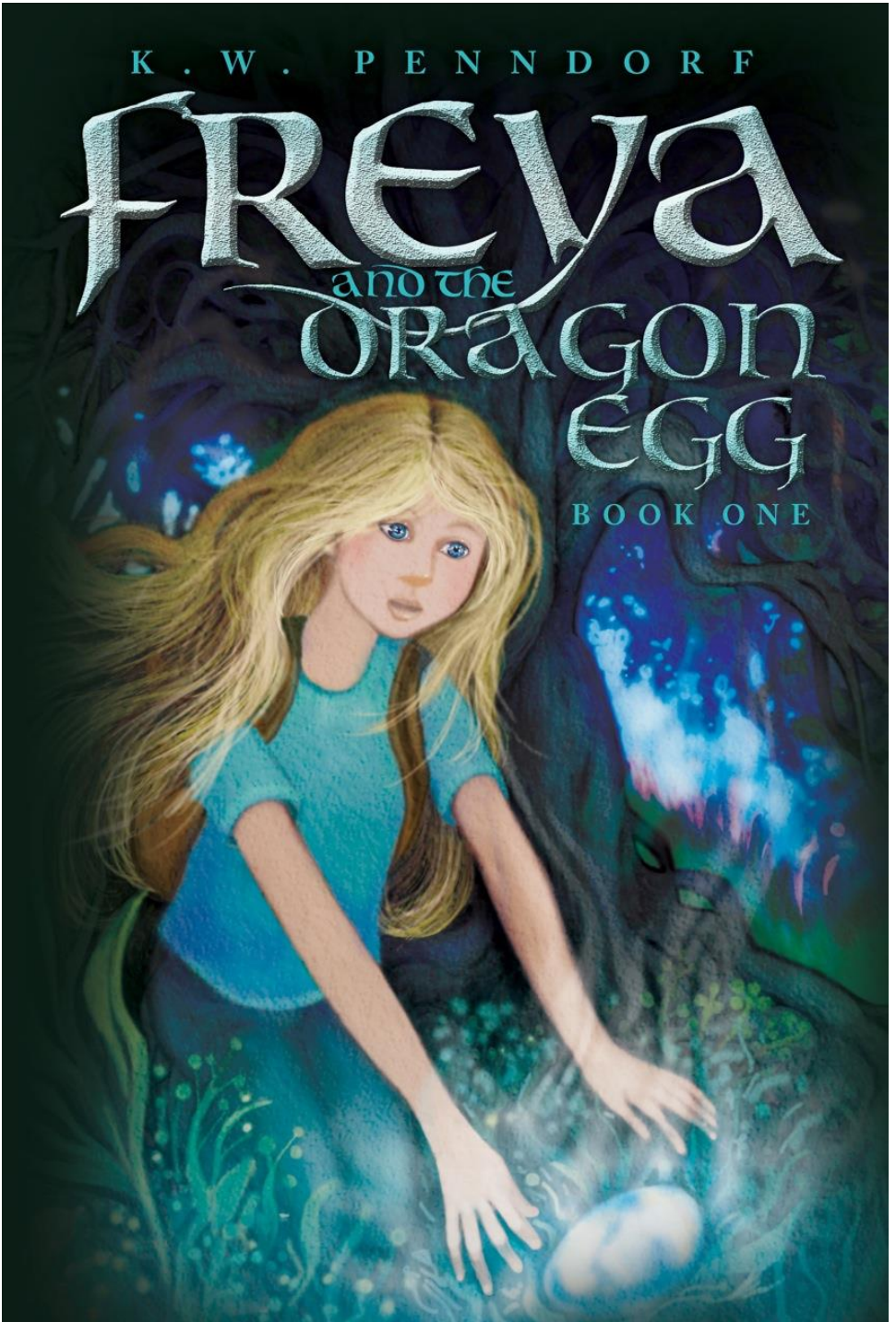


K . W . P E N N D O R F

FREYA

and the
DRAGON
EGG

BOOK ONE



K.W. PENNDORF

FREYA and the DRAGON EGG

BY
K.W. PENNDORF



Open Door Publications

Freya and the Dragon Egg

By KW Penndorf

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CHAPTER ONE

THE OMEN BEGINS

A voice in the dark whispered, “It is time.”

Off in the distance, a soft breeze strumming a gentle tune in the grass gasped. It bolted, shrieking and shrilling while dropping in temperature as if from fright.

Then all fell silent and the heavy curtain of night opened.

Three sparks crept through. Glowing and shimmering like crystals of sea ice, they moved across the blackened sky. Streaks of light trailed behind them stretching to keep up with the ever increasing speed of the sparks but fading quickly as if swallowed by the thickness of night.

The blue sparks journeyed on.

No stars were out; the sky was void of them. It was a sign—one of many.

Travelling in unison, the sparks hurried across the darkness then turned and suddenly descended, landing atop a raised slab of thick slate. The stone held them. Each little spark burned without a wick or wood to fuel their forms. Spitting and shooting the sparks twisted, shrinking in size, then twisted again, expanding and transforming into flames. Ready now, the blue fires flickered wildly.

Their once dim light strengthened with each flicker allowing the light to crawl up the black veil of moonless sky. In its wake, a large oak tree took shape, its roots intricately weaving in and out of the earthen base.

The flames crackled and popped with intensity.

As the veil of night lifted past the trunk, a branch—weighted with might—slowly emerged. Then another and another.

Sparks flew from the flickering flames, growing the fires in number. The original three burst into six, then a dozen, a score, a hundred; all glowing in the same pale hue of blue arctic ice.

A smoky haze of cool turquoise cloaked the tree, casting light upon its eight massive branches. Time had plagued the limbs, growing them into grotesque forms of heavy twists and bends. The trunk, solid and strong, held the branches with ease as they went reaching outward like the snakes of Medusa's hair.

This was Yggdrasil.

In the grass, a lingering wind struck up with new life stirring the flames and rustling Yggdrasil's canopy of leaves.

"It is time," came the voice again. "She senses us now."

Twelve-year-old Freya, slumbering far away in her bed, shuddered; completely aware the voice was addressing her.

This was not the first evening these flames had haunted Freya's sleep. Indeed, they had shown themselves to her for the past several nights. But tonight was different. Tonight they spoke—to her.

As the flames continued to flicker, their tongue-like shapes morphed into the figures of bodiless faces. Noses materialized, sharp and angular. Mouths formed, gaping open and closed. And eyes appeared.

Freya shivered; her body sensing an approaching evil, though she didn't wake. She couldn't. It was as if the blue flames controlled her sleeping state. All she could do was watch.

The wild wind swept through the flames, banging their burning faces into one another but extinguishing none. As it breezed away into the night, the faces quickly turned their brooding eyes to the flame nearest the center.

This fire, in a commanding height taller than the rest, opened its jagged mouth. "The fate of the Nine Realms has been altered," it addressed them, its voice that of the one from earlier.

"Ancestors of the East." The flame speaking turned its eyes to the right side of the slate where several tiny sparks shot up into the sky. "Of the West." Flames now to the left began to flicker, causing their sharp angular features to lose shape. "Of the South." The talking flame spun around 180 degrees just as those of the roll call dipped into a low bow.

There was one remaining group to be announced. *North*, Freya could hear her mind thinking in her slumber even though she didn't know who or what these blue fires were.

Behind the flame that had spoken were a dozen of the fires spanning the length of the slate, not huddled into one unit like the other groups were doing. They didn't flicker, shoot sparks about, or bow. Nor did they wait to be introduced. Each mouth, without a signal or command given, opened in unison and declared as one, "Ancestors from the North."

Yggdrasil shook as if a forceful blast or stormy wind had swept through its branches. Freya's ears filled with a symphony of noises as the tree's mighty limbs creaked and cracked under the movement of its massive weight.

"This gathering has but one meaning."

"Our visions!"

"Each Norn—every Norn's..."

Words rose above the noise of the tree. Voices came from every direction atop the stone, from every group, every corner, east, west, north, and south, and from the flame nearest the center.

"A power is growing," it warned.

"But all too soon." It was a voice from the north.

"Time does not appear to a Norn's visions," clarified an eastern flame.

"Such knowledge, I already possess."

"Ancestral Norns, calm yourselves." Sparks from the west shot across the slate at them. Though all it did was stir up the rest of the blue flames.

"Our visions!"

"Our predictions!"

"The evil we foresaw!"

"She has not a forlansk!"

"The gift of sight..."

"The Realms..."

"We must commence the summoning now!"

They all fell silent, and in a wave as one, they each looked up—staring directly into Freya's sleeping eyes.

"Yggdrasil," they said.

Freya shot up in bed, eyes searching her room. The visions replayed themselves, floating in and out of focus, their images burned onto her retinas. A blue light here, a blue light there. One was on her closet door.

She turned her head from it. Brightly shining in her dresser mirror, it had followed her path of sight. She blinked it away. She blinked them all away; just as she had done each and every morning for the past several days.

The impression of talking flames weighed heavily on her brain. Any other twelve-year-old might wake and dismiss such vivid and strange dreams, but not Freya—not after the conversations she'd been having with her father.

Conversations, that is to say, which she wanted to have—she longed to have—if only he would invest time in her the way he did her two sisters. They were greedy, those two, book-ending her in age and leaving her to never be the cleverest nor the cutest, which in her house were apparently the only characteristics needed to win the attention of her parents.

Well, save for one thing. Her father was the great Dr. Andersen, renowned Viking archaeologist, his passion being “all things Viking.” The Aalborg Museum, where he had worked from the time before she was born, housed Denmark’s largest collection of Viking era artifacts and had her father to thank for them all. That is to say except for Yggdrasil. Dubbed “The Tree of Life,” this thousand-year-old oak drew visitors from all over the world. Surely her father would find it interesting that night after night its image, though much more full of life than the decrepit version tourists pay to see today, was appearing in cryptic dreams to his middle child. Perhaps he would say, “Why, Freya, your dreams have given me an insight which my years of research never have. This summer I will forgo my annual dig with students and spend time discussing these dreams with you instead.”

Or perhaps not.

She rolled over in bed and sighed. School had just let out, which meant her father would be leaving soon for some remote location where he and his chosen team would unearth and excavate exciting artifacts for the museum. He was never *not* successful in finding something. Other families took trips abroad together; hers, however, took them apart. Freya reached into her nightstand and pulled out her journal, then began to write.

“‘Yggdrasil.’ Last night’s dream was much like the others except this time those little blue flames turned into faces and could talk. ‘Yggdrasil.’ That’s what they said. I don’t know why they said it, but they seemed scared. I was scared. Here’s the rest of

what I remember:”

Freya scribbled on, getting every last vivid detail from her memory into written word. What she couldn't discuss at length with her father could at least be shared with her journal—even if it *was* an inanimate object. She loved her journal and filled it with everything from wishes and dreams to pictures and newspaper clippings. If it was filling up too fast, she'd glue in extra pages until the year came to an end; the year being her birthday year and not a calendar year. Each December 20th at least for the past five of them, she received a new diary from her parents along with a matching pen, though she'd never managed to tell them she preferred pencil to ink. And each year she put to paper what failed to be put into conversation.

With her thoughts stored safely in her journal, she knew nothing could be forgotten once her father found time to discuss them with her. She opened the nightstand drawer and tucked her journal away underneath a warped scarf, her one and very lousy attempt at learning to crochet. As she closed the drawer a slow creaking noise of dry hinges sounded from across the room; there was no need to look up.

“Charlotte go away, I'm writing.” She could feel her seven-year-old kid sister's eyes prying into her room.

“Not any more you're not.” Her voice muffled as she pressed her lips through the cracked opening of the door.

“Well, go away all the same.” How Freya wished her parents would put locks on the girls' rooms.

Throwing off her blanket, she checked her alarm clock. It read eight thirty a.m. With a rumble from her stomach, she got up and went to the closet to change out of her pajamas. Her mother insisted pajamas go from body to hamper in order to help keep the house cleaner. It made no sense to Freya, but she wasn't going to bring up that argument again. Taped to the inside of her closet door was a cut out from *The Aalborg Stiftstidende*; an article with the headline, “Dr. Andersen to Take Local Students on Dig.”

“If only you would have picked me,” she said to it. Softly touching the newspaper's snapshot of her father; she then headed down for breakfast.

Freya made it down the stairs without slipping across their wooden surface, but managed to knock over a perfectly fluffed and placed throw pillow from the sofa.

Swinging open the kitchen door, she was greeted at the threshold by a mouth watering host of breakfast aromas. She inhaled the smell of sizzling bacon and the sweet scent of freshly baked carrot rolls.

“Wash your hands before you eat, dear.”

The open door self-closed and bumped Freya in the face. No “Good morning,” or “Did you sleep well?” Simply “Wash your hands.” She wasn’t sure what was worse: the greeting in a command-to-do-something form or the feeling of being pushed away—which the door hitting her in the face didn’t help to soothe.

“Ahem,” sounded in her ear followed by an elbow jab to her side.

Freya turned her head to see her older sister waiting to pass, her arms bent upwards like a doctor ready to be gloved for surgery.

“Could you get the door? I washed mine before coming downstairs.” Susanne raised her hands slightly to indicate what it was she had washed as if Freya weren’t clever enough to guess.

Rolling her eyes, Freya pushed the door out of her face and headed for the kitchen sink. She turned on the faucet, let it run for three seconds, then shut off the water and grabbed the hand towel.

“There dear, you see? Washed hands drown germs.” Her mother gave her an approving smile, then took a plate of bacon to the table.

The towel was dry, for Freya hadn’t washed her hands as assumed. It wasn’t an act of defiance, it never was. It was just that being a middle child meant being overlooked. And not getting caught pretending to wash her hands was proof of that.

She tossed the towel on the counter next to where her father’s packed lunch bag sat.

“Mother, the summer science fair is August twenty-first. You signed me up for Discovery Science Camp again this year, didn’t you?”

“Of course Su-su, and your suitcase has already been pulled up from the basement for you.”

“I hope this year there’ll be an emphasis on botany. They hinted they’d be adding courses in the future and I found forensics and human anatomy to be such a drag.” Susanne helped herself to two slices of bacon and a carrot roll. She held the roll before her mouth, her eyes lost in a daydream. “I want to be the next Anders Dahl, Mother.”

Mrs. Andersen bent and gently kissed the top of her eldest daughter’s head before seating herself in one of the open chairs next to her. “But why be the next Anders Dahl, dear, when you can be the first Su-su

Andersen?”

Susanne’s eyes drifted further into dreamland. “Yeah.”

“What about me, Mother? What am I going to be?” asked Charlotte, bouncing into her lap.

Mrs. Andersen snuggled her tight, wrapping herself around her as if she were a giant gift bow and Charlotte a beloved present.

“Why you, my darling Charlotte, will be a princess; ruling over all the pretty ponies in the land.”

“A hundred ponies?” the thought filled her eyes with a child’s delight.

“A thousand.”

Charlotte let out a gleeful giggle and hugged her back. Then she shot up in her arms and declared with excitement, “Do Freya, she’s next! What will Freya be?”

The game, albeit a bit childish for Freya’s taste, had captured her interest all the same, and she found herself frozen mid-step in anticipation of the response.

Charlotte’s infectious smile had their mother grinning from ear to ear as she turned to face her middle daughter.

“Let’s see, Freya will be...” but her expression went blank. There was silence. She had nothing.

Freya’s heart sank.

“Oh, I know what Freya can be!” Charlotte blurted out, still caught up in the fun of the game. “She can be a storyteller!” From behind her back, she pulled out a book tucked under her shirt that had been held in place by her belt. She flipped open its cover and began to read from one of the pages. “‘Yggdrasil.’ Last night’s dream was much like the others except this time those little blue flames turned into faces and could talk. ‘Yggdrasil.’ That’s what they said.”

“How dare you! That’s my private journal!” Freya flew at her little sister to stop her from reading any further. She lunged for the book and snapped it from her sister’s hands. Gripping it tightly she held it close against her chest. “Don’t you ever read my things again! Not out loud, not in your head, not to me! You’re nothing but a snoop—a spy! I hope your eyes fall out so you can never read my journal or anything else again!”

“Freya, that’s uncalled for,” her mother scolded. “Why don’t to calm yourself down you run your father’s lunch to him at the museum; he forgot it again. Then you can come back and apologize to your sister.”

“Apologize?”

“Freya...”

Her mother’s tone warned her not to push receiving a bigger punishment than running a lunch bag to her father. Freya took the hint. She grabbed the bag from the counter and stormed out the back door.

She went for her bike, stomping and kicking anything she could along the way. She whacked little twigs, bits of grass, and even the tops of her mother’s prized chamomile plants—which surely would land her in even more trouble.

“Who cares,” she mouthed off to herself, and kicked at the ground again.

“Ouch!” Something hard struck against the top of her shoe and her toe throbbed. She looked down and saw a rock; a dark grey round rock about the size of her hand and marked by three white stripes. She eyed it, then hobbled away to the shed in pain. She grabbed her bike and headed off for the museum.

Leaning forward in the saddle, her blond hair whipped in the wind as she picked up speed down a sloping hill. Being alone put her in her element, for if no one was there then she couldn’t be overlooked. Her speed increased. She whizzed by tree-lined fields, peddled through lifting fog, flew over Salt Creek’s wooden bridge and zipped by a cluster of old-style thatch-roofed houses. Next would come Dreaded Hill. She knew, as did every kid in town, that once the long stone wall border of the National Viking Graveyard came into view, it was decision time. Making it up Dreaded Hill required precision, exact timing, even mathematical calculations. Freya tossed all that aside and simply went for it. She refused to get halfway up the steep hill and be forced to walk her bike the rest of the way. A field of boulders stood off in the distance—the National Viking Graveyard. This was it. With her fingers on the gears, ready to shift them up, she pumped her legs the length of the stone wall border. Dreaded Hill was upon her. Her knees came closer to her chest.

Click.

One gear up.

The incline taunted her, its shallow slope letting her pick up speed just before its gradient turned to a five percent rise. Freya forced her legs to pump harder. She peddled further even as gravity worked against her momentum. Halfway up the hill, she could feel the muscles in her thighs burning with exhaustion. The slope slanted steeper. She thought of having to apologize to Charlotte. Her blood boiled. Freya pushed the pedals

harder, pretending they housed little images of precious baby Charlotte and her fallen out eyeballs. She grinned in delight at her imaginary backlash. The slow pace of the uphill workout caused her bike to wobble, but Freya didn't care—she had just ascended Dreaded Hill.

The view from the top of the hill had never looked so good. She paused for a moment to catch her breath and take in her accomplishment. The boulders in the graveyard looked so small. Sure, she'd seen them from this angle before, but never as the conqueror of Dreaded Hill. Today the hill, tomorrow who knows what! She could conquer it all! She could even tell her father about her weird dreams.

She set back off for the museum, crossed through the trees lining the parking lot, then, in a flash her happiness was wiped away. Three police cars were parked askew next to the museum's entrance. Twirling round and round, the lights atop the cars reflected their blue and red hues off the museum's front doors bouncing a kaleidoscope of colors into the air. Freya followed the display of lights and noticed her family's car parked nearby.

"Father."

Quickly she peddled for the museum doors.

A police officer stood outside, and waved for her to turn around. "The museum is closed," she heard him say. She ignored him, her sight fixed on the doors; nearing them with lightning speed. She watched the large silver door handles come into focus, then jumped off her bike mid-pedal letting it crash into the front wall.

The officer wasn't thrilled. "I said the museum is closed today."

Freya puffed, out of breath, "I have to get in. My father's inside. He's Dr. Andersen."

A brow rose at the name, but the officer wouldn't budge. He just crossed his arms and shook his head no.

She tried thinking of a way to get past the policeman, but it involved him getting called away to duty somewhere else, and well, quite frankly she couldn't think how to make that happen. She had no other ideas. Behind her a car door shut, she turned to look and saw exactly what she needed to get into the museum.

"Mr. Taberlig!"

Her father's partner was advancing in her direction.

Gripping a brown briefcase in one hand, Mr. Taberlig pointed his keys over his shoulder, locking the car behind him. He glanced at Freya,

barely acknowledging her call. He was a young man, no more than thirty, and had worked with her father since the first day of his apprenticeship. Mr. Taberlig pulled his I.D. badge from his pants pocket as he approached the officer. “I work here,” he explained, holding “here” noticeably longer than his other words.

As her father’s colleague, Mr. Taberlig had been introduced to the girls many times. He spoke few words, yet when he did they were almost always connected somehow to Viking history, even more so than her father. Typically such conversations Freya found boring. But Mr. Taberlig had a distinct way of speaking and Freya rather liked listening to him, making a game out of his trademark speech pattern. Nine times out of ten whichever word he ended with he would hold the final sound for a considerable amount of time. Once, he lingered on the final syllable for a count of eight seconds; his record best.

Today, though, Freya didn’t count the seconds. She was more concerned about what the police were doing at the museum and why she couldn’t get in to see her father.

The officer inspected the I.D. badge. There was a picture of Mr. Taberlig, wearing the same red and white striped bowtie as he had on now, and under his picture the officer read “Neil Taberlig, Archaeological Scientist of Viking Antiquities, National Museum of Aalborg.” He handed the badge back and stepped aside, allowing Mr. Taberlig to enter.

“Wait, Mr. Taberlig,” Freya called.

“Hmm?” he asked bending his head in her direction, his frameless glasses drooping to the tip of his nose as he did so.

“I’m supposed to bring my father’s lunch to him.” She pointed to her backpack, and then added quietly, “But the officer won’t let me in.”

“Then neither shall I. I haven’t time todaaaaay.”

“Two seconds,” she felt like snapping in his face for refusing to help her out.

She tried pleaded once more. “Then what will Father eat today if I can’t deliver his lunch to him?”

He hesitated in response, and at first she thought it meant he had reconsidered her request for help, but then she noticed that his lost-in-thought concentration wasn’t meant for her but for her bike, or at least its vicinity. Freya looked over at the fallen bike and checked herself at what she saw. Lying next to the back tire was a dark grey rock with three white stripes. As she stared at it she couldn’t help but wonder why Mr. Taberlig

was staring at it too. He couldn't have possibly also kicked a similar rock earlier this morning. She looked at him.

Mr. Taberlig readjusted his grip on his briefcase. His eyes shifting slowly from the rock to Freya then back again. Whatever he was thinking, he didn't share it with her. Instead, he only shot her down for a final time. "Today I have more important concerns to deal with than your father's lunch." He glanced once more at the rock, then turned and headed into the museum without her in tow.

Freya stood there perplexed. Didn't she just conquer Dreaded Hill? She refused to be defeated in this, but what else was she to do? She turned for her bike and checked herself again. There lay the rock plain as day under her *front* tire. Hadn't the rock been lying next to the rear tire, she questioned her memory. Rocks can't move by themselves, but clearly this one appeared as if it had.

Ridiculous.

She walked over to it, bent down with her hand stretched toward the rock, but just as she went to pick it up, her fingers recoiled. What was she going to look for, she asked herself. Little legs on the underbelly? No thank you, too freaky. Instead, from within the side pocket of her backpack she pulled out a permanent marker, leaned down and drew a thick magenta line right through the rock's three white stripes, then jabbed the marker into the ground next to the rock. "Try and trick me now," she warned the rock.

"What?" The officer's sharp tone told her he had heard exactly what she said, and of course understood it to mean him. He didn't look like he was willing to hear an explanation either.

Freya grabbed her handle bars and pulled the bike upright while watching the officer nod in agreement of her decision to leave.

BLIP PSSHH

"Officer Fisker. Come in, Officer Fisker," called a voice over a walkie talkie attached to the officer watching her take her leave.

"This is Officer Fisker." He quickly responded, squeezing the receiver at his shoulder.

BLIP PSSHH

"Can you bring in another box for the evidence bags?"

"I'm on it."

Determined to talk to her father now more than ever, she hopped on her bike, but not to head back home. She had an idea.

With his attention turned away from her, Freya bolted for the back of the museum knowing full well the access code to the employee entrance.

Behind the museum and out of view from the officer was the prized old oak tree. It dated back to the Viking Era and thus the museum owners affectionately named it “Yggdrasil,” or the “Tree of Life” for those tourists not familiar with the mythology of the name. Unfortunately, Freya always felt the poor tree hadn’t enough life left in it to warrant calling it Yggdrasil...that is, until today. It was this Yggdrasil which haunted her weird dreams. *Exactly* this one.

For as long as she could remember, the overgrown branches had always been supported by poles to keep the weight of the frail boughs from snapping in two. Once, during a storm four years ago, a pole was knocked away leaving its branch severely split. The museum staff had been absolutely beside themselves.

“The tree surgeon is doing everything in his power to mend and preserve the branch,” her father had rambled on for a week during dinner. “In the meantime new poles have been measured and cut for each bough.”

And so they were, fitted, secured and cradling the eight large decrepit branches.

Yet today, as Freya peddled passed the tree, why then were the branches swaying higher than their supporting poles?

Her bike slowed to a halt; perhaps it too was curious how such an old tree could suddenly bounce back to life.

“I’m worried for it,” came a woman’s voice.

Freya turned suddenly and caught sight of a pile of such bushy blond hair that it seemed to frame the owner’s soft round face like a halo.

“Oh, Maren, I...I didn’t know anyone was back here.” Freya’s eyes darted, checking for the possibility of police.

“Just me and my old friend.” She motioned with her head towards the tree.

“I’d think you’d be excited to see it growing so strong.” Freya knew she was excited to see no police back here. Freya liked Maren; she was nice. She also knew Maren wouldn’t prevent her from entering the museum. “Is there a new groundskeeper working on the tree?”

Still gazing at the tree, the young woman took hold of the golden locket around her neck and began to rub it between her first and third fingers. “I fear precisely that.”

Her response sent a wave of chills down Freya’s spine. “Maren,” her

voice was full of earnest. “I have to see my father. There’s something he must know.”

No hesitation was made. Maren turned to the security box and swiped her I.D. badge unlocking the employee door. Freya walked through and headed straight for her father’s office.

It was a short distance to his office and she found his door to be closed. She lifted her hand to knock, but somehow felt cold in the shadow of the dark wooden door. “Dreaded Hill,” she told herself. Taking a deep breath, she forwent knocking and instead grabbed hold of the doorknob then swung the door open wide.

“Oh, whoa!” Dr. Andersen spun around at the sound of her entrance. “Freya! What on earth are you doing here?” he asked, quickly placing his hands and the object in them behind his back. He ran to her and shut the door.

“You—you forgot your lunch.” Fool, she told herself. *Tell him about your dream—about Yggdrasil and the flames.*

Her father said nothing.

She lowered her backpack to the floor, careful not to bump it against the seventh century enameled chest excavated just last summer, where in Norway she had forgotten. It was hard not to notice him staring at her backpack. Freya pushed the bag slightly to the left with her foot hoping he’d see the chest hadn’t been harmed. His eyes followed the movement. Unfortunately, as she did so, she also managed to splash coffee from the cup on his desk, which her hand was quick to wipe the spill away from a leather bound book titled *The Raedsten*. But somehow this he didn’t even notice.

“I don’t know what else to do. It’s got to get out somehow. It can’t stay here,” she heard him say, more to himself than to her.

“What’s got to get out?”

He kept his worried eyes on her bag. “Yggdrasil is changing.” Again she felt he was talking more to himself than to her.

“About that. I know, I saw...”

“It’s a sign of something bad.”

A sign? Her dreams flooded her. She barely trusted herself to ask, “An omen?”

“Exactly.”

“Father?” It was now or never. This was her Dreaded Hill chance to tell him about her dreams.

He raised his eyes to hers.

“Last night, well really for the past several nights, I...”

“We don’t just believe Yggdrasil is some random ancient tree from the Viking Era, we believe it’s *the* Yggdrasil.”

“Come again?” He wasn’t listening to her at all.

“The Vikings believed in the existence of Yggdrasil and the Nine Realms. They believed those things to be very real indeed. And now *I* have every reason to believe so as well.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This shouldn’t be here, it shouldn’t have been found. Something of this magnitude should *never* be found.”

“I don’t under...”

“It can’t be here. Not now.”

“What can’t?”

“Freya, I need your help.”

Freya swallowed hard. He never needed anything from her, especially help.

“Sh...sure, of course. What do you want me to do?”

“Get rid of this.” He pulled his hands from behind his back and produced an object no larger than her little pinky. The oval item was pale blue and made her think of the flames. On it were several dark blue patches as well as a solitary brown line zigzagging around one end.

Her eyes widened.

“It must be removed from the museum, and not by the burglars who stole from here last night.” He placed the object inside a small box on his desk. “You must hurry. The police are due here any moment to question what I know about the break-in. If they search my office and find this...No! I don’t even want to think about that. It must be hidden. Do you understand?”

She nodded yes, though she didn’t understand at all.

“Yggdrasil is the link between the nine Realms. That Yggdrasil, outside my window there, it’s growing stronger because someone, or something, has tampered with the Realms. Could you imagine if the Realms were open in the modern day? If all the creatures, along with their powers, were unleashed...here?”

He was scaring her. “You’re not making sense.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Quickly, Freya!” He grabbed her backpack and shoved the box

within it. “No one is to know you have this. Hide it where no one can find it, and tell no one of its location. Not even me!”

The knock sounded again. “Dr. Andersen? Dr. Andersen, it’s the police. We’d like to have a word with you now.”

Dr. Andersen raised a finger to his lip, “Tell no one!”

CHAPTER TWO INTO THIN AIR

The door flung open and in barged Mrs. Iver, the museum's curator, followed by two tall policemen. Mrs. Iver was a stocky, middle-aged woman with nothing but business on her mind. It was she who kept the newspaper reporters well-fed with the latest information on Dr. Andersen's Viking findings. And it was their write-ups and interviews that kept the public's interest and money flowing into the museum. As she crossed the room to Dr. Andersen, quick to introduce the officers to him, she tossed Freya a look that said "beat it kid!"

For the first time in her life, Freya was actually grateful for being shoved away. She took her leave promptly without any lip or hesitation. But as she turned to close the door behind her she glanced over at her father whose eyes locked with hers. *Take care*, they almost seemed to say.

"Why?"

Their gaze broke. Both looked over at the officer who spoke.

"Do you suppose someone would want a, uh, an – oh what's the name of it again?" The lanky policeman flipped through his note pad. "A *ristir*?"

"Yes, you have that correct. R-I-S-T-I-R." There was a sense of urgency in Dr. Andersen's voice. And with that, Freya shut the door.

The corridor leading away from her father's office was dimly lit, not for lack of overhead lighting or bright bulbs, but rather from the magnitude of stacked boxes. Walking through this corridor was like walking through an overstuffed closet in desperate need of being cleaned out. Piled haphazardly upon each other in varying mismatched shapes and sizes, were cardboard mailing tubes reaching out at those who attempted to pass, flat shipping containers that caught on unsuspecting ankles, lids which no longer fit the boxes they came with, bubble wrap old and popped, and unhoused artifacts, most likely too many for Freya to count. This was her father's life work, well at least what wasn't currently on display. In every box and container, shipped back to the museum from far away excavation sites, were ornately forged sword hilts, welded iron blades, leather-bound wooden shields, carved steering oars, remnants of clothing, broken pieces of pottery, jewelry, combs, keys, you name it. If it dated from the Viking Era, it was here. Or soon would be. As a result, the newspapers affectionately referred to Dr. Andersen as the "Bloodhound of Archaeology" and once ran a story with the headline, "Nothing to Fear for the Vikings are Here—Thanks to the Bloodhound of Archaeology." The article was clipped and pasted into Freya's journal.

Freya put her hand on the employee door at the end of the corridor, pushed it open, and entered.

"The Great Hall," she said under her breath, realizing her mistake for not leaving the way she'd come in. Police were everywhere, and they all took notice of Freya's sudden entrance.

Quickly she looked away from the officers' incriminating stares and kept her eyes low. That's when the idea came to her that perhaps looking away might make it more obvious. So she looked up and tried to smile slightly, but only slightly so as not to look too suspicious. She put a hand in her pocket—this had always made criminals in the movies look calm and collect—and wondered to herself if she should pucker her lips together and whistle something to help ward off any impression of thievery, but she couldn't think of any tunes. Then she did the next thing she could think of, which was to try and leave without being stopped or questioned.

Standing tall to build an air of confidence, she stepped onto the marble floor of the Great Hall and proceeded to clear it as quickly, though not too quickly, as possible. She passed three orange cones, her curious eyes reading numbers eleven, twelve, and thirteen, marking an empty

glass display case, a rusted double-edged sword and a fragmented chain-mail tunic, respectively. To the left of her came a policeman from the Viking Antiquities Wing carrying two plastic evidence bags filled with iron arrowheads. She froze as he bee-lined towards her, her mind racing to find the right response to his forthcoming interrogation. Her father was her obvious alibi, but how to respond should the officer ask to search her bag? Unconsciously, she clenched the shoulder straps of her backpack, bracing herself for what was about to take place. Only, what took place was the total disinterest in her or her bag. The officer walked right past her without giving her a second glance. That was her cue to high-tail it out of there.

The Great Hall was large, though Freya had never noticed just how large until today. The entryway to the Tapestries Wing alone must have spread on for miles, making each step she strode towards the museum's front doors feel like an eternity. With one of the aisles displaying ancient tapestries finally behind her, her heart sank at the sight that there were still several more ridiculously wide aisles to go.

Nearing the halfway point, Freya overheard Maren discussing a large, dark-colored tapestry with one of the officers.

"This one? It's titled 'The Great War.' No, there are no signs of the intruder harming it. Thank goodness."

The officer jotted down her words.

Freya continued on through the Great Hall. Then out of nowhere came the officer who had denied her access into the museum.

"I told you the museum is closed today."

"Just leaving now," she flashed a shaky grin, then dashed for the doors. Slipping outside, she ran for her bike around back, jumped on it, and peddled across the parking lot with a new-found determination to secure a hiding place for the oval object.

Dreaded Hill was much quicker to get down than to get up, letting gravity pull her faster than she could pedal. Her mind raced in search of the perfect hiding place.

Somewhere where even Father couldn't find it.

Her bedroom? Nope. That was out knowing Charlotte was bound to snoop around and find it. The park? Too public. Her school? Same problem.

She pulled her feet up, placing them on the bike frame as she sped down the hill.

Mother's garden?

No. It was sure to get dug up next spring.

I need somewhere where no one can dig.

The hill leveled out, sending her bike to shoot across the pavement alongside the stone wall border of the National Viking Graveyard.

Freya slammed hard on her hand brakes.

“It’s protected.” An excitement of inspiration filled her eyes.

Before her stood a hundred or more six-foot-tall boulders. These oversized rocks were not randomly scattered about, her father had taught the tour guides to explain. Rather, they had been placed by the Vikings in oblong formations to represent the shape of a burial boat. For those not honored with a sea burial, this was the next best thing. And today their thousand-year-old graves were protected. Protected against excavation, against research, against being dug up, against her Father finding whatever might be buried there. It was the perfect hiding place. And Freya knew exactly where to put the object.

Hopping off her bike she propped it against the stone wall and began scouring the landscape for the place to dig. The land was hilly, raising and lowering boulders like a carousel ride, but somewhere, just where the land dipped low, was a boulder in particular that Freya was searching for. It was a headstone, marked with an inscription. Chicken scratch to her, the inscription’s runes, or ancient alphabet of the Vikings as she had read in an interview with her father, were full of shapes similar to the letter B. Hardly any of the other runes bore much resemblance to her modern day Danish alphabet, which was why she remembered it. Having often played hide and seek amongst the boulders with her sisters, she’d come across the B-laden boulder several times and thus felt confident she could find it now.

Freya weaved around the grave sites, making sure not to step through any of the oval formations as the idea of walking on someone’s grave repulsed her, especially a thousand-year-old someone.

Any boulder sitting on higher ground was ignored. Any boulder lining either side of the formation was also ignored as it was a headstone she was in search of. The first stone she came up to had one B, but no extras. The next had an inscription so severely worn by weather and the ages that Freya knew for certain it wasn’t the one she wanted. Off to the next low land. No Bs there. To the next, then the next. Freya bobbed up and down the hilly landside determined to find her boulder. Three more attempts and she finally found it. Tall, far bumpier than any others she had touched and

searched, and in an evenly colored medium shade of grey, was a boulder with eight distinguishably marked B-shaped runes.

Freya grabbed a nearby stick, sturdy enough to dig with, then knelt down and got to work. She thought cleverly to chisel up the grass as one whole piece of sod. The effect she was hoping for was to have the hole go undetected by covering it with the sod instead of freshly dug up dirt. So she laid the grassy sod carefully on the ground next to her for safe keeping until its final use. Now it was time for some elbow grease. Surely the untouched earth, packed tightly over the years by the constant traipsing of tourists' feet, was bound to be more difficult to tunnel through than her mother's vegetable garden. She thought of running home for a shovel, but couldn't bring herself to leave the task she'd already begun.

Every so often she'd lay the stick down and place her hand in the depression, gauging its depth. The hole reached her knuckles; she burrowed on, then her wrist, on she went. With the hole now up to her elbow, she was ready to hide this peculiar oval thing. How she wished she could tell her father. It was a catch-22, really. To earn his praise she'd have to reveal its location for him to understand just how good the hiding place was. But of course if she told him, well, that would defeat the purpose of him asking her to hide it in the first place.

Freya removed her backpack and unfolded its flap. The box with the secret object seemed much too large for the tiny thing it housed. Too large for the hole she dug was more like it. The box had to go. She popped off its lid and with her hand cupped she gently scooped up the object from within.

Knowing, as this was the best hiding place ever, that today would be the very last time anyone would ever gaze upon the object again, Freya paused. She wanted to remember this moment, to remember what the object looked like, to remember conquering Dreaded Hill, to remember how she had helped her father. She sat back leaning on her heels.

CRACK!

Freya twirled her head around and met Susanne's evil stare.

"I can't believe you dug! A hole! On protected land! Father's going to kill you!"

Fire swelled inside Freya. Her perfect hiding place was ruined.

Charlotte came bouncing into view, skipping over to her sisters from behind a distant boulder.

Oh it all made sense now! Freya was fuming. That little twerp of a kid

sister was always snooping into her business. It was no wonder she was found.

“You’ve tampered with a national treasure, Freya! Don’t you know even Father isn’t allowed to dig here?”

“Leave me alone Susanne. You don’t know what you’re talking about,” were the best fighting words Freya could think of, her mind distracted with having to find a new location for the object. “What are you even doing here anyway?”

“Well seeing how it was taking you two hours to deliver Father’s lunch, Mother sent us to come get you. When we saw your bike against the stone wall I said to Charlotte, ‘Charlotte, I bet you she didn’t even go see Father.’ Somehow, somehow I knew you pulled ‘another Freya.’ And I was right.” Susanne glared at the hole, then at Freya.

The fire inside her burned even hotter now. “Stop saying I always pull ‘another Freya!’ And for your information, I did go see Father. But when he finds out what happened he’s going to be angry with *you* not me.” Or so she hoped.

“What’s in your hand?” Charlotte’s voice was that of an angel’s—full of innocence and utter goodness. Blah! A complete charade for time and time again she always drew attention to whatever it was that was going to set Freya off.

Freya didn’t even look at Susanne; she already knew her hawk eyes had narrowed in on her hand.

“You’re unbelievable Freya. Whatever you dug up, you’d better give to Father...or else!”

“I didn’t dig it up. And besides, he’s not supposed to know where it is.”

Susanne’s eyes widened. “He doesn’t know you have it. You little thief. Give it here.” Susanne stuck out her arm, palm up and hand open commanding to be given the item.

“No.” Freya slapped away the hand.

“I *said*, give it here.” She yanked at her sister’s arm gripping it tight.

Freya wriggled free and held the object high above her own head.

Susanne smiled at the sight. “Oh, please Freya, I’m taller than you.”

But before Freya would allow Susanne to swipe at the object once more, she pulled her hand out of the air and thrust the object into her mouth, swallowing it whole.

A loud rumble roared from Freya’s stomach. Freya, Susanne, and

Charlotte all froze at the sound.

This was not the noise of hunger; it was like the growling sounds of a beast trying to escape its cage. The sound came again, followed by another and another. As the noises grew so too did the sudden abdominal pain inside Freya.

She let out a scream of agony—her sisters stepped back in fear. Freya cried once more; then with her silhouette straightening just a bit, she looked straight into Susanne’s eyes before everything went dark.

It was pitch black, and Freya was falling fast. She couldn’t gauge at what speed she was descending, but she knew by the lashing effect of her hair as it whipped her in the face that she was torpedoing towards who knows where at an alarmingly quick rate.

As she fell, a flash of bright white light dazzled her eyes. In its brief second of illumination she thought she caught a glimpse of the smooth grey rock and its three white stripes, decorated with the magenta line she had given it.

The flash of light came again, burning her eyes with its brightness. She blinked hard, closing her eyelids to flush out the stinging sensation. When she opened her eyes again, she could see Yggdrasil and the blue flames. The flames shrunk and grew, blotching out the view of Yggdrasil with a haze of soft pale blue.

Twisting and stretching, the angular faces of the flames came into view. They were bright and clear as day, falling steadily with her in the void. The faces glanced at each other with expressions of worry.

“She has altered her Fate!” one of them shouted.

“It changes nothing!” argued another.

“Her gift of sight...”

“Aye, lo she no longer acts for her true self alone...”

“She has answered the summoning. Does that not prove her worthy?”

“There is misadventure in her coming. Be it known she has answered a Raedslen!”

Gasps of horror pierced Freya’s ears, and before she could blink, the flames extinguished into nothingness. With a sudden hard landing on solid ground, she stopped falling.

Freya rubbed her right thigh and peered above the tall grass she was lying in; the only thing aside from her thigh that helped to cushion her landing.

Above her was the setting sun, streaking shades of crimson all along

the horizon and illuminating the land just enough for her to see that in front of her wasn't the Viking Graveyard or her sisters or for that matter anything she recognized. Instead, her eyes met a thick forest of very tall evergreens lining the field she was in. This forest was none Freya had ever seen before.

Panic set in.

Was this the bad sign her father had mentioned to her?

Nonsense.

Her father wouldn't have given her the object if he knew what it could do to her. Would he?

But if he had known...would he know how to undo whatever it was that got done?

"Ridiculous." Freya stood up snapping herself out of such wild imaginings. "I passed out from the pain is all. And stupid Su-su and Charlotte carried me off to this field as an evil, cruel joke. Well they will surely pay for this when I get home." The forest was growing darker under the setting sun. "When I get home."

As she looked out across the field, she saw a stack of twigs advancing her way. They came bouncing, up and down, atop the tall grass.

Freya stooped low to the ground, just to be on the safe side, and waited for the stack of wood to pass.

There was movement in the grass below the stack. A rustling sound announcing the approach of the twigs swished faintly. It was coming closer. Freya held her breath. Swish, swish, swish. The faint noise grew louder. Whatever was moving was now very near. It was just upon her when all of a sudden Freya let out a boisterous hiccup.

"What noise is this?" called a voice from behind the stack. The wood fell to the ground, revealing a young girl no taller than Charlotte.

Freya stood up, pretending to have been tying her shoe, all the while feeling foolish for thinking twigs could move on their own. But when she looked again at the girl, she could hardly believe what she saw. Dressed in a long, pale yellow, linen tunic, with two round broaches clasping a brown cape to the girl's shoulders, Freya knew at once this was Viking attire.

The girl stared back in awe. "A warrior spirit," she breathed softly.

"Come again?"

As if Freya were a celebrity and the girl her biggest fan, she declared, "See how you dress – a style not known to me. You are no foe of mine."

"Foe?"

“Nay, the warrior spirits of Valhalla do my clansmen right to come here. Let our plunder be yours for the taking. Lo! I do beseech you, leave but the burnished cuff, as my wrist has *ever* so fancied its plating.”

Was this girl insane, Freya wondered? Warrior spirits from Valhalla? Plunder? This was why she hated Viking festivals—they were always full of weirdoes. Though she had to hand it to her sisters for finding a festival so early in the summer.

“Look, I’m just trying to get home and I don’t have any mobile on me. Do you have one I could borrow?”

The girl looked puzzled by the request, as Freya unfortunately thought she would.

“Ok, I get it. Your parents signed you up for this festival so you wouldn’t be bored this summer, but honestly I just want to go home. So if you’re not willing to step out of character and lend me your phone, then at least point me in the direction out of here.”

The girl’s celebrity buzz slowly faded. “If not to Valhalla you wish to return, alas, I know not the direction you seek.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “The ‘direction I seek’ is Aalborg. My city is Aalborg. I’m sure you’ve heard of it—the fourth largest city in Denmark?”

The girl shook her head.

“No of course not, that would be too easy. I tell you what... is there an adult around I could talk to?” With an adult, she assumed, she’d be able to use the story of being a little lost twelve-year-old in search of her way home. At least adults were responsible enough to step out of character, not like this annoying little Charlotte impersonator who acted like she couldn’t help.

“Lo! My father has fared both land and sea. If any, then surely he will know your thorpe. Come away. The honor is given to us to help a warrior spirit of Valhalla.”

Freya rolled her eyes again, which was now becoming a habit the longer she stayed in this girl’s presence. “Look, you can drop the act. I’m not a warrior spirit and you know it.”

The last lingering ray of excitement faded from her face. “One day then will I meet a warrior spirit come in collection of our offered plunder.”

“Sure you will.”

Quickly the girl’s eyes lit up like a fireworks display. “Do you believe it to be true? Oh, happy a day when I shall don gear of war and raid in valor as those of yore.”

“I’m not exactly sure your parents would be proud to have a kid who glorifies battle or stealing.”

“Stealing? You do me wrong. Danelaw decrees the victor of battle all the belongings of the loser. Stealing is detestable, fit only for the wretched fool. I am a Viking and gladly take the sword, would I, to secure my place in the great Valhalla with all the warrior spirits.”

“Whatever. I believe you said your father was around here somewhere?”

She nodded. “My thorpe is yonder.” The girl pointed behind Freya.

Freya turned, and in the distance could make out several large brown mounds. She didn’t see any gate or stone wall, or even any lights, but something surrounding the area was producing a golden hue.

The girl gathered up the wood and gestured Freya to follow her into the village.

The golden haze shone brighter the nearer they came and finally Freya spied its source. Piled in heaps and mounds where the field met a farmed vegetable garden was anything and everything gold, as if someone had laid out all their valuable treasures. There were ornate goblets etched in various patterns, plates and bowls polished fine, pitchers both large and small, and jewelry, lots of it, all reflecting the sun’s last rays. She’d never seen this in any other Viking festival before and wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. It seemed a rather expensive display for tourists.

Freya followed in the girl’s steps and was equally careful not to knock her foot against any of the golden objects as the two crossed over into the thorpe.

“How are you called?” the girl asked from behind the pile of twigs.

“You mean my name? It’s Freya.”

The girl paused mid-step and in a dramatic fashion much like Charlotte, she moaned, “Oh, many a morning have I lost by dreaming I possessed a strong Viking name such as yours. Nay, alas I wake to the odious name of Grimhild. The shame; how accursed.” She picked up her pace and mood adding, “Be it known, I shall toil all my days skilling myself to the level of warrior until I glory in a new name such as Blacktooth or even Grimhild the Red, as befitting, for my red hair.”

Freya would have disagreed about the name Grimhild but that would have only started another conversation which she wasn’t looking to have with the girl, so she kept quiet.

Her silence made no difference though as Grimhild continued to chat

on anyway about a new name she wanted to acquire and of her prospects of becoming a warrior.

Freya ignored her—it was easy; her mind now distracted by the authenticity of the thorpe. The smell alone from the livestock would have been distraction enough. She noted how the brown mounds weren't piles of dirt but rather homes made of dried mud and hardened straw. Their roofs were thatched and their walls had no windows, their doors all closed by a large piece of stretched animal hide. The museum had one such hut on display, but only one. Typically the Viking festivals had tents, many made from animal skins but that's as far as they went. Never any mud huts. She had seen wooden pens for housing pigs and goats, though not this many. Here, each hut displayed two or three at least.

“So where's your father?” Freya asked as they rounded a hut and she had still yet to meet anyone other than Grimhild.

“In the back field *slaughtering* his opponent.” Grimhild's eyes twinkled devilishly as she smiled at Freya.

Maybe that was festival talk for ‘cooking dinner’ Freya hoped.

THWAP!

Freya looked to the direction of the noise.

A roar of excited cheers filled the air where she could only assume was the back field. There was clapping and laughter as loud as thunder itself. The goats in the pen next to her bleated, spooked by the sudden noise. It had even spooked Freya.

“Father.” Grimhild said proudly weaving Freya further through her thorpe. “Always a winner at kubb.”

“Kubb? My family plays that game.” Of course they did; what a stupid thing for Freya to share. It was a Viking game after all so naturally it's what her father would have them play. She should have recognized the sound of wooden batons hitting kubb blocks and just kept her mouth shut.

Grimhild led Freya around another hut as the clamor of sportsmanship was calming in the distance. There they came upon the center of the thorpe. Near a small campfire were several wooden tables, adorned with floral arrangements and covered with platters full of cheeses, meats and breads, all set and ready for the hungry inhabitants of the thorpe to come and feast.

Grimhild dumped the kindling near the campfire. “Speak now of your Aalborg to my Father for this way he comes.” She said turning to Freya and pointing out a man dressed in a grey tunic and baggy burlap pants. He

was a tall, burly man with hair as fire red as Grimhild's and whose demeanor was equally as jovial. Lit with the smile of a champion, he welcomed the celebratory claps on his back congratulating him in his kubb domination along with his teammates who all shared a drink with him from a horn shaped goblet.

Freya scanned the group of Vikings. An uneasiness swept over her. The actors were too good, the food too rustic, and the clothing too primitively made. This was a *reenactment festival*...it had to be.

A young boy ran over to Grimhild's father tugging on the man's sleeve. "A story Uncle Harald, a story."

Harald's red bearded face smiled even wider. "A story?" He ruffled the boy's hair. "Am I to be both skald *and* chieftain of Borg?"

The nephew nodded with an air of a child's command, proclaiming to his elder, "Aye!"

Harald chuckled at the boy. "Then I must oblige. Lo, strength and courage to you Magnus for a grimmer tale has not filled your ears."

The boy's eyes widened and remained so when he caught sight of Freya. Harald also took notice of her as did the pan piper who dropped the musical tune he was playing. The kids playing tag, the sword fighting boys, the flower binding girls, and the men and women all took notice of Freya who stood frozen near the fire in their sea of stares.

"Grimhild," Harald addressed his daughter. "You have brought us a guest."

Freya felt herself begin to tremble.

Grimhild wiped her hands of the kindling wood and threw a hug around her father's waist. "Aye Father. Here is Freya – lo, be it known she is *not* of Valhalla." She threw her father a look as if he too should be disappointed by the news. "She is of Aalborg and desires to make her return. Lo, she knows not the way. Know you the way Father for I have told her you know all the seas and roads of our lands and abroad."

He welcomed his daughter's embrace with a hug in return, but replied to her with an examining eye still on Freya. "Aalborg I confess is not known to me in my travels."

How could he not know of Aalborg? And why wouldn't he just step out of character? This wasn't a game. Freya's hand quivered uncontrollably in her jeans pocket nervous he honestly wasn't going to help her. "Please. I'm twelve-years-old. My father is Dr. Andersen. I don't know what I'm doing here or how I got here. First I thought my sisters

played a joke on me, but now I don't even care—I just want to go home. So if you're in on the joke could you please snap out of it? I'm having a hard time finding this funny."

Harald released Grimhild's embrace and stood tall. "I know of no joke young Freya, nor of the sisters you speak. Lo, help you I shall."

His voice was earnest and Freya believed him—that's what frightened her; that he actually didn't know of a joke, her sisters, or Aalborg. "But you can tell me how to get home?"

"Come away. Let us sup on this wondrous of feasts. You are most welcomed as our guest. Share with me of your Aalborg for your speech and attire lead me to believe it lies indeed in foreign lands." She saw him nod to a man who then tapped two others and the three of them set off away from the crowd, each in different directions.

Freya quickly picked up the serious tone of this action.

The man next to Harald exchanged glances with him. "The omen?" mouthed the man, but Harald gave no reply.

She fumbled for words, wishing she were dressed like them and spoke like them. Did he see her as a threat? *Was* Aalborg in a foreign land to wherever she was now? If it was, she certainly hoped Aalborg wasn't a rival of any kind to this thorpe.

Harald gestured her to share in the prepared foods, then took a seat himself next to the campfire. "Please, I beseech you, share with us of your Aalborg."

"Um, I—uh—" she faltered. So many people were watching and listening. She only hoped what she had to say would be well received. "Well, I'm from Aalborg. As, um, as I suppose I already said. And it's, well, well it's in Denmark." No one shifted uncomfortably at the mention of her country or gave her an evil glare. But did that mean they'd never heard of it either? "Is *this* Denmark? Here, I mean. Where we are now?" It was an awkward feeling not knowing what country one was in.

Harald smiled politely. "Aye, you are among your kinfolk the Danes." She felt her shoulders relax.

"Uncle, let us hear of her tale after for you have promised us one yourself most grim," Magnus pleaded to Harald then beckoned Freya and the others to take a seat.

Grimhild squeezed up close to Freya and handed her a pewter cup of something cold to drink as the other children began to gather near at Harald's feet. Then rather excitedly she clinked cups with Freya and said,

“Tidings to you; for before we part will your ears merry make in a tale none can word so well as my dearest Father.”

Several of the children shushed Grimhild, equally excited to hear Harald’s gruesome story.

Harald leaned back, stroked the short braid in his bushy beard and with narrowed eyes looked over each child. Then he slowly began. “Who among those here dare speak the name of the vilest beast known to Viking kind?”

A few of the older boys took the dare. “Berserk,” they answered confidently.

Grimhild squeezed Freya’s arm pretending to be scared by the name. Freya didn’t know what a Berserk was or how dangerous one could be, but she did wonder what type of warrior Grimhild would make if ever faced with one.

Harald shook his head, delighting at the boys’ incorrect response. Then in one swoop of his mighty arm he pulled the smallest boy up on his lap and hugged him in mock protection. “A good guess was that indeed for a Berserk’s bearskin form can slash the lives of an entire thorpe without shedding any blood of its own. Lo, take warning; this beast of which *I* speak harms deeper than a thousand Berserks. And unlike the mortal Berserk, this creature is not born of man.”

Now even Freya was curious to learn what could be so horrible.

Grimhild leaned in closer hanging on every word.

“Its given name...is ‘Raedslen.’”

“Raedslen,” whispered Grimhild.

“I’d slay one,” yelled out one of the boys.

“Aye!” agreed the other boys and Grimhild too.

Harald smiled at the would-be-warriors. “Excellent, for the morrow will offer you the chance.”

“Harald,” spoke a woman with long blond braids. She placed her hand on his shoulder and said skeptically, “You would send your nephew to do battle against a Raedslen when he has yet to go raiding?”

He shrugged away her hand. “Dragon slaying builds skill necessary for raiding. Or do you desire to raise a hatchling in our thorpe?”

The woman shook her head.

“No. It is agreed. We will destroy the egg in sun’s first light and stand guard awaiting the beastly mother come to weep the loss of her young. It is then shall my nephew witness the mastery of dragon slaying for which

this clan is known.”

Excitement filled the listeners, followed by a clamor of metal sounding in the distance. Immediately came a warning call of a deep voiced man as he shouted, “BERSERK! Save yourselves!”

In a wave as one, the gathering jumped to their feet. Freya, not knowing what to do, was pushed, shoved, jarred, and shouldered as everyone scampered away in a mad rush for their huts. Freya didn’t know where to go, who to follow. Nor had she seen in which direction Grimhild or Harald ran. Searching for a place to hide, a table caught her eye. Quickly, she flew under it and lay as still as she could on the dark ground.

The village was silent save the crackling of the campfire.

It wasn’t long before the figure of something furry came into her view. Against the light of the fire, Freya thought the Berserk to be nothing but a bear. Yet if that were so, then Harald’s Vikings wouldn’t be so fearful of it. Freya kept low recalling his words that one Berserk could slay an entire thorp.

The bear walked steadily keeping a quick pace as if it was after something. Then it came to a golden bowl atop a neighboring table and paused. Freya shielded the fire from her eyes. Her view was good. She watched the bear reach into the bowl, and pick up a deep blue oval object with patchy light blue spots.

Freya did a double-take.

The bear placed the object in a side pocket of its fur then turned from the bowl and headed back for the fields—with Freya following quietly behind.