

ONE

SPRING 882CE, ALDEIGJUBORG, GARDARIKE

Hands tugged at my clothing, my arm, anything they could reach. The bride's grasp was the most insistent. She pulled me into the circle's centre as women whirled around us in a ring of colourful gowns. Her face was flushed with excitement as the words of the song echoed in neat rounds. 'He will love her forever,' the singing began again as Helga held me tight and whispered in my ear.

'Will Mikel like me?' Her voice caught at the mention of the man she would marry by day's end.

The women were oblivious to her concern. The melody continued without us. 'And bring her flowers every morn and she will take him to their bed and from there, children born.'

'Mikel already loves you.' My voice strained to rise above the gaggle of voices.

The blank look on her face told me my answer had not been response enough to the question that went beyond her asking. She grabbed me by the wrist and broke the circle, dragging me away as far as the confined space would allow. The singing continued and, assured that they would not overhear us, she returned her attention to her previous question.

'Do you think Mikel will *like* me?' she intimated with the arch of her eyebrow.

The meaning was now plain and not a conversation I was keen to traverse. The so-called 'joys' of marriage were unknown to me, and I did not want to add the burden of my own poor experience to her growing concern.

‘Shouldn’t you discuss this with your mother?’ I tried to escape the uncomfortable issue, scanning the room for Helga’s mother, Hilde.

The circle was again searching for its centre. ‘He found her in a river,’ they began but took the hint when I shooed them away. It was not a day to be displeased over spoiled fun, so they encircled someone more willing to enjoy the merrymaking, my daughter Freyja. The infant, content with the attention, thankfully could not understand the words or the song’s meaning that was sung.

‘Mother has told me what to expect, but I am scared because she had nothing helpful to say about it,’ Helga worried.

The poor girl. What was she to look for when those around her had little good to speak of it? I wondered why people bothered with weddings in the first place. ‘I am sure Luca has instructed Mikel how to be a good husband to you.’

‘And what if he hasn’t?’

‘Then you must tell him if he does something that displeases you,’ I replied.

Unsatisfied with the answer, she proceeded. ‘But you did not enjoy being married. What if it’s no different for me?’

‘That’s unlikely. For one, you know and like your husband-to-be.’

A tug at my dress alerted me to Freyja, who pulled herself into my lap. Her tousled curls bounced around with her frantic movements. She was a pretty child, her blue eyes striking and her brown hair tumbled thick just like her mother’s had. *How long would it be before someone noticed that similarity?* The thought unsettled me.

‘And do not think of using my life as a stick to measure the depth of the river. I was married barely two years, unhappy as it was. Yours will be nothing like it,’ I cautioned Helga.

She nodded. Perhaps there was some wisdom in my words.

‘More flowers?’ I offered, noticing the sprig of lilac blossoms Helga turned over in her hands.

‘If you can find room for it.’ She turned from me so that I might slot it into place along with the others that adorned her chestnut plaits. With the sprig in place and her hair smoothed after the raucous dancing, she was ready.

‘The purple suits your hair and will look beautiful in the setting of the forest too. These are in bloom. I saw them just yesterday in the clearing.’

Helga stiffened at the mention of the location of the pagan ceremony.

‘I am relieved that Mikel agreed our union would also receive blessing in our church, though how you managed it remains a mystery.’

‘It was nothing,’ I lied. It had taken many weeks to convince the priest to allow it, and the priest obviously harboured an ill-founded hope of my conversion to his faith, regardless of my insistence that I had no desire to do so. As long as the ceremony happened, the man could believe what he wanted. ‘And I am glad you were able to compromise.’ Though, she faced no opposition from Mikel, who was keen to give his bride her heart’s desires so long as he could be married to her.

‘But what will our children be?’ she cried, realising that it would conflict any offspring they would have.

‘Odin’s beard, Helga! Are you only thinking of this now? Try not to worry about it. You will have enough time to talk to Mikel before a *barn* comes along.’

She sighed. ‘It is easier for you and Kjarr. You both believe the same thing.’

I shifted. Kjarr and I had never talked about having children. We hadn’t spoken at all since we were married. He left the year before on trade to return in the spring, but I had no word of him.

‘I’m sorry, I know this is hard for you.’ Helga drew me into her embrace. ‘He will be home soon.’

‘But if he does not reach the Volkhov before the snow, he will need to wait many months for it to thaw. He would have to overwinter in another city, and it could be almost another year before I see him again.’ It had plagued my thoughts, and I blamed the boredom of a lengthy winter.

‘I will pray that he makes it,’ Helga said, clasping her hands together. ‘I don’t think I could bear it if Mikel was a merchant and had to go away for long periods of time.’

‘We should not think about unhappiness today. Not on a day of celebration.’ My voice strained with the effort of lifting Freyja onto my

hip as I stood. "Time to go?" I asked Hilde, who had left her appearance until that very moment.

With an efficient nod of her head, she swept the women out of my home and into the street. The procession wove its way toward the church, Freyja bouncing in my arms with every step.

Helga puffed, though the pace was steady, "I still don't understand how you convinced the priest to marry us."

"Your man of God knows I have a healthy curiosity in his religion." The memory of my rapid-fire questioning of the priest creased my mouth in a self-satisfied smirk as we passed the lines of merchant houses.

"Father Niall? He seems quite stern to me. If I ever had questions as a child, he would say, "It is not for you to ask of the Lord," she remembered with a shudder, her hand reaching to steady the flowers topping her hair.

The holy man had an unsmiling face and encountered no humour in the world. I had talked to him many times about his religion and found he grossly overestimated his ability to bring 'heathens' into the fold.

"He finds me quite persuasive," I explained to Helga, shifting Freyja's weight to my other hip. "And, I would wager, your wedding contains the most heathens he has ever had under his holy roof." My mocking tone evident, I laughed to myself. "Likely thinks he is going to have some new converts after today."

As we cleared the open space of the market, she laughed. "Maybe he will." The glint in Helga's eye told me she saw past the mockery. "And you?" She turned to Freyja. "Will you remain the most adorable heathen I have ever known?" It was her turn to tease now.

"I do hope so, Odin's beard!"

Helga already pined for a child, and once her marriage was completed, I realised, she might have one of her own. Freyja reached up with her pudgy infant hands and, as gently as was possible with her developing coordination, grabbed a tendril of Helga's hair. My friend never tired of my daughter, never spoke harshly, and in return, Freyja loved no one better. An involuntary smile pulled at the corner of my mouth as I thought about how much my life had altered in Aldeigjuborg. My dreams of adventure were not gone but were silently waiting while I was striding toward my current ambitions of enterprise. I found it was not only my mind that had changed, my body, too, had yielded

from its hard muscles to one of more feminine softness. My heart, once guarded against love, had also softened, though that was not as visible except when attending a wedding I would have once scorned.

‘Go on with you.’ I laughed, gently pushing Helga towards the door. ‘It’s time for you to be married.’

Not wanting to ruin Helga’s day with my derision of her faith, I loitered at the entrance to the church with Freyja.

Weddings had always been something for me to endure rather than enjoy. That much I had learned the first time I wed, but this was different, I reminded myself. The bride, Helga, who had been a helper of all sorts to me, had become my dearest friend. And she married for love. This day wouldn’t be like my experience. This would be a day of smiles, and yet I found my lips remained a grim line as my mind pulled me back to my first marriage, where I was joined to the ageing Auden. Though I only suffered through two winters of marriage to him, it was enough to deter any further willingness. The Norns, however, had pulled at the strings that bound me to my fate. Though I resisted, I had been handfasted to Kjarr the year before in a strange union in which we shared nothing more than a chaste kiss. It had been an agreement between two friends rather than lovers. Time had kept Kjarr and I separated, during which I longed for something more against all my previous hesitations.

‘She needs you,’ Helga’s mother Hilde whispered in my ear, jolting me from my thoughts.

With all effort, the straight line of my mouth curved upwards into a weak smile. ‘Of course.’

‘Your mind cannot be elsewhere. She needs your strength today. She jitters around like a buzzing insect.’ Her voice was heavily accented by the native tongue, but I had long since come to understand her and the dialect. Hilde always looked past what was on the outside. She spoke directly to the core of a person.

I squeezed her hand and, choosing only to respond to the supplication regarding her daughter, I responded, ‘She needs you too, as she always will.’

Hilde dismissed the claim with a shake of her head, watching her daughter smooth the front of her new green dress. The colour had been difficult to achieve. Eventually, the right amount of nettle leaves

and iron mordant had given us the perfect shade of soft green to complement her similarly coloured eyes and delicate features.

'She looks up to you,' Hilde whispered without a trace of jealousy. There was nothing but recognition of the relationship that had been forged. 'Are you sure you will not come in?'

With an incline of my head, I answered, 'There are some things that I cannot do, not even for those closest to me.'

She nodded, passing me with a gentle hold on my shoulder as she disappeared into the church. For some time I stared outwards, pointing out things across the square to keep Freyja's interest, but the child was far more enthralled by the happenings inside the religious house. At a distance, I saw Father Niall blessing their union as the couple lit candles, then exchanged vows and rings made from leather. An eruption of cheers told me the matter concluded, and Helga and the Christian world considered the pair married. The couple exited the church to a flurry of exuberant onlookers who decorated the pair with sprigs and blossoms - much to Helga's delight.

Once the party had gathered outside, it was the women who led the way to the forest beyond the city walls for the rituals that would satisfy the old gods. As the couple walked behind the leaders, well-wishers yelled to them their own advice for a long marriage. Flowers, leaves and grass were tossed into the air and fell to the ground as we walked. We made our way through the town, proceeding past the Skogarmaor. Old Ivar, the tavern keeper, leaned out the door, smiling and raising a cup to the couple. Through the gates, the guards yelled bawdy comments that made the younger women blush and the older women wag their fingers as if the soldiers were naughty children. The merchants, their boats in the shallows for repair, banged tools against wood as they cheered our procession filing over the bridge. It gladdened folk to see a joyous moment when so much of the past winter seemed long, dark and dull. Through the outlying homesteads and farms, small children ran alongside, farmers waved and women sang until they lost sight of our group as it faded into the cover of the forest. The mood of the wedding party changed as the journey ended in the clearing. Those who were not of the old faith lingered at the back, their sense of unease palpable. Those who kept with the Aesir were comfortable with the solemnity of the Gothi who stood below the birch trees. The light of

the day seeped in between the leafy coverage of branches overhead, giving the impression of a green cavern - the perfect place to call the gods to witness. Mikel led the unsure Helga by the hand to the middle of the gathering, focussing his gaze on his bride, bestowing on her a beaming smile.

‘I call on the gods to witness and bless my marriage to Helga,’ he spoke clearly amongst the canopy of trees. ‘Frigg, goddess of marriage and fertility, bless us. Sif and Freyja, may you bless us with many healthy offspring.’ He looked up to the sky, baring his throat. A bulge at his gullet testified he was now a grown man. He bore little resemblance to the thin and gangly child I had known on my journey to Aldeigjuborg. ‘Odin, grant me the wisdom to understand my wife, who must have been created with the virtues of Balder himself,’ he said with a wink in Helga’s direction. ‘And I ask you to bless me with the strength to provide for my wife and whatever children we may have,’ he finished.

Helga would not summon the gods to witness. Her part was already done. And with Mikel asking for the blessings of the gods, there was but one thing left to do. Behind Mikel, Luca passed him a sword. Traditionally, it would have been a hereditary weapon that was handed from father to son and would be held on trust by Helga for their son to use when he grew old enough. This sword would be mostly symbolic, as neither Mikel nor Luca were warriors, though I had my suspicions that at one time Luca might have been. An auger might have been a better tool upon which to swear, as they were both carpenters, but tradition held fast. Mikel gently removed the leather ring from around Helga’s finger. He placed it on the hilt of the sword and passed it back to her, making his vow to protect and provide for her throughout their marriage. Helga did not know what to do, and she looked towards me. I urged her to take the ring from the hilt and place it on her own finger. Once she had done so, the circle cheered, and everyone rushed forward to congratulate Helga and Mikel.

‘I did not know what was happening.’ Helga laughed when I reached her through the crowd. ‘He didn’t tell me anything.’

‘You did well.’

‘I like your traditions.’ She smiled. ‘It feels like a celebration.’

‘You mean, more than a stiff man in a dress giving orders?’

Helga ignored the jibe.

‘There is a lot more drinking in our practices,’ Luca interjected with a laugh as we followed the procession up to the newlywed’s home on the outside of town, close to Helga’s mother’s home. People gathered about her once more.

‘Vell done, daughter,’ Hilde said, hugging Helga, a proud smile covering her face.

‘Once we go inside your house, there are a few more traditions before we leave you in peace to begin your married life,’ I explained.

A becoming blush darkened her cheeks. ‘The loving cup? Mikel told me something about that. Drinking from the same cup of mead during our honeymoon seems easy enough.’

I took her by the arm, and we continued on to the house. ‘Earlier I stowed the food and drink inside so the guests would not have to wait.’

‘And Mikel and I have been working on some furniture. I do hope you like it.’ Luca beamed, joining the procession.

‘This is like a dream,’ Helga said with a wistful smile as the house came into view.

It was a modest abode of one room for sleeping and living. A small landing formed the entrance, and the hearth inside was large enough to keep them both warm without having to fill it with a forest full of firewood.

Mikel, who had freed himself from all the well-wishers, sprung up beside us, seizing the hand of his bride. He spun her about in a circle into his arms, giving her a non-too-innocent kiss.

Waiting for them to break for breath before speaking, I explained to Mikel that we had already set the fare up for the feast. ‘After the feasting, tomorrow morning, I can come to help you clean up if you like.’

With a roguish grin echoing the delight of his bride, he answered, ‘Thank you for the offer, Signe. But I think we will be too busy for visitors.’