

FROM VALHALLA

Ancient Legacy: Book One



N. von Wolf

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story began a long time ago as a whisper in my mind – barely formed, slightly unhinged, and followed by Norse mythology.

Since then, it has grown teeth, scars, and developed a hunger that's going to keep your toes curling and your thoughts misbehaving.

My obsession with all things Scandinavian runs deep, and *From Valhalla* is where history and fantasy collide. You'll find threads of authentic Norse mythology and Viking lore, lovingly tangled with delicious fiction – because chaos is fun, especially when it comes in the shape of two Viking brothers.

To keep the mood as feral and frostbitten as the story demanded, I forged an original playlist – songs written by me and shaped with the help of technology. Each track bled into the writing process, and the full list is included in this book for you to lose yourself into.

And if you've picked up this book, you probably know what dark romance promises – but let me be blunt:

This story bites. Hard.

I strongly suggest checking the *trigger warnings* before sinking your teeth in.

This kind of love doesn't play nice.

If that sounds like your kind of poison...

Get your cup of something sinful, settle into your warm cushions, and allow me to offer you up to the gods of old.

They do love a little screaming.

In fire and ruin, sincerely,
N.

OFFICIAL PLAYLIST

“From Valhalla – Original Sound Track”

(Listen for free on www.nvonwolf.com)

1. **‘From Valhalla’** – Viking metal ballad
(Erik vs. Magnus)
2. **‘Play Me Like a Sinner’** – Groove metal / Hard rock
(Elise to the brothers)
3. **‘Ruin You’** – Synth metal
(Erik to Elise)
4. **‘Surrender’** – Dark synth metal
(Magnus to Elise)
5. **‘Ragnarök’** – Dark Nordic folk / Shanti
(The three brothers)
6. **‘Hush Now, Hjärta Mitt’** – Nordic folk / Lullaby
(Elise singing Magnus’ poem – Chapter Seven)
7. **‘Beg the Beast’** – Death-trap / Rap
(Erik to Elise)
8. **‘Broken Queen’** – Dark synth metal
(Brothers to Elise)
9. **‘Chains of Fire & Ice’** – Heavy metal / Power metal
(Elise with the brothers)
10. **‘Let Me In’** – Power Ballad
(Magnus to Elise)
11. **‘Into the Moon’** – Metal Ballad / Guitar Duel
(Brothers to Elise)

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Emotional and Sexual
Manipulation,
Coercion and Power Imbalance,
Gaslighting,
Psychological Abuse,
Physical Abuse,
Torture,
Human Trafficking,
Sexual Exploitation,
Objectification,
Non-Consensual Sexual Acts and
Undertones,
Dubious Consent,
Sexual Violence,
Light BDSM Elements,
Domination and Submission,
Blood Play,
Biting and Marking,
Aphrodisiac Influence,
Voyeurism and Public Acts,
Polyamorous and Shared
Possession Dynamics,
Obsessive and Controlling
Behaviour,
Murder and Execution,
Graphic Violence,
Blood Consumption,
Gore and Carnage,
Death of a Character,
Psychological Trauma,
Loss of Autonomy,
Religious Conflict,

Dehumanisation,
Internalised Misogyny,
Emotional Blackmail,
Threats of Violence During
Intimacy,
Suicidal Ideation (brief),
Aftereffects of Abuse,
Magical Compulsion,
Moral Ambiguity,
Mind Invasion and Psychic
Harm,
Violent Retaliation,
Dark Fantasy Themes
Forced Drugging / Ingestion of
Substances,
Reproductive Manipulation /
Forced Breeding Context
Parental Betrayal / Identity
Trauma
Child Endangerment (implied),
Medical torture /Mutilation,
Emotional Collapse /
Dissociation,
State-Sanctioned Abuse,
Disfigurement

*'This won't be soft.
This won't be sweet.
This won't be gentle.'*

—Erik

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PROLOGUE

We never asked for worship. Only obedience. The rest came easily enough. Twenty years ago, the veil was lifted. We stepped into the light not as monsters, but monarchs – immortal and impenitent. The world called us myth until we reminded them who wrote history.

For centuries, we pulled the strings – shaping empires, igniting wars, guiding revolutions from behind velvet curtains. And when we revealed ourselves, it wasn't for peace. It was a reckoning.

They call it the London Agreement, a treaty scribbled in careful ink to keep the balance. Harmony, they claimed. Mutual respect. We would offer protection, law, order. In return, humanity gave us labour, loyalty... and offerings. Always offerings. But balance is a fragile lie. We rule because we can. Because we remember a world before laws and cities, when power was taken with teeth, steel and fire.

Now, something tears at the seams. Blooded nobles are dying – quietly, efficiently. No warning. No survivors. Even we are not immune, it seems. Some call it rebellion. Others, betrayal. I say it's justice with a long memory and a sharper edge.

*The old world is cracking. I can feel it.
And in the silence that follows, I wonder...
What will rise from the ruins?*

—Excerpt from private journal of Magnus Ragnulf, June 7th, 2024



CHAPTER ONE

There be monsters

She stood before the painting, breath caught somewhere between reverence and recoil.

A soft halo illuminated three figures. One man's hand reached for the woman's shoulder, aching with hunger and possession. The other lingered in shadow, fingers outstretched but never touching. The woman – barely turned – teetered between them. Her body angled towards the light, but her gaze was fixed on the dark.

The brushstrokes whispered not of love or lust, but of desperation. Control.

Elise could feel it in the air – a tension thick with secrets. A single, aching moment suspended between choices. All bleeding into a delicious aftertaste of taboo.

She didn't recoil outwards. The *Oscurelle* were trained never to feel too much – not where others could see.

The gallery lighting dimmed, casting the trio in a dreamlike haze. Her heartbeat slowed as if the painting whispered her name. It had been the first moment of stillness she had felt all evening – as if the painting had opened a window, just for her.

The scent came first. Piney, tangy. Then a coldness slid down her neck.

Her awareness sharpened. This wasn't a fleeting sensation, or idle interest – it was intention. Someone wanted her to notice – to know she had caught their eye.

It wasn't the flirtation or vanity she had been taught to expect. This was cleaner. Sharper. A study in control. Absolute focus. Animalistic.

Like the stillness before a kill.

A tremor threaded through her spine, but she didn't move. Whoever had marked her wasn't after beauty or status. They were hunting something else.

Elise held still. She had been educated for this: fluid motion, masked breath, composure distilled to art. A flawless performance of composure. Handpicked as girls, raised in gilded confinement, the *Oscurelle* were trained to serve the elite. Beauty, obedience, and control were currency. Any hint of fear, excitement, or defiance would lower their value.

And tonight, Elise was on display like the rest – painted, perfumed, and promised. And it had only been a matter of time before someone noticed her.

Her mind raced – assessing, cataloguing. She was taught the theoretical rules of this dance. Scents were signatures, carefully chosen tools of compulsion. Just bait meant to unravel the untrained.

Though she was far from untrained, the precision of it unsettled her. It was one thing to learn and read about it, another to feel it sink into her skin. And it wasn't the heavy-handed allure of dominance she had been warned about. This was quieter. Sharper. Specific.

It deafened the gallery's noise – the laughter, the murmurs, the golden illusions – and gripped her with a focus that felt far too calculated.

A thread of unease unspooled in her gut, but she would not be seen trembling or chased into the shadows. Partially because she wasn't allowed – but also because she chose not to.

It was clear as day: the game had begun.

'Remarkable,' came the low, husky rasp that tickled the threads of her control, fracturing her thoughts like glass under pressure. Just one simple word, but it rolled from his tongue with the softness of a secret meant to stir. Like a warm breath over bare skin, it curled into her spine.

She inhaled slowly, steadying her breath before it could betray her.

When she turned, it was with grace, not submission. She lowered her eyes – yes, as custom demanded – and the movement was controlled and precise. Her eyes swept over the details that mattered: the crisp lines of a midnight-blue coat trimmed in gold, the weight of danger stitched into every inch of formal fabric – a Nordic uniform.

Her gaze halted on the sash.

Ragnulf.

The name was a whisper and a warning.

Every piece of him seemed designed to disarm and overpower – posture honed, demeanour sharpened like a blade in perfect balance. Weapon and wielder in one.

His tranquillity was heavier than most men's words. She felt it settle on her shoulders.

Elise was familiar with the credence behind that name. Like the rest, she had been thoroughly educated in the labyrinth of noble hierarchies, and the Ragnulfs stood apart – high up on the food chain – like shadows bleeding through the sky. Whispers surrounded them – legends of brutal efficiency, of blood-won loyalty, of a lineage that ruled not with flattery but with force. They did not preen or posture like the other Ancients. There were no opulent scandals, no ostentatious displays. The Ragnulfs didn't need spectacle. They were warriors, not courtiers – bound by discipline. Their loyalty to the Ancients' regime was absolute, their presence at public gatherings like this rare and deliberate. If one had come tonight, it wasn't simply for pleasure.

It was for purpose.

'It's beautiful,' Elise replied evenly, her voice calm by design. 'The artist captured something raw. Vulnerable.'

The noble tilted his head slightly, letting the dim light brush over his sharp cheekbones.

'Raw and vulnerable,' he echoed, as if tasting the truth like a secret worth savouring. 'Two qualities rarely valued in my world. And yet, they seem to endure.'

His gaze felt like a physical force that pulled her closer without touching her.

Elise's instincts urged retreat, to disappear into the shadows where she could observe unnoticed. But her curiosity snapped taut and held her relentlessly tethered to him.

'Do you agree?' he asked, his tone soft, but the authority beneath it rendered refusal impossible.

She hesitated, her pulse quickening. Her Educators' unseen gazes burned into her back, a constant reminder of her place.

Her heart drummed faster, heat blooming beneath her collarbones.

'Do you truly wish to hear my answer, my lord?' she asked steadily despite the tension coiling within her. Voicing her opinions freely as an *Oscurelle* was akin to signing her own death sentence.

'If one asks, one expects an answer,' he said smoothly. A flicker of

a smile curved his lips, softening the severity of his features – just enough to betray the presence of maddening dimples.

She turned back to the canvas, fingers brushing her forearm in a practiced grounding gesture, all the while feeling the noble's scrutiny crackle against her skin.

As though brushing off his gaze, she swept a hand over her shoulder and cleared her throat.

'There's terrible loneliness in the lines,' she said, her tone careful. 'The man reaches, but cannot touch. It isn't lust – it's... longing. An ache without relief.'

When she glanced back at him, the shadow of his earlier smile was contemplative, and she laboured to keep herself from meeting his eyes – if only to see if they matched the same beauty as the rest of him.

A beat.

'What of the other man?' he inquired, an almost imperceptible note of challenge carrying over.

Elise followed the shadows in the painting, her eyes adjusting to the figure barely visible in the corner. 'He watches,' she murmured. 'With restraint. He wants her – but won't take her.'

The noble's head inclined as he looked to the painting, then back to her.

'Restraint,' he murmured pensively. 'You don't think it bleeds into obsession?'

Elise studied the man's outline. The suggestion pulled at her – but she shook her head. 'No. Longing. But not obsession.'

Another beat.

'And the one who touches her?'

Her throat tightened, and only as her hand dropped did she realise she had been clutching it all along – mirroring the boldness of the touch in the painting.

'He takes what he wants,' she said. 'No permission. No hesitation.'

The noble's voice lowered, the change punctuating a moment she dared not venture into. 'And the woman?'

She paused, her eyes on her.

'She's torn,' she said. 'She yields to one, but her gaze...' Her hand lifted instinctively, hovering near the painted face. 'Her gaze goes to the other.'

She felt the tension ripple in the air. And she knew. His eyes have never been on the art. They were on her.

A silence stretched between them, heavy and intimate. Elise could feel the noble's presence enveloping her like the heat of a fire, as

unyielding as the scent of apples and leather that seemed to cling to the air around him. She drew a breath, and, instinctively, her gift unfurled like a delicate thread, reaching into him. The emotions she touched were sharp, intoxicating: curiosity laced with hunger, a restrained violence simmering beneath an icy calm. Her heart raced as she pulled back, overwhelmed.

‘A delicate balance,’ he murmured finally. ‘Possession and yearning. Loyalty and desire.’ His gaze slid back to her. ‘Which do you think wins in the end?’

She turned to meet him, the weight of the question coiling in her chest.

‘Perhaps neither,’ she said, her words trembling on the edge of defiance. ‘Or both. Love is not always kind, my lord.’

The corner of his mouth lifted, a flicker of his deepening satisfaction breaking the tension. ‘You speak as though you’ve had a taste of it, miss...?’

Her heart stuttered.

A strange question. Nobles *always* knew.

Oscurelle files were studied in advance, scrutinised like auction catalogues. The Facilities would have sent all of them to the interested parties like leaflets meant to hook and draw to a gathering like this. The Ragnulf *should* have known exactly who she was, what she could do, before ever stepping close. That he hadn’t only confirmed what her instincts already whispered: he wasn’t here for the *Oscurelle*.

And suddenly, she regarded his uniform no longer as mere formality, yet armour worn for war.

‘Elise von Albrecht.’ She bowed her chin.

‘Elise,’ he repeated. Her name sat too comfortably on his tongue – as if he had tasted it, rolled it around in his mouth until it fit just right. It slithered down her body, heat chasing it. ‘What do you make of *them*? As one, Elise?’

A warning rippled through her mind, sharp as a blade. One wrong word, one misstep, and she felt as though the very air around her might tighten into a noose. Her instincts screamed at her to tread carefully, to weigh each syllable before it left her lips.

She didn’t need to, but she glanced away and tethered herself to the painting.

‘I cannot make a bold assumption,’ she offered, her voice steady.

She held her breath, her nails digging into her palms.

Ragnulf’s posture betrayed no warmth.

‘You mean to say,’ he pressed darkly, his tone cool yet piercing, ‘that

all three are, in fact, *lovers?*' The word – silent as a whisper – trickled down his lips like a vow.

Her chest tightened as the revelation settled. She turned slowly to face him, lowering her gaze as she angled her head – a wordless acknowledgment of the truth.

The silence that followed was thunderous, its intensity sending shockwaves through the atmosphere. He was still assessing her. She could feel it in her bones.

Whatever power resided in that painting – whatever it meant – it stirred between them, dangerous and alive.

'Nobody has ever spoken the truth about my work,' he said, more quietly – as though the admission was never meant to come out.

Apprehension bloomed in her chest.

He painted this.

She reached, carefully, with her gift – brushing the surface of him again. Honesty pulsed beneath the calm, but something shriller lingered there. Curiosity. Hunger.

'You are a remarkable artist, my lord.' She dipped her chin.

He watched her in silence, each breath deliberate – as if scenting her wasn't impulse, but ritual.

'Would you give me your card, Elise?' he said – no, *asked* – offering a gloved hand. Black leather, a stark contrast against the white marble of the gallery.

The calling card of an *Oscurelle* was nothing short of an offering. Silver ink marked beauty. Gold whispered power. Elise's bore the latter, her name etched in elegant curves and scented with jasmine and orange like a signature.

She hesitated, just for a breath. Not in fear. In knowing. And in the breathless thrill of it, his request made it clear that he was no longer merely watching her. He was considering Claiming her.

She let the card slip between her fingers. His hand met hers – brief, soft.

He had asked. She had given.

And despite her disdain towards Claims, something in her didn't shrink from that.

Did she want to see him again?

To hear that voice – low and sinful – wrap around her like a velvet noose of dark promises?

To lose herself in the idea of belonging to him?

Her thoughts scattered.

But her body knew.

And the truth of it burned in the back of her throat as she swallowed it down.

‘Elise von Albrecht,’ he read aloud, his voice carrying a note of scepticism. ‘And what’s your name, *really*?’ he asked – casual, invasive. Daring.

Her pulse spiked. That question wasn’t protocol.

Now, she was sure – he knew the norms. He simply didn’t care.

The Educators adorned the birth names to raise the price. Only those versed in the ways of the *Oscurelle* would know this. This noble, this *Ragnulf*, was dangerous. The very fact that he ignored the intricate laws woven between vampire and human societies meant he operated above them, as though they did not concern him. As though he didn’t know that dancing to his tune would mean punishment for her.

‘My name at birth was Elise Amara Albrecht, my lord,’ she said, softly but evenly.

‘Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Albrecht,’ he murmured.

Then he reached for her hand – without waiting.

No *Oscurelle* was to be touched unless owned.

Her breath snagged, a thousand alarm bells bursting beneath her skin—

—and still, she didn’t move. Her body gravitated towards him.

Was this what it felt being marked by an Ancient? Reason and desire warring inside her so fiercely?

His hand closed over hers, hot and unyielding. His lips pressed to her knuckles. The heat of it bloomed – a kiss that felt like a brand. A dare.

Panic flared. So did exhilaration. Her spine was held straight, but inside, everything tilted.

She glanced towards the Educator in the shadows. The old woman stared, then dipped her head – an allowance.

Elise couldn’t tell if the moment thrilled or terrified her.

But she didn’t pull pack.

The *Ragnulf* straightened.

‘My lord,’ she murmured, dipping at the knees, keeping her chin lowered in a measured curtsy as she fumbled to rebuild her composure. Her chin was still bowed as he let her hand go, and she lowered it with care, though the ghost of his lips lingered like an ember on her skin.

His gaze flicked sideways, a sharp motion softened only by the movement of his blond waves as they shifted behind his ears. Something – someone – caught his attention. His shoulders squared, a

quiet recalibration. The shift was subtle, but Elise felt it like a ripple in still water.

Three steps. Silent. Precise. She waited until the last had fallen before daring to lift her gaze. She watched him disappear into the crowd without another word. His shoulders, broad and unyielding, carried the unmistakable set of a soldier. But it was that restrained force beneath the bearing, coiled and silent that made her stomach twist with something dangerously close to anticipation.

Her heart began to race uncontrollably, her breath tightening in her chest as a realisation churned to surface.

Sometimes tomorrow, she might have to leave the stillness of her room, one that used to be filled with the soft hum of her roommate's voice weaving lullabies in Spanish. The thought struck her like a blow that completely unmoored her.

The Ragnulf might choose her tonight.

And if he did, nothing would remain the same.

The possibility fell hard, heavier than she was ready to bear. She was suddenly grateful she hadn't eaten all day for fear of losing the contents of her stomach.

Feeling as though the ground would yawn open and swallow her whole, Elise moved away from the painting. Her lingering interest in it would attract more unwanted attention. She chased her breath across the gallery floor. The art around her blurred into a haze of muted colours and gilded frames, their beauty lost to the gnawing feeling that she was *still* being watched.

She paused near a velvet-covered bench, fingers brushing the edge of a gold-plated display frame, grounding herself in the texture – something real, something that didn't pull or demand. Her breath was shallow, her body exhausted, as though every glance, every word in the earlier conversation had drawn blood she didn't know she had bled.

She was trained for attention. But not like that. Not from someone who looked at her as if he already owned her soul – and wasn't entirely sure what to do with it.

It wasn't unusual – the whole purpose of this exhibit *were* the *Obscurelle* – but tonight felt different.

She focused on her wine glass, feeling her pulse steadying now that she was further from the crowd. The whispers, the glances, the way the air shifted as she put some distance – it all reminded her of who she was. Not a guest or a spectator. She was something curated. Her instincts pulled tighter with each step, and beneath the flicker of the fluorescent lights, that truth sunk cold in her bones.

She was one of many, but instead of beauty, Elise wielded a rare a gift – the ability to influence emotions. Even that, over time, was honed into something detached. Clinical.

Her illusions of the world that she lived in had since shattered.

She remembered when society still pretended vampires were fiction – a convenient delusion. That lie had died before she was old enough to understand what was being taken from her.

The Ancients were never after coexistence – because they had already claimed the rule. And though that rule had been wrapped in eloquence and law, beneath the gloss lay only self-interest.

The *Order of the Oscurelle* was proof of that – dressed in grace, trained in silence. Treasures, not people.

Some of them called it honour. Others, a sentence.

And Elise?

She hadn't yet decided.

Tonight, in her overripe-cherry gown, she felt like a prize on a pedestal. Watched. Weighed. Waiting to be claimed.

Elise believed none of the embellishments society draped over her. The *Oscurelle* were the Ancients' answer to obedience – human girls sculpted in ritual and cruelty, polished like art for noble consumption. Once claimed, they served. Mostly as Courtiers, Companions, or Concubines – all according to their owners' whims.

She remembered the whispered fantasies in the dormitories, fairy tales spun under woollen blankets. An unmistakable side effect of romance novels tucked beneath pillows.

Dark, beautiful vampires, promises of passion and privilege. Indoctrination at its finest.

Elise had believed that once – until the first punishment cracked the dream.

She had only wanted to help. At the time, a young girl panicked, sobbing beneath the weight of expectation. Elise had reached for her gift to calm her. For that, she had been dragged before the assembly. Her act condemned in cold, clinical tones: *'Your gift does not belong to you. It is a tool for the Ancients.'*

That was the day the fairy tale died. And now, at twenty-six, her Education was complete. Too soon.

The gown clung tightly, its colour veering into rot as she smoothed her palm over her hip. Pale against the fabric. She raised her eyes, watching her Sisters glide across the gleaming floor like angels in white gowns.

She wasn't like them. Not exquisite. Not luminous. Not crafted to

catch a predator's eye. Even her gown reflected her truth: dark where theirs shimmered – more an apology than an invitation.

Compared to them, she was plain. Blonde hair with soft waves, forgettable blue eyes, slender figure.

Her file – one she had once glimpsed in secret – labelled her Germanic or Nordic. A tidy genetic footnote to please the more particular nobles, as if rarity equalled value. But she knew better. In a sea of curated beauty, she was just background.

And she was thankful. Because in this world, beauty was just another chain.

She swirled the red wine at the rim of her glass, watching the lights flicker in and out as the liquid rippled in circles. Then she drank – fast – before the light could vanish entirely.

She had hoped her ordinariness might buy her time. Another year, maybe two. She loved the quiet work of teaching – guiding young girls through their early years. There, her power felt useful. Not just another collar. Not just another tool. For *them*.

But the call had come. Now she stood beneath the lights like the rest of them – an exhibit. A possession-in-waiting.

Her heart sank as she scanned the crowd again. Most glances passed her by, hungry eyes drawn to softer jawlines, fuller lips, glossier shadows.

Still, her stomach wrenched. She kept reminding herself that tonight, she wasn't Elise. She was an offering. A name on a card. An indulgency.

That same creeping sensation crawled up her neck again – prickling, electric. The longer she stood still, the more it coiled around her, tightening. It stirred something low in her chest, something primal and inexplicable, like muscle memory from a nightmare she had never had.

Against her better judgement, she turned slightly as she slowly sucked in a breath, her gaze drawn by instinct more than intent.

She didn't know who it was. But someone had definitely marked her. And that someone wasn't hiding it.

The gallery pulsed with life, yet no single figure explained the heat at the base of her neck. Still, the feeling clung to her viciously.

Elise clenched her jaw and moved towards a nearby sculpture that looked like an old, angry tree spreading its roots and branches as if the artist aimed to devour reality. Feigning interest, forcing her body into grace, she found shelter in its shadow.

One of the Educators shot her a sharp glare and jerked her head telling her to move back into the spotlight. Product was supposed to

be seen to be profitable.

Obliging, Elise moved to the front of the sculpture, and the woman rolled her eyes, but let her be – thankfully.

Let them focus on the others, Elise prayed. On the radiant glitter cast like stars into the centre of the room.

Her fingers brushed the rim of her glass – empty. She scanned the crowd again, more deliberately this time, searching for a waiter—

—when her unguarded gaze collided too quickly with a pair of cold, unyielding, black eyes.

A noble. An Ancient.

The stare was devoid of curiosity. It wasn't even possession. It was just ice and darkness.

Her heart skipped a beat. Instinct took over – she lowered her gaze at once, fixing her eyes just beneath his chin. To meet an Ancient's eyes without invitation was not only defiance – it was a challenge. One she had no desire to make.

But the damage might have already been done.

He began walking towards her. Her heart climbed into her throat, her breath turning into blades, cutting into it. *Deities, help me*, she thought to herself. Each step he took felt like a lifetime passing.

'I believe you are in need of a refill, Elise von Albrecht,' he said, his voice rolling over her in a cold, breathy whisper that seemed to grip her throat like a touch of death.

He extended a glass filled with dark red liquid, and she took it with a soft bow, careful not to thank him. Gratitude was dangerous with vampires – expressing thanks was a subtle way of indebting oneself to them. As she left her empty glass on a marble corner, she probed his emotions, her gift unfurling like a delicate web around him. What she found was excitement at the thought of her drinking the contents of the glass. Its acrid scent betrayed it as blood.

Her stomach turned. She wouldn't drink it. Blood was binding in too many ways nowadays.

His sash bore a name she didn't recognize: *Fitzwilliams. Likely of British origin*, she thought. Possibly, a newly accepted noble family, as such invitations were only extended to those who could prove their Ancient heritage and wealth. His scent wafted towards her – sweet, cloying, artificial. Like marshmallows, overly sugared and stale. The urge to recoil came over her, but she held it back. Barely.

This wasn't her secret stalker.

'I overheard you speak of the painting,' he said. His voice sharp.

Her heart kicked, but she kept her expression composed.

‘Do you believe yourself insolent, speaking in such a manner openly in front of nobility?’

Her mind snapped alert.

She bowed her head in silence.

‘I should like your response.’

‘If one finds insolence,’ she murmured, ‘upon gazing at the truth of an artist’s work.’ She paused. ‘Then, please, punish me for it, my lord.’

The air chilled. His presence swelled like a storm cloud, oppressive and looming. Elise’s grip tightened on the glass, the crystal biting into her palm.

His aura curled like icy hands around her throat, daring her to flinch.

But panic wasn’t an option. Not here.

She moored herself, breathing slow, forcing the fear beneath layers of rehearsed composure.

‘I just might.’ His voice lowered to a dangerous murmur. ‘What do you make of your drink?’ The false sweetness oozed out of his pores.

She glanced at the glass. Her throat constricted.

‘Would you truly like to hear my opinion, my lord?’ she asked measuredly, though her knees gave a shudder. It was clear she had pushed him too far.

‘Drink,’ he commanded, his voice slipping into her mind like a blade sliding between ribs. The compulsion struck hard, a ripple of insidious power wrapping around her thoughts like chains. It pressed against her will, its weight suffocating, demanding obedience. ‘Drink,’ he repeated, frustration lacing his words as they resonated louder, sharper, until it was a drumbeat in her mind, trying to drown out her defiance.

Elise fought to steady her breath. The compulsion scraped against the edges of her mind, testing her cracks for weakness, but her gift held firm – a fragile shield against the onslaught. Her stomach churned with nausea, not from fear alone but from the blood in the glass. His excitement pulsed through the air like a predator savouring its kill.

She would *not* drink. Even if it meant death.

Fitzwilliams leaned closer, his presence oppressive, his voice a low hiss. ‘Do not test me, *whore*. Obedience is not a choice.’ The words slithered over her skin, oily and cold, as if to remind her of the consequences of defiance. Her silence was not rebellion – it was endurance, a careful calculation to outlast him.

Then—

A flicker of unease abruptly crossed his face as a shadow passed behind her. Elise stilled except for the slow rise and fall of her chest.

And then, a voice rang out, low, booming, unyielding, cutting through the thick atmosphere like the crack of a whip.

‘This creature,’ the deep baritone growled, ‘has already endured enough for one evening. And is not allowed more than one glass under the policies of her Education.’

Elise’s heart thundered as a figure stepped into view, his towering frame radiating an intensity that dwarfed Fitzwilliams’ petty malice. What was first a faint, enigmatic scent of junipers, now overtook the air around them.

It was him – her stalker.

Unlike the Ragnulf’s measured grace, this presence was raw and commanding, his every movement charged with purpose.

But for all his grandeur – he was a liar. Because there had been no such policy. And she recognised it as a test, a means of manipulation.

Fitzwilliams said nothing, but the nervous twitch of his jaw betrayed his unease.

The large noble didn’t even glance at him. Instead, his sharp intention remained fixed on her. ‘Indeed it is so,’ the stranger said coolly, extending a hand to take the glass from her. His gloveless fingers were adorned with trails of Nordic runes that carried brutal secrets of the past, and as they brushed against hers their unexpected warmth startled her. She caught a glimpse of the sash over his chest that wrote: *Ragnulf*. This one much older than the last.

‘But, seeing that you’re nobility, Lord Fitzwilliams’—the name rolled off his tongue with a mocking edge—‘you already knew that.’

A sharp, dangerous grin split his face, revealing a set of perfect white teeth beneath lips that were surprisingly full and peachy, contrasting his rugged demeanour. His beard, dark blonde and intricately braided, curved inwardly towards his chin, framing his face in a way that emphasized its hard, refined lines. ‘So, I beg the question, why do you insist on breaking the law?’

The challenge dripped, every honed muscle straining like a spring ready to burst.

It was clear this man was dangerous, unafraid to confront those who overstepped, especially someone like Fitzwilliams.

Elise held her breath, watching as the two titans of the vampire world sized each other up. The room felt charged, as if any moment the atmosphere might shatter.

Fitzwilliams was out of his depth. If he understood the policies, he might have argued. Instead, he stood frozen, silent under the crushing weight of the elder Ragnulf’s words.

‘Fitzwilliams...’ the Ragnulf drawled, savouring the name as if tasting old blood. ‘Sounds Saxon.’

He stepped forward, powerful and carrying the weight of old authority – a war-born noble from a different cloth than the silk-draped elites. Even his scent announced him, stark against the gallery’s cloying perfume haze.

‘I rather enjoyed my time in East Anglia,’ he continued, voice heavy with nostalgia. ‘A land of marshes, wind, and salt – hard people, harder blood. My women use to draw me baths in it. Saxon blood. Hot. Soothing. I’ve not indulged in such things for centuries. So... gratitude is in order.’

Fitzwilliams raised his chin, but the tremble of his fingers was unmistakable. ‘For what?’

The giant inched closer, his voice dipping into a low, menacing growl as he bent down to meet the Saxon face-to-face. ‘For reminding me of the past, of course.’ His lips curled into a smile – cold, predatory. It was a smile that hinted at long-buried savagery, a chilling reminder of his age and the brutality that lay beneath his seemingly polished exterior.

The small noble stammered, his confidence eroding under the elder Ragnulf’s unrelenting stare as he retreated a step.

The Ragnulf’s lips remained frozen in a smile. ‘I suggest you step away entirely,’ he rumbled, ‘before I’m tempted to relive old pleasures... and paint the room in history.’

A strange heat bloomed beneath her skin – part awe, part alarm – as if the threat had been wrapped with a bow and handed to her like a gift. She should have been terrified, but instead, something bloomed within her core, dark and unwanted.

And what did that say about her?

Fitzwilliams remained motionless for a beat, but the tension in the air was palpable. He moved to reach for the glass in Ragnulf’s hands, but the Viking jerked it away with a fluid, effortless motion. ‘I think I’ll hold on to this for now,’ he said, the notes daring the Saxon to try and take it.

The dismissal was clear, and Fitzwilliams hesitated for only a fraction of a second before retreating, his demeanour flickering with traces of fear. He walked backwards, wary, as if uncertain whether turning his back on a blood-thirsty savage would be his last mistake. And the Ragnulf held his ground until the small noble was at a safe distance.

As Fitzwilliams faded from sight, Elise exhaled through her nose,

shallow and slow – the kind of breath one took after surviving a plunge. Her knees buckled slightly beneath the fabric, but she caught herself.

Don't tremble, she said inwardly. *Not in front of him.*

The glass was gone, yet the chill lingered in her palm like a ghost pressing into flesh. Her gift remained curled inside her chest – instinctual and protective.

She flexed her fingers – just once – a practiced motion from her teaching days to loosen tension without drawing notice. A reflex. A motion that grounded her in herself.

And the giant still hadn't moved. He stood like a citadel in vampire form, swathed in command and scent. The smell of something that had watched centuries fall. A scent like his was owned, not chosen. Potent.

The Ragnulf turned to her fully, his compelling frame now blocking her view of the room, the crowd, and any potential escape. His presence was suffocating, a wall of meat and threat.

A part of her wanted to collapse into the silence. The other wanted to run. But she stood, spine straight, because conditioning ran deeper than fear.

When he spoke, her thoughts scattered, unable to parse the sentence. But then she realised he had spoken into a communication device in low, guttural Old Norse – a language she barely recognised but could catch fragments of, thanks to her old life in Sweden. Something about tracking Fitzwilliams, his tone casual yet commanding.

'I must say, miss...' He turned his attention to her. 'You've been most helpful in my investigation.' His chuckle was brief, a deep sound that vibrated through her, unsettling yet oddly warm in its cadence.

She lowered her head slightly, her voice steady as she replied, 'I'm glad that I was able to contribute, my lord, however little that was.'

The tip of his finger appeared in her vision, tilting her chin upwards firmly – but not roughly – until she was face to face with him. Well, as much as she was able to be considering his height.

Terror rippled through her, but she kept her gaze trained on his lips – distractingly close. His jaw was sharp, the beard-ornaments carved with Norse gods glinting like silent watchers between them. Though she avoided his eyes, she felt their weight.

'Do not mistake this for kindness, miss,' he murmured, his tone low and rumbling. 'Fitzwilliams was of interest, and you were in the way.'

Her heart stumbled into a quicker rhythm yet again, but she managed a faint, composed smile. Still, he didn't release her from his claws – lingering, as if something in her had caught his attention mid-

thought, and now he wasn't quite ready to let go.

'Is there a reason you're not front and centre with the rest of your Sisters?' he asked, cutting through the tension, his tone shifting slightly – into one of curiosity.

Her heart pounded relentlessly behind her ears, and she swore it would burst if he kept her this close for a minute longer.

'My position has been strategically planned by those superior to me,' she replied honestly, subtly extending her power, only to hit a void. Empty. Bottomless. As if he weren't a man at all, but a sealed vessel that promised more secrets.

Unease sparked in her chest. Her gift had never failed before. She recoiled instinctively, as though something inside that darkness might bite back. The nothingness within him wasn't even absence at all. It was depth. And it terrified her. She had never encountered someone she couldn't read.

'Miss,' he said softly, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper, 'look at me.'

Her throat tightened, and she swallowed, but kept her gaze pinned to his mouth – lips far too warm in colour for someone so cold.

'Or are you so taken with my beard that you can't bear to look away?'

The line caught her off guard. A small smile twitched at the corner of her mouth – traitorous, unexpected. Vampire nobles rarely made jokes.

'It is a rather comely beard, my lord.' A truth she didn't owe him.

But it wasn't the whole of it – it wasn't the beard. It was the lips – peach-toned, oddly human. And for the briefest moment, she wondered what they would taste like. Sweet? Like sugared fruit?

The fact that this kind of thought made its way to the surface horrified her.

Heat flushed her cheeks, not from desire, but from the sudden realisation of how easily her mind had slipped. How easily the danger had cloaked itself in charm.

He chuckled again, a low, throaty sound. 'If you refuse to grace me with your eyes, the very least you can do is give me your card.'

Her fingers twitched in response. Another Ragnulf. This one much scarier.

She smiled softly as she reached for it. 'Of course, my lord.'

He released her chin, stepping back just enough for her to raise the card between them. The space brought a fleeting relief, though the heat from his body still radiated towards her in powerful waves. She

struggled against her teachings, her every movement barely restrained.

‘Gold,’ he noted with interest, his eyes darkening as he inhaled deeply, savouring her scent – her essence. And the act had her stifling a moan at the base of her throat. ‘What affinities do you possess?’

Her breath stalled. He clearly knew what the font in gold meant. Any noble versed in the protocol would know this. Which meant *this* Ragnulf hadn’t come tonight to choose a companion, either.

‘I affect the state of heart, my lord,’ she replied, keeping her answer vague, unwilling to reveal more than necessary.

He stood there, holding the card in his hand, frozen in place as though contemplating something far beyond the simple exchange they were having. The silence persevered, and for what felt like an eternity, she held her breath.

‘I believe that, Elise,’ he finally said, his voice quiet but filled with meaning. Then, without another word, he strode away. His presence parted the onlookers in his wake, leaving certainty etched in the air. She watched him go – broad shoulder tapering into a narrow waist, the coiled power of a body sculpted like a fighter’s. His hair tied into a sharp knot high on his crown, caught the light – sleek and clean like something carved into him with precision.

Her thoughts whirled, tangled in the aftermath. She pressed the remaining cards to her chest – a futile armour – and tried to steady her breath. No more words. Not tonight.

Whatever that Ragnulf wanted, it wasn’t a companion. He was hunting Fitzwilliams – and she had stepped into his line of sight.

Two Ragnulfs at a single exhibit was no accident.

She closed her eyes. Let them look.

And still, a thought settled low in her belly, cold and certain: By tomorrow night, she would belong to one of them.

And that small part of her that still belonged to herself would be gone entirely.

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CHAPTER TWO

Hunger between us

With the gallery behind her, Elise felt the night pressing against her chest. Her exhaustion masked the unease clawing beneath – or was it anticipation?

The grandeur of the exhibit, with its glittering lights and venomous conversation, already felt distant. Like a trick of mind. Here, in the sterile silence of a plain bus, reality slid in like a blade.

She wasn't returning to freedom. Or even familiarity. She was heading back to the Reichsburg Castle – the Facility that had moulded her into what she was now: a perfect, obedient offering.

The castle had never been a home. It was a monument to captivity. Its ancient walls bristled with secrets, its stones soaked in shadow. As the bus wound through the darkened hills, Elise let her thoughts drift. The gallery's glow lingered behind her eyes, soft and spectral.

The young Ragnulf's kiss still burned on the back of her hand, a brand she couldn't erase. Her fingers drifted there without thought, tracing the memory he had imprinted with infuriating ease. There was something dangerous in that kind of audacity – the way he had dismissed propriety like it never applied to him. And maybe that *was* why his lips had carved themselves into her memory so thoroughly. Reckless. Warm. Certain.

The elder one had stolen her breath with a single touch. He hadn't spoken – just stole her gaze with unnerving calm. A command wrapped in gentleness. She had braced for discipline, for expectation. Instead, he showed compassion, concealing it with a jest. A quiet, deliberate

crack in the mask – just enough to let her breathe again.

She didn't know what would have happened if he hadn't. If he had forced her to look upon his eyes.

Did they carry the warmth he had shown her, fleeting as it was? Or was it just a mirage – thin veils covering the kind of cold that ruled with Viking blood and steal?

And that frightened her more than the fact that her gift had been entirely useless against him.

Whatever the Ragnulfs' sudden appearance meant, it would change everything. And she wasn't sure if she was ready for any of it.

The Reichsburg loomed ahead, its spires slicing through the mist like jagged teeth. Elise felt the cold grip of inevitability wrap around her ribs.

The castle stood sentinel over the Moselle River, its silhouette a scar on the fading light. Its stones, worn and weathered by centuries of conflict, seemed to whisper if her attention lingered long enough. The air coming through the window was thick with damp earth and old stone – the scent she had come to associate with captivity.

Once a tourist site, it now belonged to the Ancients. Laughter had long since been exiled, replaced by the hush of obedience. To the outsiders, it was a monument to history. To Elise, it was a cage dressed in gold.

She feared it once – a child imagining monsters in the mist. Now, she knew better. The monsters weren't in the shadows. They walked the halls in silence, cloaked in power.

Still, the urge to flee pulsed beneath her skin. Even now, after all the years.

Her steps moved forward, but her spirit reached backwards, craving a freedom she had never known.

And yet, something was different tonight.

The air carried the scent of junipers. Apples. Leather. The wind stirred red leaves into murmured whispers she couldn't decipher. And beneath it all, a pull – as if the earth itself had marked her for something she didn't yet understand.

As was customary, after an exhibit, the full line of Educators stood at the entrance, their faces devoid of emotion, pride radiating from a few, no doubt bolstered by the gold added to their purses. Her own mentor, *Frau* Anna Lena Schneider, stood at the forefront. Her aged face was sharp and stern, a steel mask of foreboding punishment that had become her permanent expression, though tonight there was delight in her posture as she surveyed her protégé with an approving

gleam.

The specimens disembarked the buses, their movements slow and weary, walking in pairs. Their faces, like those of their superiors, were void of any emotion – a parade of hollow eyes and silent steps moving towards the entrance. Within the castle walls, the past clung to every surface – candlelight flickering over worn tapestries and heavy, time-darkened furniture. Their footsteps echoed through the stone corridors as they climbed, stained-glass windows casting fractured colour across the floor. Elise let her gaze linger, knowing beauty like this wouldn't be hers for long.

Her tired eyes landed on the heavy door to her room, and her heart flipped with a kind of aching relief. The journey from the capital still dragged at her bones.

The door creaked open, and warmth spilled over her like balm.

If Maria were still here, she would stand inside, auburn hair tumbling around a face lit with a smile that somehow made the grey walls seem less cold.

Instead, there was Jennifer – a recently graduated *Oscurelle* who had taken Maria's bed the moment she left for her new owner's estate. Black hair pinned in a twist, pyjamas ever-present on her frame. A book in hand – always reading.

Elise didn't think – she just moved towards the bed.

'Welcome home, Elise!' Jennifer's voice was light and lyrical.

'Thank you,' Elise exhaled, letting her luggage fall to the floor. Her body slumped onto the mattress as if every joint had come undone. She buried her face in the cool pillow, the faint scent of soap oddly calming – clean, simple, human.

Jennifer perched nearby, bright-eyed as ever. 'How many cards did you give?'

Her excitement sparkled.

Elise could feel it – but couldn't match it.

'Two,' Elise muttered, eyes shut, sinking into the bedding as if she could disappear.

Two cards. Too many. Even *that* felt like a battle lost.

She heard Jennifer's expression shift – the change in her breath, the drop in her tone. Sympathy. The kind Elise hadn't asked for.

'Oh... well, that's okay!' Jennifer chirped, voice softening. 'Don't be discouraged. I'm sure someone will call upon you! Who took the cards?'

Elise hesitated. No way to soften it.

'Ragnulf. And... Ragnulf.'

Silence. The name sucked the warmth from the room. Jennifer's smile faltered. Her voice, when it came, was quieter.

'And... what did you think of them?'

What *did* she think of them?

Her gut tightened.

The elder one had been a storm disguised as discipline. Commanding. Measured. His touch had carved stillness into her.

The younger – reckless. Certain. Rebellious. All Ancients were beautiful, but *he* was beautiful in the most dangerous way.

'They are... interesting,' she said, her voice dry. The memory of the kiss and the touch of her chin surfaced uninvited, catching her breath in a silent grasp.

'I have piano tomorrow with Anya. She's Victoria's roommate,' Jennifer murmured.

Victoria van der Berg – the most beautiful *Oscurelle* of their generation. Her name alone evoked envy and admiration.

'She likes to snoop around, and I might get some information from her, if you'd like.'

Elise, already resigned to the fact that sleep would not come with Jennifer's endless chattering, let out a sigh and sat up.

'If that would make you happy.'

She wasn't truly interested, but keeping Jennifer entertained seemed to ease her own thoughts.

Elise pushed herself off the bed, crossing the room to the wardrobe. She pulled out a royal blue tracksuit, the *Oscurelle* emblem stitched neatly over its heart – a raven standing on the crescent moon. As she slipped into it, the hunger gnawed at her stomach. 'I'm a little peckish. Do you think the kitchen's still serving dinner?'

Jennifer nodded from her bed, already engrossed in her book. 'It's not even eight yet, they should be open.'

With hunger curling through her like a warning, she left the room. Sliding down the winding stairwell, her footsteps echoed faintly against the cold stone walls. The long hallway stretched ahead, shadows flickering in the dim light. The kitchen was almost deserted, save for a lone assistant cook behind the counter, her head a mess of rusty curls.

'Good evening,' Elise called softly, hoping not to disturb the quiet too much. 'Would it be possible to get a meal? We've just returned from the capital.'

The assistant cook didn't bother to hide her displeasure. Her lips pressed in a tight line as she reached into the oven, pulling out a warm plate of leftovers. Elise looked at the sausages – simple, unremarkable,

but at least it was food.

She ate in silence, her mind drifting back to the gallery, the wine still making her head spin. She didn't handle liquor well and made a point to avoid it whenever she could.

Memories of Vikings lingered like shadows at her back.

Her gaze darkened at the thought of Fitzwilliams. The blood he had offered in that glass was sacred to the vampires, and moreover *binding*. Was it a trap? An attempt to claim her, right there in front of everyone? Had Ragnulf's intervention saved her from a fate she hadn't fully understood at the time? And what of the investigation he had mentioned? Had Fitzwilliams been its target? What had he done to warrant the warrior's attention?

Before she knew it, Elise found herself wandering into the castle's library. A line of computers slumbered in the far corner, and she gravitated towards them, seating herself cosily.

She fired one up.

The *Oscurelle* had unrestricted access to the genealogy archives – a concession the Ancients had made during the Agreement. It served two purposes: to prevent mass panic, and to ease humans into coexistence. Knowing who ruled them made obedience simpler.

The database overflowed with names and lineages of the elite.

She looked into Fitzwilliams first.

As she had suspected, the family's nobility had been barely credible. Their lineage stretched back to a no-name Ancient who had perished in World War II, and they had only been accepted into the Ancient ranks a mere decade ago. The sole survivor of the family had been Charles Fitzwilliams IV – whom she had met at the gallery. No portraits, of course. Not only did the vampires leave no trace on photographs, but the Ancients had outright refused to have their visages recorded, leaving the database devoid of them.

Next, she searched the Ragnulfs. The results flooded the screen. A dynasty of warriors, each stronger and more powerful than the other. Erik Ragnulf, the eldest of three from the same set of parents, led the family and commanded the Ancients' Special Forces. With almost two millennia on his shoulders, he was as powerful as an Ancient would get. Thorstein, his brother, headed their naval forces, yet Elise quickly realised that Thorstein's description – his tattoos and other bodily adornments – did not match the man she had encountered. That left Magnus Ragnulf, the youngest. Eight centuries old, his age held the weight of the late twenties in human terms. He was Erik's second in command – a shadow of his elder brother, perhaps, but still formidable

in his own right. He was known as an author and a painter – unsurprising, really, since many of the Ancients had turned mastery of the arts into yet another form of power. She made a note of all his literary works, as she eyed the vast library that spread in front of her.

While the information was sinking in, Elise's mind swirled. Each name represented a future she could not fully control – a path set by the choices of others. And yet, in the midst of it all, she felt a strange pull, a tug at her core.

The Ragnulfs. Erik. Magnus. Which one would force her to walk the path they chose for her? If any.

Sleep had offered no peace – only dreams that tangled duty and desire until dawn broke in a haze of unrest.

The morning after, the dining hall buzzed with animated chatter as the Letters of Claims made their way into their owners' hands. Conversations rippled through the room, fuelled by anticipation and excitement. Elise sat at the long dining table, her untouched letter lying before her, the envelope still sealed with the symbol of the Ragnulf house. She hadn't opened it, though whether it was due to resignation or worry, she wasn't sure. Her fingers toyed with the edges of the envelope, but her mind was elsewhere, grappling with the uncertainty that hung in the air.

Jennifer had eagerly informed her that only one Ragnulf had been signed up to attend the *Oscurelle* viewing. But two had submitted Claims.

It hadn't taken long for the news to reach Elise – Victoria van der Berg had been selected as the Concubine of the Ragnulf household. The announcement had come as no surprise. Victoria's beauty was as lethal as it was captivating, her sharp blue eyes and flowing golden hair akin to that of a goddess descending from myth. She moved through the halls with the graceful confidence of someone who knew she was desired, her porcelain skin and perfectly sculpted features reminiscent of a marble statue. She was a vision of unattainable perfection – a mirror image of a predator in angel disguise.

Elise had expected to feel nothing when she heard the news. Instead, something pinched behind her ribs – faint, unwelcome.

She didn't want to be chosen – she never had. Not by a Ragnulf. Not by any of the noble Houses. But the truth still stung: they had been the only ones to take her card. Even in childhood, *Frau* Schneider had called her difficult. An *Oscurelle* too stubborn to smooth out. No conditioning could bleed the defiance from her bones, no Educator sharp enough to sever it. So it didn't come as a surprise that Elise

hadn't been Claimed yet.

And with Victoria now stepping into a role at the Ragnulf House, Elise was headed for another year inside these walls.

It should have been a relief.

But the thought of never again seeing the curve of Erik's mouth – the restrained fury in his silence – scraped at her mind.

And Magnus. That dimpled smile of his lingered like a secret only she had been meant to catch.

Victoria wasted no time flaunting her victory, her presence filling the room like the cloying sweetness of rotting fruit. She approached Elise with slow, measured steps, her saccharine voice dripping with venom.

'Oh, I am so sorry, dearest,' she cooed, her eyes gleaming with a cruel, predatory light. 'I hope you didn't hold out too much hope. After all, a face like yours – so ordinary – was hardly a prize for someone like them.'

Elise could have left Victoria alone with her ignorant self-appreciation, could have turned her back and walked away, letting her bask in the illusion of victory. After all, Victoria had, in essence, been chosen as nothing more than a courtesan – a glorified street woman to warm the bed of a Ragnulf. The title may have sounded prestigious, but the reality was far less dignified. Elise knew it, and perhaps, deep down, so did Victoria. The knowledge should have been enough for her. She could have spared herself the energy of retaliating, of engaging in the petty game of insults and twisted smiles.

Yet, the idea festered, burrowing itself deep within Elise's chest, refusing to be ignored. It wasn't the Ragnulfs, nor the rejection that fuelled her simmering resentment. It was Victoria's arrogance, the sneer of superiority that attempted to make Elise feel as though she had been a lesser creature, unworthy even to exist in the same space. Turning her back now would undoubtedly leave a bitter aftertaste – like swallowing down resentment she couldn't quite purge.

Victoria's words hung in the air, laced with cruelty. The look on her face, the way her lips curled into that patronising smile – *so ordinary*.

No, it wasn't about the Ragnulfs at all, Elise thought. It was about being made to feel invisible, a shadow against someone else's gilded light.

The choice was already made before Elise had even fully considered it.

Elise let a cold smile curve her lips, her mind reaching for her gift before she could second-guess herself. Punishment be damned. With a thought of desperation and horror, and a subtle mental push, she

twisted Victoria's smug satisfaction into something as close to horror as she could muster. The shift was instantaneous. Victoria's flawless features contorted, her confident smirk dissolving into sheer terror as she let out a scream that reverberated through the hall. Her hands clutched her chest as if trying to claw away the fear that now consumed her, and she bolted from the room, leaving behind a trail of panic-stricken cries.

Survival wasn't always about dignity. Sometimes, it meant fighting fire with fire, even if the flames left you singed.

Elise watched as Victoria fled, her terror a sharp, fleeting victory that left a bitter taste in her mouth. There was no satisfaction in the act – only the cold reality that in this world, kindness was a weakness, and vengeance was a shield too heavy.

Her fingers clenched the hem of her sleeve until her knuckles ached. No one spoke – not Jennifer, not the others.

Her heart thudded, heavy with shame because, for all her disdain towards the Facility and the Ancients, *this*... she had done instinctively. Effortlessly. As a choice.

Just as they taught her.

What frightened her was how easily the decision came.

She hated playing the game.

But she hated losing more.

She clutched the letter tightly in her pocket, her fingers cold and trembling against the smooth paper. Each bite of her breakfast tasted like ash, but she forced it down, knowing she needed the strength for what was to come.

As she stood, the weight of the Claim dragged at her hand, making every step towards the gardens feel as though she was walking deeper into a storm. Her heart pounded harder with each footfall, its rhythm quickening in tandem with the rising dread. The air was crisp with the scent of autumn, but no amount of beauty could ease the knowledge twisting inside her. Victoria's smug revelation replayed in her mind, and Elise couldn't shake the consuming fear that whatever hid inside was bound to be just as bleak.

She sank onto a white bench, its cool surface catching the morning light that filtered through gold and crimson leaves – the kaleidoscope of autumn. For a fleeting moment, the garden felt still – almost soothing.

But the calm didn't reach her.

With a steadying breath, she drew the letter from her pocket. Her hands trembled as she broke the seal. The paper's crackle was sharp –

almost like blades drawn in silence.

A platinum necklace slipped from the envelope and landed in her lap – cool, solid, unnervingly intimate. Thor's hammer rested at its centre, twisted into the roots of Yggdrasil. Each line was etched with devotion – as if the metal remembered every hand that had shaped it.

She ran a fingertip over the pendant's edge. Its coolness anchored her like a promise she hadn't agreed to. And it thrilled her.

It did.

Because even without looking at the letter, seeing the pendant in her palm, a flame of hope ignited within her – she *would* be claimed after all.

This wasn't a gift, she had to remind herself.

It was a mark. Beautiful, yes – but unmistakably binding. Myth wound through metal, its meaning as sharp as any chain.

But it was actually the scent of junipers coming from it, sharp and fresh like a northern wind, that stirred something deep inside her, making it personal in a way she hadn't expected. It moored her in a memory that wasn't hers, yet felt achingly familiar, as if she could almost sense the warmth of another's skin lingering on the necklace. It had undoubtedly been worn, cherished, and carried through time by someone who had lived, fought and loved under its protection. This was a piece of someone's soul, passed down and now resting in her hands. A strange gift to bestow to a slave.

But she was already learning that there was nothing normal about the Ragnulfs.

A declaration of possession, perhaps? Ancient and absolute.

Her name appeared in delicate black script. Age. Gift. Lineage. As if her entire existence could be summarised in a few inked lines.

Her eyes drifted lower, where the title of her new position stood in bold letters: *Nurturer*. The rest of the text underneath described expectations with the Ragnulf children.

She exhaled, realising she had been holding a breath.

It wasn't entirely horrible, she told herself, another soft sigh escaping her lips. Better a governess than a courtesan. Better to read bedtime stories than bleed beneath silk sheets.

But still, the title settled like a burn. "*Nurturer*." A gentle word, a pretty leash. Even her usefulness had been repackaged into submission.

No matter how soft that collar was, she was still irrevocably claimed.

Then her gaze dropped to the bottom of the parchment, where the name of her new owner loomed:

Erik Ragnulf.

Her breath caught as she read the name again, her pulse hammering.

Erik Ragnulf.

The warrior. The elder Ragnulf. The image of him surfaced unbidden – the angular jaw clenching in authority, the curve of his lips, the dangerous smile, the cables of his neck muscles coiling like a predator ready to pounce.

A rush of emotion surged through her – fear. Fascination. Resentment. And, disturbingly, something that almost felt like anticipation.

Not claimed. Not yet.

But watched. Marked.

Perhaps even wanted.

COMING IN JUNE 2025

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from the first book of Ancient Legacies: ***From Valhalla!***

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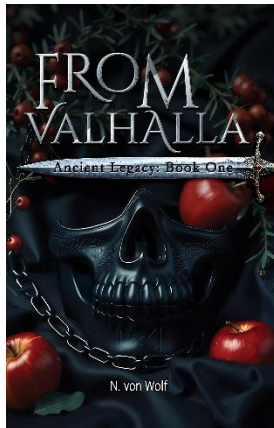
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