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“You were born of scales and sorrow, and it will destroy you, and everyone you love.”

This was the last thing young Jormun Nadr’s mother said to her daughter before she became a traitor to her people and fled to the enemy.

From that moment on, the fate of the girl born of scales and sorrow was no longer hers, for her mother’s words had filled her head like a sickness with no cure. It was the day she’d learned that she’d been born with the blood of the two worst *kunnastas*—a father with trickster blood and a mother with sorrow blood. Once the people of her small seaside village came to know this truth, it didn’t take long for them to believe that she was fated to do terrible things.

When she was old enough to feel their disgust and derision follow her like a stench, she fought against her fate. But she had no way of knowing that there would come a day when her cursed blood would save her life. Or that, in doing so, it would throw her into the arms of her own destruction.

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“Get your hands off me,” Jormun seethed, wishing for possibly the first time in her life that she wasn’t wearing gloves as she yanked at the guard’s iron grip on her forearm. Her old, tattered clothes were starting to unravel from her efforts, and she wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold out before her skin would be exposed. But she couldn’t just stand by

while the Dreng soldiers hauled her father off in chains. Even if the charges against him were true.

The guard remained stoic against her struggle, refusing to loosen his hold on her as she watched her father get taken away.

“Da!” she cried out.

The wooden, magic-drawn prison now holding him captive started clamoring down the cobblestone street, creaking and screaming in defiance. She watched as a pale face and flashing green eyes, partially hidden by long tangles of ebony hair, peered out through the bars of the window—and she thought she saw a grin on her father’s thin lips before the carriage turned a corner, out of sight.

Her knees buckled beneath her, her heart shattering into a thousand pieces inside her chest and shredding her lungs. Just then, the soldier’s hand slipped, exposing her wrist as the cloth between her shirt and glove fell away easily. He made an awful, guttural sound as the venom from her skin coated his hand, leaving behind angry red blisters. Some of the passersby turned in alarm, and she could hear them murmuring to each other words she’d heard her whole life: *cursed girl*. But she didn’t care.

Sparing the soldier a single glance, she haphazardly wrapped the cloth around her wrist again as she stood and ran after the carriage, hearing nothing but the man’s screams behind her.

*He'll be alright*, she told herself. She'd learned early on how much of her venom others could endure: any contact with her scaly skin longer than a few seconds could be deadly, but he'd recoiled from her quick enough. Most did.

Pushing past unsuspecting market-goers and nearly running over a mangy street dog, she struggled to hear the rattling of the carriage wheels over her own breathing. All she was given in return were the grumblings of those she'd disturbed in her haste and the ever-present din of the market.

She couldn't give up, though—not yet. Picking up her pace, she raced by colorful tents and persistent merchants, stopping at the next street, where it was nearly empty except for a homeless man spouting nonsense. But, looking around frantically, her own raven-black hair—like her father's—fluttering around her face from the ocean breeze behind her, she realized that she was too late: the cart carrying her father was gone.

He wasn't going to come back this time, and now she had no choice but to leave the city of Flie forever.

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“I still don't understand why you have to go,” Fen, her younger brother, said for what had to be the tenth time since she'd gotten home. The moment she'd burst in the door, breathless and tears streaming down her face, she knew she wouldn't be able to hide from him that something was wrong. But he was being particularly thick-headed about it all, and

she'd spent nearly half an hour explaining what had happened at the harbor as she hastily packed her few belongings. Why their father hadn't come home—why he would probably *never* come home. Why she needed to leave before the sun rose the next day.

“I hurt someone Fen,” she explained again. “And not just anyone—a soldier. It won't take them long to figure out who I am—*what* I am—and then they'll come to kill me. Or worse.” She swallowed the sudden fear that filled her throat. The Drengr soldiers were known for their malicious and cruel nature, especially when it came to those like her.

Jormun had been convinced for some time now that those who became soldiers *had* to be branded with a rune that stole their humanity; it was the only explanation for why her best friend had nearly betrayed her just before he was shipped off to fight in the war against the Andskoti.

A war that her father had managed to keep her and her brother out of. And now he was rotting away in a cell until the Folkhagi cast down their sentence, which she had no doubt would be death. Then there would be nothing to stop the Folkhagi from enlisting her and her brother, and turning them into weapons. Or killing them before anyone else could.

She sighed. “Father is going to be found guilty of his crimes. They'll come for us next, Fen, and I'm not going to be here when they do.”

Shoving in the last bit of clothes that she could fit into her pack, she cinched it shut, pulled up the hood of her cloak so her features were hidden in shadow, and started towards the door. But Fen put a muscled arm out across the threshold, blocking her way. His eyes glinted gray in the low light when she looked up at him.

“And you think running away like *she* did is the right thing to do? Don’t you want to at least try to rescue Da?”

His words stung; he knew as well as she did that their mother had left because of her. That the grief of having a cursed daughter was too much, even for someone with the sorrow *kunnasta*. Or maybe it was *because* of her *kannasta* that it had become impossible for her to stay. It wasn’t until years later that they found out Fen was cursed too, and that Jormun wasn’t the only one that would fall to a terrible fate.

She looked up at him, knowing her next words needed to carve deep enough that he would let her go. “He’s not worth it. And he sure as Hel wouldn’t do the same for you.” Shaking her head, she continued. “When are you going to get it, Fen? He doesn’t love you, he doesn’t love me. He only loves himself. Odin knows he’s broken himself out of worse places before; he’ll do it again, and without your help. Don’t risk your life for someone that wouldn’t do the same for you.”

Fen looked at her a moment, his jaw popping as he grit his teeth. She could feel his resolve faltering. *Let me go*, she thought at him.

Then, as if he'd heard her, he deflated, his shoulders crumpling in defeat. "At least let me come with you," he told her quietly.

"I can't risk getting you into trouble, too; your *kunnasta* is too powerful to hide, brother. Besides, I'll blend in more if I'm alone." She reached up to touch his face lightly, wondering at the patches of reddish-black stubble on his cheeks and angular jawline. *When did we both get so old?*

Fen pulled her into his arms—he was warmth and softness and *home*. She felt tears well up behind her eyes painfully, but she pushed them away.

"Promise me you'll be safe." He pulled back to look at her as he said this. "And don't let anyone touch you. If anyone out there realizes you're cursed..." She felt him shudder. "I love you, Jormun. Always will."

"Love you too, Fen," she told him, then held her breath as she pushed past him and rushed out into the cold mist of the night.

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The docks were so much quieter in the absence of day; when she was a child, Jormun had loved the way the ships swayed in the darkness, the rows of white sails piercing the stars, the sound of the waves whispering as they lapped up onto the jagged rocks. She'd even dreamed about being a captain, completely taken with the idea of sailing the endless seas with no one to tell her what to do. Now it made her sick to her

stomach. She had no idea how many months—maybe even years—she'd have to spend out on the roiling waves of the sea before the Drengir and the Folkhagi forgot about her. Before it was safe to come back to her brother and piece together what was left of her family.

She was eyeing a particularly derelict vessel with patched-up sails and layers of barnacles on the underbelly, where she hoped no one would notice another person aboard, when the distinct sound of a cannon ball sailing through the air and crashing through wood broke into the night like a thief.

Instinctively, she threw her arms over her head—and a hand latched onto her shoulder. She reached for the hilt of the dagger secured around her hips, turning quickly to find the face of her brother rather than that of a stranger. Her shoulders sagged in relief, and she whacked him with the broad side of the blade.

“What the Hel is wrong with you? I could've killed you,” she said, now hearing the distinct sound of gunshots nearby.

Fen grinned. “Come on, Jormun, you didn't think I'd let you go alone, did you?”

“You're the worst,” she told him, though she found her mouth was turned up into a grin in return.

“Right back at you,” he replied before turning back to the docks. “Bad spot of luck there; looks like the harbor is under attack.”

Jormun followed his gaze and saw that nearly a dozen ships had been set ablaze. Sparks and gunfire echoed along the buildings and skipped across the water from the docks, but they were shooting into nothingness.

“Shite,” she whispered. “Even if a ship *did* make it out of the harbor, it’d be blown to bits.” She shook her head. “Who would be shooting at us at this time of night?”

Fen looked thoughtful. “The Andskoti wouldn’t be stupid enough to attack outright...”

Jormun scanned the dark horizon while her brother kept muttering to himself, until another fiery cannon ball burst out of a ship near the mouth of the bay. Only one ship could fit through that mouth at a time, which meant that they were alone, but heavily armed.

*Pirates*, she thought.

“I have an idea,” she said, turning back to her brother. “But you’re not going to like it.”

He sighed. “Well, I’ve gotten this far trusting your shoddy judgment. Might as well see it all the way to the end.”

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“You were right; I don’t like this,” her brother commented, his teeth chattering audibly in the cold, exposed arms crossed tightly over his chest.

“Come on, Fen,” Jormun answered back as the row boat grazed the side of the pirate’s ship. “You’ve done worse for less.”

“But not right under the noses of bloody pirates,” he grumbled.

She dropped the oars and took her brother’s face in her hands. “This is our only option. Either we make peace with these pirates and convince them that they need us, or we die at the hands of the Folkhagi.”

“You’re forgetting about the third option, which is to be forced to walk the plank over shark-infested waters by said pirates.”

Jormun rolled her eyes, dropping her hands. “They’re not all that bad.”

“As if you’ve actually met one,” Fen grumbled, then sighed. “Fine, there are worse ways to go.”

Her brother closed his eyes and Jormun smiled. Watching Fen transform had always fascinated her: his slick black hair grew wild, his nose and mouth forming itself into a snout, dark hair growing all along his body and his muscles inflating beneath his baggy clothes. When he was done, he opened his eyes again, and they were a sharp silver in the moonlight—like hot pewter over a blacksmith’s fire.

Without another word, he leapt towards the side of the ship—she heard the scraping of his claws as they sunk into the wood. Quietly, he climbed up the way he had hundreds of times before, disappearing over the edge of the ship.

What felt like hours later, when Jormun had grown bored of nothing but the gentle rocking of the waves, a rope floated

down from where she'd watched her brother disappear, the end of it pooling in the dark water below. Grinning, she grabbed at the twisted twine and pulled herself up onto the deck, pack still slung over her back. Once her boots found purchase, she lifted her head—just as rough hands grabbed at her shoulders and pushed her to her knees. A gag was thrown over her mouth before she could make a sound, her hands tied behind her back just as quickly. She could feel the fabric at her wrists starting to unravel, but her bindings were too tight to fix it.

A dozen or so pirates filled the space she'd hoped would be empty, with rusty swords, sea-drenched rags, and half-drunk bottles of rum. Some were sharing a laugh at her expense, while others stared at her in a way that made her uncomfortable.

“And what do we have here?” asked one of the pirates, stumbling down from where he'd been perched on one of the larger barrels of rum. He was skin and bones, long gray hair strung together in clumps around his narrow face. “A dog and its pet mouse.”

Hearing a growl beside her, she turned to find her brother in much the same position as she was, except that they'd used metal chains rather than rope to bind him. He hadn't shifted back yet; he was too distraught. Swallowing, she realized they were in a lot more trouble than she'd anticipated. Curling her

fists, she forced small bits of poison out of the pores of her skin where the rope now touched it at her wrists.

She glared at the man who'd spoken, mumbling through her gag. He leaned in, coming closer to her.

“What’s that, little mouse? You want some cheese?”

Laughter scattered among his fellow pirates, and when he turned his head to acknowledge them, she broke free of her ropes and flung what was left of them around the pirate’s neck, using her other hand to remove the gag.

“I am no mouse,” she told him. “I am a snake that could kill you with a single touch.”

“Enough,” a booming voice called out, and something about the sound seemed to rattle along her bones.

Her head snapped to where the voice had come from, and she nearly lost her grip on the man. Standing before her was a boy no older than twenty, long blonde hair braided haphazardly along the middle of his otherwise shaven head. Lean muscles flexed beneath a simple white tunic and tight black pants, with black boots that had seen better days. He bore no runes, no scars, no signs that he was a pirate—only a belted scabbard around his hips with the runed leather hilt of a sword peeking out.

“Who are these stowaways, and what are they doing on my ship?” he asked no one in particular.

“Not sure, captain,” another pirate—a woman this time—answered in a slow, broken accent, pointing to Fen with one

long, bony finger. “Caught this one looking for a rope to help the other one onto the ship.”

The captain’s attention shifted to Jormun’s brother, and her grip around her prisoner’s neck tightened unwittingly. He choked and gasped for air, but she didn’t loosen her hold on him. At the sound, the captain finally met her gaze. His eyes were as blue as the deepest parts of the ocean: clear and wanton. She caught the flex of his hands, but that was all the response she was able to glean from him.

Jormun, on the other hand, felt something akin to lightning suddenly pulsing through her veins.

“And so you bound and gagged them?” he asked, not taking his eyes from her.

“They’re stowaways, captain,” the woman offered as explanation, throwing his words back at him.

“Have you learned nothing under my command? We do not treat the cursed this way,” the young captain told them as he stepped towards Jormun and her prisoner. She tensed up the closer to her he came. “Not when we’ve come all this way just to find them. And especially not when we’ve been graced with the presence of a Vargr, and even rarer, an Ormr.”

He was very close to her now as he said this, and though he held her fate and the fate of her brother in his hands, she was not afraid. She heard Fen growl against his gag again, but it sounded very far away. Her grip loosened on the man without much thought and he scrambled away from her—she

barely noticed. All she knew was that her blood was singing for this boy's, her shattered heart beating terribly loud against her ribcage.

The young captain was mere inches from her now, and he reached for a gloved hand loose at her side. Grasping her covered forearm lightly, he pulled her glove off slowly, one finger at a time; her heart felt like it was lodged in her throat. She should've pulled away by now, afraid of hurting him, but something told her not to. That it would be different this time.

Once the glove was gone and the salty air whipped at her exposed skin, he didn't hesitate before covering her hand with his.

An uneven breath gasped out of her at the electric current that suddenly pulsed between his skin and hers. It wasn't that she'd never been touched this way before; when she was little, the venom had only been on her chest and stomach and back. She'd been able to hold her mother's hand, touch the soft fur of the neighbor's dog. It wasn't until she'd come of age that it had begun to spread like wildfire to her arms and legs, and eventually her hands and feet.

Now was when the captain should be screaming in pain. But he wasn't. He just stared at her, holding her hand in his. She heard Fen make a strange sound in the back of his throat as the captain reached towards her neck, where her scales had recently begun to spread. She swallowed hard.

“Oh,” he breathed aloud, unbelievably, his hand inches from her neck. Then he grinned at her. “Fierce little Ormr, I do believe we will destroy each other.” Speaking louder, never breaking his gaze, he commanded, “Take them to my quarters. And set sail; we have a long journey ahead of us.”

The young captain’s crew murmured amongst themselves, but he didn’t seem to hear them.

“What’s your name?” he asked her, his voice low and smooth. Then she heard them cut the chains from Fen and remove his gag as he cursed at them.

She looked at him for a moment before pulling her hand out of his and rushing to her brother’s side. His appearance was much more human now, though his hair was still wild. But he was holding his wrists, which had clearly been rubbed raw from straining against the metal.

Looking back at the captain, ignoring the lightning that returned to her veins when she did, she said, “I’ll tell you nothing until I know that my brother and I are safe here.”

A slow smile climbed onto his lips. “This is my first time as captain that I can honestly say you’ll be safe on my ship. Not,” he amended, “that you or your brother would ever need my help. You can clearly take care of yourselves.”

“Who are you?” she asked as she stood to face him.

“My name is Rym,” he said without hesitation. “And this is my ship, the Stoedingr.”

“And how did you come to acquire this ship, *captain?*” Fen demanded mockingly, rising to stand on his feet.

Rym smiled. “By staging a mutiny and killing its previous captain, of course.”

Jormun shot Fen a look before turning back to Rym. “Perhaps I should rephrase my question,” she said. “*What* are you? There’s no godly reason why you should be able to touch me without screaming in agony. Without the poison in my blood blistering your skin and finding its way to your heart.”

Instead of answering her, his gaze sparked with intensity and the grin dropped from his face.

“Jormun, wait,” her brother whispered, and she turned her head towards him to keep one eye on the captain. “I’ve heard the name Rym before. He’s the youngest captain to ever sail the sea, but I’ve also heard rumors that he’s the son of Thor.”

At this, she marched up to Rym, fighting against the quivering in her stomach. “Where are you taking us?”

His calmness tore at her last nerve. “To the only place where you’ll find the answers you seek. To Asgard.”

Jormun couldn’t hold in the gasp that escaped her.

Fen laughed as he came to stand beside her. He and Rym were about the same height, though Fen had a couple inches of muscle over the pirate captain. “You’re mad,” he said. “The only way to get into Asgard is to be an actual god.”

He didn't answer.

She looked at him a moment, wondering, before her gaze shifted to his crew as they readied for the open sea. The longer she looked, the more she realized something was different about them. She watched one of them jump far higher than any human should've been able to as they unknotted a rope from one of the sails. Another grew a single flame in the palm of their hand to light the lamp at the helm.

"You're all gifted," Jormun realized aloud.

Rym grinned wordlessly and looked at her expectantly.

All her life, she knew there was something different about her—that she was more than she just a cursed girl. Rym had called her something; an Ormr. What else did he know about the questions she sought answers to? And why did he think they were going to destroy each other?

Before she could second-guess herself, she said, "I'm in."

"Damn it all to Hel," she heard her brother curse. "Should've never gotten on that bloody rowboat."

She took a step towards Rym as Fen stomped off. Something deep inside her told her that she was making the worst mistake of her life. But the electricity in her blood that sparked when she took Rym's hand in hers told her that she no longer cared for the burden of mistakes. Her fate was her own now, and she was finally ready to take it, just as the sun flashed over the horizon.