

LORELEI

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Drawing the brush through the flowing tangles of her hair, Ygritte's back teeth clenched tight together. She gripped the brush handle with such force the knuckles on her left hand were whiter than the bone the brush was carved from. It hurt, tearing through her own hair with such force, but then she hadn't really noticed. Not at first anyway.

Her mind was elsewhere, far away and filled with a thousand fretful images. She only had to close her eyes to see them painted across the canvas of her mind. Blood pooling beneath the fallen bodies of wolves and men alike, dead eyes staring, rictus-carved faces wrenched into horrific surprise. Why were they surprised? It was war. War was death. Death was everywhere...

It made no sense.

She may not have been a great warlord like her husband, but she knew enough: no one planned to die on the battlefield. Every soldier, terrified as he was of death and injury, expected to go into battle and return triumphant to nurse his wounds and live to fight another day. Her husband promised her every time he marched he would return to her victorious and unscathed, but one day he would not, and she knew this with a grave certainty she did not dare share with him.

War was death, and death was all around them.

The fate of far too many soldiers with no business being on a battlefield rested on her conscience. Her husband's men died for her, for her freedom and her future, and the enemy died for the same cause. Because of her. Because she ran away from the arrangement of her marriage, fell in love with an U'lfar warlord who put a child in her belly and swore to end the life of any man who dared come near her. Most especially the man her father promised her to before she was old enough to take her first steps.

Rognar would die for her; she knew that with such certainty it broke her heart. The day would come when he would fall upon the earth and live no more, just like the dead wolves she saw every time she closed her eyes, and that loss would haunt her until she drew her last breath.

It was senseless.

"Lord Rognar the Conqueror, my lady," Elyse, her handmaiden, announced as he pushed past the tent flaps guarding her from the cool night air. Elyse lowered her head in reverence and respect, an old habit that made him laugh behind the handmaiden's back sometimes, but the warlord barely even noticed the girl standing there.

"Rognar," Ygritte gasped. "What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you, or I would have dressed."

Turning over her shoulder, every part of her body fluttered and tensed to see him standing at the mouth of the tent exactly as he promised the last time he left for battle: alive and entirely unscathed. He'd removed his helm before entering and the mess of rakish auburn waves and braids were tangled and damp with sweat.

"You know you aren't required to dress for me," he grinned. "Please leave us, Elyse." He turned toward her handmaiden and the young girl hesitated, looked to her lady for approval, but Ygritte didn't draw her stare away from Rognar. "I will see to your lady's needs until morning."

"My lord?" She questioned him, her eyes still wide with surprise and the barest hint of protest in her voice.

"I said you may go," he reaffirmed in a firm, but gentle tone. "I will send for you in the morning before I gather my men to return to the field."

“Yes, my lord.” With lowered head, she curtsied and then turned out of the tent, leaving the warlord alone with his wife.

“She fears me still.”

Unbuckling the leather armor straps beneath his right arm, he loosened them and pried the pliant shell away from his breast before dropping it into a rattling pile on the ground beside the tent flap. Even unburdened by his armor Rognar carried the weight of the world across the broad span of his muscular shoulders, the fate of an entire clan—no, more than that—his entire race, and yet the moment he saw her there, brushing out the tangled waves of her hair in front of the tiny mirror propped upon the table, all his troubles seemed to melt away except for the inexplicable fright of a young girl in service to his wife.

“You are a terrifying beast, my love.” Ygritte turned in her chair again and lowered her hairbrush onto the table. She glimpsed him in the mirror’s reflection, caught the brilliant amber of his eyes as they flashed playfully and for the briefest of moments they only stared. “And besides I think you mistake respect for fear. She is eternally grateful you have given her a place here with me. She would be lost if she could not serve me. It is all she’s ever known.”

“Sometimes your ways are still so strange to me,” he confessed.

She watched his soft mouth twitch, a stern pretense that spread quickly into amusement as he took three steps toward her. He rested a hand to her shoulder and then knelt to brush his lips across her left temple. The bristling hairs of his beard made her skin itch, but she turned her head into that kiss, closing her eyes and relishing in his closeness. Weeks passed since last she saw him, sixteen days to be precise, every one of them counted down in the pages of the journal she kept as company in his absence.

“When did you return?”

“Only just. We leave again before dawn, I’m afraid, but I couldn’t live without seeing you when you were so near me.” Lament dampened his spirits, but only briefly. “Aelfric’s troops march toward Vrinkarn, but we will try to cut them off as they cross the river. I’ve sent my fastest ahead with word. They are to evacuate the city at once and merge with the war camp. Come morning, camp will move to join with them and head further south, toward Drekne. I only hope they heed my warnings before the fires start and join you where it’s safe.”

Ygritte reached over her shoulder, rested her hand atop her husband’s and gently squeezed his fingers inside her own. “Your boy is there,” she murmured, “in Vrinkarn.”

She felt stupid saying it, worried he would snap at her and ask if she thought he needed reminding of the whereabouts of his only son, but Rognar was not that kind of man. He never snapped at her, never barked orders or made her feel as if she had no voice in her own affairs. He respected her, even when she stated the obvious like an absolute idiot.

“Aye,” was all he said. He tightened his fingers upon her shoulder and then withdrew. Lifting his hand into his hair, the fingers caught in the tangles but he wrenched them through slowly until they were free again and his arm dropped slack to his waist. “Deken’s wife and children too. Eornlaith is heavier with child than you are. Fit to burst any day now.” At the mention of their baby, she dropped a hand to rest on her stomach. “So many families took refuge in Vrinkarn, believing it was safe because of the river, but we were fools to think anyplace was safe.”

“Are you worried for them, my love?”

For the briefest of moments the truth flashed in his eyes like fire, and then he shook his head. "Galisa is a smart woman. She and Eornlaith will be among the first to leave Vrinkarn."

"I'm sure you're right." She turned sideways in the chair to face him.

"Of course I am," he laughed. "I'm always right."

Her chuckle brought the light back into his eyes, and he gestured for her to rise and let him take her in his arms. Ygritte went to him, pushing her chair away from the table and turning into his waiting embrace. The musky scents of sweat, leather and iron mingled on his skin, but the loose tangles of his hair smelled like the night air: smoky, crisp and fresh as the oncoming autumn. Wrapping her arms around the thickness of his waist, she pressed her cheek into his chest and squeezed him as if it might be the last time she held him in her arms.

It very well might, she thought bitterly.

Any moment they stole together might be their last, so each and every one of them was precious. He brought his arms around her, held her close and breathed her in as if memorizing her scent so he might carry its memory with him into battle.

"How does our little one fare?" he whispered beside her ear, hand stroking through the length of her hair before finally resting on the small of her back. "Is she still making you ill?"

"Not as ill, no." She shrugged her shoulders and took a step back as he brought his hands up to circle around her upper arms. Holding her out to have a look at her, she watched his face light up with admiration and wonder. "She makes me very tired, though. I wake up every morning and think only about going right back to sleep."

Rognar's amusement wrinkled the corners of his eyes, which always made Ygritte think of dark, polished amber, and then he laughed again. "Her wolf spirit is strong. Have you felt her move yet?"

"Not yet, but your sister says it's only a matter of days, maybe only one more week before the first flutters can be felt."

Her hand lowered to the tightness of her belly, which hadn't even begun to swell enough to show her pregnancy. Rognar followed her gesture, bringing both of his hands around to cup hers, curving over top of them and cradling the place where their child grew inside her.

"I hope I am here when you feel her move for the first time."

"As do I."

He knelt in front of her on his knees, peeled her hand away and pressed his cheek against her womb. Closing his eyes, he turned in to kiss her there and Ygritte felt giddiness swell inside her the way it always did when he was near her. For a moment she closed her eyes and just let the feeling wash over her. The safety of his nearness, the warmth and tenderness of his touch. She felt him move, and when she opened her eyes again to look down at him, he was staring up at her, his bearded cheek pressed again to her belly. He was grinning, the bright red tangles of his hair falling into his face and rustling against the exhale of his contented breath.

Gods, he was so perfect, so beautiful and strong. Lowering her hand, she tucked the strands of hair away, behind his ear so she could see his face. "I hope our daughter looks like you," she murmured.

"Now don't curse the wee little thing before she's even born, Ygritte. However would she get through life with a face like mine?"

“You have a beautiful face.” She snorted a laugh and then shook her head. “I don’t want her to be manly like you, silly. I just... I hope she has your eyes.” Fingers tickling through his hair, she tucked another strand behind his ear. “Your beautiful, beautiful eyes.”

Rognar rose slowly from where he crouched, his body moving against hers as he stood. He took her hands in his and walked her toward the palette of woven leather and furs tucked behind the partition in the rear corner of the tent. He sat down on the edge of the palette, drew her into his lap and put his arms around her from behind. Just holding her against him, he pressed his face into her back and tickled the hairs of his beard across the space between her shoulders for a long time, the occasional sigh escaping and relaxing him. She could feel the tension of his muscles draining away, the stiffness of his arms loosening around her as they shared a rare and silent moment.

There had been so few of those since they’d come together. So few opportunities to simply be together and take solace in one another’s company, but she cherished them when they came. Tuned out the sounds of the camp beyond the thin walls of their tent and let herself forget for a moment they were at war.

A war her husband insisted had nothing to do with her, that would have come regardless of his taking her as wife, but she knew better.

Aelfric waged a full-scale war on Rognar’s people because of her. Before Rognar found her, the U’lfer had an almost unspoken agreement with men: we raid, we kill and what remains in the end becomes ours. But that agreement was shattered the moment Rognar took Ygritte in and made her his wife.

All because Aelfric thought he wanted her.

And he didn’t. He didn’t want her at all. He didn’t even know her, not beyond the three times they were awkwardly pushed together at court after she came of age and the plans for a wedding her father had been negotiating since she was still in swaddling clothes were in full swing. Aelfric barely even spoke to her, hardly looked at her at all during those meetings in which she was forced to sit prim and proper and let the men in her life plan her future.

But Rognar saved her from the plans others made for her. He took her in, promised to protect her and keep her safe, and he fell in love with her so swiftly it was like a great wind swept down from the heavens and pushed them together—where they were meant to be.

There was no one in the world for her but Rognar; she would die if anything ever happened to him.

Ygritte’s eyes stung with unshed tears, and before she could even gain control over her emotions her body started to tremble. Sensing her sorrow, Rognar leaned outward, distancing his body from hers to look at her.

“Hey,” he murmured, sliding her off his lap and onto the bed beside him. “Hey, what is this all about now?”

“Nothing.” She sniffed, quickly brushing her knuckles across her cheeks to stop the tears from making the journey toward her chin. “It’s nothing. Just my silly body, I suppose.”

“A woman doesn’t cry for nothing,” he remarked. “Even with a babe in her belly there’s always a reason. What is it, Ygritte? Why are you crying?”

She pinched her lips together so tight they formed a white line beneath her nose that he reached up to run his fingertip across. Shaking her head again, she lowered her lids

as she looked away from his insistent gaze silently demanding she tell the truth. Her throat felt tight, as if she'd swallowed something hard that didn't quite go down, but no matter how she tried to force that feeling to go away, it only tightened and hardened until the only way to make it stop was to give in to her tears.

"I don't want to lose you." She burst like a dam, sobs overtaking her, body trembling with fear and emotion beyond her control. "Every time you leave me, I think it is the last time I will see you, and one day that will be true, Rognar. One day you will go and you will not come back to me."

"No," he shook his head, "that is not true. I will fight for you until the day I die, but that day is long in the offing, my sweetling."

She wanted to believe him; oh, how she wanted to, but her dread-tangled gut never ceased to roil with fear.

"Every time you face him on the field, he outnumbered you fifty to one."

"That's because it takes fifty men to kill an U'lfer," he chided.

Turning in to face him, she batted her open palm at his shoulder, not daring to smile, even as he tried to amuse her.

"Why can't you take this seriously, Rognar? Your men are dying out there. Every time you return to camp it is with fewer and fewer warriors. He's made so many of your people pay. Routed out settlements, set fire to them. And for what? For me?"

"Not just for you," he protested. "For freedom. For the right to do as we please when we please to do it, Ygritte. This war, it isn't just about you. It never has been. You were the final straw in a long list of offenses that tyrant claims he won't suffer anymore. He's convinced himself I hold you here against your will. That he battles us in an effort to rest you from my claws."

"When nothing in the world could be further from the truth," she hissed through clenched teeth. "That arrogant..."

"Ygritte." He steadied her with both hands, holding onto the backs of her arms and drawing her back against his chest. "Ygritte, it doesn't matter. I know you've told yourself it means everything, but none of this matters. Not the tyrant king, not this war... But I will go on fighting Aelfric and stomping my boots through his war until you and our daughter are safe from his reach."

"Then let us go away from here," she insisted. "Just you and me. We'll leave this place, go far from Leithe and leave your people in peace."

"You really think he'll leave my people in peace if I take you away from this land? That he'll stop killing simply because I'm not here to stand up to him? Ygritte don't be a..."

"You will die here, Rognar!" she countered. "What about our daughter then?"

"I'm not going to die by Aelfric's hand."

"But if you do?"

The tightening of his fingers on her arms felt almost powerful enough to bruise beneath the skin, but she didn't try to wrench herself free. He shifted her body, lifted her onto the palette beside him, still holding onto her arms and staring down at her with such conviction the fierceness of his sharp amber eyes made her blood warm. Under the surface she trembled, not in fear of him, but fear for him, for his life and the life of the baby they'd made together.

"Do you want me to die, Ygritte?" A hint of mischief flared to life in his eyes, but there was nothing funny about that question and Ygritte finally pulled herself from his grip.

"Of course I don't want you to die!"

“Then stop worrying about it, and it won’t happen.”

“Oh, if only the world worked that way!”

“It could,” he shrugged and lowered his hands atop his thighs in front of him. “For all we know that’s exactly how the world works, how magic works in our lives. We simply think a thing so often, it becomes the truth. If you keep thinking about my dying, Ygritte, who’s to say it won’t manifest to satisfy your fears?”

“Don’t say that.” Tears burned in her eyes again, quickly slipping down her cheeks like gleaming rivers of despair. “Can’t you see I am afraid, Rognar? Every time you leave me, I am filled with so much dread? You are everything to me. All that’s ever mattered.”

“As you are to me.” Lifting his finger, he brushed the back of his knuckle through her tears and then brought his hand in to cup her cheek. He stared down at her, lowering his forehead to rest against hers and then closing his eyes. “And I don’t want to die any more than you don’t want it for me, but I can’t just turn my back and walk away. It’s not who I am, Ygritte. It never has been, nor will it ever be.”

Nestling her face into the warm curve of his calloused palm, she closed her eyes. “Can you promise me, Rognar? Can you promise you aren’t going to die out there?”

After a long silence, he tilted his chin forward and touched the softness of his mouth to hers. It was a slow, lingering kiss that said more than his words could ever say.

“Nay,” he murmured across her lips. Her breath hitched through them and she tried to catch the dismay before it left her. “I can’t promise you that, but I can promise this...” He waited, as if silently commanding the undivided attention of the gods as he made his declaration, and then he said, “I promise you that while I live, I will love none but you and I will fight to my last breath to keep you and our child free and safe.”

Her throat was so swollen and tight with emotion she couldn’t swallow, and when he kissed her she felt like she couldn’t breathe. She believed him, knew in her heart that so long as he drew breath he would hold true to that promise, but try as she might to cling to the hope that came with his promise she couldn’t set aside her fears. Their days together were numbered, and without him she couldn’t imagine a life.

“And if you die,” she finally managed a whisper.

“If,” he started, pausing on that word for emphasis. “*If* I die, Ygritte, you must live. For her.” Reaching for her hand, he held both of their palms over the barely noticeable bump beneath her nightgown. “For Lorelei.”

“Lorelei?” She shook her head and drew back to look at him again. “You’ve already named her then? And without even asking my opinion?”

Rognar chuckled, turning his hand and curling fingers around her own. “She came to me in a dream the night before last.” Casting his eyes downward, the amusement waned, replaced as quickly as it came with melancholy.

“Did she now?” Tilting her head curiously, she felt an odd jolt shudder through her and she straightened her spine to try and push it away.

“Aye,” he nodded. Ygritte watched as he pulled away and leaned forward on the palette to unlace the leather straps of his boots.

When he didn’t elaborate, she brought her arms up and crossed them over her sore breasts, hugging herself against the eerie chills lifting the hairs on her arms and legs and the back of her neck. “What did she look like?”

The corner of his mouth jerked toward his ear, accentuating the long dimple beneath his beard as he grinned. “Beautiful, of course. I’d expect no less since you are her mother.”

A girlish heat warmed her cheeks and then she reached out to shove him with a playful scoff. "You're pulling my leg."

In mock disdain, Rognar drew his other heel to pry the loosened boot from his foot before leaning down to unlace the other. "I would never pull your leg about something like this."

"You're really serious, aren't you?"

"Well of course I am."

"What did she say to you?"

For the briefest moment the amusement waned, replaced by a dark seriousness that terrified her, and then it passed as quickly as it came and he was grinning again. "She said to me, 'Da, you have to stop that woman. She wants to name me something awful, like Marisol or Aralane. You must go to her right now, before it's too late, and tell her my name is Lorelei.'"

"You're playing with me." Her slightly cupped hand came down on his shoulder again, playful, but hard enough that he mocked falling backward onto the palette as though she'd struck him with all her might. "What's wrong with Aralane?"

"Nothing at all as far as I'm concerned, but her name is Lorelei. She told me so herself."

"Lorelei," she repeated in a soft, thoughtful voice. "It is pretty, but what does it mean?"

"Fierce and beautiful as the waves."

"Fierce and beautiful," she nodded. "I like it."

"She'll be pleased then when you choose it for her."

"I still say you're playing with me."

"I would never play about something so serious as the name of our child."

Ygritte turned inward, rising up on her knees beside him and then stretching her leg across his waist to crawl atop him and sit down. "What did she look like?" she asked once more. "I mean, really what did she look like? Did she have your eyes?"

Rognar's chest rose with his breath. He brought his arm up and lowered it across his brow to rest. "She did," he said, a strange lament in his tone that puzzled her. "And hair like fire."

"Just like her father," Ygritte smiled.

"Aye," he agreed, "but she looked so much like her mother she broke my heart. Just the way her mother does every time she looks at me. Come," he held both arms out to her, "come to your husband and let him hold you in his arms."

She did then, snuggling down into his arms and taking comfort in their strength around her. Those arms made it easy to forget her fears, for the short time they held her, and the promises he whispered in her ear as they made love made the worries disappear. In his arms she believed everything would be all right and even if it was just for one night, Ygritte was able to rest.

And she dreamed, just as he did, of Lorelei.

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