

Please enjoy a prologue and first chapter of On the Silver Edge of Time.

Keep in mind that this has gone through a first round of edits but may go through a few more small changes when all is said and done, but for the most part, this is Erik and Keelin's story and one I'm very pleased to share.

Prologue

Vadrefjord, Éire, 896AD

Inga reached out a trembling hand and touched the damp head. "I have born a child of great beauty."

The movement caught Segrid's attention once more. She'd been here before with the last birthing, had witnessed the loss her mistress had suffered. Segrid turned away, unable to bear her mistress's delusions. "Aye, she's perfect. A wee darling for your gods."

Inga clutched the frail babe tighter. "*Nei*. This--this child is strong. She bears not the same sickness that befell the first and will pass Lothar's test. My husband will have no cause to kill this one."

Segrid rested hands on her own swelling mound, and a strong kick made her catch her breath. "Dame, Herre Lothar had no choice, and well you know it." Already the poor mite struggled for air.

Inga pressed a kiss on purple flesh. "She will not grasp a teat to suckle."

"She's sickly, Dame. Let me take her from you, before she causes more heartache."

"*Nei!* You would give her to Lothar." Inga clutched Segrid's hand and squeezed.

"Ach, Dame, you will not blame your husband this time. He's away a-viking and won't return for a fortnight or more. You have no one to be brave for you and lessen your suffering."

As Lothar's personal thrall and bedslave, Segrid had witnessed Lothar's sorrow. The young jarl hadn't liked the duty he'd performed, but the fruit of his loins had been too feeble to survive. He'd done the only humane thing possible. But Inga had blamed Lothar for the girl's death, thus causing a rift between them.

Inga dropped her hand. "Forsooth, why won't Freyja bless this union with a male child? Lothar would never leave a male child to the elements. Mayhap, we could hide her. You could tell everyone she arrived without breath, stillborn. No one need ever know she is mine. By the gods, so shall it be. Someone must want the child."

"You must see the truth." Segrid's voice turned brittle with frustration. "The child will die no matter who cares for her. Can you not see? Leaving her to the elements will insure her place beside Freyja, for surely her sacrifice will bless the community."

"You take her. Your child will be born soon, and if you birth a boy, we could switch them. He--he will bear the mark of my husband." Inga lifted from the bed, her blue eyes bright with desperation. "This truth you dare not deny."

Segrid turned wistful at the memory of Lothar's hands upon her thin frame. As a slave, she had little say when the master wished the use of her body, but she'd come to love the way he made her feel. Her conflicted emotions made it difficult at times to love both her mistress and her master, but love them she did. She pulled her hand from her lady's. "*Nei*, Dame, your own *völva* claims I carry a girl child." While Segrid still had

difficulty believing in the *völva*'s power, the Vikings believed strongly in the seer's ability to foretell future events.

"By Thor, I wish not to lose this one to the fates." Inga fell back on the bed sheets, the babe still nestled in her arms. "I cannot bear another loss."

Segrid brushed the damp tendrils of hair from her lady's forehead. The child in question would not suckle, but lay limp and unresponsive. Barely past her eighteenth summer, her mistress had been married for three years and during that time had birthed two other female babies. The first had miscarried before reaching full term, and the second Lothar had left for the gods. This one would die, but without Lothar's intervention, the death would have no meaning.

"I will pray for death if this child is taken from me as well, and Lothar will think me weak and unworthy as a wife."

"Your husband loves you. You do him a disservice to think otherwise."

"But he seeks his pleasure with you."

"Only because he cannot bear the thought of hurting you."

"But if I gifted him with a son, he would hold me in high regard." She shrank back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. "I long to be a mother, to smell the sweet scent of life nestled against my breast. I need a miracle, Segrid."

"A miracle?"

"Ja. I will call upon every god." She sat straighter, her face full of determination. "Bring the *völva*, Segrid. Send for Ærndis. Mayhap her knowledge as a seer can save my child." The babe whimpered, and Inga brushed a finger across the babe's cheek. "Her life is too precious to be discarded so lightly."

Segrid eyes widened. "Ja, Dame, a miracle. I should've thought of it sooner. Your witch is strong, but I know of another whose magic far exceeds that of your Ærndis."

Segrid paced the floor, her mind awl with possibilities. Incense filled the chamber with strong, sickly sweet odors, masking the tangy scent of blood and afterbirth. On the far wall, a tapestry documented one of Lothar's many battles, attesting to the brutality of the man. She stared at the bold images and smiled. She knew a way to help her mistress, if only...

"Tell me, Segrid. I beg you." A sense of urgency made Inga's voice break. "If--if you can give me a miracle, I'll make Lothar free you. As thrall, you can marry not, nor can you own property, but free--you can make your own way. This I would grant if you save my babe."

Segrid fingered the metal collar around her neck, a symbol of her bondage to this woman and her husband. She'd been a thrall, a slave, for so long, freedom seemed impossible.

"Pray, Dame, and have faith." She gave her a gentle smile. "Tell no one you have birthed a girl child. I shall return posthaste with news. For now, rest. You will have need of your strength."

Segrid bundled the babe securely and set her in a basket beside the bed. What she had in mind would only work if the babe remained covered and lived long enough for the magic to work. Satisfied, she hurried from the oppressive room. Several village folks stopped her along the way, asking after Lothar's lady and her bairn. To each, Segrid replied that the mistress had born a healthy child, one to make his father proud.

She stopped before a secluded cottage on the far edge of the village. When no one

answered her summons, she pushed the door wide and peered inside. Her eyes scanned the cluttered hut until they lighted upon the frizzed white mane of Fintan. He bent over a stack of books, his attention arrested by the script. He lifted his head at her intrusion.

“Why do ye disturb me, child?”

Unlike herself, Fintan did not wear the yoke of slavery. He had proven himself more valuable to the Vikings as a free scholar than as a thrall, yet he kept his true talents hidden.

“I have need of your services.”

Fintan’s white beard scraped across the parchment, and his ebony gaze settled upon her with reproach. “Close the door behind ye. There be a wee draft this eve.”

She did as asked and took cautious steps closer. After navigating rare items of sorcery, she stood within an arm’s length. “M-my mistress needs you, Fintan.”

“Aye, this I know, lass.” He scratched his whiskered cheek.

His uncanny knowledge of events that had just taken place unsettled her. She frowned, not knowing quite how to proceed. “If you know, then you will help?”

“Aye. It does me heart good tae thwart these Viking heathens.” He smiled. “I know just how we’ll accomplish the impossible, child. A fine jest, a fine jest indeed. Dinna ye think so?”

“I care not about a jest.” Segrid wrung her hands. “I only wish my mistress no more suffering. Forsooth, if you can perform this miracle, she promises to make me a freewoman.”

“Aye, this I also know, and it be for this reason I’ll grant your request. Ye’ll bring me the bairn three nights hence when the moon crests above yon trees. By and by, tell everyone the babe be male, but dinna let anyone see the child. With the jarl gone, the babe can no’ be accepted into their fold until such time as our ruler returns tae name the wee bairn.”

Segrid nodded, eager to please the great wizard. “Ja, I understand. ’Tis the Viking way. ’Tis glad I am, it is not the way of the Éire. Can you change the child? Can you make her the healthy son Lothar wants?”

“I can no’ change what is, lass, but I can make it seem as though I can.”

Segrid didn’t understand his cryptic words, but Fintan’s use of strong magic was legendary among the Éire people. Fintan would provide the miracle they sought, and she would be free. Her hand settled upon her rounded abdomen, satisfied that her daughter would never wear the collar of slavery.

One

Off the coast of Northern Francia, 919AD

The green monster swooped low, spitting a stream of fire that scorched the dry earth. People screamed, ducking from its bold advance.

“Take cover!” Erik refused to lose good men to a dragon’s appetite.

“*Nei*. It’s an omen, a blessing sent from the Norns.” Dísa brandished her cane like a weapon.

“You fool.” Erik hissed under his breath, sure the old crone would topple from the tall chair. God’s breath but she had no sense. She stood atop the funeral tower as if no danger could befall her. From her perch, she sang chants meant to send his brother quickly to Valhalla.

Rurik sidled next to Erik and stared at the retreating winged creature. “She’s mad.”

“Look you there in the sky.” Dísa pointed upward. “A full moon in the middle of the day and a dragon that fails to attack.”

The crowd gasped. How had she known? The *völva* had been blind as long as Erik could remember. He stared at the silhouette of the dragon as it swept in front of the round disk.

“What have the Norns to do with Gustov’s passing?” Erik yelled to be heard over the murmurings of a frightened crowd. They buried his brother this day, but the seer and his people made a mockery of the proceedings. No doubt Dísa had conjured the beast just to make a point.

Dísa swung her gnarled staff until it pointed at Erik, though her sightless eyes fixed somewhere over his right shoulder. “The Norns, the three fates, have chosen you, Herre Erik.”

The crowd quieted, waiting with held breath to see what prophecy Dísa would proclaim.

Rurik leaned toward Erik. “She knows how to capture their attention with her bold words.”

“Ja.” Erik stared at his anxious people. “Her power is most evident at a funeral where the old ways rule. By Thor, these mourners act like children in need of a mother’s hand.”

Erik swung his gaze toward Gustov’s boat that sat crooked beside a gaping hole. His brother had died a hero and, as such, deserved a hero’s burial. Even so, he hated the power Dísa wielded when she chanted to the pagan gods.

“Pray tell, what would the Norns have me do? What task must I accomplish to see Gustov buried as is his right?” Erik asked.

Beside him, Rurik swore beneath his breath, making Erik frown. He liked not the game Dísa subjected him to, but he had no choice but to follow along.

“Behold those around you,” Dísa leaned over the chair’s armrest. “To rule in Gustov’s place, you must follow the Norns’ quest. You must journey forward in time to seek a woman who would be your destiny.”

“My destiny is here, witch.” Erik laughed in spite of the gravity of the situation.

“Think what you will, but on the morrow, at the peak of dawn, the dragon will steal the sun.” She gripped the sides of the platform, and her cat fur-lined cloak rippled in the wind. “In order to restore light, Herre Erik must go to Fintan’s hut and enter the

magic circle.”

Erik growled. The crowd believed her words. Why wouldn't they? Dísá was the seer, a strong witch with an uncanny ability to foretell the future. She wore blue to pay homage to Hel and the realm of the dead. She settled into her tower seat, a structure erected for the sole purpose of allowing her songs to be heard. Her voice sounded rich and rhythmic as she chanted her prophecy.

“Come men, help me lower Gustov's *jaght* before he journeys to Valhalla without the means to sail.” Erik glanced over his shoulder before finding his place. The dragon made no further attempt to disturb the gathering. A strange omen indeed.

Pre-selected men took their positions around the boat. At Erik's command, they slowly tugged on the cradle of ropes and lifted the boat from the ground. Muscles strained against the heavy burden, but they managed to position the vessel over the grave.

“Hold!”

The shout came too late. The bow of the *jaght* careened downward into the grave. Erik Lotharsson rushed forward and grabbed the rope. His heels dug into moist dirt as he took a position behind three other men. “Pull!”

Muscles bulged and heavy grunts filled the air. The rope bit into Erik's palm, but he held steady, forcing the boat to cease slipping. Now situated at an angle, his brother's *jaght* presented a new challenge. Setting the vessel into the deep grave intact proved difficult but would insure Gustov's ascent into Valhalla.

Behind him, heart-wrenching sobs rang out from the gathered women while Dísá's voice provided a tone unchanged in pitch.

On the other side of the gaping cavity, Torin O'Faeláin led another team of thralls. Erik peered over the boat at the five men holding the stern aloft with woven hemp.

“Ease her down, Torin!”

Though the bite of winter cast a pall over the already gloomy day, the activity kept them warm. Biceps strained as the men let out slack in small measures. As soon as the boat leveled, Erik gave the command for both groups to lower their burden. Steam escaped the mouths of those who had the honor of placing Gustov's *jaght* within the grave.

With a soft thunk, the vessel settled on the rich soil. The thralls dropped the rope and stood. Winded and worn, their bodies doubled over from exertion. Only Torin remained upright.

Erik rounded the hole. “Hard work agrees with you, Torin.”

“Aye.”

The short answer struck a nerve. At one time, he and Torin had been close. That was before Ailis's death, and Torin's father had attacked the Viking clan out of vengeance. Torin had blamed Erik for his sister's demise, but Erik was too stubborn and proud to tell Torin that Ailis had killed herself. She'd preferred death to marriage to a Viking, but Erik still grieved.

“I can order you back to the stables to muck filth, if you find the task more to your liking.”

“Nay. I'm well pleased wi' the new work ye have me doing.” Torin warmed his hands with his breath and rubbed them together, grimacing at the rope-burned palms. His ruddy cheeks and quick breath suggested he'd over-exerted himself. “I would much

rather toil with my hands than gather woad like some woman.”

“Ja, but you would rather be free of bond than work at all.” Erik scratched at the sweaty wool. “I would that things were different between us, but we must abide by fate’s hand. Help the men gather the rest of Gustov’s possessions anon.”

He didn’t wait to see if Torin obeyed. After two years of captivity, the fallen prince had no choice but to accept his new station in life. Erik stared into the gaping hole, at the vacant eyes of the carved dragon. His gaze shifted to Gustov. His brother’s body was as lifeless as the figurehead mounted on the bow of his *jaght*. He should celebrate Gustov’s death, acknowledge the sanctity of the moment.

The boat looked so different viewed from this angle.

As did death.

Below, thralls placed items in order of their importance. His brother would need weapons and tools for his new life in Odin’s hall of slain warriors. As per pagan custom, Gustov’s personal slave had been given a choice: life here on earth learning to serve a new master or life in the hereafter serving a master she already knew. The female had chosen death, being assured she would follow Gustov into Valhalla. Her body lay next to Gustov’s in quiet repose. She had loved him that much.

His stomach quivered. Although Erik embraced Christianity, the rest of his family held fast to the old ways. To this end, he would honor his brother’s belief in Valhalla and provide him a full Viking burial in the tradition of his forefathers, but the killing of the slave weighed heavy on his mind. What made her love so strong she would choose death over life?

“You do not approve.” Rurik joined him and gazed at the grave.

“As jarl, I must abide by Gustov’s wishes. Our brother deserves that much.”

“But... you do not believe in Valhalla.”

Erik shrugged and turned his back to the scene. “My opinion holds little sway over the hearts and minds of the people.”

Behind him, the rest of the men shoveled dirt on top of the boat. Erik briefly closed his eyes and grieved silently for his lost comrade and blood kin. They’d left the shores of Éire three years hence with hope in their hearts. They’d come to this land seeking a new life, not death, but enemies who did not welcome their presence surrounded them.

Erik and the people stood vigil through the night. He welcomed the solemn moment as he collected his thoughts. With Gustov’s passing, Erik now assumed responsibility as Jarl. The people looked to him for guidance. That his first task would take him far away seemed contrary to the purpose of a jarl. A leader should be at home where he was needed most. He wrapped his *sagum* closer to his shivering body and welcomed the biting cold that kept his mind alert.

Was Dísá right? Must he prove himself worthy of his new title? He stared at the reawakening sky and shivered. Dawn’s glowing light peered over the horizon. Would the dragon truly steal the sun? Already, those in attendance made their way toward Fintan’s hut.

“Come, we must hurry.” Erik shook the melancholy from his shoulders and turned toward Rurik. Without waiting to see who followed, he took off for Fintan’s hut. They would have to prepare through the night if they hoped to prevent the dragon’s intent.

Rurik fell into step beside him as they journeyed from the solemn activity. “Will

you honor the *völva*'s prophecy?"

Erik studied the craggy path and the chain of people before him. He clenched his fingers. Dísa had climbed from her tower and now led the way, her slow gait making it difficult for those behind her.

"How can I not? You heard the chant. She waited until all were gathered to mourn Gustov's passing, waited until she claimed the ear of many. Forsooth, the woman knows how to strike a serpent's blow."

Rurik laughed. "Ja. Dísa has a mystic's way of taking command."

"The witch seeks to undermine my new authority, yet I am caught in her web." Erik pinched the bridge of his nose. "I would that Gustov had not died thus making me jarl. The people must warm to my leadership."

"They will give you their full loyalty once you follow Dísa's dictates."

"Ja." He glanced at the strange sky again. "I fear her words may hold truth."

He continued down the path toward Fintan's hut, his gut in knots. The wind gathered force, accompanying him on the long trek. Erik drew his *sagum* closer, seeking warmth from the thick piece of wool. Beside him, Rurik offered silent company.

While the mourners waited outside, Erik entered without knocking, not waiting to see if Rurik followed. The pungent herbs boiling in Fintan's cauldron caused Erik's nose to wrinkle. "The prophecy sends me to find a woman. It says naught about poisoning me with incense."

What their *völva* proposed caused his mouth to go dry. For his people, though, he must abide by her words. The haste by which Gustov found Valhalla depended upon Erik's respect of Dísa's vision. In return, he would take position as jarl with greater ease and a loyal following.

"Ye do well to keep your humor, lad." Fintan stirred the brew, a broad smile pasted upon his withered features. "Ye'll need all your wits about ye this day. Now be a good lad, and shed your clothing."

Erik poked a stick in the bubbling pot only to have Fintan slap his hand. He withdrew the reddened fingers and shot Fintan a disgruntled glare. "Ja. I'll wear my wits in place of clothing. Is it needful to journey forth stripped to the bare? The blistering wind will likely freeze my bullocks afore I've a chance to travel far."

Rurik laughed. "His intended will find little use for him then."

"Hold your tongue. The jarl can ha'e no trappings from this century upon his person." Fintan turned to Erik. "Ye must travel as natural as the day ye were born. The magic will no' work unless ye come to the circle pure in body and thought."

Erik pondered the wizard's reasoning for a moment then shrugged. He'd follow the old man's instructions if only to prove them all wrong. He fully expected to find himself still in Nyjord after the impending doom had run its course. He sat on a bench in the corner and bent to unlace his shoes. Next, he unlatched his garter hooks and slipped off his stockings. With a deep sigh, he stood, removed his woolen braccas, and placed them in a pile in the corner of the room. After unclipping his fibula, the heavy *sagum* fell free, and he tugged off his tunic. When done he rubbed his arms to ward off the cold and returned to Fintan's side.

"Have you no more heat than the small flames warming your cauldron?"

From the corner, Dísa cackled. "If only I had my eyesight. I would drink in the sight of our jarl in all his glory."

“Be still, ye witch.” Fintan pulled out his stirring stick and brandished it about. “Already Erik mistrusts your prophecies. Ye do no’ wish to see him evade his duties, do ye?”

Erik chuckled at Fintan’s fit. The wizard’s show of temper was wasted on the *völva*.

Dísa laughed harder, her loosened and wrinkled skin wobbling about her face. Erik grimaced at the sight. He had no liking for what he must endure, but a *völva*’s word carried much weight. His people believed in her abilities to predict the future.

“*Nei*, Erik the Giant will fulfill the prophecy.” She leaned upon her cane, her sightless eyes shifting from side to side. “I’ve seen a great journey for you, Jarl Erik, eldest son of Lothar. The future of this clan rests in your hands. A son will spring from the bloodline of Lotharsson and unite all of Northern Francia. Only the true bloodline of Lothar will keep our people safe in the turbulent years to come. I charge you to find Keelin, true daughter of our people. Through her, you can find the peace and unity you seek and the wisdom to make changes.”

Her voice dropped an octave, and she leaned heavily on her cane. “The road will be treacherous and painful. Betrayal marks your path. The great dragon will awaken and strike fear in the hearts of our people, but strength to protect our people and the one you love will guide you. With the passing of the next Winter Solstice, those enslaved will be freed while you who are free will become the slave. So it shall be, for I have seen what will come to pass. You have only to find the courage to grasp the tail of the dragon and journey on the silver edge of time.”

Erik blinked hard, wary of the words Dísa spoke. Unease prickled at the base of his spine. Dísa had intoned similar words last eve. He dreaded the coming event, dreaded the unknown. Fintan gave him further instruction, making his head spin with foreboding.

Erik caught Torin’s eye. “Do you gloat?”

“*Nei*,” he said, but the twinkle in his eye belied the comment.

According to Fintan, Torin would play a huge part in this prophecy. Erik almost smiled, knowing the slave would not welcome the task.

He motioned Rurik to his side. “Fintan informs me that another will take my place once I leave this place. You will see to it that the guest is given into Torin’s safe keeping. Will you abide by my words?”

“*Ja*.”

Erik nodded and an eerie quiet descended upon those gathered. The time drew near. His gut twisted and his palms grew sweaty. A fierce warrior held no fear of dying, but this ...

The bubbling cauldron of herbs interrupted the silence in Fintan’s abode. An ember popped. The strong scent of mugwort and vandal root clung to the waddle and daub enclosure, saturating the air with a heaviness that made breathing difficult.

Fintan crooked his finger at Erik. “Come, Jarl Erik. Ye must stand within the circle.”

In a small courtyard outside, Fintan had prepared a ceremonial altar. Celtic symbols decorated the ground, carved into the dirt with a sharp knife and sprinkled with white sand. Erik frowned, distrustful of the wizard’s fey ways.

“I can summon no liking for what will pass.”

“Aye, but as jarl you must heed the people’s wishes.” He gave Erik a sympathetic

smile. “Do you ken what I told ye?”

“I-I must find Keelin.” The icy ground bit into his feet, and he shivered uncontrollably. “A look at h-her left shoulder will reveal the mark given upon her birth.”

“Aye.”

Rurik clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Go with your god.”

Erik nodded but said nothing.

Large stones encircled the area, an ancient ritualistic shrine to past gods, Fintan’s gods. Erik turned to protest. An audience of thirty of his *hirðmenn* stood in attendance in addition to the throng of laborers and their women. He bit his lip and retracted the sharp rebuke. He’d promised Dísa. He’d promised his people. To balk now would show weakness before his men. He would humor them all to keep peace within the community even if it meant deferring his own beliefs.

“Hail, Erik the Giant!”

“Make us prosper, Jarl!”

The cheers gave him strength.

With proud dignity, unashamed of his nudity before so many, he entered the circle. He stood tall, a giant among his brethren. The morning sun glowed with an intensity that threatened to consume his very soul, warming his chilled skin.

For the people.

Dísa’s prophecy settled on his shoulders like a heavy shroud. To go against the words of their *völva* meant dividing the community. The loyalty he gained from this journey far outweighed the risks.

A collective gasp signaled the beginning. The murmurings of the crowd quieted as a dark shape crept toward the sun. The promised sorcery stole over the land. He closed his eyes, shutting out his fear.

Fintan’s strong brogue ended the silence. “I evoke the powers o’ the earth, sky and sun. As day becomes night, and night becomes darker, opposites make balance. Time flows free, but only through the balance of all things earthly. I call upon the stars, the sun, and the moon. I call upon Dagda and Danu. Allow this human creature to journey fourth and find his point of origin. Allow him to reunite with the one who has taken his place in the future. Balance this journey with another soul so that order be restored to the universe.”

With Fintan’s last word, the sun disappeared. Erik’s eyes snapped open. Darkness descended, inky black and suffocating. Mist rose from the ground. Swirling. Thick. His body floated. The ground beneath his feet disappeared into an abyss. He wanted to scream, to cry. Fear held his tongue. The icy fingers of terror paralyzed him.

The dragon claimed more than the sun’s light. The vanishing sun claimed his very soul.

~ * ~

Dallas, Texas, in the year 2024.

Naked, she waded into the icy lake. Her breath caught. Cerulean eyes locked with hers, warming her from the inside out as they beckoned her forward. The Viking warrior held out a hand, urging her to slide even deeper into the frigid water. Reaching him, she smiled. He touched her cheek and pulled her into his embrace. Skin warmed by the sun pressed against her chilled body. Slowly, he bent his head. She leaned into him, welcoming the touch of his lips upon her own. For such a hard man, his lips felt soft as

they nipped and tantalized. He tasted of sunshine, strength, and desire, a heady blend of male temptation.

“Keely! Keelin Haverland.”

Keely jerked her head back and gazed up at her best friend. She blinked several times to clear the dream from her mind. Stretching, she rolled her neck and swung her legs from their curled position in the chair.

“Wake up, sleepy head. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were on Zeston or some other narcotic. You looked zoned.”

She shook the fog from her mind. “I was dreaming.”

“I’ll say. It took three tries to wake you.”

She glanced at her watch. “I wouldn’t have dozed off if you hadn’t been late. It’s almost eleven.”

“Traffic woes, and I couldn’t find a place to park.” Irma dropped her gym bag and glanced around the vacant lobby. “This is an odd time for a workout. So... what gives?”

Keely shrugged. “I had a particularly trying morning.”

“Sex.”

“What?”

“You need sex, not exercise. Give up on Sank and find a real man. That is why we’re here, right? To satisfy your twisted desire to see a man who doesn’t know you’re alive.”

Give up on Sank Crenshaw? How? When every dream, every daydream, every waking thought centered around him. He would always be her nocturnal lover.

“You refuse to understand.”

“And I bet you’re dying to clue me in.” Irma unzipped her workout jacket and let it slip from her shoulders. “All right. I apologize. You have that I-need-to-talk look, and I’m being my usual surly self. Tell me about your morning.”

“I’m that transparent?”

“I can see your bones, kiddo.”

Keely chuckled. She could always trust Irma to lighten the mood. Irma understood Keely better than Keely understood herself.

But could she make Irma truly understand about Sank? While Irma knew most of her secrets concerning him, Keely hadn’t confessed everything. Some things were just too private to put into words, but after last night’s embarrassing fiasco, she felt the need to spill her guts.

They carted their gym bags to the front desk and used personal code-cards to log in. The security gate opened, and they headed for the changing room.

The familiar smell of sweaty socks permeated the room. Keely sighed. She dropped her belongings on the floor. Lockers lined one wall, while personal hygiene stalls lined the other. Metal benches provided space for patrons to sit while changing into workout clothes.

Irma yanked off her pants and stuffed them into her duffel along with her jacket. “So, tell me about this bad day you’ve had.”

Keely paused and ran a hand through her hair. “Sank.”

“Well, that says a lot. Dang it, Keely. You’ve really got to get over this guy.” She zipped her bag closed. “They have laws against stalking, you know.”

“You said you’d listen.” Keely shot Irma a disgruntled glare.

Irma threw up her hands in mild surrender. "Okay. I'm listening. Really."

"I like to think of my attempts to snag Sank's interest as being aggressive with my desires." Keely took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled. She dropped onto the bench. Maybe she was stalking him, but if so, she had a good reason. "What am I going to do? I can't stop thinking about him."

Irma pulled a sport top over her head. "This crush you have is destructive, Keely."

"It's not a crush."

"Get real. You obsess over Sank *all* the time. Remember when you tried tele-net hookups to get his attention? Somehow, your specs got mixed up with Margo's, and he asked her out for a date and not you."

Keely stared at the tile floor. "That's not the worst."

"Does it have anything to do with last night?"

She nodded, miserable over her embarrassment.

"Tell me."

"I sent him an e-link of my dreams." She clenched her fists. "I allowed him access to my deepest desires." Even now the memory caused her skin to flame. Whatever possessed her to do such a thing? It had to be the wine. At the time, it made sense. If she could get him to experience the same consuming dreams she was having, he might open his heart to her.

Irma's mouth gaped, as well it should. The ability to project virtual dreams had become available two years ago. Nano-technology had exploded since Keely's parents had been teens. Her actions must have seemed drastic to her friend, but she'd exhausted all other avenues for gaining Sank's attention. She needed him to understand what drove her obsessive desire.

"You sent him the one where you and he ..."

"That one and others." Keely squeezed her eyes shut.

"Tell me you were drunk."

Keely shook her head. "I don't drink enough to get drunk."

"You don't have to. One drink and you're feeling no pain."

"Two. I only had two."

Irma grabbed both of her arms and gave her a gentle shake. "Portal static. I just don't understand you. Why?"

"Have you ever had a dream so real you couldn't distinguish between reality and fantasy?"

Irma dropped her hands and stepped back. "Sounds like a bad virtual trip to me."

"But it's not. I've never hooked up in that way. I believe in living life in real space. I don't like the idea of living in a fantasy world, which is why I need Sank to share the same feelings. Look at me, Irma." She pointed to her hair. "I'm a retro geek. I should have been born twenty years ago when life was a lot simpler."

"Oh yeah, simple. I should have never dared you to dye your hair green, but at least it will fade. If you lived back then I can just imagine the body art you'd sport. At least you only have the one, tiny tattoo." Irma nodded toward Keely's leg where a mystical dragon curled around her ankle, a tattoo her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday. No one in her age group wore tattoos. It was considered bad form to mutilate the body, but she'd wanted the image, wanted some way to connect to the visions she'd had, dreams that included a tall Viking warrior.

“I know this sounds strange, but I imagined Sank long before I met him.” Her voice turned wistful. “In my dreams, he comes to me dressed like a Viking warrior.”

“Sheesh, surrounded by hunky cowboys and you want a Viking.” Irma shook her head and followed Keelin to the treadmills. “Why can’t you just forget about Sank Crenshaw?”

Why? Because every night, he visited her subconscious mind and touched her soul. Because he came to her in a haze, his naked skin gleaming and his gaze fierce. She’d been fantasizing about Sank since her freshman year, but the dreams grew more vivid, more real with each episode. Her heart was committed to an illusion, and yet she saw him weekly at the gym.

His indifference confused her.

From the moment Keely set the treadmill into motion until she finished her routine with a yoga set, she pushed her body to its limit. She caught site of Sank working out with weights, his muscles expanding and contracting with each move. She sighed.

If only he’d glance her way.

After they finished their workout, they headed for the locker room to change into swimming apparel. Their routine always included a half hour in the sauna, and today was no exception. Wrapped in a terry cloth robe, Keely followed Irma into the large steam room.

Twelve individual cubicles circled a central space. A man she recognized as Antoine Legre already occupied one seat. She chose a partitioned bench across from the main door and catty-corner from his location. Irma took the booth next to her. With the gym remote, she regulated her own temperature and shifted until she found a comfortable position.

Irma closed her eyes and leaned against the wall. “Ah. Steam those worries away.”

A few minutes later, Patricia Benziger, a grade school teacher and a family friend, joined them. Keely mumbled a greeting and settled her back against the wall.

“I haven’t seen you in an age, child.” Mrs. Benziger smiled at Keely. “How is college going for you, Keelin?”

Keely adjusted her covering, chagrined at the woman’s use of her given name. She much preferred her nickname. Only her teachers called her Keelin or her father when he was upset.

“Great. I’m wrapping up my senior year in art. It’s taken me a year longer than I wanted because I’ve had to work, though.”

Keely didn’t want to talk about school. She wanted to lose herself in the warmth of the sauna without partaking in idle conversation. Maybe a bit of self-reflection would help her decide what to do about Sank. She smiled when Mrs. Benziger turned her attentions elsewhere.

Keely peered at the empty booths and turned to Irma. “Rather a small gathering today. Usually the sauna is packed with folks waiting in line for their turn.”

Irma raised a brow. “Maybe they’re all watching the eclipse.”

Keely gasped and sat up straighter. “Oh wow, I wanted to see the eclipse. When is it again?”

Irma shrugged.

Mrs. Benziger leaned forward. “Around noon I think.”

Keely wiped the layer of steam from the face of her watch. “That’s in about fifteen minutes. Stars! We should be outside watching instead of pampering ourselves. It’s been twenty-two years since a solar eclipse visited this area.” She jumped up and motioned to Irma.

“Ah hell, Keely. Sit down.” Irma blotted the perspiration from her forehead. “It’s a little late to be thinking about the eclipse now. Besides, there isn’t much to see. I mean, it gets dark and then it gets light again. No big deal.”

Antoine leaned forward, resting overly hairy arms upon his knees. Steam swirled around his bald head, heavy and thick. “Clearly you don’t have an appreciation for the marvels of science, young lady.”

The temperature increased. Keely tried to turn her heat down a bit with the remote. She adjusted her robe so it fell slightly open in front.

Irma shot the man a derisive glare. “This sauna is a marvel of science, and I appreciate the heck out of it.”

“I guess you’re right. It’s too late now, but I’m going to regret not seeing the eclipse. I can’t believe I forgot.” A bead of moisture cascaded down Keely’s cheek. The heat intensified. She inhaled, and her lungs struggled with the thick air. “Is it me, or does it seem to be getting hotter than normal? I can’t seem to get the controls to work right.”

“Maybe I spoke too soon. I like the sauna fine when it’s working correctly.” Irma lifted the remote and punched a button. “I’m having the same problems.”

“Maybe we should try a different cubicle.” She fanned herself.

Antoine shook his head. “Don’t bother. None of the thermal units responded to my remote. Something must be wrong with the system.”

He stood and sauntered to the door. Searching for the panic switch, he located the button and pushed. Keely stared, waiting for the steam to abate and the temperatures to drop. She waited in vain. Nothing happened. The man tugged on the door, but the door held fast. Panicked, he pounded on the thick metal.

Keely’s breath caught. “Oh God, we’re stuck in here.”

Antoine pressed his ear to the door’s surface. “I can’t make the door budge, and no one seems to hear the ruckus I’m making.”

The steam grew heavier. Keely took a step forward, but her muscles resisted her efforts to walk, and she stumbled. “I’m so hot.”

“Me, too.” Irma whipped off her terrycloth robe. “Better sit. This heat will make you dizzy.”

An odd sound trickled up from the steam jets. Keely tugged at her ear.

Surely she imagined it. The volume increased, plaintive, mystical. A wind instrument of some sort. A whistle. Or maybe a flute. It sounded... Celtic.

“Strange things are said to happen during full moons.” Irma’s gaze roamed the interior, and she laughed. “Think the same can be said of eclipses?”

Mrs. Benziger stood and groped her way to the door. Her fists connected with the metal, creating a loud racket within the living tomb. “I don’t want to die!”

“Get a hold of yourself.” Antoine grabbed her hands. “I’m sure the staff knows.”

The music echoed off the walls, growing louder with each minute.

All four froze, paralyzed by the surreal nature of their confinement. By now the steam had grown white, making visibility in the room impossible.

Trapped.

All of a sudden, the music died, leaving in its wake an eerie silence. The lights flickered. Mrs. Benziger whimpered. A surge of power caused the steam to glow, then the lights went out, shrouding the sauna in darkness.

Keely exhaled her pent-up breath. With no electricity, the other mechanisms in the sauna would fail. The temperature would have to cool. She relaxed against the wall and wiped her face.

“Try the door now,” Irma suggested. “Without power, the locking mechanism should be dead.”

“No such luck.” Antoine slammed his hand against the slick wall. “Let me escort you back to your seat, Mrs. Benziger.”

“No.” She shied away. “I don’t want to sit. I want out.”

“We all do,” he said, but headed back to his cubicle without her.

The steam seemed less oppressive. Keely ran her hand over her saturated face. “Let’s--let’s not panic. The alarm should sound soon, and someone will get us out of here.”

“Really, Mrs. Benziger, Keely’s right.” Irma never dealt well with uncooperative people, so her tone was rather brusque. “Come sit. You’ll feel better.”

After tugging one more time on the door, Mrs. Benziger finally complied. She stumbled once, but eventually plopped plump frame into her space without further comment.

The backup generator must have kicked in because dim lights flickered on.

Keely fixed her gaze on the center.

And froze.

A drop of perspiration blinded her. She blinked it away. Something rose from the mists. She peered through the fading fog. Everyone sat in their cubicles, but something or someone else had joined them. Her pulse rate increased, a reaction that had nothing to do with the broken sauna and everything to do with a strong premonition. She focused on the specter.

The temperature cooled, and the steam evaporated. The shape lifted itself from the floor. A man. A great hulk of a man, beautifully formed, perfectly proportioned, and gloriously naked arose. Keely gasped. Beside her, Irma leaned forward. “Oh my.”

Mrs. Benziger screamed.

The man stood too fast. His knees buckled, and he collapsed. He shifted until he knelt on one knee with his head bent forward. Long, thick waves of blond hair spilled over broad shoulders. Slowly, he uncurled his body and stood. Keely had never in her life seen a man so stirringly beautiful and yet, so familiar. Then he raised his head.

She clutched the edge of her seat. Beside her, Irma gasped.

Sank.

“Sank?” How in the world had Sank appeared out of thin air? And naked? *Oh my God, he’s naked, he’s really naked, and he’s every bit as beautiful as the Viking in my dreams.*

“Good grief, man, cover yourself. There are young women present.” Antoine removed the towel around his neck and threw it at Sank.

Sank stared at the white scrap of terry cloth but made no move to pick it up.

Keely swallowed. Her skin pricked with embarrassment for the man. Mrs. Benziger averted her gaze and hissed. “I’m hallucinating. This isn’t good for my heart.

Not at my age.”

Irma giggled. Something appeared wrong. Sank wasn't responding like he should. Irma's amusement grated on Keely's nerves. How dare she belittle Sank in this manner? Couldn't she see he wasn't himself?

A sense of fierce protectiveness stole over her. She stood, and her movement garnered Sank's attention. His gaze settled over her, fierce and proud. She shivered. “Sank?”

Again the man did not respond to his name. She frowned, wondering how she should approach this golden opportunity. “Sank, do you know where you are? Do you recognize me?”

Beside her, Irma snickered. “Of course he doesn't recognize you, Keely. He wouldn't know you even if he wasn't in some kind of stupor.”

“Do you know this man, Keelin? Should we call the authorities?” Mrs. Benziger asked.

“Of course we should call the police. This stranger appears out of thin air, displaying himself in a most disgusting manner,” Antoine said.

Keely clutched Antoine's arm. “Please. I know him, but I think he must be ill or something. If we call anyone, it should be an ambulance.”

“Keelin?” The man's rich baritone echoed in the small chamber. Keely's mouth dropped open. His nostrils flared. Her name had triggered some sort of recognition. She pulled away from Antoine and took a step closer to Sank.

Was this another dream? Had she passed out in the overheated sauna? She pinched herself. No dream. She stared at the vision before her, and her gaze dropped lower, arrested by a ragged scar that ran the length of his inner thigh.

“Sheesh, what's with the wig?” Irma asked.

Wig? Keely stared at Sank's hair, wanting to reach out and touch the thick, long strands that framed a chiseled face. Were the waves of hair blonder than usual? A thin scar ran the length of his cheek from eye to chin. She studied his forehead where wisps fell across deep, blue eyes. He wore no hairpiece. Everything about this man was far too real, including his striking resemblance to Sank.

Keely stooped and picked up the towel. As she straightened, her gaze swept over his genitals. She couldn't think, couldn't breathe. The reality of the man was more stirring than any dream. Before she could lose her nerve, she stretched the towel around his middle and tucked the ends before securing it over his blatant sexuality.

His large hand grabbed her wrist, and he turned her around. She squealed, but her protest died when he pulled the robe from her shoulder and touched the odd scar her parents had called a birthmark.

“Keelin.”

His voice sounded strange, different, with an accent she couldn't place. She nodded, affirming her name. He pulled her against him, her back to his chest, and wrapped a possessive arm around her. She froze, unable to grasp the man's bold actions. Even so, she did nothing to escape. Something about the way his body trembled made her realize his fear was greater than her own. She tried to relax, hoping some of her calm would transfer to him.

“Let her go, Sank.” Irma tugged at his arm. “She was just trying to help.”

He snarled and tightened his grip. His forearm dug into her rib cage, and Keely

yelped. So much for being calm. She should thrust a sharp elbow into his midsection and take her chances, but the desperation in his voice and the familiarity of his arms kept her from retaliating.

“*Vær rolig,*” he whispered in her ear, loosening his hold and wrapping her in a warm embrace that was anything but abusive.

“Irma?” Keely took a deep breath, trembling in spite of her resolve to remain calm. “Irma, I--I don’t think this is Sank.”

“*Du frykter ingenting.*”

Her eyes opened wide. His strange words and thick accent confirmed her fears. This was not Sank. A stranger held her captive. Yet, not a stranger. She twisted in his hold to look at his face. His deep blue gaze locked with hers. A frown furrowed his brow. A surreal feeling came over her as if a dream held her prisoner. Her dream.

Antoine circled to the left. “Come on, man, the lady meant no harm. Just let her go.”

“He doesn’t appear to understand. Does anyone speak a different language? Something he might respond to?” Mrs. Benziger asked.

Antoine touched the stranger’s arm. “*Ne pas nuire la femme.*”

Sank loosened his hold but didn’t release her. “*Elle est le mien.*”

He spoke French?

“*S’il vous plait. La femme est d’aucune consequence,*” Antoine said.

Keely made a move to escape, and her captor tightened his hold once more while continuing to converse in rapid French. As much as he looked like Sank, he was nothing at all like the man she so admired. Yet, a sense of déjà vu claimed her. The feel of his skin against her own and his spicy scent triggered a memory, one that stirred the fine hairs of her fear. She glanced at Antoine. “What’s he saying?”

“I told him to release you, that you are of no consequence, but he says you’re meant to be his. For some reason, he believes he has the right to cart you off. Fascinating. It’s almost a caveman mentality.”

“Caveman? Maybe it is Sank, after all,” Irma said.

“Not funny, Irma.” Of all the times for her friend to spring her sarcastic wit, now was not one of them. “This is serious.”

“Yeah, I know. I think it’s time to call the authorities.”

“No.” Keely’s voice cracked. “A show of force might fuel his temper. I sense restrained anger as if he could blow a fuse at any moment.”

“Well, we have to do something.” Mrs. Benziger clutched her robe and ran for the door. She wrenched it open. “Looks like the power’s back on. I’m not staying a moment longer.”

“Sheesh. Some folks need a bit more backbone.” Irma wrinkled her brow at Mrs. Benziger’s retreating figure. “Perhaps, Mr. Legre, you can figure out why this man singled out Keelin.”

Keely nodded. She wanted to know why a duplicate of Sank would accost her. Could one of the scientific research companies have cloned Sank? While she knew laws existed to prevent this type of situation, laws were often broken. A clone might not be psychologically stable. She swallowed, trying to slow her racing heart.

What about Sank? Would the real Sank know this man?

“Ask your questions, Antoine. In the meantime, Irma, can you find Sank? He

works Monday afternoons, so he should still be in the gym. Hopefully, he can shed light on this situation.”

“Sank? Are you nuts? One Sank is enough, and you want two?”

At Irma’s rising voice, Sank’s look-alike squeezed harder. Keely gasped, finding it difficult to breathe. “Tell... him to loosen his hold. I don’t think he realizes his own strength.”

At Mr. Legre’s request, the brute eased his hold. Keely squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply, noting the man’s musky scent. “Can--can you ask this man his name?”

They exchanged words, and Antoine’s stunned expression caused her heart rate to increase again. This was no dream. Had her fantasy just come to life? Had she been wrong about Sank all along? She returned Antoine’s stare. “What--did he say?”

Antoine shook his head. “You don’t want to know. I really think you should call the police.”

“Just tell me.”

He sighed. “His name is Erik, and he claims to live in Francia during the year nine hundred nineteen AD. He’s clearly not right in the head. Time travel hasn’t yet been perfected. From the studies I’ve read, time travel is still just theory.”

“He said more. You’re keeping something from me.”

“*Keelin me va avec.*” Erik pressed his cheek against hers. “*Vous êtes le mien.*”

Keely’s eyes widened at his boldness.

Antoine touched her hand, claiming her attention. He appeared worried. “I can’t believe this man’s nerve. He says you’re to go with him, that you’re his. Keely, this man plans to take you back in time.”

“That’s--that’s preposterous. Why?”

He shrugged. “That’s a good question, especially since he doesn’t seem happy with the idea.”

She stiffened. *Not happy? He accosts me, and he’s not happy?*

Antoine continued to converse with the stranger while Keelin tried to relax. No sense making matters worse by panicking. After a short time elapsed, Antoine smiled, his eyes warm and gentle. “He was sent to fetch a wife, and instead he finds a green-haired creature with a surly disposition.”

“Wife?” She choked on the word.

“His French is a bit different than mine.” Antoine scratched his head. “Congratulations, though. Unless I misunderstood, you’ll become the next queen of Nyjord, Francia.”

~ * ~

Erik sucked in a lungful of air, finding it difficult to breathe in the contained box. His gaze swept over the odd structure as he searched for an exit. Had he arrived in the right time period, right place? Destiny had taken him to a strange land where nothing made sense. His heart quickened. Surely fate had brought him to Keelin’s future, for if not, he’d discovered hell. Fintan hadn’t prepared him for hell.

Strangely garbed people with hostile stares surrounded him. Suffocating heat seeped from the shiny walls, and moisture clung to his body. Did the Goddess, Freyr blanket him with tears? Disoriented, lost, he fought against rising panic.

A woman confronted him with her luminous eyes and green hair.

Keelin. His Keelin. She bore the mark described by Fintan, thin lined scars that etched her name. Would this strange creature fulfill the prophecy? His anger stirred. Fintan must be laughing along with the witch Dísá. They both enjoyed a fine jest at his expense.

Grabbing Keelin about the middle, he held her fast. No one made a fool of Erik Lotharsson. He'd show them all. This strange woman would travel back to Francia and prove the *völva*'s words false. He crushed her to his chest, and a strangely pleasant odor wafted from her odd hair. Her damp skin felt silky beneath his touch. He stroked her shoulder, wishing the strange fabric wrapped about her would disappear. She trembled at his touch, her fear matching his own. He growled, pulling her closer.

She yelped, and her helplessness caused him remorse. He didn't want to hurt the girl, but his temper and fear raced unchecked. Their strange language frustrated him. How could he proceed if no one understood his words?

A man stepped forward and touched his arm. "Don't harm the woman."

Erik started, loosening his hold. The man spoke the native tongue of the Franks, but more importantly, Erik understood most of his words. He inhaled a sharp breath and stiffened his back, thanking Thor for small wonders. "She is mine."

"Please. The woman is of no consequence."

No consequence? There he was wrong.

"Tell me your name."

"Erik Lotharsson, jarl of Nyjord, Francia." He puffed out his chest and studied the other two people in the confined room.

The man wouldn't be ignored. "I'm Antoine Legre. To my right is Irma Slominski, and on my left is Mrs. Benziger. The woman you hold prisoner is Keelin Haverland. Now, will you at least tell me why you're here and why you claim the woman?"

The soft down of the garment Keelin wore pressed against his naked chest. He licked his lips, his body tense and wary. "I must return Keelin to my people."

"I don't understand."

"The witch bade me fetch Keelin and restore her to my home."

"Nyjord?" Antoine asked as if he didn't understand. He took a step closer each time he spoke.

Erik growled, not comfortable with Antoine's aggressive approach or his lack of understanding. Would that he had his sword, so he might slay the foe and be done with it. Dragons were less fearsome than this stark hall filled with demons. Bright lanterns flared, illuminating the fading mist and the polished silver walls. He threw his head back and stared at the flameless torches. "God as my witness, I am your humble servant, for I fear Odin has spirited me to this heathen land with the aid of Viking magic. By Thor, send me on a swift voyage, for I fear my time here will tax more than my strength."

To his left, the woman called Irma pushed open a door, snagging Antoine's attention with a burst of light. Antoine sighed. "The power must be working."

"Power?"

Antoine crooked his head and gave him a curious look. "You talk of Viking magic and gods as if ..."

He tightened his hold on Keelin and swore. "I hail from Francia, from the year of our Lord, nine hundred nineteen. Fintan sent me to this time, this place to claim my

queen. I seek nothing else save that which is mine.” This man need not know of his plans to thwart the witch and prove the prophecy wrong. *Nei*. Once Keelin returned to Nyjord, he would have time to discover the truth behind Dísa’s words.

Keelin whimpered, a small, plaintive sound. He shivered with foreboding, not knowing how to handle the woman.

“Erik, your arm hurts her. You don’t need to hold her so tight.”

Nei, he didn’t, but she fit nicely within his embrace. He nuzzled her neck and nipped her ear, marking her as his. She breathed harder, faster, her fear a tangible, living thing. He lifted his head. “Ja, I do. She must learn who controls her fate.”

Keelin shifted, and the material about his waist slipped. Oh, but he liked her show of spirit. “Tell her I have no wish to harm her.”

Antoine relayed the message, and Keelin went still in his arms. At least she seemed amenable to his authority. A smile curved his lips. Perhaps this strange woman would make a fine mate after all, though he cared not for her odd looks.

A commotion at the door caught his attention. He pivoted, taking Keelin with him and faced the newest threat with wary purpose. No matter who challenged his right to this woman, he was prepared to fight.

Irma returned, clothed in more than the small costume he’d seen previously. His eyes rounded at her attire--the pants and tunic of a man. His gaze shifted. A man followed her. He, too, was garbed in clothing unlike any he’d ever seen. Tight leggings hugged his thighs, tapering to his ankles. The material stretched across his body like tanned hide. A short, tunic-like top fit his torso in similar fashion. Blond hair, trimmed short, framed a vaguely familiar face. Erik strained to remember where he’d seen this man, but could conjure no answers.

“Sank,” Keelin said as if she had intimate knowledge of the newcomer. She’d called Erik by that name when first addressing him. This man’s name?

Sank, he assumed, glanced around the room until his eyes focused on Erik. Sank froze, his face distorted by shock.

Antoine put a hand to his mouth. “Oh, mon Dieu! The women did not lie. He is the very image of you.”

Erik shook his head. “*Nei*. ’Tis not possible.”

Sank took a cautious step closer, his hand outstretched, and Erik retreated, dragging Keelin with him. Sank stopped and mumbled something beneath his breath.

Antoine responded to Sank’s remark with unfamiliar words. Immediately, Irma left. Erik growled. He wanted to know what had been said, why the woman had left. “Speak so I might know what was said.”

Antoine pursed his lips, but it was Sank who answered, his voice laced with awe. “I’m--I’m looking at myself.”

Though Sank’s command of the Frank’s language wasn’t as refined, Erik understood most of his words.

“*Nei*. No two people can share the same face unless Freyja curses the mother with twins.”

“I instructed Irma to fetch a mirror,” Antoine said, shifting his gaze between both men.

“Mirror?” The word held no meaning for him.

“Sank?” Keelin dared speak again. Erik eyes narrowed. He cared not for the soft

way she said this man's name.

Erik stroked Keelin's cheek, inhaling her fresh scent. She whimpered again and strained from his seeking fingers. His body stiffened against her show of defiance. She might not like his touch, but she would learn. When Sank crept nearer, Erik hauled Keelin closer, staking his claim.

Something wet touched his arm. He glanced at her. Tears pooled in her eyes, and Erik almost felt sorry for her, but he couldn't focus on her discomfort, not when his own mind held confusion.

Sank tilted his head, his gaze fixed upon Erik. "I just can't get over it. You're my double."

The door slid open and Keelin's friend slipped inside. Sank took an object from the woman and held it in front of Erik's face. As Erik peered into the reflective glass, his jaw dropped in amazement. His image bore a more-than-striking resemblance to Sank's.

Sank placed his own face next to the mirror. "You're my brother, my twin."

Erik pushed Keelin away, grabbed the reflecting glass, and threw it against the wall. It shattered. "*Nei*. I have no brother here. You lie."

"Don't move, Erik." Antoine backed away from the broken glass. "The shards will cut your feet."

Keelin stumbled past Sank, careful to avoid the broken pieces, and ran into Irma's outstretched arms.

Erik made no further attempts to restrain Keelin. The man who bore his face interested him more. He stole another glimpse at Sank only to discover tears. The man cried? Erik frowned. Viking men had no use for tears, proof that this man could not be of his blood. Sank placed a hand on Erik's shoulder. "I had a twin who was stolen at birth. He disappeared without a trace, and my parents had no clues. The authorities couldn't explain it. It was as if he'd never existed."

Though Erik failed to understand some of the words, he still gleaned the meaning. Sank believed Erik was that missing twin.

"I cannot be that babe."

"Maybe, maybe not, but until I know differently, I'm going to assume you are indeed my brother."

Erik dropped onto the bench, failing to comprehend all his eyes beheld. With the exception of the way they each wore their hair, the images in the glass had been the same. "I know not what to do. I was sent to fulfill a prophecy, but now I wonder if my task had another purpose."

"I have a ton of questions," Sank said, taking a seat beside Erik.

"I, too, have questions."

"Look, this isn't the place to sort through this. Irma told me how you came to be here. I suspect you haven't any place to go, so why don't you accompany me to my apartment?"

Erik glanced at Keelin, sensing his given task slipping from his hands. His stomach churned. In a strange time and place, he must consider the best way to proceed. According to Fintan, the dragon would try to steal the sun again, but when? He assumed he had time before he returned to his home. Surely the appearance of a dragon was a rare occurrence. He shifted his gaze to Sank. Could he trust Sank? Perhaps not, but his curiosity outweighed his apprehension.

“Ja. I will go with you, but the woman...?”

“Goes home,” Sank scoffed. “I can’t imagine what you want with Keely. The lady can be a real nuisance when she wants.”

Erik grinned. “You do not like this Keelin.”

“She’s okay,” Sank shrugged. “She just has this annoying habit of watching me all the time.”

Keelin stomped her foot and rattled off a stream of words. Erik raised a brow at her, and Sank explained. “She must have heard her name. She doesn’t like the idea of us talking behind her back.”

Erik furrowed his brows. This lack of communication proved tiresome. “She must learn the Franks’ tongue.”

“Why?”

“When I return to my home, Keelin will journey with me.”

Sank laughed. “Kidnapping is a federal offense, and somehow, I don’t see Keelin going quietly.” He sobered then smiled. “I still can’t believe you’re here. You can’t leave until I know all there is to know.”

Erik nodded, understanding. He, too, had a powerful need to learn the truth. He’d been played for a fool and wanted to know whom to blame. Either Fintan or Dísa had perpetrated this hoax. Ja, he’d been sent a thousand years into the future to discover a brother. Blood meant everything. A Viking’s honor sprang from family loyalty.

Dísa was wrong. Fate did not send him into the future to find a mate. No-- somehow, his destiny had become tangled with that of his brother, his twin. And Keelin?

Keelin still presented a mystery, but time worked in Erik’s favor. Fate had been kind in that respect. When the moment ripened for him to return, Keelin would join him on a journey that would change both their lives.

