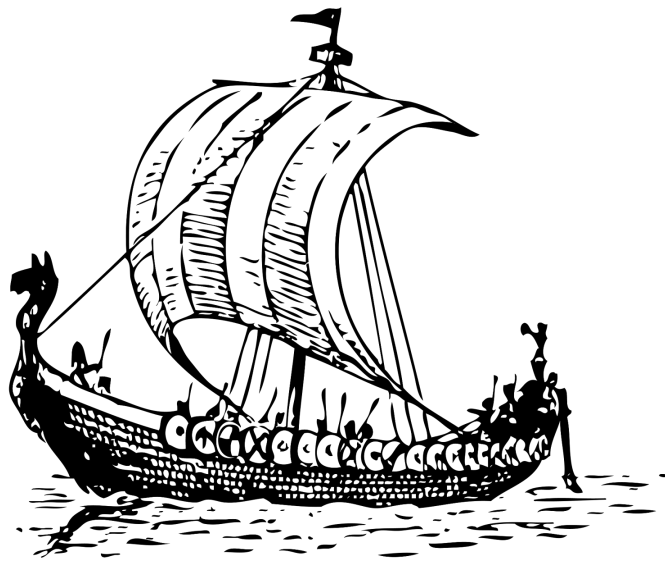


The Viking

By Carrie Cotten





CARRIE COTTEN
Gripping Christian Fiction

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Edited by Sarah Stasik

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Praise for *The Viking*

The Viking is a gripping and powerful story that takes the reader on a journey where faith and loyalties are tested. Ms. Cotten is a master at storytelling, drawing the reader into the world of her characters with fast-paced action, achingly beautiful romance, and faith woven into each page. You'll find yourself crying, laughing, and swooning, and your faith will be strengthened by the end as Cotten points the reader back to the One who loves beyond measure.

Latisha Sexton - Author of the In the Midst and Lavender Falls series

A beautiful and heartrending reminder that family is often found in the unlikeliest of places and God's plan takes impossibilities and turns them into stunning realities. *The Viking* raises the already soaring standard set by Cotten in *The Huntress*, bringing more action, higher stakes, and deeper motivations. The backstories of her characters will blow your mind and warm your heart—after breaking it just a bit.

Hannah Hood Lucero - Author of the Sons of Vigilance series

Travel back to medieval Europe in *The Viking*, Carrie Cotten's thrilling sequel to *The Huntress*. If you fell in love with Astrid and Eowin and the explosive sparks between them, you won't believe where she takes their epic, strongly Christian, twist-filled story or be able to put it down.

Heather Wood - Author of the Finding Home Series

Carrie Cotten has raised the bar once again with another epic tale of her Lionheart Women, delivering an unforgettable adventure you won't want to put down. *The Viking* deliciously blends friendship, romantic tension, and brilliantly written action, while interweaving the Gospel message faithfully throughout. Cotten has solidified herself as the queen of speculative fiction and medieval banter, and fans—new and old—will find *The Viking* to be a story they absolutely won't want to end.

-B.R. Goodwin, author of What Remains in the Wilderness, What Remains When Flowers Fade, and the Sugartree Romance series.

Dedication

To all the ones who have let the past define you, do not worship and make idols of your weaknesses. Hand them over to the One who can turn them into strengths.

Our own strength is never enough, but the Lord's is always sufficient.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalm 46:1

Acknowledgements

As always, Jesus, my Lord and Savior, receives all praise and honor and glory for anything good contained in these pages and for anything good that comes from this effort.

Secondly, my family deserves immense appreciation for all the missed meals and extra chores while these words were being written.

Speaking of these words, this book would not exist without the collaboration of so many people. Nicole, Brianna, Ashton, and Kelly, thank you for blazing the trail and taking the first crack at this story.

Jennifer, if you hadn't come to my rescue in the beginning, there wouldn't have even been one chapter—much less a completed novel. You deserve all the recognition for the fantastic developmental edits and countless messages from your crazy client who second guesses every word.

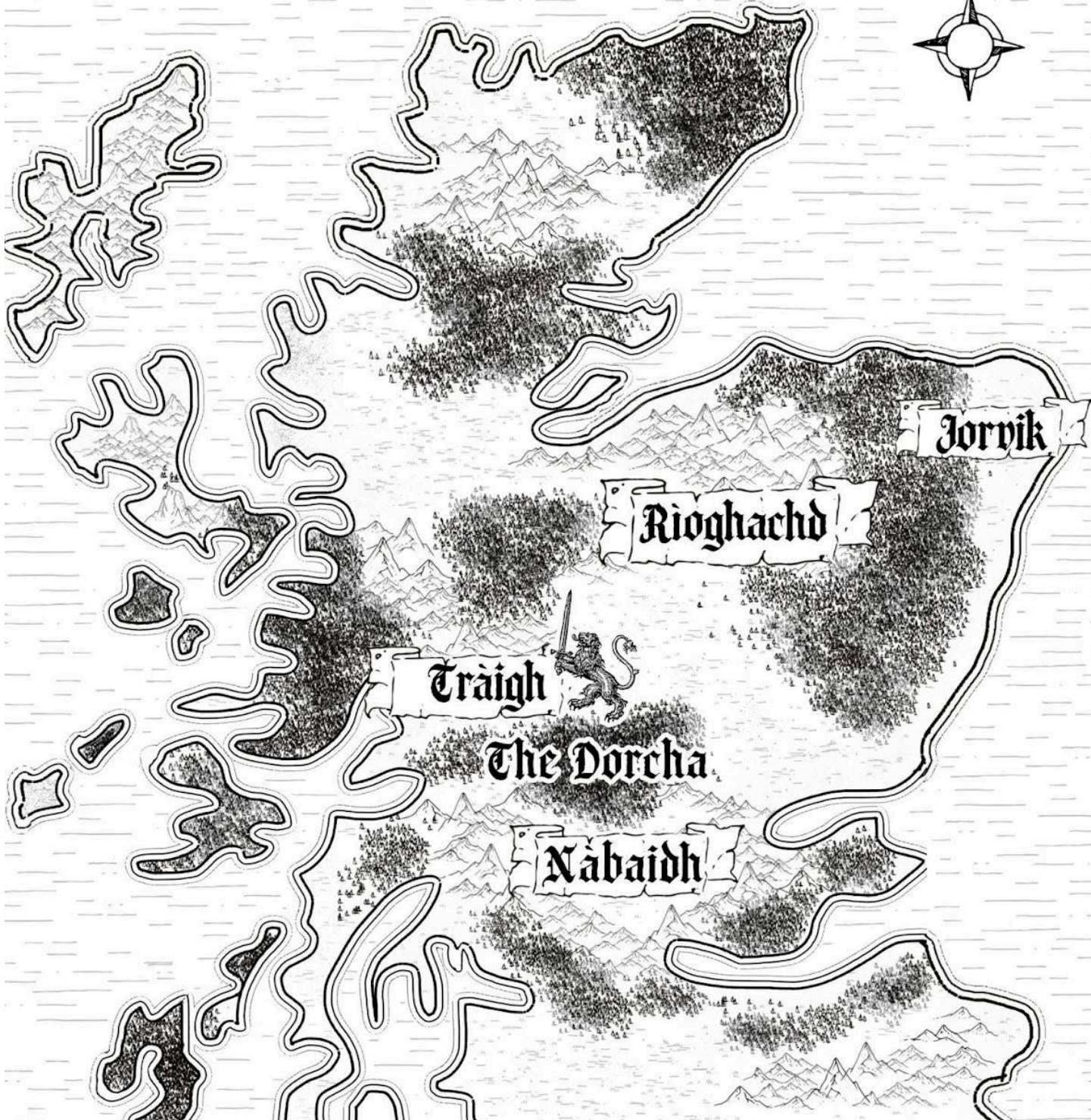
Christine, you have been such a resource for all the nitty-gritty Viking details. Thank you for your patience and all the hours you spent answering my questions. If there are any faults in my facts, it isn't because Christine didn't know it—it's because I didn't ask her! If there is something to know about Vikings, Christine knows it.

To my incredible beta team: Dani, Christine, Heather, Myra, Hannah, and Latisha. You guys challenged and uplifted me with your thoughtful insight and helped me fill in all my plot holes.

To Sarah, who agreed to take on the daunting task of editing this beast, thank you my friend. Good thing you have experience with dragons!

And to everyone who kept reaching out, encouraging me to keep going when I wanted to give up: Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The Vestlands

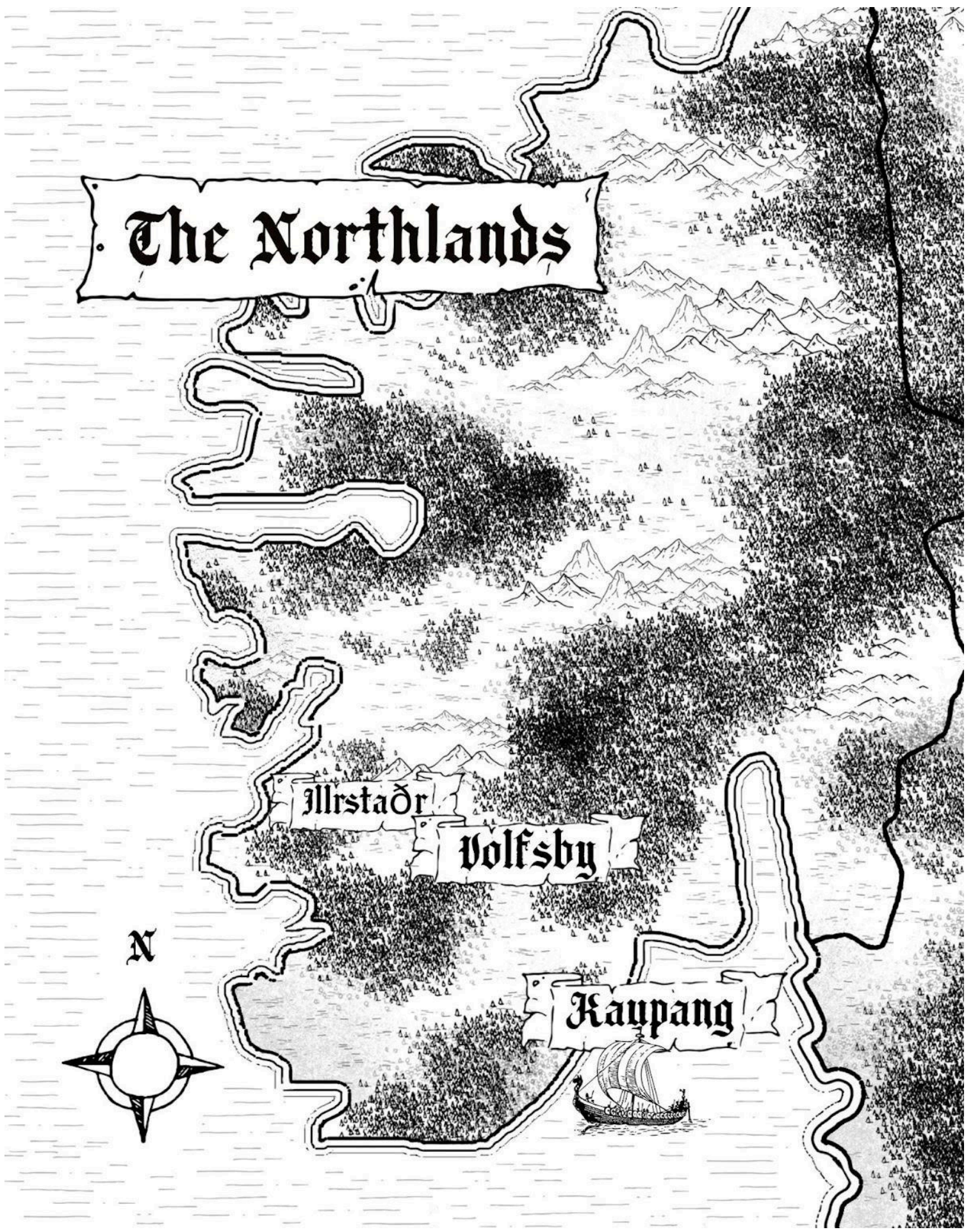
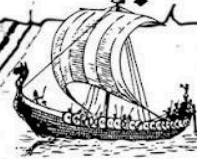
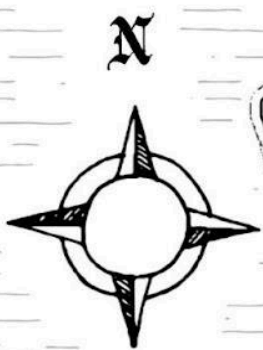


The Northlands

Illstaðr

Völsby

Kaupang



Pronunciation Guide

Astrid - /A-strid/

Eowin - /Ay·uh·wn/

Cyrene - /Sih-reen/

Ysra - /Yur-sruh/

Bjorn - /Byorn/

Jarteign - /Jar-tayn/

Njall - /Nuh-jall/

Isa - /Ee-suh/

Tràigh - /T^hra:j/

Dorcha - /Do(r)-huh/

An T-aon - /Ahnt-ay-on/

Rìoghachd - /Ree-oh-gacht/

Nàbaidh - /Nah-bee/

Taranau - /Ta(r)-nah/

Volfsby - /Vulfs-bee/

Illstaðr - /Ill-stray-dur/

Kaupang - /Cow-payng/

Prologue—Astrid

808AD

That she'd managed to stay hidden for a full night and day could only have been a blessing from the gods. The lurch of the longboat over a surly wave shook Astrid from her sea-sickened stupor. Stomach cramping from hunger and mouth so dry she feared parting her lips would release a cloud of dust, she curled tighter into the crate half-stuffed with strips of linen. The crew of her father's longboat would use them to bind their wounds after a trip to whichever shore they planned to plunder. From the muffled conversations she'd heard surrounding her hiding place, they were still days away from that land.

Her stomach cramped again; her bladder was painfully full despite her thirst. She just needed to last until they were too far to turn back. Blinding sunlight poured between the splinter-riddled slats of her self-imposed prison. She squeezed her eyes closed, begging whatever gods would listen to let her slip off to sleep for another day. Or an hour. A minute? She would accept any gift of time to find relief from the ache in her bones after being trapped in her suffocating hiding place for so long.

The sharp curse of a crew member came too quickly before the grating creak of the crate's lid. Her futile attempts to bury herself beneath the meager pile of linens were useless. She was too slow, her moon-white hair too bright, and the linens too few.

"What is this?" Her eldest brother's gruff voice scraped against her ears as, with one hand, he hauled her upward by her arm into the blinding light. His other arm was tucked tightly against his chest, blood trickling from the wound that had driven him to seek entrance into her sanctuary.

She raised a hand to shield her eyes as footsteps approached. Her heart nearly burst from her chest when she realized they belonged to her father.

"Astrid?" His voice, at first infused with concern, instantly turned harsh. "What are you doing here?"

Her brother's somewhat gentle grasp was exchanged for the bone-breaking strength of Bjorn Amundsen. Astrid trembled under her father's furious glare, her mouth too dry to form words. His fingers pressed into her already bruised arms, drawing a strangled cry from her lips.

"What have you done? How could you have dishonored me like this?" Her father shook her, finally loosening her tongue.

"Faðir, I... I was afraid! I did not know what to—"

"Afraid?" Her father's grasp grew tighter, and Astrid bit her lip to keep from crying out. His brown eyes blazed against sun-darkened skin. The light, reflected off the waves, gave his beard the appearance of red-hot coals. He was a raging fire, ready to consume her. In all her thirteen years, she'd never been as afraid of her father as she was at that moment. "Do you know what I had to do to..."

Bjorn released his grasp with a jerk that sent Astrid sprawling in a heap on the deck. He ran his hands over dark hair that rose in a plaited ridge down the center of his skull before releasing a roar that threatened to shake the clouds from the sky. He made a full lap across the length of the longboard before storming back to where she cowered against the unmoving legs of her eldest brother.

Her father glared at her and then moved to the side of the longboat, gripping the curved planks with such force the wood groaned beneath his palms. A sob ripped up through Astrid's chest, spilling out onto the sea-salted boards beneath her. The sound drew her father's stern scowl back to her face, and he slammed his fist against the waist-high edge of the craft, shaking the boat to its very bowels. Astrid curled herself into a ball, wishing to vanish and become one with the vessel that held her afloat.

Sinister words spoken in a hushed but threatening tone came back to her. *No one will believe you.*

Her father bellowed his frustrations to the sea, slamming his fist against the sun-paled oak of the longboat's sturdy side once. Twice. Three times.

"Plot our course to the Vestlands," he ordered her two brothers and his men, who had stilled at the oars. "Our journey is cut short."

Unbothered by her whimper, he grabbed her by the dingy sleeves of her dress. "We will take whatever plunder we can gather, and with the gods' favor, it will be enough to undo the damage you have done."

Astrid turned her head, finding twenty pairs of eyes staring at her as if they knew—as if they could see. She looked up at her father, pushing herself to her knees.

"Faðir, please." She clasped her hands together in front of her chest.

"You have no faðir." His voice was as hard and cold as the frozen ground in winter.

He snatched her up with one hand, lifting her so that her toes barely scraped the ground, and dragged her back toward the crate where she'd been hiding.

He was going to lock her in. She'd starve or die of thirst before they reached land. And if she did survive, the next time she saw the sky, she'd be back in Voflsby and delivered into the hands of the one who'd sent her running to her father's boat in the first place. The boat had already made its turn. They were heading to the Vestlands.

Everything she'd been threatened with would come true when they returned. Her family would be disgraced. She would be outlawed, cast away from everyone she loved. She was ruined. Astrid's breathing shallowed as the boat bobbed on growing waves. Hopelessness welled up in such a violent storm that she did the only thing she could. She became a wild animal. She screamed and clawed at her father's hand, willing to suffer his wrath rather than what awaited her at home. If he would not listen, she would pitch herself into the sea.

Taken by surprise, his hold slipped. She dropped to the deck, landing on her feet. He lunged, but she dodged his grasp, aiming for the side of the boat.

Realizing what she was about to do, her father shouted to the nearest oarsman, who dropped his oar and seized her around the waist.

"No!" she screamed against a growing wind. "Let me go! Let me go to the sea."

Gripped with the agony of every promised threat coming true, she fought, desperate to touch the water. To dip her fingers into its salty coolness just long enough for the god of the sea to sense her willingness to join him below the waves. Then he would take her. Even if she dwelled in his kingdom as a slave, it would be better than the life destined for her on shore. Even if there were no god of the sea and she drowned, it was better. Anything was better.

The oarsman struggled against her flailing but managed to get an arm around hers, pinning them to her sides. Unable to break free, she sagged against him, tears streaming down her wind-chapped face.

"It was not I who dishonored you!" she croaked as her father flew to snatch her from the oarsman's hold.

His nose nearly to hers and fire in his eyes, her father snapped, "What did you say?"

You will bring death to anyone you tell. She nearly took it back—nearly closed her lips and accepted what was to come. But her father was so strong. He was so brave. Surely he could survive that promised death.

With quivering lips, she confessed. Her father's jaw tightened with every word.

His stillness unnerving, her father stared, his brow drawn and face hard.

"Please believe me." Her plea was barely audible, desperation weakening her voice.

No one will believe you.

She watched as his eyes focused on her face, taking in her bruised cheek and split lip before traveling to the finger-shaped stripes on her neck that made it hard to swallow even a day later.

The rowers still worked, churning their way through choppy waves toward the darkening sky on the horizon and the Vestlands beyond.

Bjorn turned to her eldest brother, who stood silent at his side, having also heard Astrid's dark tale. His expression was as hard as their father's, a wordless rage boiling behind his pale eyes.

"Keep the course," Bjorn ordered.

Astrid was turned, her back to her father's chest. The cold eyes of his crew settled on her, roaming from her head to her toes. She had seen that same hungry look the night she ran and knew what it meant. Though she could still feel her father's anger, she curled her shoulders in, leaning closer against him.

Some of the men were her kin, but most were not. Many she had never seen before. And she understood why her father's voyages had been so successful. He was the commander of the most vicious crew in all of Volfsby.

Astrid released a cry as her father hauled her to the far end of the deck and dropped her in a shaded space between crates. Her pleas went unanswered as he walked away, the shadow of her middle brother's lean body blocking her view of the crew and the sea. She was free of the crate but trapped behind a wall of boxes and barrels.

Despair threatened to consume her as she pounded on the deck until her palms bled and her tears stained the wood. As she'd told her story, it seemed her father believed her—as if he was softening. But still, he'd commanded the crew to turn back. She couldn't stomach being trapped in that open prison with every imagined punishment she would receive plaguing her thoughts.

If her life was to end when she reached her home shores, she at least wanted one chance to see the sun set on the water. To witness the brilliance of color her brothers boasted of after returning from their voyages. It would be the one beautiful thing no one could take from her. The best she could hope for now was a clear view of the sky.

She finally settled against the curved side of the longboat, wrapped her arms around her drawn up legs, and once again begged any god who would listen for mercy. Never had she seen them bestow such a thing—only success for hard work and punishment for failure.

There was the God above all other gods—another fantastic tale her brothers had told from their voyages to the Vestlands. They claimed some far off tribes worshiped an all-powerful and all-knowing God who actually cared for humans. She prayed to Him too, though she didn't know His name. Her one request: to be rescued from her circumstances.

But when a skin of water and length of dried meat was tossed at her feet, she accepted that her prayers had gone unanswered—or had been callously denied. Her father meant to keep her alive before feeding her to the wolves.

Astrid couldn't hold her eyes, swollen from a torrent of tears, open any longer. She drifted into sleep.

Days passed, and she spent them cradled in her corner, guarded by her brothers. On the fourth night, she was awakened by the steep pitch of the longboat, which sent her slamming into a smelly crate of dried fish.

Pain ripped through her side and icy water splashed over her legs. In the dark, she was cocooned by panicked screams and roared orders to the crew to stay at the oars, to hold their posts.

A crack of thunder shook the vessel, and Astrid's hiding place lit up as if it were day for a split second. She was floating, weightlessly suspended as the boat rose and fell over a massive wave she could not see.

Astrid grasped for anything to hold onto but found nothing. The best she could do was spread her arms, palms flat, in preparation for a jolt that felt like shards of glass through her bones when she landed on the unforgiving deck. She pressed her feet to a nearby crate, keeping it from crushing her and holding herself in place as the boat tumbled over wave after wave.

"Faðir!" Astrid's screams were swallowed by the rush of water pouring over the sides of the longboat. It splashed into her mouth and through every crack and crevice of the deck. "Faðir!"

The sea soaked her dress, pelting her with cruel slaps from its watery hands. Her fingers—so cold she worried they would snap like icicles—ached from pushing against the boat's side. Teeth clacking together, she cried for her father again and again.

The invading seawater assaulted her throat, taunting her with the promise of a slow suffocating fate. Only then were the crates and barrels of her deck-side cell tossed aside as her father's shape loomed in the space.

Astrid's head snapped back, meeting the hard boards of the boat's side when the vessel pitched again. Her vision blackened. She blinked against dancing flashes of light as strong hands lifted her by her arms. Her father lugged her to the center of the boat. She wrapped her arms around his waist, choking on prayers of gratitude. Her relief turned to panic as she realized the solid blue-gray wall at their backs was not murky sky but a wave stretching higher than the sails—a gaping mouth rising from the sea, hell-bent on devouring them.

Astrid's throat released a soundless scream as her father lashed a rope around her waist. Men struggled to keep their oars under control, many losing the battle as splintered wood snapped under the violence of the storm.

Astrid stared through wide, horrified eyes as body after body was plucked from its seat and swallowed by ruthless, fang-toothed waves.

Legs shaking so violently she could hardly stand, she clung to the solid oak that was her father. He wrapped one arm around the massive wooden mast and kept Astrid pinned in place with the other around her waist. She peered from under his arm as the wave's frothy lip curved toward them, curling in a deadly sneer.

For a split second, the world stood still as she turned her face up to her father's. The smallness of her voice reached him even through the howling wind and stinging rain.

"Faðir?" It was a single word loaded with all the questions that tore through her mind. They'd changed course because of her. Because she'd been too weak to fight for herself. And they were being swallowed by this storm because she'd prayed for death instead of facing her people again. "Forgive me, Faðir!"

His reply was the press of his warm lips to her frozen head and the tightening of his arm around her. "I would have burned the world for you, my dóttir."

She blinked away the rain clouding her vision of his face. Was it true? Was he taking her home to defend and protect her?

"Be brave."

"I will. I will, Faðir." The words were a broken pledge on her lips as she buried her face in his strong sea-drenched chest. It was a vow to never be afraid again, to never be powerless again.

Despite her promise, she could not open her eyes and watch as the wave slammed against the longboat. She knew it happened when her father's body tensed, his head lowering and his beard brushing against her cheek. He was strong. He would keep her safe.

You will bring death to anyone you tell.

"Forgive me, dóttir." His rasped words shattered her aching heart in the same instant the merciless wave fractured the longboat as if it were a child's toy under a giant's fist.

She was torn from her father, her arms reaching and fingers grasping for him. She sailed, wind-whipped, through the air until something around her waist tightened so painfully she thought she'd been torn in two. Bits of splintered wood pelted her body, carving shallow lines across her skin. The storm sucked every bit of air from her lungs before plunging her into the raging icy waters. Arms flailing and lungs burning for air, she fought to reach the surface. Something tugged at the rope that rubbed her stomach raw. It pulled her upwards, keeping her afloat despite the sea's determined efforts to draw her under.

Salty water filled her mouth and nose. She coughed and gagged each time her head broke the surface. She searched the dark waves for her father—for her brothers—but only caught chance glimpses of bits of wrecked boat. She was pulled under again. Some miraculously floating thing on the other end of the rope kept pulling her up, but even that wasn't enough.

She was going to die. The sea was starving, and its appetite would only be satisfied by their lives. The gods would have their vengeance for her cowardice. They would greedily accept the sacrifice of her family for her crimes. Just when Astrid's body slipped below the frigid waters, a hand clasped her wrist and hauled her up. Those same hands slipped under her arms and launched her over the hard surface of a slab of drifting wood.

"Live, Astrid." Her father's voice reached her as if carried by the wind itself.

Astrid dug her frozen fingers into the rough surface of her raft, kicking and scrambling until her chest and stomach were securely aboard. She turned, expecting to see her father grasping the edge, but she was alone.

"Faðir." Her weak cry didn't travel further than the soaked planks that kept her adrift. Her father's last command echoed in her ears. *Live.*

He'd wanted her to live. He had tossed her behind the crates and set her brother as guard to protect her from the crew. He had changed course to protect her. He loved her. He wanted her to live. He had died because of her.

She wanted to die too, but as much as she desired to let herself be taken by the waves, her stubborn body kept fighting. Muscles stiffened from the cold, Astrid slowly tugged at the rope her father had fastened around her waist, discovering it connected to an empty barrel that had continuously hauled her to the surface. Her father had fastened her to the thing he knew wouldn't sink. He'd made sure she would live.

When the last of her strength was slipping away, she worked the knot around her waist with frozen fingers, securing herself and the barrel to her makeshift raft. The sea unleashed its fury, yet she held fast. Her cheek scraped against rough planks as she turned her head. Through the pummeling of rain, wind, and waves, her eyes found the sky and sought the first star.

Even after her arms went limp and nothing kept her from the sea's greedy fingers but her father's rope, she kept watch on the sky, begging the stars to lead her to safety.

Chapter 1—Astrid

821 AD

Astrid stopped her trek to the armory, spinning on her heels at the vulgar name one of Duncan's soldiers snarled in her direction.

"What did ye say?" She searched the crowd of bearded faces, seeking the guilty one.

The man didn't have the good sense to blend into the rest of the group, and he was seemingly unbothered by the dozen of Astrid's own warriors gathered at her back. He stood a step forward from the rest, staring at her with his lip curled in disgust.

"Ye heard me."

Another soldier stepped next to him, raking his gaze up and down her body in a way that left her feeling exposed. She resisted the urge to wrap her cloak tighter around her shoulders.

"I guess the king thought we could use a few more dogs to ward off the rats," the second soldier laughed when he'd finished his stripping glare.

"Ah, so it is to be a show of solidarity?" Astrid scanned the soldiers gathered behind the two mockers. "Anyone else care to join?"

The number was few, and their captain was not among them. She flicked her eyes to the bit of training area she could see from where she'd stopped, not finding a glimpse of Eowin. Not that he would stop their tormenting. He usually ignored any dissention, encouraging her to let her warriors prove themselves in the training ring instead of shutting down harassment.

She would put an end to the hostile taunting if he wouldn't. Enough was enough.

"Well," the first man spoke again. "He'sna keeping her around for her skills wi' the blade. I dinna think we needed anymore cowards wi' longbows who hid behind walls and hedges while the rest of us face our deaths."

They both laughed, and the hisses of her warriors shot over her shoulder.

"Mayhap it was ye that was hiding," one of her warriors snapped. "Or ye would have seen our captain amidst the battle, saving your sorry hides. Ye would have seen us all."

There was a pressure at her back—the pulse of energy and fury from her warriors. It was a demand for her to lead, to defend them. She splayed her hand behind her, giving them a silent order to stand down. Lead she would, starting with these two pigs.

The first man ticked his chin up at Astrid. "I'd have thought his Majesty would have sent this one home wi' the rest of the Norse swine."

The man reached out a grubby hand as if to touch her hair, and Astrid jerked her shoulder back, refusing to retreat. Her Norse lineage was no secret. She couldn't hide it if she wanted to. Her moon-white hair was a blazing sign.

"Mayhap 'tis some leftover Pictish magic clouding his mind." The second barked another laugh, running his filthy hand across his mouth. His hand came away wet with brown-tinged spit. "If it werena fer the new queen, she'd be nothin' more than a scullery."

If this was the caliber of men forming Duncan's warband, she might prefer the kitchen. Her warriors would stand a better chance against an enemy with the tower servants at their side. They, at least, had been civil. If their shared victory against Duncan's traitorous cousin and three months of training and living alongside each other had not eased the distrust between the armies, there was not much hope they

would ever become unified. She could accept that. But she would not accept jibes that were becoming more like threats with each passing day.

“We could help ye though, *Captain*. I saw yer skills wi’ the sword were a bit...lacking,” repulsive vermin number one said with a wicked grin.

His equally vile counterpart snorted at the insult.

“Mayhap we should have a test.” Astrid gripped the smooth curve of her longbow, gingerly placing it against the side of a stone. “See just how much I am lacking.”

In an instant, there was a blade in her hand and a circle of onlookers.

“Captain,” one of her more reserved warriors whispered. “What are ye doing? There are two of them.”

“I’d rather there be ten. Then, at least, it would be a challenge.”

Eowin’s men formed one half of a circle around them and her warriors the other. Astrid knew what Cyrene wished. The new queen of Tràigh had hopes that the people of her husband’s kingdom would welcome them with open arms. That they would remember how the Picts had fought alongside their army in the battle against Duncan’s cousin, William, and his hired Norsemen. William had threatened to overtake all of Tràigh and the woods beyond, where Cyrene’s people had lived in secret since being branded enemies of the crown. When faced with the choice of dying apart or surviving together, the two leaders, King Duncan of the Tower and Queen Cyrene of the Woods, chose to give their kingdoms a chance to live.

But long-held beliefs were hard to break, and some prejudices simply ran too deep. Duty to the crown kept the armies from shedding blood during training, but there was an obvious divide. Astrid had taken as many murmured insults as she could stand. If she couldn’t earn their respect with her leadership and silence, as Eowin suggested, she would have to win it with her blade and wit. Those had been with her the longest, saving her life more than once.

She faced both opponents, mirroring their pacing inside the ring formed by the two armies. If this was what it would take to end their insults for good, then this was what she would do. This was the best way—one battle, one victor. Winner takes all.

“This ends,” she snarled her terms, addressing her opponents and the men behind them. “I best ye both, and ye will end the insults to my warriors. Ye will give them the respect the crown desires.”

One of the men in the ring huffed a mocking laugh. He clearly didn’t expect to lose. But he also underestimated her determination. She lunged, her first strike drawing blood. Just a nick—a thin red line across his cheek.

He touched his face and studied the blood on his fingers. His expression settled into vibrant fury. In a heartbeat, both men were on her, but she was quick. They were bigger and stronger but clumsier.

She ducked and whirled, ending up at their backs and flicking her sword so that little bits of their tunics fluttered to the ground. When they heard the snickers from her warriors, any semblance of decorum dissolved into pure hatred. Astrid saw their eyes harden, and her pulse quickened.

Her warriors saw it too and shifted their stance almost in unison. She ordered them to stand down. This was how it was done. One battle. One victor. Tension crackled in the cooling air of the late evening, as if a storm was brewing there in the ring instead of the sky. One of the men twirled his wrist, his blade spinning in a circle, and the other moved in the opposite direction, trapping her between them.

Her warriors inched forward, but she lifted a finger, warning them to stay back. She was captain. If she were to prove herself worthy among this new warband—if they were to bend to her command—she

had to earn it. Her head whipped back and forth, eyeing the two challengers. She had to make an example of them.

When they lunged, she jumped back, managing to avoid their grasp and blades. They ended up grappling with each other for a half breath before lunging again.

“Who is teaching who?” she hissed in the ear of one man when she wrenched his head back with a handful of his hair before shoving her foot in his back and sending him stumbling into his friend.

She’d almost counted her victory when one of her own warriors uttered a vile remark, igniting the dirt-dry kindling that only needed a spark to blaze into a consuming flame.

“No,” she barked the order, but it went unheard.

Oh, this is bad.

Then she saw Eowin, flanked by more of his soldiers, racing up the path.

This is verra verra bad.

Eowin caught her eye, his expression stern and furious, but when his gaze flicked to the two men opposite her, a flash of panic lifted his brows. Something else came over his face then—a look bordering on murderous. Astrid clenched her teeth. She’d have to get this under control or he’d try and rescue her. Again.

But as she moved to address her warriors, the king’s warband and the queen’s warriors converged, fists flying, swords clanging. It was too late. Astrid took a blow to the cheek that sent flashes of white across her vision before a leg swept behind her knees, bringing her to the ground.

She pushed up on her elbows, willing her lungs to open. She had to end this, had to at least get her warriors under control. This wasn’t the first time a snide remark had led to an all-out brawl. She tried to stand, but someone pushed her back down, and in the midst of chaos, two faces hovered over hers.

Them. The two soldiers she’d humiliated before the chaos broke out. And they were out for blood.

She rolled onto her knees, grappling with the slick grass as she tried to crawl away. She just needed to get to her feet. For more than half her life, she’d sparred and trained, but she’d only fought in one true battle. Something had come over her then—a strength she knew was not her own. It kept her going long after she should have collapsed.

She hadn’t asked for it, but she knew it was a gift from *An T-aon*, given to save her queen, her kingdom. She didn’t expect such a gift now. Not when she could have just kept walking. Mayhap she *should* have kept walking.

Urgency pumped through her veins, causing her pulse to pound in her ears.

“Oh no. Dunna run away, *Captain.*” An arm snaked around her waist—much too low on her waist—and she felt the man’s breath in her ear. “We are just starting to enjoy yer company.”

A hot wave of panic rushed out from her stomach, tingling along her limbs. She’d made the biggest mistake she could make. She let him get his hands on her.

His friend soon joined. She fought. She twisted and kicked. She scrambled and scratched. But hands were everywhere, and bodies pressed in. She couldn’t breathe.

One of them pinned her arms while the other sat on top of her, straddling her hips. She was trapped. Powerless.

Other hands—ghostly hands from a memory she’d slain long ago—crept from their grave. Starved from years of being caged in the prison of her mind, the recollection sent clawed fingers into her flesh, scratching at her neck. Pressing, pushing, squeezing.

Something inside of her snapped, and all she could hear was the rush of a howling wind in her ears. She became as wild as the sea, ripping and tearing. Everything but the need to be free—the need to rid her body of those hands—fell away.

She was not powerless. She was not weak. She would fight.

“Captain.” A voice reached into her red-coated rage. “Captain. Stop.”

Another set of hands were on her: broad, strong hands that gripped but did not hurt. Still, she fought. She was consumed by the only thing that mattered. Get free. Get away. Her fist met the hard curve of a jaw.

“Captain!”

Vice-like bands wrapped around her, pinning her hands to her sides—a different kind of pressure seeped into her, and her lungs took in their first full breath in minutes.

“Astrid.” The voice, ragged but firm, seeped into her too. “Stop.”

She did stop. She blinked. Once. Twice. Three times until her vision cleared and she saw what surrounded her. Her warriors and Eowin’s soldiers were sprawled on the grass. Some lay flat, others nursed injuries—only a few managed to stay on their feet. All were bloodied and panting, finally united in their suffering.

A new wave of panic seized her until she counted her warriors. They were all alive and breathing. She saw no serious wounds. She scanned Eowin’s men next, finding them in the same condition.

Except for the two who had attacked her. They were...well, they were alive. Her arms were useless, but her feet were free. She kicked one of the men, eliciting a groan from where he rolled on the ground at her feet, his arms wrapped around his middle. The arms restraining her tightened, and she shifted to the side, glaring at her captor.

She knew who it was without seeing his face. Eowin.

“Are ye done?” he asked, still breathless.

She despised that his voice had been the only one able to reach through her panic—that his hands had calmed her enough to breathe again. She clenched her jaw, and the moment he felt her knees flex, he released her, correctly sensing her head was aimed for his chin.

Wishing her stares were arrows, she whipped her head to the two men who still lay on the ground. They were no longer a threat, definitely the worst off of anyone in either army, and it filled her with a mix of satisfaction and shame. Then she faced Eowin as he scanned the carnage around them, and any hint of success faded with his grim expression.

There had been training-ground brawls nearly every week since the two armies joined—the warriors of Queen Cyrene led by Astrid, and the army of King Duncan led by Eowin. Their leaders had united in marriage, and their armies united in war to save both kingdoms. But now that the battle was over, the armies found little common ground. Astrid and Eowin had troubles of their own as they battled over how to navigate command of one army with two captains. But this...this was...she glared at him again. Where had he been? He opened his mouth, but she would not, could not, hear whatever chastisement he was about to deliver. Not when he was as much to blame as she was. She snatched up her longbow from where she’d laid it against a rock and marched to the armory before his words could catch her.

“Get yerselves cleaned up. All of ye,” she heard him growl. “I will have answers.”

Apparently, those answers were going to come from her, because he stormed into the armory and slammed the door behind him. They were alone. Astrid closed her eyes, forcing her breathing to slow. She was not powerless.

“Where were ye?” she demanded, deciding it was best to claim the upper hand.

“Me?”

“Aye!” She tamped the end of her bow on the stone floor. “Aye. Yer men are continually hurling insults at my warriors, taunting and bating them, and ye are never around. Even when ye are, ye do nothing to stop them.”

“Are ye telling me yer warriors are so sensitive that they canna handle a few taunts? Are they bairns?”

Fire raced up her spine, coating her neck and cheeks. “‘Tis more than taunts, and ye ken that. Are ye too weak of a leader to keep yer people under control?”

His face flamed then, and his feet carried him to her. He stopped inches away. “I am not weak.” He punched each word through his teeth.

No. She couldn’t argue with that. Astrid would not make the mistake of letting her eyes dip to his muscular chest, which heaved at nose level.

“Nay, yer just conveniently absent.” She held his gaze, refusing to back down, refusing to give in. That proved to be a mistake as well, because she found herself nearly drowning in his stormy gray eyes.

“It was yer warrior’s words I heard setting off the fight,” he countered.

He was too tall—too massive—and Astrid fought her instinct to back away. Did his eyes just dip to her lips?

She ground her teeth harder, determined to use those lips as a weapon.

“Aye, because ye werena there. Like I said.”

“If ye canna control a few archers—”

She shoved him then. Taken by surprise, he actually moved back a few steps, though she knew if he’d been prepared, she’d have ended up on her backside before he gave an inch. There was a tightness in her throat when he regained a step. If he got his hands on her, she could not escape. He was too strong—an opponent she could not physically defeat. But she knew, deep inside herself, he wouldn’t hurt her, no matter how hard she pushed. Still, she moved, putting the long table in the middle of the room between them.

“I can control my warriors.” She splayed her fingers across the table, leaning forward enough to let him know she wasn’t backing down. “But as long as yer men continue to treat us as though we are refuse, there will be no warband. Our armies will not be able to train or defend this kingdom together.”

“Agreed.” Eowin crossed his arms.

“Then keep them in line.”

“I challenge ye to do the same.”

Astrid turned toward the door.

“Are we going to talk about what happened out there?”

She stilled, not turning to face him, only cocking her head to the side.

“What was that, Captain? Ye were—”

“I was fine.” She cut him off and took another step. “I was only defending myself.”

He was at the door before she could blink, cutting off her escape. It wasn’t right for him to be so large and so quick.

“Ye were not fine. What were ye thinking? Two against one? They could have killed ye.”

Her cheeks flamed. He wasn’t concerned with the carnage she’d inflicted—it was like he hadn’t noticed. He still looked at her as a damsel who needed saving.

“If ye’d ever use the brain I assume is in that enormous skull of yers, ye’d have seen I had it under control.” She couldn’t help taking a step back. He was too close. Always too close. “Since ye wouldna, I was going to deal wi’ the two of them and end it. I set the terms.”

His brows furrowed, as if he didn't understand what she meant. Of course he wouldn't.

"I ken ye are strong, no one is doubting that, but these ar'na simple townspeople, Captain. These are trained warriors."

"I said I was fine." She whirled, planning to show him exactly how she could handle herself, but he was already there. "Or did ye not notice who was left standing?"

"What about the next time?" Ducking his first attempt to reach her, she rolled across the table on her back, knocking over a woven basket of short swords. They loudly skittered across the stone floor.

Before her feet could find purchase, he was there again. He had her wrists in one of his massive palms, her arms stretched above her head and her back against the wall. His other hand was splayed across her collarbone, his fingers dangerously close to her throat. She was pinned.

If his hands hadn't, the blaze in his storm-gray eyes would have immobilized her. Her throat went dry, and she knew he could feel her heart slamming against his palm. She should be locked up in panic—her mind should be racing wildly and her body frantic. But though she knew he could close that massive hand around her throat and end her, she was not afraid.

She didn't know what made her more furious, that he could hurt her or that she knew he wouldn't.

"Ye have to be smarter than this, Captain. Yer quick, and I've seen ye fight wi' strength that I canna explain, but yer still human. There will still be those who are stronger, and ye canna go around tempting death just to prove a point."

His nose was practically touching hers, his breath hot on her cheek. She saw the feathering of his jaw muscles under his beard as he clenched his teeth. Slowly—too slowly—he peeled his fingers away, stepping back with his hands raised in surrender.

Her eyes watered from the rage he'd set free when he rendered her helpless. A throbbing rhythm drummed in her head. Her cheek ached from the hit she'd taken, and her skin was on fire from where one of the men had dragged her across the rocky ground. She could have ended it. If everyone had just stayed calm, it would have been over.

"This canna go on." Her words felt small.

He didn't get a chance to respond before the armory door burst open and Liam tumbled in. The lanky warrior who had never hidden his unrequited love for the queen looked as pale as the moon. Sweat glistened from his forehead, and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"Assassin." He groaned as his knees gave out and he sank to the ground. "Assassin in the tower."