

## Chapter Four: Siv

They stood around me, giving me a good kicking.

“Die, Beast!”

I felt one of my ribs go.

“Kill him!”

Another went.

“Let me at him!”

Whoever it was, he was enthusiastic because I passed out. When I came to, I was locked up in a cage. Right, just like an animal. It was made of metal bars an inch thick. Old and rusted in places but solid. Lifting my head, I could see a large key hanging on the opposite wall. It was well out of reach. There was also the matter of the hog tie.

My arms were aching, my legs were screaming, and my trashed ribs meant every breath was liquid fire. I could still feel the skin on my wrists and ankles burning with the pull of the rope, but it wouldn't be long before I'd go numb with pain. Once that happened, I would be deader than last week's catch.

I was alone. They feared me so little that they'd not bothered to post a guard. Clearly they thought the rope and the cage would hold me. I'd show them they were wrong. I'd get out, kill every last *hrafnasueltir* and burn the place down. But how?

Looking at the rusted bars gave me an idea. Rust is soft, but it leaves rough metal underneath. If I could wear down the rope on my wrists, I'd be free of the hog tie. The cage was small, and there was a rusty bar right next to me, so I only had to force myself onto my side. Once I was free, I'd use the rope to lasso the key.

Right. The words were simple, but carrying out the plan was hell. I rocked up and down, forcing myself onto my broken side. Then I started sawing the cord around my wrists on the rusted bar.

It was agony. Every muscle in my body was strained to screaming point, and my ribs were on fire. But I kept at it. I thought it was sweat running down my face and into my eyes; it turns out it was blood. It dripped all over the place, pooling underneath the bars laid on the stone floor.

“I want a word with the Beast.” The Patriarch's voice came floating through. “He may have information about that settlement up north.”

He came in, carrying a bucket of hot coals. He set it down, closed the door and growled, “You cursed Beasts cost me a fortune!”

You see, last year when we burnt down Brighthelme, we also emptied the armoury and raided the smiths' guild. Their craftsmen are famous for their new invention, the musket, and we found out later that the

Patriarch had invested heavily in their venture.

By the look of him, he was still furious at his loss. The Patriarch rolled up his sleeves, picked up tongs and selected a coal. It flared red in the draft of the window. "You're going to pay!"

So much for wanting to talk to me. He didn't even ask me what our defences were. He just went for it, touching the coal to my shoulder. It burnt white hot, searing me to the bone, making me snap like a fish on the line. As one, all the smashed ribs seized as I gasped. I bit my lips till they bled but when he did it again, I couldn't be silent; I screamed.

"Feel Ullr's wrath!" the Patriarch roared.

The coal touched me again. And again. And again. I knew I had to stay conscious. I had to move through the pain. Then, when the rassragr left, I'd get out of the hog tie. Once I was free, I'd kill him first, and slowly.

More agonising pain.

"Repent, Beast!"

"Go suck Odin's spear!"

I think I said it, or maybe it was just a thought. I fought him but I couldn't breathe. As the world went black, my last thought was that I'd failed. Again.

"Fucking bastard! Poxo whoreson!"

I opened my eyes. The room swam around me. I blinked, an effort of pure will, and it settled. The cage was open. The window was wide, too, allowing in a blast of cold air. I could smell the sea. Freedom was so close but I'd never reach it. The thought made me furious.

"May the Lady shove her wand up his arse!"

It was her. The ice-haired wolf maiden. Except she swore like a drunken Llanfaes mercenary. She didn't like me much by the sound of it. Still, being a whoreson and a bastard is better than being called an animal.

I thought the treacherous bitch had come to gloat, but then she was kneeling next to me. "May Ullr the glorious one give him boils!" She was spitting mad, but not at me. "He's made a right mess out of you, hasn't he?"

So she was raging at the Patriarch. But why was she here?

She was examining me, the blue eyes glowing as they looked into mine. She touched me, just a hand in my hair, and then I was floating.

*I rubbed the rope against the rusted bars beneath me, used it as a lasso to pluck the key off the wall, and then I was out.*

The vision flickered and died. I was gazing into those swirling eyes again. She smelled of the forest, clean, cool, and fresh, delicious but without warmth.

“Freyja’s sweet will be done,” she whispered. “You are a tough son of a bitch, aren’t you?” She took out a little bottle and then stilled. Her eyes were locked on mine, wild as the summer skies. I was floating, lost in them, but then she sighed, bumping me back to earth. “So much for best plans. I’m getting you out of here.”

A rescue? So she wasn’t a traitor after all! I tried to speak, but I was beyond words.

She put the bottle at my lips. “This should help. Just a tiny sip, though.”

It smelled of fields, and it tasted like piss. Sharp and sour, it ran down my throat. Before I could protest, I’d swallowed.

“There.” She tucked the bottle into her skirts. “You’ll feel better soon.”

I couldn’t feel my body. There was no pain, no sensation at all.

She pulled out a knife, the blade shining sharply. It swept out of my sight, over my back. “I’ve cut the rope,” she said. “I’m going to pick you up, okay?”

She was clearly delirious. There’s no way a woman can lift a full-grown man.

“It’s going to hurt, but you must keep quiet. Your life depends on it.”

I don’t know how she did it, but one second I was lying on the rusted bars and the next I was rising in the air. She’d hauled me up over her shoulder. I was dangling uselessly, looking down at her arse. It looked pretty good. Firm yet rich.

I must have growled appreciatively because she shushed me, adding, “Quiet now, Beast.”

The bitch! Calling me a Beast! I was fuming, but at that moment a ripple of fire ran through me. After hours of the hog tie, my tortured muscles were knotting. It was like being burned all over again. I wanted to scream like a weak-willed girl. Instead, I buried my face in her hair. It was soft, silky, and smelled of flowers. It was comforting, but it was also damn infuriating. Being powerless was killing me.

“Come on. We’re almost home free.”

We were out of the cage, and then she was lowering me out the window and into a small cart. “Wait a moment.”

As if I could do anything else. I was as useless as a barren mare. Even twitching a finger raised waves of agony.

As I bit my lip, I heard small sounds coming from inside. A door closing. A lock scraping. Then she was climbing out the window and closing it.

“I locked the cage and put the key back. That should fix them.” She took one look at me and frowned. “Poor Beast. You’re a sorry sight, aren’t you?”

She patted me on the head, as if I were a damn animal, and before I could tell her to stop it, we were on the move. We trundled past a

snoring guard and through the village. Not a soul stirred. It was as if there were a spell on the place.

The wolf appeared out of the shadows, padding silently beside us. It was so unreal that I wondered if I were seeing things, the way I had when I was floating in the ocean. Except that had been comforting, while this was filled with pain. The feeling was flooding back in agonising waves. I didn't let a sound escape me, but she knew.

"Have another sip."

More of the foul stuff went down my throat. It hit my guts, burning briefly in foulness. I wanted to protest, but then the foulness dissolved into a warm glow. It suffused me, wiping out the pain.

The blue eyes were gazing into mine. "Good. It's working." She put a gentle hand through my hair again. "Let it do its stuff, Beast. In a few minutes, you'll feel better."

I was sinking into a cloud of warmth, so delicious that it softened even the insult. She was Eid, the Valkyrie famed for her healing skill.

As we moved on again, I faded into a half dream, watching the village houses go by, dissolving into a country lane, then fields. We went through them, into the velvet night and into the forest beyond. There was no path but she went straight through the trees. I was in and out of it, finally coming to as the wood opened up into a meadow. In the light of the moon, I saw a hunting lodge and stables. I could hear a brook babbling nearby.

"Home." She didn't seem too pleased about it. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

She dumped me on the grass, sweet and fresh smelling, stripped off my leathers, stiff with salt where they weren't ripped, and then she poured bucket after bucket of water over me. She was right, all the muck of the sea and that cursed village was washed clean away. I was feeling better just being clean again.

"Up and inside now."

She gripped me by the upper arm, and then I was up on my feet. Kind of. Truth be, she carried me into the house. She had some evil habits, but this was a strong woman. While I resented her for it, I was secretly grateful.

The house was as unusual as the ice maiden. From the outside, it looked like a hunting lodge like the ones owned by Prydain nobles, but it was furnished like a farmhouse. There was a plain wooden table, big sofas marked by clumps of wolf fur, and the walls were lined with shelves crammed with glass jars and bottles. Herbs hung from the rafters in bunches, and there was a cauldron hanging over a low fire.

"Soup should be done." She piled me onto a large chair. "Food first. We'll fix you up after."

I hadn't realised I was starving, but the scent of onions, carrots and meat made my stomach growl. When she put a bowl to my lips, I was gulping it down. The wolf was watching me, sitting on the rug by the hearth. It had a look in its eye that told me I was eating its supper.

"You're black and blue." She was looking me over. "I need to see how bad this is." Her eyes were glowing, shimmering like the summer sky. "It may hurt."

The second she touched my side, the vision of the gentle Eid faded. I hissed at the fire her touch set off.

"You'll have to suffer." She was completely matter-of-fact. "I need to know what we're dealing with."

She went over every inch of me, poking and prying mercilessly. It shouldn't have bothered me, in fact, I should have been grateful, but it was damn humiliating. I didn't get why until she casually rolled me onto my side and put her hand on my balls.

The goddamn cheek of her! Prodding me as if I were a steer at market! Humiliation swept through me. I wanted to yell at her, but all that came out was a low growl.

"Stop grumbling," she snapped. "I'm just looking!" The eyes were mocking. "Don't be shy, Beast, I've seen it all before."

As the degrading examination continued I stayed determinedly silent. I'm a warrior. A disrespectful bloody woman feeling me up is something I can deal with easily. Except that I wanted to kill her.

Eventually she was done. "Broken ribs on both sides, two broken fingers on your right hand, and the left wrist is sprained. Burns on both shoulders and the tops of your arms." She sat back and considered. "You're a lucky Beast. Thank the gods you wear leathers. If not, that whoreson would've torched your balls."

I was crossing my legs as she spoke. "Stop calling me Beast!" is what I intended to say but it came out like a snarl. The wolf was up in an instant, teeth showing and growling.

"Lie down, Saga. He's harmless."

The evil she-wolf! I wanted to slap her.

She knew it, too. "Don't you rage at me, Beast! I should've kept to the plan, overdosed you with poppy and left them to burn your corpse." She got up and started messing about with a jug and bowls. "I'm too damn soft for my own good!"

Right. Soft as rock. So she'd been planning to put me out of my misery. Like an animal. But my common sense kicked in and told me that despite it all, she'd intended to be merciful. Yet I couldn't like her for it.

She didn't care what I thought, I could see that. She was totally intent on her task. The wolf was making puppy sounds now and dancing on tiptoes with excitement. "Here you go, Saga."

She put down three bowls filled with milk. I could smell it, rich and sweet. The wolf lapped it up, its eyes closed in ecstasy. I was wondering who the others were for when two cats walked in.

Thule has always been too cold for them. I'd seen them in Prydain's

cities, but they were small creatures, ankle high and skittish by nature. These beasts strolling in were huge, with long fur, gigantic paws, massive pointed ears, and wide slanting eyes. I recognised them as kisa, the big cats that hunt in the forests.

“Just in time for supper,” she said to them. “Did you have a good time in the woods?”

The cats made straight for her, head-butting her knees as she rubbed their backs. It really took me aback. First the wolf and now the wildcats. This was an unusual woman.

I should have been grateful, but to be completely helpless infuriated me.

“Want some milk?”

I’d let my feelings get the better of me and growled at her, but she’d interpreted my anger as a whine for food. Like I was as dependent as that damn wolf of hers.

“Have some.” She immediately poured out a mug and put it at my lips. I should’ve refused, I wanted to, but milk is a luxury we’ve never had in Thule. When she put the cup to my mouth, its rich buttery goodness was irresistible. I gulped it down, and it was nectar.

“Well, you’re clean and fed, but now we have to fix you up.” She was setting out needle, thread, bandages and splints. It looked like she knew exactly what she was doing. “We’ll set those fingers first.”

I can’t remember the first time I had a bone set because we Skraeling begin scrapping as soon as we can walk. I’ve broken plenty of them since, and so I knew what to expect. It was going to hurt.

“Want something to bite on?”

“No.” Treating me as if I’m a cursed coward who squeals at a bit of pain!

“Hmmm, so you can speak? Good.”

Then she touched my hand, and all thought of snapping at her died. A broken finger or two is nothing, but setting them hurt like hell because every touch made me suck in my breath, which set off my ribs. Cleaning my face and setting my nose wasn’t great, either. By the time she was done, I was dizzy from keeping determinedly silent.

“Come on, Beast. Lie flat so I fix your back.”

Her words were cold and practical but her hands gentle. She flipped me over, and I was face down on the rug, being observed by the wolf and cats. We stared at each other as the witch cleaned and dressed the burns and stitched the whip cuts.

“Sage and yarrow will help you heal,” she said cheerfully, “and comfrey will give those ribs a boost.”

While I bit my lip and pretended it didn’t hurt, the wolf ended up lying against me, its nose by my face. It was a female wolf, and now I was in trouble, her instincts were to soothe. Women are like that. Good ones, I mean. The one that was working on me didn’t even make an attempt at nurturing. She went to work like Odin and his brothers ripping apart Ymir’s body and brain to make the world and the sky.

I buried my face in the wolf’s neck, breathing in the musky scent, and held onto my pride. By the time she finished, though, all I had was silence. I couldn’t move. In fact, I was as weak as a kitten—and I don’t

mean those hulking cat brutes that attended her.

They were watching me with slanted green eyes, their looks as cool and measuring as hers. The wolf at least had some compassion. She was nosing my hair, her breath puffing in my ears. I'd never heard of a tame wolf before, but I decided I liked Saga.

"Poor Beast." I thought she was determined to insult me, but when I looked in her eyes and saw they were concerned, I understood that the ice maiden was trying to be kind. "Come on, let's get you into bed."

It smelled of her, and it was soft. I sank into feathers and was covered in flannel sheets and woollen blankets. I should have slept, but I was too strung out. I lay there, watching her.

I couldn't figure out what or who she was. She was a Skraeling, but she lived with the Prydain. That made her a traitor to us. She called me a Beast at every turn, too. Yet bringing me here meant she'd betrayed them.

It made no sense, and in my weakened state, all I could do was gaze at her. She was the first woman of my own kind that I'd seen in years, and I didn't know if the pain in my heart came from hurt or joy.

She was staring into the fire. The flames illuminated the ice-coloured hair and made the pale skin glow. She was totally still, and just like the first time I'd seen her, she seemed like a creature from another world.

Outside there was a patter of rain. It fell in sheets, the rhythmic clatter of it smothering the cackle of the flames. Time stopped. I felt as if I were floating in the sea, adrift in blankness. Then she sighed, and the world flowed again. The rain switched off abruptly, and the birds began to sing.

"Freyja's purse! What the hell is going on?" She looked surprised, shocked even, but it was a puzzle what was bothering her.

She stood and stretched, showing off trim waist, long hair, and delicious breasts. I almost growled like her wolf in appreciation. Whatever she was, she was beautiful.

I must have said something because she came to me, straightening the covers and tucking them in. "Keep quiet," she said, "and stay put." She was staring out into the night. "They're coming, but they won't find you as long as you're quiet." Her eyes were shimmering again. "Whatever happens, don't confront them!"

She set up a little wooden rack, dug into a dresser and quickly piled underclothes into it. Soft knickers and silky looking shifts in blue and green now hung in front of the bed. She opened all the cottage doors and windows, took a basket of herbs, and sat down on the stoop.

Very soon the sun was inching over the horizon, sending golden light flooding over the meadow and highlighting the trees beyond. An hour later, just as I was about to fall asleep, a rider appeared. It was a Citizen, dressed in a velvet habit and riding a beautiful white horse.

I was minded to get up and kill him, but before I could move, she whispered, "Stay down!" The small sound went straight through me,

reverberating in my mind. I stayed down.

“Courtney,” she stood up and called out. “Something wrong? Was someone injured during the hunt?”

“No.” He swung off the horse. “I’ve just returned.”

“Then you’ll have heard from the Patriarch.” She sounded cool.

“Only the bare bones.” He stood in front of her, almost as tall as her, but not as imposing. He had red, weather-beaten skin, and he was too fat. He looked like a peasant dressed up in a noble’s clothes. “The Beast is gone. He escaped!”

Behind him, a dozen men appeared, all carrying pitchforks, spears, and nets. They had dogs, too, straining on leather leashes and barking at the wolf. I’ve taken on a dozen soldiers at a time and creamed the bastards, but even I knew that I was in no state to take on this lot.

Luckily for me, she was more than a match for them. She put her hand on her wolf, who sat obediently, and then addressed the peasant in velvet. “Really? How?”

She sounded surprised. If I hadn’t known, I would’ve believed her. She looked like an honest Skraeling, but she was a typical lying Prydain. I should’ve known, but it seared my soul to see such pure beauty addled by poison.

“We can’t figure it out! The cage was locked, and the key shut safely away. It’s like he walked through the bars!”

“And you came here to warn me?”

“Erm. Yes?”

I could only see her back, but I knew she was giving him full-on ice. “And you brought twelve men with you to help you give me a heads-up?”

“Erm, well. Erm...”

“Oh, I see! I suppose I’m the one who set him free?”

The yokel actually shuffled his feet. “Well, you did speak up for him.”

“I did not!” she snapped. “I said this was the duke’s business!”

“Erm, right, yeah.” More shuffling. “Erm, I guess some of us thought, well...”

“That I crept out at night and took the Beast?” She sounded colder than a glacier.

“Well, you see, the dogs followed the scent through the village but then it began to rain, and well, uhm, we thought we should just come and see.”

“Right, and when do the dogs not want to come and see Saga? You know they’re always fascinated by her.”

“Yes, right. That’s probably it.”

He was looking miserable, and she was scathing.

“Probably? What is this? Do you think I’m hiding him? Why don’t you go check my bed?”

I was open mouthed at her brazen dishonesty. This wasn’t lying; this was taking deceit to an art form.

Courtney glanced into the lodge, doors and windows wide open, spotted the shifts and looked away hastily. “No, no, of course not!”

I was a dozen steps away from him, and he didn’t have a clue. She was a liar, but a part of me admired her. She’d taken them on all by

herself and defeated them easily. This was more cunning than even Loki's plots.

"I suppose the Patriarch sent you here?"

"Yes. No." Courtney was looking miserable. "He said you defied him."

"He has no rights here. His place is the Vale. It's you who are in charge, and I reminded him of that."

"Yes, yes of course."

"I have warned you before about the Patriarch. You know he longs to usurp your position."

"Bliss, I'm sorry. I guess I just forgot. He got me all riled up."

"I have been a loyal friend to you, but one word from that dirty, bearded fat gut and you ride here to accuse me?"

"No! Well, yes, but it wasn't like that!"

He might as well have spoken to the horse. Now the woman had the yokel at her mercy, she set about beating him down. "I wonder what will upset our liege most?" she mused. "Not informing him that you found a Beast? Or letting his enemy escape?"

"It wasn't me! It's all the Patriarch's fault!" the coward cried.

"As he'll claim he's Ullr's servant, I'm sure the duke will forgive him." She was stirring nicely, gutting the *rassragr* with every nasty word. "Not sure he'll let you off the hook, though."

The man finally found his balls. "You can't speak to me like that!"

"When you don't do your duty, Freyja demands that I do!"

The squire went white, then red, and then, filled with rage, he turned around, got on his horse and rode off.

"What an arsehole," she grumbled. As the birds settled back into their song, she came inside. She closed the window and instantly the room was dark, like a soothing, warmly scented cave.

She was talking to me as if I were a child. "You're perfectly safe, Beast, don't worry."

"Hey!" I actually snarled at her. "Stop that!"

"Be nice." She actually patted me on the head! "Stop grumbling at me."

Bitch! After calling me Beast to my face! "I could snap your neck in an instant!"

She was shaking her head at me, looking coolly superior. "You can't stand up or hold a cup of milk by yourself, but you're threatening me?"

Damn all women! They insult you and then turn every little thing against you. As if I were the kind of blackheart who would hurt her after she'd helped me. "No!"

"Then stop snarling at me and go to sleep!"

She marched off before I could answer. She sat down on the stoop, the wolf at her side, and went on sorting her herbs. "Arschhole," she grumbled. "Like all bloody men!"

Lizbeth always raged at me that way, too, she'd call me Beast and animal, knowing it infuriated me but that I wouldn't—couldn't—retaliate. Not after I'd promised to care for her.

"You see, Saga?" I could hear the ice maiden talking to her wolf. "You feed them, bind their wounds, and even then, men are ungrateful buggers." I heard the wolf moan. "Well, we'll treat him the way we did

that bear cub we found. We'll ignore the bad-mannered snarling, get him on his feet and send him on his merry way."

A traitor and yet my rescuer. Maybe it was all a crazy dream, wolf included. A wave of exhaustion hit me. The bed was comfortable, and my body was at its limit. I decided I would think about what it all meant afterwards.

"Men are villains, Saga, never forget that."

Yes, I'd sort it all out later. After I slept. I settled down under the covers and was out like a light within seconds.