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A CURSE CARVED IN BONE

SAGA OF THE UNFATED
BOOK TWO

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CHAPTER ONE

FREYA

The storm struck without warning, attacking the drakkar and driving us away from the rocky coast with such ferocity that the gods themselves must not have wanted us to cross the strait. As the Nordelanders struggled against the violent waves, any visions I might have had about the glory of raiding across the seas were swiftly dissuaded by the cold. By the wet. But most of all, by the endless vomit.

Not mine, as my sea legs were strong, but the contents of the stomachs of nearly everyone else, including Harald's hooded thralls, was filling the hull. Better to wade through vomit than to lean over the side and risk being swept away by the angry sea.

"What a disappointment it will be," I shouted over the thunder and the raging waters, "if all your plots and all your schemes amount to nothing because we are drowned beneath the sea!"

All on board glared at me, though Tora's glare held little threat given that a stream of vomit spewed from her lips in the middle of it. I laughed and leaned against the hull where I sat beneath a seal hide coated with my magic to keep the spray from soaking through. "Or perhaps not even such a glorious death as to be claimed by Njord, but a death by

turning your own innards into outtards. I have heard such grand tales of Nordelander ferocity, but this is pitiful.”

“Is she ever silent?” Harald demanded of Bjorn. The king of Nordeland was not immune to the tossing waves and his temper was fraying as a result. I gave him a beaming smile and was rewarded with a scowl.

Bjorn only bent over the oar he was manning, unaffected by the waves. Which was regrettable. If anyone deserved to taste the sour burn of bile, it was him and his lying tongue.

“You’ll know no peace, Father,” Bjorn finally answered, the muscles of his back straining against his tunic as he put his strength into rowing. “But I’ll remind you that you invited her vitriol upon yourself.”

Harald’s jaw tightened. Yet instead of offering a retort, he only leaned into his own oar, thin arms laboring. Not even Nordeland’s king was absolved from rowing through this nightmare, everyone’s strength required to keep us from floundering. The Northern Strait was notorious for claiming lives, and Njord’s domain cared not for the power of kings.

Nor the children of gods.

A wave rolled over the drakkar and water slapped me in the face with such violence it hurt. Fear rose in my chest, for it was impossible to breathe in the icy deluge. The vessel tipped and slid down the trough between swells, the blackness of the depths seeming to reach for me. I clung to what handholds I could, nails scratching on the wood and my ears ringing with the shrieks of the thralls who lost their grips. To fall meant death, for there was no salvation in the crushing sea.

Yet my fear faded to longing as I stared at the dark water. It whispered words promising relief from the grief that clawed at my heart. From the rage that plagued my soul. From the loneliness that hollowed my insides, for I had lost everything that mattered to me, including my purpose.

The sea reached for me, and my fingers slackened, my broken heart yearning for the respite from the pain. To be drawn *down down down* into the darkness.

Only for my grip to tighten as Hel whispered in my head, *Why concede when you have the power to take back all that should be yours? The power to reclaim all that has been stolen from you?*

I don't have that power.

Her laughter was soft and yet as loud as thunder in my skull. *You are the mistress of death, daughter. All who draw breath fear your power.*

I don't want to be feared.

My mind's eye filled with a smile that was half curved lips and half naked bone. The sight made my heart gallop, though it was her words that made my hands turn to ice. *Fear is the weapon that will win you what you want.*

The drakkar righted itself, no longer at risk of being swamped.

I wiped the salt from my eyes, not sure if it was tears or seawater, only that the roar of my pulse had nothing to do with my near brush with death.

Fear is the weapon that will win you what you want.

What did I want?

I did not know, but the torrent of emotion in my guts needed an outlet. My eyes latched onto Steinunn vomiting up seawater, and I shouted, "Skald, will you write a song of this crossing? If you do, let it be called The Saga of the Seasick. Or perhaps Quest of the Queasy. No . . . Yarn of the Yackers!"

"Be silent!" Skade screamed at me from her oar, her crimson hair plastered across her face. "Cease your noise, you bleating bitch!"

"And if I refuse?" I laughed wildly as Skade abandoned her oar to the thrall next to her, a glowing golden bow appearing in her hands. The same weapon she'd used to kill my mother. "You'll shoot me? Cast me over the side?"

She lifted her bow, nocking the virulent green arrow that never missed.

"Do it!" The shriek tore from my throat. Not out of any desire to be shot but because I wanted her to feel the same indecision that plagued my own soul. "I dare you to do it!"

Skade only pulled the bowstring taut, glittering blue eyes filled with many things—indecision was not one of them.

My mouth went dry with the abrupt certainty that I'd gotten myself killed with my bluster. Only for her weapon to disappear as Harald snarled at her to hold her temper or suffer the consequences.

Not caring that my laughter sounded deranged, because it was surely better than sobbing, I howled, "You all sacrificed so much to steal me, so I think I can say what I please, and you all have no choice but to listen! No choice but to suffer my words. You wanted me? Now you *fucking* have all of me, so enjoy! Delight in the fruits of your labor!"

Skade dove at me, small fists swinging.

Though I'd tempted this fate, she still surprised me. Her fist struck my cheek and knocked me back. My head hit the mast, stars bursting in my eyes as Skade's hands reached for my throat.

"You need to be put down," she screamed in my face. "You are a plague, Hel-child!"

I jerked my knee up and slammed it into her cunt. The other woman rewarded me with a shriek but didn't let go, fingers implacable around my throat.

Then Bjorn grabbed Skade around the waist. He hauled her off me, but she only turned her ire on him, and all went to chaos.

Thralls recoiled as the pair collided with them. The drakkar groaned and turned sideways, dipping into the swell of a wave. Water crashed over me, heavy and relentless. Everything tipped and I rolled, my eyes filled with wood and waves and blackened sky.

And then hands had me by the wrists, Bjorn's skin hot against mine as he pinned me to the bottom of the vessel. "Are you trying to get us all killed?"

"Yes!" I screamed as the others struggled with the oars. "That is exactly what I'm trying to do!"

"If you die, you will never have answers!" He pressed down, holding me in place as I thrashed and tried to knee him in the balls. "You'll never know the truth!"

“Do not speak to me of truth!”

To avoid my knees, he forced himself between my legs, hips in the crook of my pelvis as the ship rocked. Wholly against my will, my mind filled with memories of us in the cave when happiness had felt possible. Memories of his lips on mine, hands on my body, cock buried deep inside of me as he made me his. And my traitorous desires surged in defiance of fear and logic, my lust uncaring of the fact that the man it wanted was my enemy.

Only rage had the strength to drive the *want* away, and I reached for my anger even as I unleashed all the cruelty born of the pain in my heart. Wrapping my legs around Bjorn’s waist, I ground against him, my voice mocking as I said, “The truth that will regain you this?”

His grip on my wrists tightened as the drakkar rocked violently, and I dug the heel of my shoe into his back, feeling him press against me. “The truth that will get you back your pretty Freya so you can make her your wife?”

Lifting my head, I kissed him, catching his bottom lip hard enough between my teeth that he jerked away. “So that you can become a farmer with her? Have pretty daughters who look just like her? The truth that will ensure you grow old in her arms?”

I hurled the dream he’d given me in that cave back in his face, my rage relishing the flash of pain in his eyes because I wanted him to hurt as much as I did. “There is no truth that will bring me back to you, for you are a liar. A traitor. A fucking coward who does not deserve to see Valhalla!”

“You think you know everything, Freya,” he said. “But you know nothing.”

I spat in his face. “I know that I’ll hate you until my last breath, Bjorn. And that is something.”

“Hate me all you want.” He let go of my wrists. “But your last breath will not be today, Born-in-Fire.”

I watched him return to the oars, joining the effort to see the drakkar through the storm.

“The Allfather sees all that was and all that the Norns have said will be.” Harald had ceased rowing, and his gray eyes locked on mine. “Saga is his child and knowledge is his gift. Other seers might have answers, but Saga, it seems, is bound to your fate. It may be that he’ll show her the truths you so desperately desire.” Without waiting for a response, Harald faced forward again, muscles bunching as he rowed.

My anger slowly faded, and its absence left me hollow. Tilting my head back, I stared at the blackened sky and swirling clouds, lightning dancing among them. What I wouldn’t give to be fated. For higher powers to have already determined the course of my life, so all that I said, all that I did, and all that I ever wanted could be blamed upon them.

But the two drops of god’s blood in my veins, one from Hlin and one from Hel, meant I was accountable for everything I left in my wake. Failures and successes. Nightmares and dreams. Love and hate.

What did I want?

The question sank into my soul, because I needed an answer. Needed a purpose to pull me forward. To remain where I was, as I was, would mean incinerating myself from the inside out.

I want the truth.

I wanted to hear from her lips the future that Saga had foreseen because Odin’s children did not lie. Wanted the story of what had happened between her and Snorri. Wanted answers about whether Harald was as much of a villain as I’d been raised to believe.

But most of all, I needed the truth about who I was.

Climbing to my hands and knees, I crawled until I found a spot next to a thrall with heavily tattooed arms. Taking hold of the oar, I put my strength into it and looked to the rocky coast of Nordeland. The winds slackened and the seas began to ease, and if the Norns were watching, I was certain they feared for the future they had created.

Because I was Freya Born-in-Fire. Daughter of Hlin. Daughter of Hel.

And I would weave my own fate.

CHAPTER TWO

BJORN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most especially in my heart.

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

Why.

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

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