

My mother taught me many skills to ensure I'd make a good wife to my husband. How to cook and clean. How to weave and sew. Where to hunt and gather. She'd have been better off teaching me the restraint needed not to stab said husband when he proved himself a short-witted drunkard with an acid tongue . . .

For my temper was being sorely tested today.

"What are you doing?" Vragi demanded, his breath reeking of mead as he bent over my shoulder.

"Exactly what it looks like." I ran the tip of my knife down the fish's belly, its innards spilling outward. "Cleaning the catch."

Huffing out an aggrieved breath, Vragi jerked the knife from my hand, nearly slicing open my palm. Snatching up another fish, he opened its belly and scooped out the innards into a bloody pile before stabbing the tip of my knife into the wooden block, his technique identical to my own. "You see?"

"I know how to gut a fish," I said between my teeth, every part of me desiring to gut him. "I've gutted thousands of fish."

"I don't like the way you do it." His lip curled. "The way you do it is wrong. People complain."

That much was true, but it wasn't complaints about fish guts.

My dear husband was a child of the gods, having been granted a drop of Njord's blood at his conception, which gave him powerful magic over the creatures of the sea. Except instead of using it to care for our people, he used his magic to deprive other fishermen of any catch even as he filled

his own nets. Then he charged double what the fish were worth of the very people whose nets he kept empty.

Everyone knew it. But no one dared speak a word against him. He was Vragi the Savior, the man who'd delivered Selvegr from famine when the crops had failed ten years past, drawing in fish from the North Sea to fill bellies, ensuring no one went without.

A hero, everyone had called him. And maybe once that was so, but fame and greed had vanquished the generosity that had earned him the title, and now people spat at his name even as they honored him with an annual feast. That no one had put a knife in his back was mostly because he had the protection of the jarl.

But not entirely.

"We all do best to remember we might need his magic again, Freya," my mother told me when I griped. "You would do best to remember that he brings wealth to your home."

Wealth.

It was the reason my father had agreed—despite my vocal protests—to Vragi's proposal of marriage. Yet instead of living to see his error, my father had died on my wedding night, leaving everyone to mutter about bad omens and ill-fated matches. If it had truly been a message from the gods, they need not have bothered: I'd known from the moment Vragi had stuck his foul tongue in my mouth in front of all the guests that this marriage would be a curse.

The past year had given me daily proof.

Except it was hard to cast bitter words about him into the ears of others, for Vragi was generous to my mother, paying for all her needs while my brother earned his place in the war band of our jarl.

For my family, I will do this, I silently chanted, much as I had the night I'd been wed. For my family, I will endure him. Aloud, I said, "I will do better." And because he didn't look satisfied, I added, "I will do it your way, Vragi."

"Show me." The condescension caused my teeth to clench so hard they nearly cracked, but I obliged, swiftly gutting another fish.

Vragi snorted, then spat on the ground next to me. "My mother was right—I should've married an ugly woman whose worth was in her skill. Not a pretty one whose only skill is her looks. Looks do not gut fish. Looks do not cook food. Looks do not make babies."

As far as the last went, my looks never would.

I spent nearly all the coin he gave me purchasing lemon juice and sponge from the traders who came to us from the South Seas, and if Vragi had ever wondered why his cock smelled of citrus after we coupled, he'd never asked. Long may his ignorance last.

"A year, woman. A whole year of marriage and servicing, and yet no son."

I bent over the board, gutting another fish to hide the angry tears threatening to fall. I'd never subject a child to this man. Never. "I'll make an offering." Which was no lie—at the beginning of every cycle I made a sacrifice to the goddess I was named for, begging her to keep my womb empty. Thus far, she'd been merciful.

Either that, or I'd been lucky.

As if hearing my thoughts, Vragi caught hold of my braid, jerking me to my feet. "I don't want offerings, Freya," he snarled. "I want you to try harder. I want you to do things correctly. I want you to give me what I want."

My scalp stung, only the tightness of my braid preventing him from

ripping out a handful of hair, and my temper snapped. “Perhaps it is you who is doing it incorrectly, husband. That’s certainly how it feels.”

Silence thickened the air.

A smart woman would regret such words, but I was clearly an idiot of the first order as all I felt was a flash of wicked triumph as the barb slowly struck home. Vragi’s face darkened beneath his thick beard, a vein in his temple pulsing like a purple worm. Then his knife pressed against my cheek, his breath rank as he whispered, “Maybe the key is to make you less pretty, Freya. Then you will have to learn other skills.”

The steel was cold and cruel. It wiped away my triumph and replaced it with fear.

Yet . . . I couldn’t concede. Couldn’t allow myself to break or cry or beg, because that was what he relished: bringing me low. Instead I met his gaze and said, “Do it. Do it, Vragi, and then go to the village and see if they’ll still host your feast and call you a hero when they learn you cut your wife’s face to spite her beauty.”

His lip curled. “They need me.”

“That doesn’t mean they need to honor you.” And a narcissist like him needed that honor.

I watched the wheels of his mind turn; no doubt he was musing how much he could hurt me without consequence. But I refused to look away despite the cold sweat that slicked my palms. The blade pressed harder against my cheek, stinging, and I sucked in a sharp breath to control my rising panic.

He heard it.

Vragi grinned, my tiny show of weakness satisfying him. He let go of my hair, lowering his knife. “Get back to work, woman. When you’re finished, bring two fish to your mother. Perhaps she’ll remind you of your duties. It is her fault, and your father’s” —he spat— “that you don’t know them.”

“Do not speak ill of my father!” I grabbed my knife, but Vragi only sneered at it.

“There is the proof,” he said. “He forgot you were a daughter and taught you like your brother. Now instead of a wife, I have a grown woman who plays at being a warrior like a small child, brandishing her stick and imagining every tree her foe.”

Heat burned up my chest, turning my cheeks to infernos. Because he was not wrong.

“Perhaps I’ve been complicit,” he said. “I’ve allowed you too much idle time, which the gods know is the ruination of good character.”

The only idle time I was allowed was the hours I slept, but I said nothing.

Vragi turned away from me, going right to the water’s edge, the fjord glittering in the sunshine. Lifting his hand, he invoked Njord’s name.

For a long moment, nothing happened, and I breathed a silent prayer that the god of the sea had finally recognized what a piece of shit his child was and stolen away his magic.

Wasted prayers, for a heartbeat later the water quivered. And the fish began jumping.

Only a few at first, but then dozens and dozens were hurling themselves out of the water and onto the beach until I could barely see the rocks through the teeming mass of fins and scales.

“This should keep you occupied.” Vragi smirked. “Give your mother my love.”

My bloody blade quivered in barely checked rage as he turned and walked away.

I stared at the fish thrashing about on the beach, desperate to return to the water. Such a waste, for there were more here than we could sell before they went to rot. And it was not the first time he’d done such a thing.

I’d once watched him beach a whale, but instead of ending the animal’s life immediately, he’d allowed it to work its way back into the water only to use his magic to draw it out again. Over and over he’d done it, all the village watching, his eyes filled with fascination as he tortured the animal for no reason beyond the fact that he could.

It had only ended when my brother pushed through the crowd and embedded an axe into the whale’s brain, putting it out of its misery and allowing the rest of us to begin the process of butchering the carcass, no one celebrating what should have been a glorious day of feasting.

I refused to feel the same sort of regret again.