

The Arrow

My father liked to tell me that the future was written in stone, and I supposed, for the men of my village, that was true.

Because for every man awaited the same journey, the same path that they must follow before they would be allowed to marry, to build a home, and to raise children of their own.

They were to slay a wolf. Just as my father had, and his father before him. Just as my grandfather and his father before him. Just as the first man of our village did to stop the famine of winter from ravaging our town.

It was an honor, one that many waited years to partake in. Even as the wolves became fewer and fewer, we continued to hunt. And now, after five long years, there was finally another wolf. The tradition would continue. Some could go their whole life without slaying one, never to know the respect and admiration of their village members.

And Eirik was just old enough to participate.

“You’ll pass over the smaller knife, won’t you, Astrid?” Eirik asked, his voice soft as his teeth bit down on his bottom lip, far too focused on carving his arrows to think of much else. Competing against four other hunters, he wanted his work to be known. He wanted to be sure that they knew it was him who took the wolf down.

Because it would be him, the best hunter... If his arrow didn’t snap first.

“You’re whittling it down too much,” I said, resisting his request, my legs dangling over the kitchen table as I looked down at his work, my mother having relegated him to the ground for his carvings because she didn’t want wood shavings all over her table.

“I’m a hunter, Astrid,” he insisted, raising his arrow to closer inspect the shaft. “I think I’d know whether or not an arrow would snap.”

I snorted, taking in the intricately carved arrow... and giving it a swift kick.

He glared up when it broke easily. It was at least an hour of his life wasted—but I had warned him long before he’d even begun.

“That design will not work,” I informed him. “You’ll have to try a different one.”

“Spoil sport,” he mumbled, looking at the two halves in his hand and quickly tossing them away, grabbing from the bundle of sticks he had resting beside him and starting again. “Alright, no hollows or braiding of the wood. What do you suggest for this one? Which design will be the most impressive to offer to my future wife for her to mount above the fireplace?”

“A line,” I said sarcastically, causing him to make a sour face and throw the broken arrow halves over his shoulder in my direction.

I would not give him any sort of intricate design, largely because I knew that would be the last I saw of the arrow. It would go to Eirik’s wife, and then it would remain in his house where I would never see it again.

Because I would not be his wife, and once they came of age, hunters were not to keep female friends. Especially not dowdy little girls with plain features and stringy hair, thick ankles and not enough swell in their hips to be desirable. Even if they had spent their whole lives beside each other.

Eirik would have the best. I knew that because he was the strongest hunter and the bravest boy in our village. He would not settle for less than a woman who was worthy of his talents... which was not me.

“You’re sour today,” Eirik acknowledged. “Are you mad your father won’t let you go on the hunt? It’s not his fault, you know. You’re a woman. The village elders do not care if you know how to string a bow or are the second best shot in the village.”

“The second best?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, of course I am the first,” he grinned up at me, nearly nicking his thumb in the process.

He earned the second kick, chuckling as he hunched over his carving once more. He was taking his time, likely hoping that my father would be home soon to invite him to stay for dinner. While my mother was no fan of his, my father saw a lot of my late older brother in him and invited him as often as possible.

Which suited Eirik fine, since he lived with his aunt and uncle after his parents passed away years ago, spending just as much time in our cabin as he did theirs.

“Do you think your cousin will get a hit in?” I asked, always curious whether his older cousin, a slacker who seemed cursed to compete with Eirik, would even bother to string his bow. Of course, he was in love with the lovely Yvette, as was half of the village, so maybe he would try.

“He promised me he will one up me a thousand times on this hunt,” Eirik said with a hint of amusement. “He’s got to win if he’s going to have any chance of snaring Yvette. She’ll likely be married by the end of this hunt.”

Ah, just as I suspected. I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised. She was small, cute in a way, and giggled at the right times rather than letting out outrageous laughter. Those were good traits to have, not ones that women often truly envied in each other, but ones that men sought after.

Still, the fact that it was her—the exact opposite of me—made my heart quiver. I was far too selfish.

“She’d be a pretty bride, wouldn’t she?” I said wistfully, almost seeing her behind my eyes. She had soft blonde hair, blue eyes everyone talked about, and features that turned up in all the right places. “I bet the person who does get her will be thrilled, and she’ll display their arrow prominently regardless of design.” She was kind. So kind that I was almost jealous of her. One could carve anything into those arrows and she would display it.

“If it were you,” Eirik began, smoothing the surface of his arrow so it would take to more delicate designs easier. “What would you want on your arrow?”

I would never receive an arrow. I would end up married, sure, but not to someone that the village respected.

Still, I humored him, my eyes going to the window behind him and taking in the skeletons of the autumn trees. “Flowers,” I said simply, because it was cold and would be cold for a while longer. There was nothing I wanted to see more than flowers when I knew that winter was nearing. “Wildflowers, the ones you see at the beginning of spring.”

Eirik tsked, likely amused by my extravagant request, and turned back to his work, whittling abstract shapes into the wood.

The wolf would come back soon, and the hunt would take place any day now. He had to be ready for that, finishing his arrow shafts and securing the silver tips to the ends. I would have to be ready too.

I would have to be ready for the world that would come after he had hunted.

“You just keep looking off and worrying,” Eirik said, patting the space beside him on the ground and urging me to move to it. “Come sit next to me, tell me what you’re thinking instead of deafening me with your thoughts.”

I snorted, sliding down to the ground beside him, my eyes taking a quick glance over to the fireplace and watching as the logs crackled there. Soon, nights like that one would begin to fade from memory.

“Shit!” Eirik exclaimed, evidently getting distracted and nicking himself with the blade of his knife. He immediately raised his hand to his mouth, trying to suck away the blood.

“Oh, give it here, you big baby,” I proclaimed, tearing his hand away to properly inspect it. The cut was deep, way too deep. He’d have trouble loading his bow because of it the next day. “You’ll need a wrap,” I began, standing up. He immediately sighed in relief and I knew why. I didn’t say that he couldn’t hunt because of it. “Don’t get cocky,” I warned him as I went across the kitchen to the hunter’s box by our front door, where my dad kept many of the bandages and medical supplies in case he came back in worse shape from a hunt.

“A split second’s slip up,” Eirik groaned, throwing his head back as the blood from his hand continued to ooze from the cut and down his forearm. “What will it cost me?”

“Nothing, you big idiot,” I said, coming back to him with a needle, thread, and some gauze—I set them aside before quickly running to grab a rag and some of the water from the bucket by the door. Then, once I was prepared, I set forward to take care of him, only to find that he’d been watching me the whole time.

“I had to focus on something other than the blood,” he said cheekily. “A pretty girl seemed like a good enough distraction to me. It was either that or start carving again.”

Idiot. “You should not have been making such big gouges in the wood to begin with. What did I just tell you?” I shook my head at him, my eyes drifting over to his arrow to see what exactly he’d deemed so worthy of injuring himself over.

His hand moved to cover the shaft, blocking the design from view. All I could see was the stain of red towards the tip. Obviously, this design was a bit more personal.

“Eirik,” I warned, casting him a glare as I tended to his wound. He averted his eyes from me. I don’t know if that was because he didn’t want to look at what he’d done, or because he was embarrassed to have done it. Still, a lazy smile spread over his face.

“Do you think anyone will give you their arrow, Astrid?” He asked, his voice sounding distant but still joyful. “You know, you have admirers in the village.”

He was teasing me.

“I’m not Yvette,” I scoffed.

“What does Yvette have to do with it?” He asked in return, and I knew he was joking. He had to be joking at that point, because Yvette was undeniably perfect. “I suppose that if a hunter were to win you over, your father would build him a cabin just the same as Yvette’s father would do for her lover. The others might think that’s pretty valuable. You’re likely the second choice.”

“Cabins, marriages, arrows,” I rolled my eyes. “Focus on the fact that you have just hurt your bow hand the day before you will go hunting. You’ll be lucky if you can hold your bow up at the very least.”

“Ah,” he laughed, flexing his hand in my grip. “You would be surprised, a little determination can take you far, and I am determined to win.”

“Then become determined to heal, because you need to fix your hand before you can even think of shooting,” I told him. “They say the wolves around here can smell blood, and when they do, they pounce.”

“Pounce?” He laughed. “They’re wolves, not mountain lions, Astrid. I doubt any of them will pounce on me. Funny of you to hope for it, though.”

"You'd be surprised," I responded. "You never know."

He frowned, looking at me with an almost disappointed expression. "Alright," he said, "You're confident in that, so let's make a deal."

"A deal?"

He nodded. "If I come home all in one piece, then you have to give me anything I want. If I win, I want something big. So be prepared for that."

"And when will you come to collect what you want? Before or after you have given your arrow to someone and become betrothed? Because you know you cannot see me afterwards."

"Always the realist, my Astrid," Eirik grinned, his dimple sinking into his cheek. "Before, I'll come to you first thing, and I'll bring my arrow with. Then I'll give it right afterwards, I promise you. That way you don't have to worry about me, and you can sleep easy." Catching my concern, he added, "We'll keep it a secret if that's what you want. I would hate to disappoint you."

I nodded curtly, sewing his hand shut. He, of course, flinched with every poke of the needle. Eirik was never one for blood or wounds.

"You'll make someone a fine wife someday, Astrid," Eirik mused, his eyes dancing in the firelight. "I look forward to seeing you when I come back."

I snorted.

I KNEW LITTLE OF THE WORLD BEFORE EIRIK. HE WAS a part of my earliest memories, the being that marked the

time after blurry stumbling and defined thought. I could almost remember more of him than my own brother, which was sad in its own way, because he belonged to me far less than the older Oskar did.

Oskar died on his hunt years and years ago. Long before the last one, long before the one before that. When the wolves were more plentiful, and not as many hunters had to scramble to find them. The story was unclear, but from my understanding, he got cornered and lashed out too quickly. The hunters could not find much left of him afterwards. We buried the pieces that remained.

Hunting was not safe, but the rite was even more unsafe. I was reminded of that fact as I stared at the young group of men, each holding their weapon in their hands as if it was the line of fate guiding them.

They had spotted the wolf outside the village, one with white fur and eyes a darker black than the midnight sky. The hunters would begin to hunt him when the sun set on the horizon. These were the moments to say goodbye, the moments when well-wishers from all over the village would put their hands on them and wish them well.

“Well,” asked my father. “Will you tell Eirik goodbye?” He knew, of course, he could read it in my eyes plain as day; I wanted nothing more than to say goodbye to Eirik.

But people crowded around him and even though his eyes drifted over to mine, I couldn’t help but think that that was wonderful in its own special way. He had no family, and yet over time he’d endeared himself to the public to the point where nearly the whole village wanted

to say goodbye to him. Who was I to steal him away? He was not mine alone. I could not bring myself to walk to him and demand his attention. I could never do that.

"I will congratulate him when he comes back," I said to my father, tearing my eyes away from Eirik. "Then he can show me the wolf pelt before he goes to throw it on his wife's doorstep." It was easier that way as well. If I began to distance myself, then my heart wouldn't ache so much when he came back and took Yvette's hand.

"You should say goodbye," my father said warily, walking after me but still casting a look over his shoulder. "You never know when it will be your last time."

"Eirik and I are the type of friends that do not need to say goodbye," I said. "We are the type of people to always see each other again." Even if we did not speak, but instead looked at each other for brief moments in the town square. We would always see each other again.

"It would surprise you how rarely you get to see people again," my father said. Oh, how I wish I knew then how right he was. Oh, how I wish I had turned around and threw my arms around Eirik's neck.

Even if I never told him I loved him, it would have still been better than what happened.

THEY WENT OUT INTO THE WOODS, SEVEN YOUNG MEN. Seven young men determined to become adults. It never hit me before then how wrong it all was, how dangerous our ways were. It never hit me until he didn't come back.

We waited for them to return, the whole village did.

Standing in a line by the trees, looking for faces amongst the grey and white mottled trunks. It was a tradition, even if they never returned that first night.

They were never meant to return that first night.

But they did, because something awful had happened. Something that they could barely speak of.

That night, five young men returned. He was not amongst them. One other was missing, but they had a reason for that, his body was buried deep in the woods. The wolf had savaged the young man. Apparently, Eirik had tried to stop it. The wolf dragged him off; they didn't know where he went. They couldn't answer any questions, and I wasn't allowed to ask them, anyway. They just said he was gone, and that was the end of things. Years and years of knowing Eirik, and in one night he had disappeared.

And with it, he took a part of me.

"Do you think they'll go back to the woods and look for him once it's all over?" I asked my father that night, standing on the porch of our cabin, gazing out into the dark, endless woods. I already knew the answer.

"No, they won't," he said with an air of misery. "Astrid, the rite is more important than anyone. These men need to prove themselves before they can even think of someone like Eirik." Because that's all we were, weak vs strong. Nothing else mattered. That was why we had such a trial to begin with, to ensure that the men of our village were strong. To ensure that our village would survive for generations, not wasting too many resources on men who would never amount to anything.

"He should have won," I argued. "He's not weak.

Everyone knew Eirik was going to win this. Something went wrong! Shouldn't the fact that he tried to save someone count for anything? Shouldn't they want to bring him back, even if he is broken somewhere?" Sadly, I already knew the answer, as did my father. They brought back only pieces of my brother, and that was after a victor had been proclaimed.

"These woods," my father said, "if you don't pay attention, they will eat you up."

"They have already eaten me whole," I replied.

I DON'T REMEMBER HOW OLD I WAS WHEN I FELL IN love with Eirik. It had always seemed like my life was divided into two sections, the time before him and the time after him. The time before him was so brief and unmentionable that I didn't think about it. The time before him was spent mourning my brother and wishing for change. I'd hardly even known that man, I could not even remember my older brother's face. But the time after Eirik? The time after Eirik was extraordinary. The time after Eirik was filled with laughter and joy. It felt like as soon as I could walk; I knew him. I knew everything about him.

We would sit in the fields picking wildflowers together, and I would weave chains out of them. He would sit and whittle with his knife, creating all sorts of different creatures, and then he would give them to me to put by my bedside at night. We would go to the shore of the large lake that sat just a few minutes away, and we

would pick up rocks to try to find the best ones. He taught me how to skip stones, and then he would count the beats. Every single skip against the water was another day that you were lucky. It was a stupid rule, but it was ours.

We had a lot of stupid rules, a lot of stupid things. But they were ours. He was mine.

And then we grew up, and every day he waited for a chance to prove himself. Eirik wanted to belong to the village more than anything. He wanted to prove that he was so much more than an orphan. He wanted the pretty bride and the large cabin that he would get as an adult; he wanted the long nights curled at a fire beside his bride, just like everyone else.

And that bride would have been Yvette. I knew this because she was the prettiest, therefore the best. Eirik would have the best of everything; the best cabin, the best bow, and the best bride. He couldn't feel like he belonged otherwise. He always told me about it, this beautiful life that he would build for himself.

I always looked on in jealousy.

He barely knew her, yet he wanted her. And I? I wanted him. Me with my stick-like body, my overly long limbs and my brown, wiry hair. I wasn't so blindly optimistic that I thought he loved me. I knew he didn't. I wasn't cocky enough to believe that he could.

But Yvette didn't even mourn him. In fact, she didn't even blink an eye when she heard he would not be coming back. For all that she was kind-hearted, she did not care. Because he was truly nothing in the end, not if he couldn't kill a wolf, not if he couldn't escape the woods. She moved

past him, focusing her efforts on the next most likely victor, his cousin.

And I focused my attention on his cousin, Jarl, as well — because I didn't trust him. Jarl was always jealous, he was always spiteful. What would stop him from pushing Eirik in front of the wolf? Sure, it was a silly, nonsensical idea, but it felt like I was right to suspect him. Did he even think about shooting the animal that held Eirik? Or did he let it take him, because if he put a stop to it, then he would surely lose.

He went out the next day, not a single word about what had happened slipping from his lips.

None of the men told the story of how Eirik disappeared. None of them talked about how a wolf could drag him into the woods. It didn't sit well with me. Maybe they were all in on it, maybe they all wanted him out of the way. Because so long as he was there, no one else could win.

And now no one would go into the woods to find him. He would never be found, and I couldn't live with that. I could not live with the idea of never seeing my friend again, even if seeing him meant facing awful truths and seeing vile things.

The young men were still hunting the wolf, they were still lurking throughout the woods, tracking it down. Every day, the other men, the adults, would stand at the edge of the forest and stare. They would wait for a victor. Which meant that they weren't in their cabins.

Which meant that they left their hunting stores untended to. It was a crazy, borderline insane idea, but it was mine. I was not a bad shot. In fact, I was better than most

of the men in the village. My father had taught me how to shoot. He thought that was important that I know. You never do when someday something could go wrong, and he didn't want me to be caught unprepared.

I don't think he ever thought that I would steal from him, nor that I would ever go out in the woods alone. Especially while the men were hunting, especially during wolf season. It was unheard of for a woman to go out in the woods when there were wolves prowling within the darkest corners; they were dangerous. But I couldn't leave Eirik out there.

So I stole his bow from where it rested by the front door, and I grabbed the hunting box that sat so near to it. I couldn't take it all. It was far too heavy for that. All I could do was empty most of the contents into a pouch that hung from my hips, then hope for the best. I had no rations for food, nothing. I was working under the assumption that he was out there, injured; I had to make sure that I could treat him if that was the case.

The image of his throbbing, leaking hand kept popping back into my mind. It had lured the wolves in. There was no doubt. The blood was probably the first thing they scented. Wolves had an extraordinary sense of smell.

And then Jarl left him behind. The idea was chilling, but not impossible. I wouldn't put his cousin above it. Maybe he even tripped him.

"I'm going to find you," I promised Eirik, not even looking back before exiting the cabin. "And when I do, I am going to save you."

But despite my determination, the woods still stood in

front of me, daring me to enter. Endlessly tall trees seemed to reach further and further back, until there was nothing left, and when I reached the end of the woods, I stood there and stared, wondering if a girl and her bow could truly face it all.

“For Eirik,” I reassured myself, my knuckle growing white as I gripped my bow. For him, I would do the impossible. For him, I would become the huntress. Even if the winds whistling through the trees made me feel like anything but that.

And so I took one last look back home and, because you never knew when you would see something again, I whispered my goodbye, hoping that those words would carry on the wind and end up where they needed to. My father deserved children that came home, but I could not guarantee that. All I could do was whisper that goodbye.

“I love you,” I said for my father, so that he would know. I needed not whisper it on the wind for Eirik, because my actions spoke volumes above anything else. Instead, I kept my hand on my bow as I set off, ready to find him.

I HAD BEEN TAUGHT AS A LITTLE GIRL NOT TO GO INTO the woods alone. It was one of the first things I learned, deemed as important as speech by my father. That was how it was for the girls in my village. They knew not to go into the woods alone from the moment they could walk. Most of them never even bothered to picture entering them. Such a thing was impossible. Young boys, however,

were taught to foolishly charge into the woods at a young age.

And because I was the girl that I was, I would foolishly charge after them. After my brother, after Eirik, occasionally after my father. All the same, I was scolded. Sometimes in laughing voices, sometimes with anger. Little girls should know their place, little girls should not put themselves in danger. Little girls should do this or that—These were words girls heard quite often, even if their father was as patient as mine. But Eirik didn't say those words.

Every time he caught me out, he said, '*Hello Astrid, how are you?*' He did not so much as blink at me being there, perhaps presuming my presence in the woods to be as natural as the grass beneath his feet. I was always beside him, so it only made sense that I would be beside him there too. He never complained.

But now that I was truly alone and not with him, not anywhere near him, I wondered what he would say. I wondered if he would scold me.

He'd only yelled at me once before, during the last hunt. I'd decided to venture out to get a peek. I just wanted to see what was going on, what the wolf looked like. I did not walk that far beyond the trees.

But I saw that strange wolf with its bright blue eyes all the same. I took in its white fur and its strange demeanor, and it took me in too. When it looked at me, I could not move.

And Eirik, who was hunting small game near the edge of the woods where the wolves normally never went, saw me. He saw me and he tackled me out of the way. He was only fourteen then, but he scolded me as if he was fifty,

and I was a mere child, rather than a girl two months younger than him. He was furious beyond reason.

A part of me wanted him to scold me like he had before, because if he did, then that would mean that he was there, and he was alive. I would take yelling and him dragging me away over anything else. But so far, as I walked through the woods, I got none of that. None of anything close to that.

The sun would not set for many hours, but I was far enough away from the village to be safe for the most part, at least from the other hunters.

“Eirik,” I called his name, starting to formally search for him. “Eirik, where are you?” No response. I didn’t expect one. Of course, he would not be there. I just had to round my way back to the place where the men had walked out of the woods the other day, since going directly to that part of the woods while still in the village would have raised questions.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel like something, or someone, was watching me. I tried to keep my eyes forward and not think too much. Even if my stomach did growl. Even if I did not know where the other hunters were. I was safe, at least for the time being.

How much longer I would be safe? I did not know.

IT WAS AROUND NOON WHEN I DECIDED I NEEDED TO settle for the time being; the air was brisk and the leaves on the trees had long since fallen down. Fall was not the time to wander about the woods. My fingers stung ever so

slightly from the wind, not as badly as they would in winter, but still enough. I knew that so long as I kept moving, I would run across one of the more permanent encampments put in place by the hunters; fire pits and lean-to shelters made from more sturdy materials. I just had to keep moving.

But that was a hard concept for my limbs to understand. I was tired, far more tired than I had thought I would be, and the day was still young. Constant motion would do that to someone.

More than that, it surprised me that I had not seen or heard a hint of the hunters; it was as if my section of the woods was empty. A part of that was a relief... another part was not. I did not feel alone, not truly. It felt like something was out there, watching me. But I could not prove it, not then. It was just a feeling.

Still, that feeling only increased when I heard rustling in the distance, the sound of snapping twigs and rustling leaves. Many creatures of the forest had learned to be careful, so it seemed such an odd thing. More than that, my father had long since taught me to recognize the sound of a deer or rabbit, but that? That was something else. Something I had not heard before. Instantly, my blood went cold.

I kept my hand on my bow, my other reaching behind me into my quiver, withdrawing one arrow silently. With my luck, there might have been something out there, and if there was, I would not be caught empty-handed.

Silently, I slunk through the woods, my footsteps becoming lighter and lighter as time went on. Again, I heard a sound, another noise in the distance. I looked over

my shoulder with my eyes alone, knowing that if I turned immediately, I might startle what was there.

I saw a flash of grey and felt my whole stomach drop. I wasn't wrong. Something was out there.

Something far larger than any rabbit, and far quieter than a deer. A hunter, one that did not walk on two legs. My body stilled at the realization.

At another crack, I notched my arrow in the bow, my fingers at the ready. The bow was my best bet; it kept a distance between me and whatever was out there, and it allowed me to exert more force than I would have been able to with a knife. It was my lifeline.

But whatever was out there knew that I was hunting it. I had to act fast and either convince it that I did not suspect that it was there, or shoot it. I opted to speed up my gait, trying to relax my shoulders. Eirik had taught me that one. He'd told me that if I ever hunted, I should act as if I had not seen what I was looking for.

It was hard to do that, however. I was never one to put up a facade, aside from withholding my feelings from Eirik. Everything else I did lay clear across my face. All other motions that I made were obvious.

And then I heard the growl.

The moment it hit the air, my body stopped entirely, and the arrow slid from my fingers, hitting the ground rather than any target. I hadn't even begun to aim.

A wolf. There was a wolf out there, and it had its sights on me. I could hear it in the background, hear how it rounded me. Surely, it had been the thing hunting me. Surely, it had decided that I would be its tribute. I could not will myself to run.

I heard it move closer.

In the back of my head, there were a thousand voices telling me to move. Every member of my village screamed I should run. Nevertheless, I could not. I could not begin to run until it moved far too close to me, only a few feet away from me, staring at my back.

Then, finally, my feet moved. They flew, propelling me forward, leaving behind my bow and the arrow, only a useless quiver of arrows on my back. As I ran, I heard something run behind me, the pants of a canine chasing me down, one that could last far longer than me and move far faster. How could I ever hope to stand a chance against it? How could I ever hope to survive?

I wove through the trees, trying to avoid it, trying to avoid the pain that would soon come. All the while, I kept my eyes closed, not daring to look back. If I did, surely I would slow and it would kill me. But some good that did, it just kept gaining and gaining. Then, I felt it.

A hollow thump, my body hitting the ground. I only had a moment to process the fact that I had fallen before my head hit the earth with a thud, knocking me unconscious.

I DID NOT EXPECT THE CRACKLE OF FIRE THAT WOKE me up, nor did I expect the clothed male back that sat in front of me, roasting something over the flames. I merely blinked in confusion as I looked at the jacket over me, the pattern familiar, but the wear on it far too unfamiliar. For a moment, I thought I recognized the stitching I saw on

one corner, because it was far too clumsy and uneven to be anyone but mine's.

And then I realized I recognized the back in front of me, despite the mussed-up hair and the numerous stains across the person's clothes. Despite the way that it hunched in, bent over to be smaller in a way so unlike him.

But it still felt unreal. So, I reached out, just the simplest motion, and ran my hand across it, if only to make sure that he was really there, that was Eirik sitting in front of me and no one else. The moment I did, he turned around, his familiar face looking back at me.

A familiar face marred with scars, scars far too healed to have been recent... but not present before. He had always been boyishly handsome, with light brown hair that was stuck in an adorable way and deep dimples that only sunk in lower when he really meant to smile.

Those dimples reappeared, and I felt my heart thunder in my chest, because it almost felt like it shouldn't have been him. He shouldn't have been there, not in front of me, not again.

"Astrid," he said my name, and there was not a trace of anger. If anything, there was relief. His hands reached for me just as I reached for him, the only difference being that this time, he reached for my face. He had never touched my face before. Sure, he had touched me with the same tenderness before, but something about this was so jarringly different.

His face fell when he realized that I was shocked. Not just by his appearance, but by his actions, and by the fact that he was there.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, making to pull his hands

away—I grabbed them before they could leave, and kept them on my face. I understood it to a point. He wanted to know that I was real just as much as I wanted to know that he was real.

Sitting up slowly while still cradling my face in his hands, I looked at him like the strange, overwhelming thing that he was. I couldn't believe that he was there, really there, and I was not imagining it.

"Eirik," my arms were around him, clutching him to my chest. His name tasted so sweet on my lips. I could not believe that he was there. I could only hold him tighter, hoping that he wouldn't disappear.

The grunt of pain that he made in response did not go unnoticed.

I pulled away quickly, my eyes wide and my heart racing. My eyes raced over him, looking for damage. I saw nothing... save for the rips in his clothes, accented by deep brown stains from his blood. But underneath those cuts in the cloth sat nothing, no visible wounds. Just more scars.

"What... happened to you?" I asked, squinting at him as he looked back at me almost shyly. It was strange to see him bashful for once in his life. For too long he'd been overly confident, so sure of himself that it almost made me ache.

"Nothing," he said right away, looking away from me. He turned back to the fire, to the fish he was roasting atop sticks in front of it. "Are you hungry?" He asked, changing the subject like I wouldn't realize that he had done it.

Truthfully, I was. I was ravenous. But I was more confused than ravenous, more in need of knowing than anything else. "You didn't go back to the village," I said,

ignoring his offering. "You're fine, and you didn't go back to the village."

"Oh? Did I not?" He said tensely, as if that could be something that he wouldn't realize. "You know, I think I got a bit lost." Lost? He was a hunter, and the village was so clear in location. If you followed the moss that grew on the trees, you would always find it.

"Are you okay?" I asked, trying to peer at him. Instead of answering me, he poked the fish in my direction, silently asking me to eat. I blinked at it, hesitantly accepting it only because it was the only thing he would give me. If there were no other options, then I would take that one.

"Good," he said once I'd accepted it, looking away from me. "You should eat, then you should go home."

"We should go home," I corrected him, taking a large bite of my fish. "I should eat, then we should go home."

He looked away. I didn't miss it. Instead, it made me feel even more concerned.

"Are you not going home?" I asked him, because the idea was just so crazy to me. "Eirik, you have to come back. People are going to think that you're dead. Unless you're still hunting, in which case I understand, but—"

"I'm not going home, Astrid," Eirik replied, and my face fell entirely.

"What do you mean you're not going home?" I fired back, furrowing my brow. Suddenly, the food he gave me didn't seem that palatable, not if it was going to be paired with a statement like that. "Eirik, people are going to think that you're dead—"

"Let them think that," he replied, looking away from

me. "It was good to see you, Astrid. But I can't stay there, and I bet you don't want to, so..."

My eyes narrowed. "Do you want me to stay here?"

He looked away.

"What's going on?" I repeated, moving closer to him, desperate to know what had happened. He still avoided me, not wanting to look into my eyes. I frowned.

"I was happy to see you," he admitted, and that was it. Then he got up, offering his hand to me once more, expecting me to take it.

"I came all this way to find you," I said, and he flinched, almost in twice as much pain as he seemed to be before. "Eirik, I've been looking all over for you—"

"You shouldn't have," he replied. "Jarl was supposed to make sure that no one did."

"—Why?" I demanded. I wouldn't get up. I wouldn't think of leaving before he told me. He seemed to understand that, looking almost frustrated when he gazed back down at me, as if he wished I was less stubborn. If that was the case, then he would always be disappointed. "Eirik," I warned. I could not help my lingering suspicions towards his cousin.

He only shook his head. "There is so much that I wish I could tell you, but... Astrid, I can't. Astrid, I can't go home with you, but I'm okay." Even as he said that, he didn't look okay. He looked worn down and stressed, distanced in a way. It wasn't like him, not anywhere close.

"You're not okay if you're not home," I interrupted. Because that was it to me. He was someone who was so intrinsically tied to the village that it was ridiculous to even think of him severing that tie, to even think of him

alone. And then, once my mind rushed through everything, I had another realization, a reason why he couldn't stay there. "Eirik, there's a wolf out here. There's something around here, it was stalking me."

"Astrid, I don't think that we need to worry about that," he reassured, but I wasn't having it. My eyes were already darting around, looking for the beast, fearing for the worst for him. "Astrid, just look at me."

"You need to come home," I decided, shaking my head and only standing to push on his back, determined to get him moving. "It's not safe here."

"It is," he tried to argue, but I couldn't listen to him, not when I knew that there was something out there. He had to see reason. "Astrid," again he said my name. This time it was heavier than before. It was almost a plea, almost as if he couldn't have me arguing anymore.

He wasn't coming. The realization hit me. No matter what I did, he would not come. There was nothing I could do to convince him. So I would have to make a choice, go home and leave him there, or... "What happened?" I repeated, needing to know.

He looked down at me, at the way that I kept pressing against him, trying to move him. There was an air akin to pity on his features. "Astrid, I can't—"

He couldn't. Fine then, I'd accept that answer. I knew him well enough to know he would tell me anything if he could. But even though I accepted it, I still looked at him, waiting for something, my arms crossed and my foot practically tapping. I needed some sort of physical explanation.

He blinked at the fact that I wasn't pushing anymore,

or even trying to move. For a second, there was something like hope in his eyes.

“Just give me an idea and I’ll stay with you,” I began, and he looked even more surprised. “I’m not asking for much, I just need a reason.”

“I will give you one eventually,” he promised.

“Now,” I demanded, and watched him hesitate again. My eyes lingered on his scars, as if those would tell me the answers. He didn’t have them yesterday, not at all. He was still a boy yesterday.

“I lost my carved arrow,” he said finally, as if that was any sort of explanation. “If I could show you it, you would understand everything—”

“But you can’t, so you won’t begin to tell me the truth,” I sighed, sitting back down, this time closer to the fire where I could warm my toes. Night still hadn’t fallen, but that didn’t stop the cold from seeping in. I had to fight against it. “Eirik,” I started. “I want you to go home.”

“And I wish I could,” he said abruptly. “Especially knowing the bargain that we had made.”

I scoffed, leaning closer to the fire and, after a moment, grabbing his fish instead of my own, deciding to eat that just because it was closer. He didn’t look to be starving, anyway. What difference did it make?

I couldn’t help but notice how his eyes glimmered when I grabbed it, almost looking complimented by the action. How odd, but also, how endearing. It was almost as if he was proud to have done something for me. He looked like that often at home too, when he came by with extra kills for my family and added them to our stock. With two young hunters, his family was always taken care of, so I

never thought twice about it. He gave food to nearly everyone in need. But this? This was different.

He settled beside me on the log set beside the campfire, and I stole a glance at him, looking at the cut that I had sewn up just two days prior and noticing that the stitches were still there, but the cut itself...

"How did you do that?" I demanded, moving the food into my other hand to pick up his hand and inspect it, bringing it close to my eyes. He chuckled from above me, a sort of 'wouldn't you like to know' sound, one that was almost grating. I frowned, running my thumb across the back of his hand, feeling the uneven skin beneath it. "We need to remove the stitches if it's healed."

"By all means," He said, flourishing his hand in front of me, waiting for me to get to it already. I couldn't help but notice that the rest of his hand was changed as well, a few more small scars dotting it.

I took it in my own, squinting at the marks that decorated it, and running my thumb against a few of the pale crescent moons decorating his skin. He let out a soft hiss at one of them, obviously finding that it was healed but still sore, and my eyes snapped up to meet his.

His hand wrapped around mine in return, his eyes softening when mine met his. "You should go home soon," he said, his hand giving mine a light squeeze. "It's probably for the best." Even though he most definitely didn't want me to. Right.

I tried to ignore him, looking around for the small bag I'd been carrying and seeing that, though the strap had snapped at some point in my fall, he'd collected it and placed it near the fire, the leather tied in on itself.

“What attacked me?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at that.

“Nothing,” he said evenly, and I moved around him to grab the pack.

“No, something did. I felt it watching me, and it knocked me down to the ground. There’s something out here—”

“If something had meant to attack you, wouldn’t there be a mark on you?” He asked in reply, his voice slightly clipped. Still, there was a slight tremor to his words, as if they almost made him nervous to say. Odd.

I turned back to him, the small, metal scissors my father had bought specifically for stitches and a pair of tweezers in my hands. Of course, I didn’t picture that I would remove them when I set out to find Eirik, but this was better than the alternative.

I knelt down in front of him, once again taking his large hand in mine. He wrapped it loosely around mine, his eyes on me the whole time as I worked his wounds, biting my lip ever so slightly in pain at the resistance I felt from the stitches. Every time I winced, he moved a little closer.

“You’re good at this,” he said, and I almost jumped when I realized he was at my ear. My scissors slipped just slightly, and he was lucky that they didn’t stab him.

“I’m only good at this because you’re clumsy and insist on keeping me around,” I said, keeping my gaze away from his. Looking at him would be dangerous.

“I’m lucky that you stay around,” He replied, his hand moving underneath mine as I pulled out the last stitches. The last one made him hiss ever so slightly, a bead of blood

escaping him that I was tempted to repair before he distracted me, grabbing my hand and tugging it up near his face, his eyes once again looking for mine.

I couldn't pay attention to his wound for a moment longer, because his lips reached up to meet my skin, kissing the back of my hand with a tenderness that I'd never felt before. A small, strangled gasp escaped me, one that I tried to bite back.

"You've bandaged me up," he said, stroking the thin skin at the back of my hand. "Are you not satisfied yet?"

The blood at the back of his hand had dried already. I don't know how it scabbed up so quickly. All I did know was that he was there, and far too present. He chuckled once more at my astonishment, releasing my hand before standing up far too suddenly. His hand jerked in my direction once more, this time urging me to let him help me up.

His lips were pressed tightly together, almost strained, but his hand still wrapped around mine all the same when I took his, letting him pull me to my feet, ignoring the fact that I almost collided with him in the process. I couldn't help but wonder if this was all part of some elaborate show to prove that he was okay, and then he walked away from me and grabbed the pouch I carried, slinging it over my shoulders without another word.

He pointedly placed the bow in my hands, securing my hands around it, and adjusted the quiver on my back to fit better, before nodding to himself. It was too showy, too 'look I'm fine'. I hopped to conclusions.

It was. It was a far too elaborate farce to convince me he was fine. Something was eating him up, and I didn't know how to fix it. All I could do was wait until he turned

away again and watch him, taking in the ways that he had changed, the obvious scars over his body that seemed to get lighter and lighter by the second.

They did nothing to calm me. He did nothing to calm me. I didn't see his pack or any of his equipment anywhere near him, his back instead being barren of such implements. I was scared.

Absolutely terrified.

And then he moved, expecting me to follow him. It was as obvious as the moss on the trees which direction we were moving in, that I would soon be at home and he would not. I hated that. I hated this. I hated the fact that he would not talk to me or dare to elaborate.

My arms came up around him before he could take another step closer, anchoring him in place. I did not want to leave, not if that meant leaving him in this place all alone. Not if that meant losing him.

His fingers overlapped mine, his head bowing with the action, not capable of looking up anymore, but rather looking down at the ground away from everything.

"I have to tell you something," he whispered, "actually, I have to tell you so many things."

But the moment he said it, the leaves behind us rustled, and suddenly I was pushed ahead of him, the two of us running.

HIS HANDS WERE ON MY SHOULDERS THE MOMENT WE stopped, my back pressed against a tree and the bow still in my hands. His eyes were wide as he looked at me, half

shocked as his hands moved insistently over my shoulders, as if calming me. I could only stare back at him, the beginning of a question caught in my throat but never reaching fruition.

“You need to stay here, Astrid,” Eirik demanded, pinning me to the trunk. “Stay here and no matter what happens, do not move.”

“Eirik—”

“Stay here,” he replied, and suddenly his lips were pressed to my forehead, his hand moving behind me and pulling out a single arrow as he pulled away, pressing it into my palm. “No matter what you hear, you stay here and wait. I will come back. I’ll try to come back for you.”

Try.

My blood ran cold, but he just kept moving, just kept slipping further and further out of sight. And what could I do? What more could I say? I just sunk against the tree trunk, wishing that I had said something. I wished I had the strength to speak to him. But instead, I watched him disappear...

And realized that the trunk behind me bore heavy claw marks, and that the leaves had been moved away. Somehow, that realization stung more.

Where was this? Had he been there before? Did he intend to take me there? I didn’t know, my eyes just kept moving across the ground, looking for answers and not finding any... And then I saw the hints of red against the leaves, splattering the base of the tree trunks, and the desperate marks of fingernails trying and failing to hold on to wood.

Something had happened here. Something had

happened to him, there was no doubt about it. But he was still there. There were legends in the village about ghosts and things like that, but nothing like this. Nothing like a man covered in scars that seemed to fade by the minute. Nothing like my Eirik.

I dropped to my knees, digging through the leaves, unsure of what I was looking for in a myriad of oranges, reds, and yellows—Just that there had to be something.

And then my hand landed on something solid, something uneven.

I pulled it off of the forest floor, brandishing it in front of me.

An arrow. Stained with blood, but also donning wild-flowers cut expertly into its surface. My hand tightened around it, my legs pulling in on themselves, the delicate carving beneath my hands. There was more blood than there was before, and there were crescent moon marks pressed into the softness of the wood, like someone had struggled to hold on to it.

“Astrid! Astrid, are you out here?” A voice called in the distance, not Eirik. Jarl. “Astrid, you need to get out of here now, before he finds you.”

Before he found me? My breathing hitched, the arrow still in my hand. It became clear then, this was not an arrow for Yvette. None of them had been.

“Astrid, he’s not right, he’s dangerous—” I heard the quiet growl of something in the distance. Something, or someone, was out there with Jarl and I... And Jarl wanted to bring me home.

And if I went home, I would never see Eirik again.

I stayed quiet, not daring to talk, not daring to give

away my position. If I went home, I would never see him again. I could never ask him why he had carved that design in the arrow. I could never ask him what secrets he had been keeping from me. I could never tell him I loved him. That I loved him from the moment he first smiled at me. I would not go home.

“Astrid, you are in danger,” Jarl screamed, trying and failing to convince me to come out. Then, another growl, the sound of something growing nearer. “Eirik, you cannot live life as you want.”

He was trying to bring me home, but I doubt Jarl would understand that. More than that, he needed to leave. Something was there with us, and it was dangerous.

I loaded my bow, firing a long shot to the side, trying to move Jarl away. He saw it, of course, and I looked around the trunk to see his eyes immediately sought me out, trying to find where I had fired from.

“Astrid,” he repeated, growing nearer.

And then something ripped out of the woods, falling in between us. Standing there. A wolf.

“Do not make me do this,” Jarl started, levelling his bow at the wolf. I didn’t know if it was to save or to harm, just that I wanted to stop it before it could even begin.

I heard him notch another arrow, despite all common sense and rational pointing against doing such a thing. I took off from behind my tree and I charged, running at him. Both immediately lashed out, and then I saw it. I saw its eyes.

The wolf.

“Astrid,” Jarl warned. “Get out of the way. Get out of the way now, we need to bring you home.”

Home? Not without him, not without Eirik. Jarl knew what he was.

“Astrid, these are things you can not understand. Killing him would be a mercy.”

I backed up, practically stumbling as I did so, my back falling against the creature behind me, soft fur and smoky eyes greeting me. Eirik. My Eirik. Not flinching, not recoiling, but waiting for the arrow. Waiting for death.

Why would a hunter ever want to live as a wolf?

“Eirik,” I said his name, shaking my head. “Eirik, Eirik, Eirik.” He was shifting, trying to line himself up with the shot behind me, giving up on living in that moment. It was all I could do to keep moving, all I could do to keep blocking.

“Astrid,” Jarl warned, but there was no Jarl. There was only Eirik. There was only ever Eirik.

In my hands, the arrow still sat, the one he had carved for me. His eyes saw it, his body releasing a whimper.

I shook my head at him, at the mess we were in, and at how stubborn he was. There were other answers, other ways. He just didn’t see them.

My hands reached for him, pressing down on his muzzle, forcing him to look at me. His eyes caught on mine.

Eirik.

My lips pressed to his neck.

The arrow left my hand before I even knew it, before I’d even realized that I’d placed it in my bow. It had sailed, and it had landed, sitting mere feet away from Jarl and making clear my intentions.

“Astrid,” Jarl repeated, and yet it did not dissuade me.

I did not move to stand beside him, as he likely expected, instead I hitched another arrow. "Astrid, Eirik is not human anymore. The wolf—to kill him would be kinder."

"It does not matter what he is," I said, steadying my arrow. "He is mine, and I am his," I whispered, and it was such a blatant admission that Jarl could only stare, his eyes aimed at the gleaming silver head that pointed in his direction.

"These woods will eat you alive, Astrid, just as they did your brother—" Jarl tried, to which I could only laugh.

"They have already swallowed me whole," I replied, so harshly upon the string that I could feel it cut into my fingers. "Leave me to rest behind the wolf's teeth," I said. "To be with Eirik is the only thing I know."

It was a statement that Jarl could not contest, and a pity that rang behind his eyes. His mouth opened and just as quickly closed shut, his eyes remaining on me and the wolf beside me, on what was left of his cousin's life.

Jarl gave the smallest of nods, the slightest indication that he understood, and just as suddenly as he gave it, he stepped back. His bow lowered, his arrow quivered in his hand, and he looked between the two of us with something else hidden behind his gaze, something I would never know.

My grip on the bow loosened as I slowly unnotched my arrow, watching Jarl cautiously. He made no moves to rush me or turn on us at the last moment. That should have been rewarded. In my hands, the stained wildflower-printed arrow sat.

I didn't need it anymore.

I removed the arrow from my bow entirely and tossed

it on the ground between us. The rise and fall of Eirik's body was still present behind me and reminding me he was there—still alive, and still mine.

"Take it," I said, nodding to the arrow on the ground. "Give it to Yvette, and never mention what you have seen," I demanded. "Tell them that the woods have taken me too, that you found my remains beside the wolf and were so enraged that what little there was of the beast could not be brought back," I requested. "That you lost yourself."

He nodded, tentatively taking the steps towards the arrow and picking it up off the ground.

"Do not come back," I demanded, giving my final request as Jarl's eyes met mine. "Never come back."

He collected it without a word of protest, tucking it back into his quiver and nodding, just for that moment, before turning back to the bushes. He spared a single glance back then, not at me but at Eirik, and swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment in silence before beginning his walk, likely preparing his explanation for how the village lost three this hunt.

And there was only Eirik and I. Just as there always had been. Just as there always would be. That future?

The one with him by my side?

That was set in stone.

