take him away. Odin as well. Even the blind god, Höder, would have given it his best. White Christ let himself be taken without a fight. The Christians were all supposed to live with White Christ as an example, weren't they? What kind of example was that?

"It might interest you to know that the prince is well liked amongst the men. And a veteran."

Atle glanced at Brandr and caught the cheeky smile. There was no one in the world who knew him better than Brandr did. And no one in the world he trusted more.

“Yeah, I heard. Kungahälla.”

“Mhm. And not on horseback either. He led from the front.”

Atle smiled and patted Brandr on the back. “Maybe the prince fights with Odin, huh?”

“Don't get your hopes up, old man. Come the Gaetes and we'll be fighting shoulder to shoulder with men whose biggest wish is to be martyred.”

“Based on numbers, I think we might all be destined for Valhalla sooner than we planned. We need to see the fleet.”

“I agree.”

“It's enough to bring a small search party. You, me. Maybe Gyllir and Oli.”

“Let's bring it to the king. Should we leave with sunlight tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah. That'll give us time to get an idea of what's going on here and prepare for a quick ride.”

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“Is it really necessary to see the fleet?”

Atle worked hard to not let his frustration show, particularly when that hog of a bishop smirked at him.

“How else are we to prepare, King Sigurd?” Atle asked. “As it is, we know that Styrbjörn is on his way with an unknown number of men, an unknown number of ships. What would you have us do if we don't know what we're up against?”

“But what *can* we do? Even if you see this fleet for yourself, you can't find more men to fight for you.”

Atle sighed, ready to blow. Only Brandr's hand on his back calmed him.

“Fighting is more than numbers, King Sigurd. The more we know about who we are meeting, the more we can prepare, come up with a plan. And by following the river to meet them, we'll get to see the terrain. Maybe there is somewhere along the way where we can lead them off the water, somewhere where numbers won't matter so much. Bodvarg...” Atle looked at the general. “I'm sure you can confirm this to the king. Or Olof, you've been at battle, you know that it's not just the number of men that will decide the fate of an army.”

Bodvarg the general nodded.

“He’s right, Father,” Olof said, looking from Atle to Sigurd. “At Kungahälla, we were severely outnumbered. It was the terrain that made our victory possible. That, and we knew the land better than the opponents.”

Sigurd seemed to consider this, although he didn’t look too happy to have Atle refer to his inferiors.

“Fine. Atle, you and your group can go. Bring Olof and Erik with you. We both need to see this fleet. Bodvarg can stay here and manage the men.”

Atle gave Olof a look, trying to say, ‘Look, your father sees us as *two* sides, not one’, but he wasn’t sure whether the prince picked up on it. As it was, it was a nice idea to ride out with Olof. Olof was also the best person to bring the two sides together. He had the legitimacy of the Funir throne and the fighting experience that Atle’s men respected. The unknown was Erik, who seemed to guard Olof with a lover’s jealousy. Could they be...? Atle glanced between the young men. No. Erik was jealous, but Olof was clearly oblivious.

“Good, Your Majesty. We’ll set off with the first daylight.”

“Yes. Good. Now, let us eat and drink and be merry.”

Atle nodded, leaving the hall together with Brandr.

“There’s too much left of the day yet. Let’s go see how the men are doing. *Then* we can drink and be merry.”

“Keep hold of your temper, Atle,” Brandr said, putting his hand back between Atle’s shoulder blades. “We need the support of the king.” Atle noticed how Brandr looked around before he spoke again. “No matter how big a bastard the man is.”

Atle laughed. “You’re half right. We don’t need the king, but we do need his men.”

Atle and Brandr both turned at the sound of Olof’s voice.

“Atle?”

“We’ll talk later,” Brandr said, patting Atle on the shoulder and disappearing into the spring sunshine.

“What can I do for you, Olof?” Atle asked, smiling.

“I, er, I was wondering about the ride tomorrow. How do we...?”

“We set out at first light. Ride as far as we can during the day. See how far we get. A fleet like Styrbjörn’s is slow moving. We should have a few days before we need to be back. And I need to see it for myself. Your scout said nothing about numbers.”

“He said it was a large fleet. Rumour says it’s Styrbjörn’s Gaetish fleet and a fleet of Jomsvikings.”

“‘Large’ isn’t a good enough word.”

“Better than nothing.”

“We need to know how many. If we have any chance at all to beat them on the water. I can’t believe you didn’t send a new scout to count heads once you knew they were coming.”

“It was all a rumour, then. They hadn’t even left the Danish lands.” Olof looked down at the ground, kicking at it gently with his shoe. “Bodvarg and I asked the king to send a proper party to assess the threat, but he wanted to build numbers first.”

Atle reached out to put a hand on Olof’s shoulder, making the prince look up at him. The prince had brown eyes, dark like good soil. Olof’s mother had been the daughter of some important man in the South and the heritage showed. Sometimes the prince looked almost like the men Atle had seen as far south as Miklagård.

“Olof...” Atle looked into Olof’s eyes. There wasn’t a hint of hostility or challenge in those eyes. Olof, for whatever reason, trusted him. Atle licked his lower lip. “Your father might be a forceful king to his people, but he’s a useless general. Make sure he listens to you when you speak. You or Bodvarg.”

Olof nodded, but Atle knew that King Sigurd didn’t listen to any man who didn’t say what he wanted to hear.

“Now come with me and check on the men,” Atle said, putting his arm around Olof’s shoulders and leading him down towards the stream and the training ground.

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There was music in the hall, but it was nearly drowned out by all the excited voices. Only the steady rhythm of the drum could be heard, like a heartbeat. It was good to see the men mingle, Atle’s own men with the Christians. It wasn’t necessary to be friends to fight side by side, but it helped. This way, when the time came for fighting, the men would count on each other.

Atle saw Sigurd and the bishop huddled together by the top of the table, separate from everyone else. He wondered if the king knew the names of any of the men who would be fighting and dying for him. Atle did his best, taking part in the drinking games, laughing and joking with the others. He looked around for Olof and found him next to Torúlf, one of his own men. They looked like they were deep in debate about something, both of them gesturing wildly. When Olof looked up, he caught Atle's eye and looked surprised to see him. Atle smiled and raised his cup at him. Olof raised his cup back, smiling in a way that made Atle want to whisk him away from Torúlf and take him somewhere private. As it was, Torúlf didn't even seem to notice that Olof's attention had briefly been on something else, but continued to talk excitedly to him. Olof returned his attention to the argument. Atle watched them for a moment longer before he moved away.

Suddenly there was a roar, followed by some commotion that made the crowd part. One man—one of King Sigurd's men—had pushed another one so hard he nearly fell into the fire. It took Atle a moment to realise that the other man was also one of King Sigurd's.

The man who had nearly been pushed into the fire rushed towards the other man, and with a vile oath, nearly threw himself at him, throwing a sloppy punch as he went. Because they were both drunk like hell, it found home and blood sprang from the man's nose. Disregarding the red river staining his tunic, he launched forward, connecting his fist with his assailant's brow. Another red river sprang forth, quickly turning the man's face red.

"What's this about?" Atle asked the man next to him, who was watching the fight with ill-concealed amusement.

"A woman, what else?" the man answered, chuckling. With his cup, he indicated the man with the bleeding nose. "Sandarr there is convinced Ragnvaldr is sleeping with his wife. You ask me, I'd say Ragnvaldr is more likely to sleep with Sandarr's dog than his wife, but you never know. They fight about it every now and then."

A strong voice could suddenly be heard over the commotion.

"Cease!"

Atle was surprised that the voice belonged to Olof. So far the man had seemed so quiet and calm. Now here was fury worthy of the battlefield. Atle hid in his cup for a moment as he felt his stomach flutter with excitement.

"Sandarr and Ragnvaldr, enough. Go and wash the blood off in the stream."

Atle wouldn't have thought Olof capable of such a commanding voice, but it was nice to hear. Someone else suggested everyone go and have a swim in the stream. Atle threw his cup aside and joined the crowd making their way down to the water.

Soon the stream was full of men and a few women. Atle had been to many Christian countries and knew they were usually uneasy about nakedness, but it seemed these men were still shaped by the old gods.

Atle was surprised to see Olof caught up laughing and play fighting with Erik. Soon they were shedding their clothes and joining the others in the water. It seemed there were many faces to the young prince. The devout son, the authoritative leader... For a brief moment in the bathhouse, there had been something else that Atle didn't even have a name for. And now this. Playful boy. Atle wanted to pursue Olof, but if there was ever a diplomatic crisis in the making, it was that. Fucking your ally's son? Not really the done thing, Atle supposed. Grasping at what little determination he had, he turned away, searching for Brandr but failing to find him and instead finding a nice barrel of mead. There were always women, but Atle didn't have it in him. Not tonight. Filling a cup he'd found on the ground, he decided to get drunk instead.

"It's so nice when you get in the water, but it's a nightmare when you get out," Olof said, sitting down next to Atle on the ground.

Atle, surprised that Olof was here, sitting (some might say falling) down next to him with his own cup, barely recognised him.

"Cold, are you?" Atle asked, taking Olof's cup and refilling it from the barrel, although to be fair, the prince didn't look like he needed more.

"Oh yeah. Do you want to warm me up?" Olof asked, leaning in towards Atle.

"Help me, All-Father," Atle muttered. "There's a nice goat in it for you if you remove temptation." He handed the cup to Olof.

"Feel," Olof said, grabbing Atle's left hand and placing it on his thigh. "Can you feel how cold I am?"

Atle made an attempt to remove his hand, but Olof held it against his thigh. The prince didn't feel cold in the least, but the muscles under his damp trousers were nice and substantial. There would be no sacrifice of any goat in the near future, Atle decided.

"You're fine," Atle told Olof.

“So are you,” Olof said, his face close to Atle’s and his eyes firmly set on Atle’s mouth.

Atle lifted Olof’s hand away so that he could move his own hand from Olof’s thigh. With willpower he never knew he had, he stood.

Leaning down towards Olof—who was looking up at him rather like a drunk puppy—Atle said, “It’s not that I don’t like your company, Olof. But you’re either too young or too in your cups to know what you want from me, so best leave it for tonight, eh?”

Atle walked away from the stream and the bank. It was dark now, and there were fires. The musicians had moved outside and there seemed to be an endless supply of drink. He walked past men and women fucking and fighting, a couple of young lads puking, a long row of men pissing as if they were competing to see who could piss the furthest. It was time to get some sleep. They had an early start tomorrow.

Unlike the banks of the stream, the town was nearly deserted. It disconcerted him more than he could fathom that he hadn’t heard the footfalls of the person who suddenly tackled him from behind, wrapping strong arms around Atle’s own arms and his upper body.

“But I do know what I want from you,” Olof said as he pulled Atle into the shadows between a couple of houses. He let go of Atle but soon grabbed him by the front of his tunic, holding him against the firm wood of what smelt like it might be a baking house. Even empty, as it would be this time of day, Atle thought he could smell bread.

“Oh yeah?” Atle said, pushing away the insolent whelp. “What *do* you want from me, Olof Sigurdsson?”

Olof took a couple of stumbling steps back in the narrow space between the baking house and whatever the other building was, looking at Atle with wide eyes. He was scared *and* turned on, and Atle had a fleeting feeling the combination should have been more disturbing than it was. Instead he felt his blood heat up as he moved slowly towards Olof, and saw how the young man looked like he was at the same time hoping and dreading that he would get whatever it was he had come after Atle for.

“Answer me, boy,” Atle said quietly. He put his hand under Olof’s chin, holding his face up.

Olof swallowed, clearly hesitating. Atle was about to let him go and make his own way to bed when the prince spoke up. Too quietly for Atle to hear.

“What did you say?”

“I said what you did to that girl in the woods.”

“What about it?”

“That’s what I want.”

“You want a girl in the woods?” Atle said and released Olof.

“No, damn you,” Olof said from behind him. “What you did to her. I want that. You to do that. To me.”

Atle was glad he had his back turned to Olof, because if Olof was nervous now, how nervous would he be if he could see how little control Atle had over this situation? If he could see how much Atle wanted that too?

“You know what they say about men who want that?” Atle asked.

“That they’re not men at all. They’re *argr*. But you said that wasn’t true if the man wanted it.”

“And you want it?”

Olof fixed his dark eyes on Atle, and Atle could feel his resolve lifting like fog. This was why he didn’t believe in the unmanliness of being fucked. People said it was weak for a man to want to be used like that, but they had clearly never experienced how weak it could make you to want to take a man that way.

“I want it,” Olof said, putting a hand on Atle’s arm. The heat of it, what looked like a cut from a sword on the back of it, the dark hairs creeping towards Olof’s fingers from below the sleeve of his tunic, all conspired to make Atle want to throw caution to the wind and pin the boy against any convenient surface.

“Olof, listen to me. If I fuck you tonight, will you kill me tomorrow because you think I insulted you?” Atle was hoping he wouldn’t get a noncommittal answer like ‘I don’t know’, because his willpower was waning and he found himself increasingly inclined to take the risk.

“No. I wouldn’t, I’d...”

Olof dropped off, but the fervour of his answer confirmed that this wasn’t just a young horny man. Whatever it was Olof felt, he felt *something* more than just the need to be fucked. That in itself should’ve warned Atle off, but it only encouraged him. Damn it. Atle suspected that somewhere in Asgård, the All-Father was having a good laugh at his expense.

He pulled Olof close, letting him feel his growing hardness against his thigh. Olof gasped at the feeling, as if he had never known another man's cock before. Maybe he hadn't. Though within a moment, Olof was moving his own cock against Atle, as if he wasn't quite aware what he was doing.

"Is this what you want?" Atle hissed in Olof's ear.

"Yes. Please, Atle..."

"Not here. Come."

Atle grabbed Olof around his wrist and pulled him along. The house opposite the baking house turned out to be a sewing house, with benches for the women to sit. There was a fireplace in the middle, but obviously no fire, and textiles all around. Atle thought he could probably count on one hand the number of times he had been in a sewing house, and he couldn't begin to guess what all the implements were. Not that he cared what they were *really* for. All he cared about now was that there were benches for them to lie on and enough stuff hanging around the place that even if someone else came into this house in the middle of the night, Atle and Olof would be perfectly concealed if they were lying down on a bench at the far end of the house.

"Here?" Olof asked, indicating a wide bench by the wall furthest from the door.

"Yeah."

Olof lay down on his back on the bench, dragging Atle down with him, spreading his legs to let Atle settle between them. Atle's long, red hair shielded them even further from the world as the kiss turned desperate and sloppy.

"Have you been fucked before?" Atle asked, his lips rasping against Olof's.

"No."

Atle pulled away enough that he could take in all of Olof's flushed face.

"But you have some experience with men?" Atle thought for a second of Erik's jealous glances and felt an unexpected and thoroughly unwelcome pang of irritation.

"Boys. When I was a boy myself."

Atle kissed him again, his hands fumbling blindly with Olof's belt. He wasn't going to fuck Olof, much as he wanted to. Not yet. Not tonight, of all nights. Not when there was a long ride ahead of them tomorrow. Someday soon, perhaps, if Odin willed it, but not tonight. He freed Olof's straining cock

before breaking away for a moment to open his own breeches. The friction of naked skin against naked skin, the mountains and valleys of muscle and bone, was glorious. Atle was still trying to decide how they were to go about this when actual fucking wasn't an option, but Olof pulled him tight against himself with two strong hands on Atle's buttocks.

"God. So good," Olof moaned, sounding like he was seconds away from completion already.

Atle eased them apart and brought them around so that he was on his back. He pulled one of Olof's hands down to his hard cock. His own hand, instead of taking Olof in hand, strayed behind Olof's balls, touching his arse but not breaching it. Olof jerked, finding a way to rub down against Atle's hip.

"Oh fuck," Olof panted. "Oh fuck. More."

Atle gently eased only the tip of his finger inside Olof. Meanwhile Olof was inexpertly jerking Atle off, pressing his open mouth wetly against Atle's neck. Atle let his head fall back, giving Olof access. For what it was, it shouldn't have been so hot, but the weight of Olof on his body as the man shamelessly rubbed against him was perfect. But the hand around his cock wasn't enough on its own. Atle reached down and wrapped his own hand around Olof's to control the movement. Much better.

Olof had stopped forming actual words and was panting and moaning—whimpering—against Atle's neck, in complete abandon. Atle adjusted his hand on Olof so that a finger remained inside him but another finger pressed down on that spot behind his balls that usually made things a lot more interesting. The sounds against Atle's neck sounded even more desperate and Atle could feel Olof jerking against him. Olof let out a final moan and spent himself on Atle's skin.

This was the stuff of boyhood adventures, but it still touched Atle to his core. Before Olof had opened his eyes again, Atle was already reaching his own climax, his seed spilling over his and Olof's fingers.

Atle let out an amused, 'Heh,' surprised by how very good that had been.

"Oh my god..." Olof sounded somehow unbelieving and the eyes that met Atle's when he looked up at the young man reflected wonder. "God. I should, uh, get dressed."

"There is no rush, Olof," Atle said, sitting up as Olof got up. Some men got funny once they'd spent; Atle hoped Olof wasn't one of them.

“No, really...” Olof was looking around the room as if noticing it for the first time, and tied up his trousers with his belt. “No... I should go. Early start tomorrow, you said?”

“With first light.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Olof. Sweet dreams.”

Atle watched as Olof made a graceless exit through the hanging fabrics before he leaned back on the bench, hand on his chest. He could feel his heart below his hand, still thumping hard. He couldn't decide if what had just happened was good or bad. Probably very bad, though he still couldn't make himself regret it. And wasn't that just the worst sign of all?

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## Chapter Five

It wasn't the first time Olof had woken with a sense of dread. The last time, he had opened his eyes to find himself in bed with the wife of a visiting dignitary. Not only was that a potential diplomatic crisis, but she was at the very least twice his age. And although Olof couldn't deny that she had been a very skilled bed partner in that way of married women (who, unlike young maidens, had the experience and who, unlike prostitutes, honestly enjoyed it), an evening of drinking in the light of a fire had hidden the full extent of her maturity. The cold morning light had showed Olof a face so different from the one he had found so pretty the night before that he considered whether sorcery was involved. Still, the dignitary and his wife had been in very good spirits when they left later that day, so maybe it hadn't been so bad after all.

This morning though, the sun was about to rise above the trees in the east, and Olof dreaded seeing Atle again. Since the heathen's arrival, he had done his best to make a good impression. To show Atle that he was a man who could be counted on in this predicament they found themselves in. Olof thought he had been making some progress. That Atle perhaps respected his fighting experience, and his strategic insight. What would Atle think of him now? Olof wanted to pull his blanket over his head and hide from the world when he thought about the way he had pursued Atle last night. Practically thrown himself at the man.

To approach a man for a bit of mutual enjoyment was perhaps not so bad. Men did it, Olof knew, even amongst the Christians. But the way he had done it! No better than a bitch in heat. Following Atle like he was bewitched by him. Asking him—actually outright *asking* him—to treat him like a woman. And when the man refused, humping against him like a silly boy until he was coming, shameful and glorious, against Atle's stomach. Olof's face burnt with the humiliation of having shown himself so eager. Not to mention spilling his seed as quick as a virgin. What was it Atle had said? That Olof thought himself old enough for battle but not old enough for marriage? Well, hadn't he just proved that point last night? He had behaved in the worst possible way. Not matter what Atle said, Olof was *argr*, unmanly, like a woman.

Yet, amidst all his shame, he wanted it again.

Olof pulled himself out of bed and dressed quickly. He was half-hard again, thinking about the previous night. Because if he himself had been *argr*, Atle had been perfect manliness. Strong and perfect like that pagan god whose

hammer Atle was wearing. Olof had had his hand around Atle's cock and somehow the intimate knowledge of him charged everything with a kind of sparkly energy.

A knock on his door stopped his daydreaming.

"Olof? Are you ready?"

Olof opened the door to Erik and nodded. "Yeah, I'm ready. Are the horses ready?"

"They are. The pagans are waiting."

"Good. Let's go."

Olof and Erik exited the Great Hall together. The morning was pale and misty, and although it would warm up soon enough, it was chilly. Olof was thankful for the wolfskin over his shoulders. The pagan men—Atle, Brandr, and two men Olof didn't know the name of—were waiting in the courtyard. Atle's hair caught the first rays of sunlight, and despite the cold light and the mist, it shone like gold. With a dark skin (Olof thought it might have been bear) over his shoulders, Atle looked more regal than even Sigurd with his crown.

"Are we ready to go?" Olof asked as he walked up. A stable hand brought him his horse, and he took it by the reins but didn't mount. Atle was still standing on the ground.

"In a moment," Atle said, looking at him. Olof couldn't see anything in those blue-grey eyes that even hinted at what had happened between them. It was reassuring and disconcerting all at once. "Look here."

Atle had a long stick in his hand and he was drawing in the dusty ground of the courtyard.

"This is the river," he said, pulling the stick along a line like a snake. "We're here." He jabbed hard at the ground. "If we're lucky, Styrbjörn hasn't made it further than here." He jabbed a place further down the river, past a great big bend. "Still, time *and* numbers are against us. Brandr and I were talking last night, and we think that, rather than following the river which will take us days, we'll cut across the woods. Like so." He drew a line from one point of the river to another, cutting past the vast turn.

"Sounds sensible," Erik agreed.

"It's a risk, but I think we'll have to take it. This way is a day's ride. It's at least three days on the river."

“Good, let’s go.” Olof mounted his horse.

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Even though they were riding towards a bigger threat to Funir than Olof had ever known, he soon became impatient. They were going as fast as they could and there was little communication between them. Atle was in the front, next to Brandr, and they seemed to exchange the odd word, leaning towards each other across the narrow distance between their horses. The other two men, who Olof now knew to be Oli and Gyllir, were on the flanks of the little group, with Olof and Erik riding last.

The sun was high when Atle held up his hand, signalling for the group to stop. They were by a small forest pond, its water beautifully clear and probably freezing cold. Olof pulled his horse to a halt.

“Let’s rest the horses and get something to eat. We’ll continue soon,” Atle said.

“Who the hell put him in charge of this expedition,” Erik muttered as they dismounted and led their horses over to the pond.

“He is highest ranking, I suppose,” Olof whispered back.

“Is he? The leader of a band of thieves is higher ranking than a Christian prince?”

“What is it you’re unhappy about? What do you think I would’ve done differently if I were in charge?” Olof asked.

Erik sighed and glared back at Atle and his men who were sitting a short distance away from the pond, pulling food from their parcels.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Erik muttered.

“If it makes you feel any better, you can pretend that I’ve delegated the job to Atle.” Olof smiled at his friend, though a flutter in his stomach reminded him of the ridiculousness of him delegating anything to Atle. Atle was completely in charge of him, in all sorts of perverted ways.

“Yeah, well, you two seem to get on well.”

“Olof and Erik!” Atle called at them from their spot under a few trees. “Come and eat. We have enough to go around.”

“We brought our own food,” Olof said, walking away from Erik to join Atle and his men. “And we have mead.”

“As do we, Prince Olof,” Atle said, looking at him with the ghost of a smile on his lips and a quick wink of his eye. “But if you’re happy to share, you can add your food and mead to ours when we stop for the night. For now, let’s have something light before we set off again.”

Erik came up and sat next to Olof, muttering something about pagans controlling even their diet.

“Do you want to say prayers to your god?” Atle asked. “Go ahead, we don’t mind.”

“I should hope not,” Erik said, before lowering his head and putting his hands together.

Olof joined him. The other men were quiet as Erik and Olof prayed. When Olof opened his eyes again, Atle was watching him with an expression that Olof couldn’t quite read. It wasn’t amusement, but it wasn’t quite *not* amusement either.

“Well, the weather’s turned nicer since we set off,” Gyllir said, and then the conversation was off on practicalities. Even Erik seemed to warm up a little when he could offer his input on the best way to reach the river by nightfall.

Before long their rest was over and they gathered their things and horses and set off again. They had all removed their wolf- or bearskins in the warm sun. Even so, by the time they finally reached the river, Olof’s tunic was soaked with sweat. He noticed he wasn’t the only one. Atle’s hair looked damp around his temples.

“I wasn’t sure whether we would actually make it before nightfall, but here we are,” Atle said, gazing out at the river for a moment before dismounting. “I’m having a bath before anything else.”

The others agreed and soon the horses were drinking from the river while the men undressed and waded out into the water. It was cool, it being early in the year yet, but since the sun was already below the horizon, it was pleasant enough as the air turned cooler. Erik cheered up, and when Gyllir splashed water at him, he splashed back, grin on his face. It made Olof’s heart lighter to see it. He felt eager for the men to get along. Not just the men with him here, but all of Granbyr’s men with all of Funir’s. There was no reason why they shouldn’t. Apart from religion. And his father’s ambitions to take over their land.

He yelped when a pair of strong arms circled his waist from behind, lifted him up and threw him away. He didn't have time to react but he noticed the hair on those strong arms was red.

"Sorry about that," Atle said when Olof re-emerged from under the water, though he didn't look sorry in the least. He was grinning madly. Olof grinned back. "Couldn't resist."

Olof dipped below the surface again. It was almost black below, the sun too low to provide enough light to penetrate the water. But he knew roughly where Atle was, so he swam forward, until he saw a dark shadow. Then he reached out, grabbing Atle's ankles, tipping him over. He pushed up just in time to see Atle topple headfirst into the water.

"Oh no," Atle spluttered as he re-emerged. "This is war."

Atle threw himself at Olof, grabbing him from behind again, trying to pull him up. But Olof was prepared this time and wouldn't let Atle lift him. That they were both laughing like children didn't help matters. He was so caught up in the play fight and the sheer fun of it that it took him a while before he realised that he had Atle's naked body pressed up against the back of his. Once that thought had entered his mind, he could feel his body respond to it—although it didn't detract for a second from trying to stop Atle from throwing him into the water again.

Olof managed to put a bit of distance between them. Then he threw himself at Atle, front to front, wrapping his legs around Atle's waist in a move that looked like they were wrestling but that really allowed Olof to rub against Atle. They were both hard.

"Alright, that's it, I think," Atle declared after a while. Olof felt Atle's fingers against his buttocks as the man walked past him towards the beach. "It's getting dark, I'm making a fire."

In the short time they had been in the water, day had turned into night. It was dark enough that Olof didn't have to worry about his body betraying his secrets as he stepped out of the river and got dressed. He tied up the horses, grabbed his parcel, and joined Atle who was blowing life into a fire. The other men were busy getting the food out. Gyllir and Oli had found a couple of logs that would suit for sitting.

Soon the fire was going and they were sharing what they had, talking and laughing, getting a little jolly from the mead they had brought. The more tired

and drunk he got, the more Olof found himself watching Atle on the other side of the fire. Atle seemed to gleam in the firelight. Not just his Thor's hair, but his very skin. The hammer around his neck caught the light, but Olof wasn't so shocked by it anymore. If there was something he had learnt in the past couple of days, it was that Atle and his men were good men, despite their superstition. Maybe they would come around to the One True God eventually. Or even if they didn't, Olof wasn't as bothered by the thought as he would once have been.

Olof's mind returned to the conversation as he caught the tail end of an outrageously dirty story that Oli told that made the men laugh loudly.

It was a good while before they decided that it was time to sleep. It was agreed that Erik would take first watch and then they would share the remainder of the night between them. It would mean very short watches, but that also meant they all had a good chance at being well rested in the morning. Brandr, Oli, and Gyllir were the first to nod off. Olof could hear their snoring as he was putting some things away in his parcel. Atle was checking on the horses.

"I'm just off for a piss," Olof told Erik, walking off towards some trees by the river.

"Alright. Keep by the river," Erik said.

Olof ventured away from the camp and into the dark away from the fire. He did his business and turned back to the camp, when a hand over his mouth and a strong arm around his upper body made him try to reach for his sword. Realising he was no match for the strength of his assailant, he thought his last moment had come.

"Sssh, Olof, it's me," Atle hissed in his ear. The hand over Olof's mouth disappeared, but Atle held onto him for a little while longer. Whether because he wanted to or because he wanted to make sure that Olof had heard him, Olof didn't know.

"What the devil? I could have killed you," Olof whispered.

"Debatable." Olof's eyes were just enough used to seeing in what little moonlight made its way through the trees to be able to make out Atle's grin. "Anyway, it was a risk I was willing to take."

Atle held out his hand to Olof, who took it. Olof found himself pulled close against a body that he was growing increasingly addicted to.

“Erik knows I’m here,” Olof said. If they stayed away for too long, Erik was bound to raise the alarm.

“We’ll have to be quick then,” Atle said.

Olof wished he could put up a fight about this, but even with Erik probably counting the minutes he was away, he still wanted Atle. He should resist. But when Atle leaned forward to kiss him, Olof yielded immediately.

“Yes,” Olof breathed against Atle’s lips. “Yes. How do you want me?”

“Just undo your trousers.”

Olof did as he was bid, noticing Atle did the same. Then they were kissing again, with Atle’s hand on Olof’s erection and Olof’s on Atle’s. It was messy and stupid, but in a span of a few days, Olof had gone from intrigued to powerless before Atle. This was more than enough.

“Gods,” Atle panted, and not even that heretical plural could cool Olof’s blood.

Olof was embarrassingly quick again, but before he could feel too bad about it, Atle jerked in his hand and came. In the faint moonlight, they leaned their foreheads against each other, panting and smiling. Olof wanted to raise his fingers to his mouth and lick them clean, but worrying that it would seem wanton, he quickly bent down and wiped them on the soft moss instead.

“Not to your taste?” Atle asked as Olof stood again. Olof watched as Atle sucked delicately at his own index finger. He looked like it was the most natural thing in the world. Perhaps it was.

“I don’t know,” Olof answered truthfully. Though he’d had the impulse, he didn’t have the experience.

“No? Come here,” Atle said, pulling him close for a kiss. Olof thought that maybe he could taste himself on the kiss, but mostly it was the taste of Atle. Some lingering sweetness from the mead they’d been drinking. “Seems I can’t resist you,” Atle muttered as they parted. “I can’t decide if it’s a weakness...” Whatever he had planned to say next, he didn’t. It sounded like a joke. Was Atle also weak in the face of this?

“We should get back,” Olof said, not knowing what else to say. And they *should* get back, lest Erik come look for them or raise the alarm.

“Yeah,” Atle said. “You go first. I’m sure your friend misses you.”

At the harder tone, Olof looked at him. He couldn't see much in the scarce moonlight.

As Olof stepped out into the warm glow of the campfire, Erik met him, hand on hilt.

“Where the devil have you been?”

“I told you,” Olof said calmly. “I just went for a piss.”

“A long fucking piss in that case.”

“What was the hurry anyway?”

Erik made a frustrated noise. “You could've been... God, Olof. Honestly.” He stepped closer to Olof and lowered his voice. “And Atle gone as well. Are you consorting with him in secret?”

“Don't be ridiculous. Is Atle not here? He must've gone for a piss as well then.”

Erik inhaled to say something else when Atle stepped out into the clearing a distance away. He nodded at them before lying down on a blanket and pulling his bearskin over himself.

“I'm going to sleep now, Erik. Wake me for second watch, will you?”

“Fine.”

Olof lay down close enough to the fire to get some warmth from it. The ground was hard but he was tired from the ride and content from the brief encounter with Atle in the woods. Satisfied. He looked over at Atle's red hair. Happy.

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## Chapter Six

The morning had been mercilessly cold as they rose right before dawn so that they could get going with the first light. Atle and Brandr had taken a morning bath in the river and it had been so cold Atle was expecting ice in his beard and hair when he dried off. Brandr seemed completely unaffected as usual. The man was as untouchable as a mountain.

Now, though, the sun was high in the sky and Atle was comfortably warm. It was encouraging that they had not yet come across the fleet, but Atle found himself anxious. Not knowing was worse than knowing something bad. He was impatient. He wanted to know what it was they were up against. As it was, they only had the account of one of Sigurd's moronic messengers. What the hell kind of grown man would report a "large" fleet without even attempting to count the vessels?

"Let's get up that hill. Unless they're days and days away, we should be able to see them from there," Brandr said as they arrived by a high hill.

The climb was occasionally steep, the horses' hoofs clapping against the rock sticking up through the moss and grass. Brandr led the way, a firm, silent presence that always calmed Atle. Olof and Erik were in the middle, with Oli and Gyllir taking up the back. Atle tried to anticipate what they would see, to think of ways they could use cunning rather than brute force to win. Really, what he was trying to do was to not think of Olof.

They soon reached the hill's summit. No trees here, just flat rock and graves as old as the gods. Brandr and he had come here sometimes as boys, daring each other to spend the night with the dead.

Brandr saw it first. Without a word, he met Atle's gaze before nodding at the horizon. Atle felt a weight of excitement when he saw the sails. No wonder Sigurd's messenger hadn't counted the ships. He probably couldn't count so far. It was beautiful. And terrifying. Sail after sail after sail, the fleet seemed golden and otherworldly in the bright sun.

Brandr and Atle were both watching the fleet transfixed when Olof rode up beside them.

"Five wounds of Christ," he whispered. "We're doomed. On water or on land, we don't stand a chance against so many men."

Atle looked at Olof. His dark eyes were on the glorious fleet, his face dispassionate. Before he could think about it, Atle reached out and put his hand on Olof's arm. It broke Olof's reverie, and he looked down at the hand before he looked up at Atle's face.

"We can, Olof," Atle said. "Not outright and not if we let them decide where we fight. But we can. I have an idea."

Olof looked doubtful. "What?"

"Let me think about the details. I'll tell you when we get back to Funir."

"Right..."

"Brandr," Atle said. "How many?"

"Thousand longships," Brandr replied. "At least."

"Right. A naval battle is out of the question. We need to get them ashore. Let's ride like the Fenrir wolf is after us until we get to Granbyr. A short distance on this side of Granbyr is a bit of flat woodland. If we can get them to go ashore there, we can fight them amongst the trees. Their numbers won't be such an advantage to them then. Now, we need to split up. Oli and Gyllir, send a *budkavel* in all directions to let people know we're invaded. The rest of us will ride back to Granbyr. Brandr and Erik, you can stay there, get the people started on putting stakes in the river. Olof and I will continue to Funir and let the king know of our plan and have him send men to assist. All agreed?"

There was a murmur of agreements and nods, and then they were off.

Once they were back on flat land, Oli and Gyllir took off in a different direction. The rest of them rode on as quickly as was possible.

It was the middle of the night when they arrived at Granbyr. Brandr and Erik could deal with waking the men and getting them started on the stakes that needed to go into the river. Atle and Olof changed their horses and set off to Funir.

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Funir was just stirring to life as they arrived. The sounds at this time of day were rural, not urban: cows lowing, sheep baaing, dogs barking. The noisy commerce hadn't started yet. Atle had expected the king to still be fast asleep, but when they entered the Great Hall, the king was sitting at the top of the table with the bishop and the general by his sides. Thank gods for the general's

presence, Atle thought. Apart from Olof, Bodvarg the general was the only one on the king's council with any damn sense.

"Ah, Atle Týrsson," the king said by way of greeting. "And Olof, my dear son. Come, sit. Tell me what you have learnt."

The king looked as if this was just a friendly social call. Like they were there to gossip. The bishop was smirking, which seemed usual for him. The general looked grave, like he knew that their news wasn't good.

"The fleet is a thousand longships strong, King Sigurd," Atle said, looking straight at the king. "We are vastly outnumbered."

The king's face fell. "A thousand?"

"A thousand," Atle confirmed, pleased that the king at least realised the extent of the challenge they were up against. "The only way we can take them on is by leading them off the water. There is land just south of Granbyr where we can fight them without their numbers being such an advantage. As long as we can lead them off the water."

"What's the land like where you want to fight?" Bodvarg the general asked.

Atle looked at him, thankful for someone who was able to pick up on the important bit.

"The river bends in a peak towards this place, so they won't easily surround us. It's plain, a nice soft forest floor. But there are trees. Not to our advantage, but also not to theirs."

"We need to make it our advantage," Olof cut in, drawing the king's attention to himself.

"Exactly," Atle said. "My suggestion is this: we are already at work putting stakes in the water to stop the fleet from advancing past this point. They will have no choice but to go ashore there. I have instructed the thralls of Granbyr to climb the trees of this place. They will each be given buckets of glowing charcoal, which, at my signal, they will tip over the attackers."

"You want to pour glowing charcoal at them?" King Sigurd said with obvious glee.

"It's a distraction," Atle said. "It's not in itself enough to do any serious harm, but hopefully there will be enough chaos amongst their ranks for us to be able to attack where it counts."

“It sounds like a clever idea,” the king said.

“Any man or woman of fighting age need to get to the area as soon as possible,” Atle said. “We can't afford to waste any time.”

“We don't have any fighting *women*, Atle Týrsson,” the king said disdainfully. “But all our fighting men will be on their way within the hour.”

“Good. I will go back immediately to oversee the work. I can bring your men with me.”

“Yes. Good. Do that. Olof, you will act as my ambassador. No need for me to be there if you're there.”

“Yes, Father.”

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## Chapter Seven

When Olof and Atle arrived in Granbyr, the place was buzzing with activity. Brandr was standing in the epicentre of it all, giving instructions and joining in with various tasks as needed. Olof spotted Erik huddled together with a group of Funir men, drawing on the ground and talking to them with a frown on his face.

Olof had been through Granbyr in the darkness of last night, but seeing it in daylight was something of a surprise. Maybe because Atle and his men were always talked about in Funir as a band of robbers, Olof had half expected them to sleep in tents on the ground. What he saw of the place now was far from that. For one thing, it wasn't just men; there were women and children too. It seemed like a well-functioning community of farmers and fishermen. And fighters, Olof thought to himself when he glanced at the men carving stakes for the river. The Granbyr Great Hall was every bit as grand as the one in Funir, which surprised Olof as well.

Olof had never seen so many men working so hard to achieve something. Apparently, Atle was still worried that Styrbjörn had sent scouts and didn't want to let anyone know that there would be thralls up in the trees with buckets of burning coal. Olof watched him accompany each individual thrall to a tree and help them hoist up the buckets. It wasn't exactly covert, but with all the activity going on around them, Olof doubted anyone would notice. Atle didn't want to wait for nightfall, he said, because you never knew when Styrbjörn's men would arrive.

Olof watched as Atle oversaw the preparations, but when Atle stripped down to his waist as the midday sun made it warm, Olof made himself useful somewhere where he couldn't see him. Too distracting.

"I hope that redheaded bastard doesn't lead us all to our deaths," Erik said, sidling up to Olof.

"What is it that worries you?" Olof asked. "Do you see anything that looks off?"

Erik didn't answer. He mumbled something under his breath and returned to whatever he had been doing.

The battle took place the next day. Olof and Atle stood at the front of the army. Behind them, the men of Funir and Granbyr were hitting their shields with their swords and axes, creating enough noise to drown out a person's thoughts and fears. A distance away, with the river at their back, were Styrbjörn's Gaetes and their allied Danes. Heathens, Olof thought, just like Atle. It seemed their pagan gods would need to take sides in this battle.

There was a charge in the air right before Styrbjörn's men advanced. Olof felt excited, barely able to stay still and just wait. His instinct was to run to meet them. Instead he stood and he watched. He could see the moment when the attackers realised that Olof and Atle wouldn't attack. It was as if the whole army took a nervous breath, trying to figure out what would happen next.

There was no signal that Olof could see, but suddenly there was a fiery rain from high up the trees. Olof knew that it was only bucketloads of burning ember, but it could have fooled him. It looked like something from a wrathful God, like the fire and brimstone that destroyed Sodom and Gomorra.

Though there were screams of pain, the embers were not in themselves enough to do much damage. The beauty was the confusion it caused the attackers and the halt it put to their advance. Some retreated, some kept charging, some ducked. Their tidy lines disintegrated into chaos. However, they recovered quickly, and just as it looked as if the chaos was slowly beginning to merge to order, Atle called out in a voice that cut through even the deafening roar of war.

*"Fram! Fram! Odinnmenn! Kristmenn! Til Valhalla!"*

The men from Funir and Granbyr charged forward, meeting Styrbjörn and his men. Olof got his first kill a moment later when a Dane raised his axe at him and Olof managed to cut the man's chest as he exposed himself. The air was still thick with burning embers and flaky ash, and before long the ground was red with blood and littered with bodies and dropped weapons.

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Olof's muscles were screaming, but he couldn't stop. Didn't want to stop. Something was changing in the dynamic of the battle. It was no longer like treading water, like they were just cutting flesh without getting anywhere. The Gaete lines were thinning. Olof knew what hubris could do to you, so he barely dared to think it, but they were winning. Whatever gods had their hands in the fate of this day, they were tipping the scales in favour of Olof and Atle.

Styrbjörn's last attack was desperate and clumsy, his men brave but demoralised. They knew they were only fighting for a place in Valhalla. The lines were broken and thin. Styrbjörn was still first in line, leading what was left of his men onwards, but to no avail. A group of Funir's men swarmed around them and made quick, bloody work of them. Olof wasn't sure what deity had put Styrbjörn in his path, but suddenly, there he was. Obviously defeated but still fighting. Their eyes met and Olof imagined they both knew in that moment that Styrbjörn was about to meet his maker.

Without preamble, Olof stabbed Styrbjörn with his sword, causing the man to drop to his knees. He didn't drop his axe though.

"Well fought, King Styrbjörn," Olof said. "If it's Valhalla that awaits you and not Hell, you will surely dine with your gods tonight."

Styrbjörn tried to say something but managed nothing but making blood bubble from his throat and pour out of his mouth. Olof put the tip of his sword to the fragile place between the man's clavicles and pushed. It was over. He had done it.

"Let's cut his head off," Atle said, appearing behind Olof as if from thin air.

Olof turned to look at him. Atle's face was red with enemy blood and he looked like a demon from hell. His eyes were unnaturally bright in that dark bloody face. Even the gold of his hair was matted with blood and sweat.

Atle wrapped his hand around the back of Olof's neck, pulling Olof's forehead against his own. It was brief contact but glorious.

"I'll use my axe," Atle said, breaking the moment.

It took one chop to sever Styrbjörn's head from his body. Atle grabbed it by the hair and spiked it on a discarded spear. Then he held it up to show the fighting men.

"Styrbjörn is dead!"

The call spread amongst the men until everyone knew that the battle was won. When faced with the demise of their king, the few remaining Gaetes fled back to their ships. Olof joined his men in the victory call, feeling the elation of being thoroughly knackered but victorious.

Trying to be discreet about it, Olof looked for Atle, only to see the man with his arm around Brandr's shoulders, both of them smiling at each other. Olof's

first thought was that it was the first time he had seen the serious Brandr smiling. His other thought was a pathetic pang of jealousy.

“You won the war for us,” Erik said, wiping the blood from his sword.

“I didn't. I killed a king when he was already defeated,” Olof answered, turning away from Atle and Brandr and offering Erik a weak smile.

“As far as the men are concerned, you won. Your father will be proud.”

“Thank you, Erik,” Olof said, patting Erik's arm.

“Tonight we feast in Granbyr,” Atle called out. “Valhalla will have to wait!”

The men cheered, a roaring sound of victory around the trees.

“Send a messenger to my father,” Olof said quietly to Erik. “Then we'll feast.”

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## Chapter Eight

Atle filled his cup from a barrel of mead and drank down almost all of it at once. It had worked. It had been an impossible feat, but they had managed. All around him, men were washing off, splashing each other, and behaving more like little boys than vicious and victorious warriors. Even now, with Styrbjörn's head on a spear in the forest, Atle barely dared to think about how uncertain he had been that they would actually pull this off. He had been too busy to properly worry about it, but when he thought about it now, he felt a shiver from the recklessness of it.

Granbyr's Hall was full and heaving with people. There had been losses on their side as well, but they were minor compared to the challenge they had faced. And at this point, most people were too drunk to remember to be sad. They drank to fallen comrades, to Atle, to Olof, even to Styrbjörn and his men who had fought and not fled. Not, Atle noted with some satisfaction, to Sigurd.

Atle moved around the hall, greeting the men, talking to them about the battle. He found Brandr sitting on a bench, a freewoman on his lap, her skirts flowing over their legs. Atle wondered if they were already fucking or just about to.

"Take it outside. No one wants to see that," Atle said in Brandr's ear. They were both grinning.

"Come now, Atle. Jealousy doesn't suit you."

"Jealousy? No offense, but I see nothing here I want." He gestured between Brandr and the woman.

"No, I know what you want," Brandr said. "And he's over there, in case you were looking for him."

Brandr nodded towards the fire, where Olof stood with Gyllir, talking and laughing.

"You're a bastard, Brandr," Atle said fondly.

"So are you when you're pining."

"I'm not pining."

"Go, for Odin's sake. I'm not blind, Atle. I know what I know. Go get him."

“You’re an arse.”

Brandr laughed and returned his full attention to the woman.

Atle couldn’t be bothered to pretend he wasn’t going to talk to Olof, so he made his slow way over. When he arrived, he suddenly felt foolish.

“Well fought, Gyllir,” Atle said, patting the man’s shoulder. He was stalling, he knew, and it made him embarrassed. He barely dared to look at Olof.

“Every single man fought well,” Gyllir said, raising his cup in a toast.

“They did,” Atle agreed, holding his cup up. “And so we’re here tonight and not in Valhalla.”

“There will be plenty more chances to get there,” Gyllir said, and with a smile at Olof, then Atle, he left them.

Atle wondered for a moment whether Gyllir had figured him out as well, but it didn’t seem likely.

“It’s hot in here,” Olof said, leaning slightly towards Atle. “How would you like a bit of fresh air?”

“Good idea.”

They pressed through the crowded hall. Atle caught Brandr’s eye as they passed, and the man winked at him. Atle just rolled his eyes, thankful from the bottom of his heart to have Brandr as a friend and ally.

Olof and Atle emerged into the night. The cool air was a blessing against his heated skin. It was a beautiful moonlit night. They strolled towards the river, slowly and quietly. Everywhere around them were men, women, and children celebrating. Even the animals seemed more excited than usual.

The river, once they reached it, was full of bathers. Drunken men wrestling. Boys showing off. A few romantic couples obviously seeing magic in the moonlight on the surface.

“You reckon the skalds will write songs about this battle?” Olof asked, breaking the silence between them. His breath, as it brushed against Atle, was sweet.

“Probably,” Atle said, looking out over his people. His land. “The thralls in the trees are worth a verse or two, I would’ve thought.” He turned to Olof with a smile.

“That was ingenious,” Olof said, bumping his shoulder against Atle’s side. “The confusion it caused made all the difference. It would have been a different night indeed had we waited for them in Funir.”

“You would have spent it with your god,” Atle said, suppressing the shudder that ran through him at the thought.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Olof replied, sighing. “I think I might just be doomed.”

“But you’re a warrior,” Atle objected. “You killed Styrbjörn. Bravely. You would have fought bravely in any situation.”

“But I’m corrupt. Atle, what I’ve done with you... What I still want to do. I can’t even regret it.”

“I don’t regret it either.” Atle wanted to reach out for Olof then, to take his hand and stroke his thumb over the dark hairs there. Instead he put a comradely arm around Olof’s shoulders. Olof was just that little bit shorter than Atle to make the gesture perfect. He breathed in the scent of Olof. Atle thought he could smell the river on him.

“It’s a sin,” Olof said, but he moved closer to Atle. “That’s what the priests and the Bible say.”

“They’re wrong,” Atle said simply. “You know they are or you wouldn’t be here with me.”

“Maybe I’m just perverted?” Olof looked up at him with a grin.

“Maybe you were just created in a way that makes us fit together, you and I?”

“I hope so,” Olof said.

By some mutual decision, they turned their backs on the bathers and walked back to the hall. There was still music and drinking and too many bodies in too small a space. Atle led Olof forward with a hand between his shoulder blades. Even that touch, the feeling of Olof’s muscles beneath his tunic, was enough to set Atle’s blood on fire.

“Won’t someone notice?” Olof asked, though he didn’t slow down for a second.

“In this chaos? No.” But Atle looked around for Erik, who was the only one he could imagine would draw all the right conclusions and be a bastard about it.

He saw Erik by a table, in animated conversation with a Granbyr girl and a Funir guy. Making sure Erik wasn't looking, Atle led Olof into his private rooms.

There was a fire burning in the smaller hearth there, providing more than enough light to see by. Atle looked out at the guests one last time to see who might have seen them, but no one paid them any attention at all. He closed the door and locked it before he turned to Olof, who stood by the hearth. Olof was a beautiful man in any circumstances, but the glow from the fire made him look spectacular.

"Take off your clothes," Atle said.

Olof grabbed the hem of his tunic and pulled it over his head. His chest gleamed in the firelight, begging Atle to run his hand through the dark hair and over the defined muscles. Olof untied his breeches and let them fall to the floor, where he kicked them off with his boots. He was already fully erect, his cock jutting hard and proud from a patch of nearly black hair.

Atle didn't deny himself any longer. He walked up to Olof and dropped to his knees. He presumed Olof had had this done to him by women before, maybe even by boys, but he knew from experience that it was something else to get a full-grown man to willingly kneel before you to do this. Olof's shaky intake of breath seemed to confirm this. Atle relished the feeling of the smooth hardness in his mouth and the big hands threading through his long hair.

"Atle... Atle, stop..." Olof sounded breathless and the plea for Atle to stop was the least heartfelt Atle had ever heard. "You're making me come. Please, I don't want... Not yet."

Atle reluctantly pulled off. He pressed a smiling kiss to Olof's hipbone, licking a little at the hot skin there. Olof sighed.

"Turn around," Atle said, gently guiding Olof around with his hands on those delectable hips.

"What?" Olof asked, but didn't object.

Atle moved his hands to the round globes of Olof's arse, squeezing them to feel the muscle before he parted the cheeks and pressed a kiss in between.

Olof nearly jumped, instinct making him pull away from the sensation before eagerly getting into position again. Atle smiled against Olof's skin, knowing how Olof must be feeling. Olof supported himself hands on knees, but

when Atle suggested they move over to the bed, Olof made a grateful noise and moved quickly.

Olof lay down on his front, legs slightly apart.

“So beautiful,” Atle whispered, more to himself than to Olof.

“Huh?” Olof looked at him over his shoulder.

“Nothing.” Atle smiled. “You should see yourself, Olof. So strong. So perfect.”

Olof turned his head back to the pillows beneath him, as if he didn't know how to take a compliment and had to hide from it. Atle stood watching him for a moment longer, taking in the splendid line of Olof's spine as it curved from neck to buttocks.

“Lie on your back,” Atle asked. “I want to see your face.”

Olof turned around, slowly, almost reluctantly, as if perhaps ashamed of his obvious arousal. Once on his back, propped up against the many pillows, he watched Atle with unabashed interest. There was none of the covert glances of the bathhouse. Atle stood, letting Olof watch his fill. When Atle reached for his own erection, giving it a couple of strokes, Olof let out a sigh.

Climbing up onto the bed, Atle said, “You might not want me to kiss you, considering—”

“No, kiss me.” Olof put a hand to the back of Atle's neck and pulled him down.

Atle let himself be pulled close and when Olof spread his legs to accommodate him, he could've wept with joy and relief. The kiss was messy and desperate. Atle moved his cock between Olof's legs, thinking to himself that if this was all Olof wanted tonight it would be enough. He could feel Olof's cock against his stomach as they moved together, how it throbbed against his skin.

“More, please,” Olof mumbled into the kiss.

Atle wanted to laugh. He broke the kiss and teased Olof's lips with his finger before Olof by experience or instinct took the digit in his mouth.

“That's it,” Atle said. A crash followed by a good-humoured roar from the other side of the wall reminded him that there was still a feast going on in the hall, and he wondered that he had managed to forget. Then Olof gave his finger a good suck and he forgot everything but the perfect man below him.

He pulled his finger from Olof's mouth and moved it between his legs, pushing gently against the relaxed muscle. Olof pulled him back for a kiss as Atle continued to move his finger inside the burning heat of Olof's body.

"More," Olof whispered.

Atle groaned, pulling his finger out. He spat on his fingers and applied them to Olof, his wet fingers sliding in and around Olof's body, driving them both insane.

"Atle, more. Please."

"Oh gods..."

Olof's eyes closed as Atle finally pushed inside him, a small crease between his eyebrows. Atle tried to be as gentle as he could, but then Olof wrapped his legs around Atle's waist and with his calves against Atle's lower back pushed them perfectly together.

They gasped on the same breath, and then they were kissing again. Atle had a fleeting thought that they moved so perfectly *together*, that though Olof was below him, his legs spread, he was no passive receiver, he was an active participant. He gave as good as he got. Atle was no more in power or control here than Olof was. That was the difference, Atle supposed, between *argr* and not.

"Do you like it?" Atle asked, lips to Olof's ear, though he thought he knew.

"I love it," Olof breathed back. "Oh God, I fucking love it."

Atle reached down between them and took Olof's cock in hand, trying to get his pleasure-clumsy hands to cooperate to make sure this was as good for Olof as it was for him.

"Oh Christ," Olof gasped, evoking that strange god of his who didn't like men taking their pleasure.

"Are you coming?" Atle hoped so because he didn't have long to go himself.

"Yeah... Oh..."

Atle lifted his head to look down at Olof's fluttering eyelashes as the man's eyes rolled back in his head with pleasure. He sat up on his knees, trying to focus on Olof's pleasure and not his own, moving with fury in and out of that glorious body.

“God, now, Atle...” Olof opened his eyes for a moment before they fell shut again. “Now.”

Atle watched as Olof came over his stomach, over Atle's hand, on his chest. As soon as Olof was done, Atle pulled out of him and used his messy hand to work himself. Soon after, he added his own semen to the mess on Olof's stomach. Not caring about anything in the world but being close to Olof, Atle fell down on top of the man.

“That's sticky,” Olof commented, running a hand through Atle's hair and twisting a strand of it around his fingers.

“There's a pail of water over there. We'll clean up later.”

“Mhm...” Olof put his arms around Atle, pulling him even closer.

“Are you falling asleep?” Atle asked, raising himself up on an elbow and looking down at that beautiful face.

“Mhm... Near enough.” Olof didn't open his eyes, but he was smiling.

“Here then.” Atle grabbed the corner of a blanket and wiped them clean. To the sound of drunken singing on the other side of the wall, he pulled the blanket over them. Olof's breaths were soon slow and heavy with sleep and as the noise from the hall died down, Atle let himself fall asleep as well.

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## Chapter Nine

Olof sat up on his horse, his face burning and his heart thumping. He avoided even looking at Atle in case he'd somehow give something away. They had woken up together in the morning. Olof had intended to get up, say something mildly polite about enjoying the previous night and get out. But even the sight of Atle's red hair falling over the pillow had made Olof hesitate. And when Atle had opened his eyes and smiled, Olof had smiled back and kissed him. Atle had wrapped his arms around Olof, holding him tight, and they were soon moving together towards another perfect, messy climax. They hadn't parted until Brandr knocked on the door and discreetly informed Atle that the men were gathering for breakfast and that he was running out of time if he wanted to get someone out of his bedroom unseen.

They had washed off and dressed quickly. Olof made it out into the hall only noticed by a woman with straw-coloured hair who was carrying a basket full of apples. There had been no time for Atle and Olof to talk, and not knowing if they would meet again was like a persistent ache in Olof's gut.

He looked down at the brown glistening mane of his horse, at the reins in his hands, remembering touching pale skin and red hair. He could still *feel* last night. The way Atle had felt inside him, the way he had touched him. How could he even bear to look back at the man now? Would Atle know what he was thinking just from a look? God forbid, would someone else know?

He had to look back of course. He was the damned prince of Funir. He couldn't ride off without as much as a glance at an ally.

Atle's face was unreadable. He was staring into the distance, his arms crossed over his wide chest. He was standing firmly in the middle of the courtyard outside the Great Hall, looking every bit the heathen warrior. Watching him now, you'd think him completely incapable of tenderness, but Olof knew better. As if Atle could hear Olof's thoughts, he suddenly looked up, pinning Olof with those pale-morning eyes.

"Goodbye, Atle Týrsson," Olof said stiffly. It was difficult to appear unaffected when that gaze seemed to peer into his very soul. "We thank you for your... your invaluable assistance."

"Anytime," Atle said, nodding at Olof.

It was Erik who initiated the ride, calling out and spurring his horse, thus setting the whole army off.

It was half a day's ride from Granbyr to Funir, but to Olof it felt longer. Leaving Granbyr somehow felt *wrong*. Like this wasn't how it was supposed to go. But there were no alternatives, and even if Olof could accept that letting Atle into his body wouldn't make him *argr*, not being able to leave the man definitely did. He was a prince, damn it, not a lovesick maiden.

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All of Funir greeted them as the victors they were. Olof smiled and waved and nodded, but he felt nothing like the hero who had killed the enemy king. Sigurd met them on the courtyard, his crown gleaming in the sun and a smile on his face. Olof looked at his father and thought that it was a political, diplomatic smile rather than a loving one. Then he thought of Atle and Atle's smile, and he felt even less like a victor.

"Here they are," Sigurd said, holding his arms out. "The heroes."

"Hardly that, Father," Olof said, getting down from his horse.

"Did you hear that it was Olof who killed Styrbjörn?" Erik asked, getting down as well and handing his reins to a stable hand.

"I did hear!" Sigurd said, pulling Olof into a stiff hug. "I am very proud of you, my son. All of Funir is."

"Thank you."

"Now, come, come... It doesn't end here, does it? Olof, Erik, Bodvarg... There is a meal prepared for you and we have much to discuss."

Olof was tired after the ride and wanted nothing more than to just lie down in his bed and wake up to a new day. But no one said no to the king, especially not the king's son, and so he dutifully followed the other men into the hall. The table was set with more food than they could possibly eat between them. Although Olof was hungry, he reached for the mead first. He ignored the others: Erik, who sat down right next to him; the bishop, who sat opposite him as always, close to his father; Bodvarg, who was as quiet as if he expected bad news; Sigurd himself, at the top of the table, immediately grabbing a piece of meat and tucking into it.

"This is truly a noble victory," the bishop said. "Against so many heathens."

"Although not without significant help from heathens," Olof cut in, looking up at the bishop's spherical features. When he saw the malignant triumph there, he realised he'd stepped into a trap. He just didn't know what sort of trap it was yet.

“Ah, yes, there is that,” the bishop agreed, smiling like a snake.

“We have made a decision in your absence,” Sigurd said, a faint movement of his head indicating the bishop.

No decisions that included the bishop could ever be good, Olof thought. He raised his head and met Bodvarg's eyes. The general clearly had the same thought as Olof.

“We need to take advantage of this truce with Atle and his heathens,” Sigurd continued. Either he hadn't noticed or he didn't care about the glance between Olof and Bodvarg. “I've been told our men and the heathens have been getting on well. Erik also informed me that you, Olof, in particular, have made good friends with Atle. This is good. This means he trusts you, yes?”

Olof nodded in numb dread.

“We have decided that we will shortly invite the fighting men from Granbyr here to us, to celebrate the victory. They will come, of course. There will be much to drink and when every one of them is drunk enough, we will invite them to go swimming. They seem fond of bathing in rivers. With their weapons on the shore, they will be easy prey for a Christian knife.”

“Father...”

“I will drink with Atle here, and post someone next to us who can take him out at my signal.”

Olof wanted to argue, but it was Bodvarg who spoke up.

“Sire, without them, we would have perished. Do they not at least deserve the chance to turn to the True Faith before we slaughter them like Easter lambs?”

“Heathen or no!” Sigurd banged his fist against the table so that the tableware bounced. “The Gaetes showed us that the waterways to the south are important. We want full access. Atle stops us. He's stopping us from trading! We are a kingdom; they are a band of robbers ruled by a corrupt jarl. They should bow to us.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Bodvarg said, but he didn't look convinced.

Olof's first thought was that he had to warn Atle. That he didn't for a second consider going along with his father's plan made something slot into place inside him. His loyalties were no longer with the Funir king and it was at

once scary and liberating. He sat quiet for the rest of the meal, planning his return to Granbyr. To Atle.

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Olof waited until nightfall before he saddled up and left Funir. There was enough moonlight to see by, thank God, and he knew the road by now. The horse probably knew the road too, having travelled that very same path only hours before. Despite the moonlight, the trees were so dense that they turned to black shadows. Olof didn't want to think about bear and wolf hiding in these woods. Not now. He needed to get to Atle to warn him before his father could set his plan in motion. If he was only quick enough, he might make it back before his father woke in the morning.

He imagined he was nearly to Granbyr when a shadow even darker than those of the trees stepped into his path. The horse jolted, scared by the sudden appearance. Was this man or ghost?

"Identify yourself," Olof said, surprised his voice came out strong and sure.

A man stepped out into a ray of moonlight. Another man followed him. Then three more men. When they spoke, Olof recognised the accent. They were Gaetes.

"Get off your horse," one of them said.

Olof wanted to spur the horse on, but another man had already grabbed the reins.

"What are you still doing here? Shouldn't you be on your ships back south?"

There was a humourless laugh from the men.

"Didn't you hear? Our ships burnt."

Olof didn't say anything, wondering who had burnt their ships. He had given no such order and he couldn't imagine Atle had either.

"Styrbjörn set them alight himself," one of the men said in answer to Olof's unspoken question. "So that no one would retreat."

"Was he worried someone might?" Olof knew that taunting them would probably get him killed. Hell, he was probably going to die regardless, so what was the point?

"Look here, you son of a bitch." Olof was prepared for the hands that grabbed him and pulled him off his horse, but he was powerless to do anything more than to make sure he landed on his feet.

Whatever it was they wanted, Olof didn't know. He didn't have anything on his person of any value. The only thing he had was his horse, but to men who didn't have the means to return home, a horse would be valuable. He had some bread and cheese, and maybe they were hungry enough to rob him for that. Maybe they just wanted revenge.

As soon as he was down, he pulled his sword out of its sheath. A quick swipe saw one of the men bleeding from a wound at his throat. Olof didn't have the time to think about whether it would be enough to kill the man. The only reason he'd managed to get even that strike in was that he had had the element of surprise on his side.

The men didn't seem to have swords themselves, but they had clubs or something similar. Heavy, enough to knock Olof out. Realising this was it, he gasped out a prayer to God to receive his soul before it went black.

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## Chapter Ten

Brandr had called him a grumpy bastard more than once since Olof had returned to Funir, but Atle didn't care. Something about the way Olof had just left made the victory feel unsatisfactory. Yes, it was a victory for Granbyr, for Funir, for Atle himself, for Olof, for everyone else, perhaps, but it was all political. And something didn't sit right with him. The whole thing felt unfinished, somehow.

When a group of four men arrived on horseback from Funir two days after the battle, Atle wasn't even surprised. He felt like he had waited for this.

"Atle Týrsson!" one of the men called.

"What!"

"We're here for Olof Sigurdsson. Where is he?"

Atle frowned. He might not have been surprised by the arrival of the men, but their request had surprised him.

"What do you mean?"

Brandr came up to stand beside him and some other men drew near as well. The Funir men looked around, something like mild anxiety on their faces.

"We've been told he's likely to be here."

Atle exchanged a look with Brandr.

"He is not. He returned to Funir only yesterday, what possible reason could he have to be here now?"

The men looked at each other.

"He didn't return. The men who did return said they lost sight of him and presumed that he had returned here."

Something was wrong, Atle felt it in every bone in his body. Olof wouldn't leave his men halfway to Funir to return here.

"Brandr," Atle said. "Gyllir and Oli. We go with these men to search for Olof." He added to Brandr, out of earshot of the visitors, "Well armed."

"Thank you, Jarl Atle," one of the visitors said. "King Sigurd is much worried as you can imagine."

“Of course he is,” Atle said, caring little about the blatant sarcasm.

Atle, Brandr, Gyllir, and Oli were soon on horseback, riding with the Funir men through the woods. They had their swords at their sides and additional knives tucked away on their bodies and under the saddles. Atle couldn't get over the feeling of something being wrong. Seeing that Brandr looked even more hard-set than usual told Atle that he wasn't the only one.

“What do you think?” Atle asked Brandr quietly as they were riding quickly through the forest towards Funir. “What is it that I'm not seeing?”

“I don't know,” Brandr replied. “But something is off. Olof wouldn't return to Granbyr on his own.”

“No, that was my thought.”

“Eyes open, senses alert,” Brandr said.

“We should spread out,” one of the Funir men said. “You take that side, Jarl Atle, the rest of us fan out to the side.”

The suggestion would have made Atle suspicious, but before he had the time to worry too much about it, he caught sight of something on the forest floor only a short distance to his left. He set off at breakneck speed, and when he arrived, realised that it was a bloody body.

“Brandr!” Atle called out. “Brandr! Come!”

Atle didn't think. When he realised the bloody body was Olof, he jumped off his horse and ran up to it. Seeing Olof's hair smudged with blood, his long dark lashes smoothed against his cheeks with what was probably a mix of blood and dirt, Atle was furious. Whoever was responsible for this was going to pay. He was going to find them and kill them, slowly and painfully. He would find their families and kill every single one of them.

“Olof?” Atle pulled the bloody head into his lap, stroking away the sticky hair. “Olof? Do you live?”

A couple of fingers to Olof's dirty neck told Atle that there was still life in the body, if faint.

Brandr and the others rode up. Brandr got off his horse as well, squatting by Atle's side.

“Is he alive?”

“Barely,” Atle replied. “We need to get him back to...”

He fell quiet when he saw the faces of the Funir men as they rode up. He still didn't understand the whole picture, but some things slotted into place. This was a set-up. He reached for the sword at his waist, seeing in his peripheral vision that Brandr, Gyllir, and Oli did the same. With a minute nod from Atle, they rose as one, attacking the men on horseback.

"I want at least one of them alive!" Atle called, as Gyllir drove his sword into the unprotected neck of one of their assailants.

Atle was cut on his upper arm, but he barely felt the sting. Instead he rushed straight into the man who had cut him, knocking him over. He could have killed the man then, but instead he cut off the hand in which the man held his sword. The man screamed. Another scream behind him made Atle turn around and he saw Brandr sticking his sword into a man who was about to kill Gyllir, who was lying on the ground. Well, at least they had one living prisoner. The others could be left for the crows.

Seeing the fate of his comrades, the fourth man dropped his sword and held his hands up. Christians, Atle thought. No man of Odin would ever drop his sword. Atle stepped off the man beneath him who had passed out from his pain. He grabbed a bit of rope from his saddle and tied up the surrendering man against a tree. Then he sat down in front of the tree and watched his prisoner.

"Brandr," Atle said, eyes never leaving the man in front of him. "Take Olof back to Granbyr and make sure he's cared for. Gyllir and Oli, you go with him. Get Aslaug to care for him, I want him to live."

"You?" Brandr asked.

"I will stay here and I will find out what their orders were. I will return to Granbyr before dusk."

Atle didn't take his eyes off the man tied to the tree even as he heard the other men gathering their things and loading Olof onto one of the horses. When they had set off, he rose.

"Do you want to die?" Atle asked the man by the tree.

The man cried and shook his head.

Atle took his sword and ran it through the neck of the man who had passed out. The man by the tree looked at him with wide eyes.

"Will you tell me what I want to know?" Atle continued.

The man nodded.

“What were your orders?”

The man was no match for anything Atle could impose on him, but he clearly still struggled with giving up information. Atle put the tip of his sword against the man's neck and pressed gently, only pinking the skin.

“Your orders?”

“We found a group of stray Gaetes and engaged them to intercept Olof on his way back to Granbyr.”

“*Intercept?*”

“Leave him half dead. For you to find him. The king was under the impression you'd care about the prince's well-being.”

“You had Olof nearly killed?”

The man by the tree nodded.

“On the king's order?”

The man nodded again.

“And then?”

“We were hoping that you would ride out with just a few men, and our order was to kill you.”

“Me?”

“Both of you. You and the prince.”

“The king ordered the murder of his own son?”

The man by the tree nodded again.

“We didn't want to. The prince is well liked. But the king is feared.”

“Why would the king want the prince dead?”

“He questions the prince's allegiance. He said that if the prince had set off, it was to warn you.”

“Of what?”

“I—I don't know.”

“No,” Atle sighed. “But I think we can both guess, huh?” Then he ran his sword through the man's neck, leaving him to bleed out as he mounted his horse and rode towards Granbyr.

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A place had been prepared for Olof in Atle's private rooms. By the time Atle walked in, Olof had been washed and put to bed. Aslaug was bent over his sleeping body, wrapping a rune against his ribs.

"Will he live?" Atle walked up to them, putting his hand over the healing rune.

"If the All-Father wills it," Aslaug answered, brushing away her long hair. "But yes, I think so."

"He's Christian," Atle said, unsure why. Maybe the gods didn't favour Christian men.

"Oh, no, this man is of Odin," Aslaug said, a patient smile directed at Atle. He smiled back. "Strong, then."

"Atle, you will need to appeal to Odin for him. He's not cut, but he is badly beaten. As close to death as his assailants dared, I think."

"Thank you, Aslaug. I know what I need to do. Leave me for a moment."

Aslaug took a basket of linens and herbs with her as she left the room. She was done, Atle presumed, or she would never have agreed to leave. She'd be back when he was done and she would stay with Olof until he was better. Because he would be better, Atle was determined.

The small statue of Odin All-Father stood in a corner. Atle didn't normally light the candles on each side of it, so he supposed Aslaug must have done it. With a glance over at Olof's sleeping and gently breathing form, Atle turned his attention to the god. He bent down on one knee and looked at the ancient wood of it. He traced the pattern of the wood on the god's right foot, the place polished from the many times Atle had done that before.

"Odin All-Father," he whispered. "Bring him back to me. Let me have him. Let him be mine. Let me keep him. In return... I will give you a king."

The statue of the one-eyed god remained still as ever of course, but Atle felt that strange whisper inside that told him that Odin had listened and was on his side. He rose with a sigh and turned again to Olof. When Atle bent down to kiss Olof's forehead, he noticed the hair still smelt of blood.

"I'll look after him," Aslaug said from the door where she stood watching.

Atle was surprised that he didn't feel worried at all about Aslaug having caught the gentle gesture. He smiled and thanked her before marching out of the hall.

“Here you are,” Brandr said, handing Atle the reins of a horse before sitting up on his own horse.

“What are you doing?”

“I know what you’re planning and you’re not doing it on your own. Get up now, and we’ll get there before first light.”

“Brandr...”

“No. Atle. This is how we do it. Together.”

“Thank you.”

Brandr nodded.

“And thank you, Odin All-Father,” Atle whispered under his breath.

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When they arrived at Funir, it was quiet. They had left their horses outside the town walls, but Atle thought they would probably have been able to ride straight into the hall and no one would have noticed them.

The only watchmen they saw were two young lads posted outside the hall. As far as Atle knew, there would be no one but the king inside the hall. He was hoping the king would be alone; Atle really didn’t feel like killing a woman just for the sake of getting to Sigurd.

Brandr and Atle hid in the shadows on each side of the hall until at once, they rushed forward and soundlessly slit the throats of the guardians. They quickly pulled the bodies inside the hall.

“Keep watch,” Atle whispered to Brandr. “I’ll get the king.”

Brandr nodded.

The hall was mostly dark, but there was a single candle burning in an alcove. Enough light for Atle to see by. He made his way to the king’s chamber and gently opened the door. The king was sleeping—alone, thank Odin—and Atle went inside and closed the door behind him. After pausing for a moment, Atle swiftly straddled the king’s sleeping form and put a strong hand over his mouth.

There wasn’t any light in the king’s chamber apart from the moonlight making its way through a window, but Atle saw the king’s wide eyes as the man realised he had awoken to a nightmare, not from one.

“Your guards are dead,” Atle said. “And I have put my men in their place. Try to raise the alarm, and I will gut you like a fish right here. Agreed?”

The king nodded best he could in Atle's hold.

"You're a dirty pagan bastard, Atle Týrsson," the king spat when Atle had released him. "What the hell is the meaning of this?"

Atle stood by the king's bed, calm and composed, watching the aggravated man.

"You ordered the murder of me and of your own son," Atle said. "Why?"

"Come now, Atle... You know how this works, let's not pretend you don't."

"Fine. Let me guess. You're taking advantage of the alliance to get me out of the way, thus annexing my land to yours. Am I right so far?"

The king nodded, a thoroughly unpleasant smile on his face.

"But Olof...? He's your only heir."

"Who couldn't get away quick enough to warn you. Funny how a son's allegiance can shift over the span of just a few days. Why is that, I wonder?" The king stood now as well, shorter than Atle but a commanding presence nonetheless. Even in his nightshirt. "After your little scouting mission, I was informed by a reliable source that you and the prince seemed to have developed a... special bond, shall we call it?"

Atle stood still, not saying anything.

"I always had my suspicions about Olof. Something wasn't right. There was something soft about him. Womanly. Cowardly."

"Your son fought in the front row of a battle in which we were spectacularly outnumbered. There isn't anything cowardly about him. He was there, with the men."

"Oh please. Don't think you know him better than I do just because you fucked him. I'm his father."

"His father who ordered his men to kill him."

"It's for the good of Funir. We need a Christian king, not someone who's going to spread his legs for Odin."

"King Sigurd, you will die tonight and Olof will be crowned the new king of Funir. If he sticks to the new religion or returns to the old one remains to be seen, but regardless of which, he will make a better king than you ever were. You must know how much the people love him." Atle looked at Sigurd, getting

a perverse kind of satisfaction from seeing the man's anger. "How much I love him." Atle winked at Sigurd. "I'm sure Olof and I will be able to come to some agreement on the trade routes."

"You're a disgrace, Atle Týrsson! Don't think this will go unpunished."

It wasn't a very tidy way of sorting the situation, but Sigurd never saw the punch Atle threw and never defended himself. He was out cold. Atle went to the front of the hall to get Brandr, who helped him drag the unconscious body from the hall and past the town gate.

"Help me get him up over the horse," Atle whispered.

He and Brandr stood Sigurd up and hoisted him over the horse. The horse took a couple of stumbling steps, as if he weren't sure he could take the burden. Brandr took the reins of his own horse and Atle took the reins of the horse carrying Sigurd and off they went.

"This bit I will need to do on my own," Atle said to Brandr when they were far enough into the woods that they were safe from every threat but wolves and spirits.

"I know. Shall I leave you here?"

"I'm taking him to Blótkullen. To hang."

"Of course. You have everything you need?"

Atle held up the rope.

"I'll check in on Olof before I go to bed. Then I'll see you tomorrow." Brandr mounted his horse and was soon swallowed by the darkness.

Atle diverted from the path, leading the horse a distance into the wilderness. All the while, Sigurd remained unconscious, and Atle began worrying that he was actually dead. However, leaning in close, Atle could hear his breathing.

Atle tossed the rope over a thick branch, securing one end like a noose around Sigurd's throat and tied the other around the trunk. Then he sat down to wait for the king to wake up.

The sun was slowly dragging itself above the horizon by the time Sigurd stirred awake. Atle stood, making sure Sigurd wouldn't fall off the horse. He saw the confusion on the king's face, then the dread when he realised what was going on.

"I did tell you I'd kill you," Atle said quietly.

“You’ll not get away with this,” Sigurd said, voice hoarse. He was struggling in his bonds, but with his hands tied behind his back and the noose around his neck, there was little he could do.

“Did you know that Odin All-Father hanged for nine days and nine nights from the world tree Yggdrasil?”

Sigurd didn’t answer.

“To learn the runes,” Atle continued. “And lucky he did, because as we speak, your son is recovering in my hall, a healing rune against his wounds.”

“That’s blasphemy. Superstition. Olof won’t stand for it.”

“We’ll see, won’t we? If Odin is pleased with my sacrifice, he might allow Olof to live. With me.”

Sigurd made a grunting noise but didn’t reply. The sun was half above the horizon now; the heavens burning in red and orange. It was time.

“And now I give you to Odin,” Atle said, pushing Sigurd off the horse.

The king struggled, of course. He only dropped a very short distance and his neck remained intact. Instead he was strangled, suffocated. At first he fought, then the movement slowed as life left him and he seemed to accept his fate.

Atle watched for a moment, before mounting his horse and setting off back to Granbyr.

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## Chapter Eleven

Olof woke in a warm room with the scent of wool in his nostrils. He gingerly moved his fingers over the sheepskin beneath him. When he opened his eyes, he saw a woman bent over him, looking at him intently. Her straw-coloured hair and the brooches of her dress glowed in the light from the fire. She smiled at him. He tried to smile back but wasn't sure whether he managed.

"He's awake now," the woman said over her shoulder.

Olof heard rustling from the other side of the room, and when the woman moved aside, he saw Atle approaching. If he had thought the woman's hair glowed in the firelight, it was nothing compared to the fire of Atle's hair. It hung long and clean down his shoulders. Olof's fingers moved again with the need to run through that gold.

"Leave us," Atle said. He kept his eyes on Olof, but the woman bowed and left the room.

"You scared me," Atle said, sitting down next to Olof. He reached out to brush his fingers over Olof's cheek.

"I didn't think anything scared you," Olof said. Using his voice irritated his throat and he swallowed compulsively to avoid coughing. He wasn't sure what exactly had happened to him, but there was an ache in his chest that he was sure would only get worse if he coughed.

Atle quickly reached for a cup on a nearby table, holding it to Olof's lips. Mead, of course, sweet and heavy. Soothing.

"Thank you," Olof said.

"When I found you in the woods, I thought you were dead."

"I thought I was dead too. Those men who did this to me... They were Gaetes."

"Engaged by your father's men, acting on your father's orders," Atle said, brows knotting.

It was the fact that Olof wasn't surprised by it that hurt the most.

"Was I supposed to have died?"

"I think they wanted you injured enough that I would get off my horse to help you without thinking about it. Get me focused on you so that I'd be easier to kill, perhaps. The ultimate goal was to kill both of us."

Olof sighed, unable to think of anything to say. Even a curse seemed pathetic and inadequate.

“Olof...” Atle looked down at his hands. “I’ve killed your father. I had to. He plotted to kill me and I had to retaliate. That has a lot of implications.”

“Indeed.”

“You could kill me for vengeance.”

“Debatable,” Olof managed to say, echoing what Atle had said that night in the dark woods.

Atle smiled at him then, a hesitant smile that told Olof that Atle was probably still weak in the face of whatever it was between them. Because if he wasn’t, he should have killed Olof and claimed the Funir throne for himself.

“You’re the king now, although I think you need to get to Funir to claim the throne as soon as you can.”

“Maybe I won’t,” Olof said, swallowing around the dryness in his throat. “Maybe I’ll decide that I’ve had enough of court life.”

“You would make a good king though, and you’re popular with the people.”

“You’re a jarl, Atle, aren’t you? Do you enjoy it? If someone gave you a chance to do something else, would you take it?”

“I’m only jarl for as long as the people want me to be. When they don’t, they will choose someone else. As long as they do want me, however, I have a duty to them.”

“Are you saying I have a duty to the people of Funir?”

“I think they deserve a good king after decades with a bad one.”

Olof looked away from Atle and towards the fire that was burning in the room. He didn’t have any ambitions to be king. All he wanted was to mean something to Atle.

“What about...” Olof started, feeling unspeakably childish for raising the issue. He couldn’t bring himself to actually say the word *us*, and instead made a vague gesture with his hand between them. Even that small movement hurt.

“We will forge an alliance, King Olof,” Atle said, his smile now much wider and more genuine. Reaching his eyes. “Trade routes will be opened. My men can travel out onto the Austmarr; your men can travel on the rivers inland. There will be commerce between us. Friendship and joint feast days. The jarl of

Granbyr and the king of Funir..." Atle took Olof's hand, letting his thumb rub gently against the skin. "Will meet often," he said, crooking an eyebrow. "There might be talk of how unusually friendly they seem, but no one will think it anything other than friendship. What do you think?"

Olof smiled then although his lips were so dry it hurt. "I think that sounds very agreeable."

He tried to move to his side, but something that was pressed against his ribs hurt. He let go of Atle and put his hand to it, realising it was a small object wrapped in his bandages. He pulled it out and found himself looking at a small bit of bone with a carved rune on it.

"What's this?" Olof asked, worried he was subjected to witchcraft.

"A healing rune. Aslaug put it there to appeal to Odin to heal you. She didn't mean to offend."

"I'm not offended. I'm very grateful to her."

"She says you walk with Odin, not White Christ."

"I don't know who I'm walking with anymore," Olof said, terrified of the truth in that. "Apart from you." He felt like he was glowing with embarrassment, but he pushed on. "I feel like I know what I'm doing when I'm with you."

"Isn't that enough? Everything else is just details." Atle pressed smiling lips against Olof's forehead. "Go back to sleep now. Heal. And when you're well, we'll rule this land together."

## **The End**

## **Author Bio**

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