

BONUS EPILOGUE – LEGACY OF THE RUNES

SURTR'S JOURNEY (*Heyannir/August AD 879*)

'Come *on*, you stubborn bird! I know you can say it. *Please!*

'Stubborn bird. Surtr, good boy. Treat!'

Storm scowled at the raven perched on his forearm. 'No! You're not a good boy and you don't get a treat until you say the right words. Go on, say after me – *með blóð skaltu ferðast!*

'Good boy. Treat! the black creature retorted, his peppercorn eyes seemingly defiant.

'Aargh! I give up.'

Storm sighed. It was no use. He had hoped to teach his wife Freydis's pet bird the magical sentence that might – with a bit of luck and the help of the Norse gods – transport him to the twenty-first century together with the rest of their little family. It was time for him, Freydis and their son Wolf to return to the modern world. They'd been planning to do so for a while now, but Storm knew that leaving Surtr behind would be a wrench for them all, even if he'd be well looked after by their friend Joalf. Freydis especially would be very sad, and he hated the thought of her being upset. After nearly four years together, Storm was still fathoms deep in love with her and would do anything to make her happy. But in this instance, he couldn't do it without the help of the obstinate bird.

Wolf, their son, had been born in Iceland two and a half years ago at the settlement founded by Storm's sister Maddie and her husband Geir. Storm and his family had stayed with them until recently, but had travelled back to Svíaríki in early summer with Geir's brother Hrafn who had arrived on a trading journey. After spending some time with relatives near Lake Mälaren, they were leaving in a couple of days, time-travelling with the help of a special axe he owned. It was past time, as Freydis was pregnant and they needed to go before the new addition to the family was born. They'd spent weeks training Wolf to say the magical words and the little boy had the sentence memorised perfectly. It was lucky he'd been an early talker and was happy to say anything they asked him to.

Unlike the wretched bird.

Storm sent Surtr another glare. They had been sitting on the end of a jetty, a peaceful spot where no one had disturbed him and the raven. He'd been trying to make the bird repeat the words after him for several days now, but Surtr was a law unto himself.

'OK fine, have it your way, we'll have to go without you,' Storm muttered and stood up, ready to head back to Hrafn's longhouse. But because he loved the magnificent bird and knew it was unreasonable to blame him for not wanting to say something, he relented and extracted a treat from his leather pouch. The large curved beak was quick to accept it, looking regal and as if this tribute was owed to him.

Just as Storm took the first few steps along the jetty, the raven suddenly opened that beak and spoke. '*Með blóð skaltu ferðast!*' he said clearly.

Storm stopped dead and stared wide-eyed at Surtr. 'You said it!' He smiled at the bird. 'Well done! Good boy, Surtr. Say it again, please?' He fished another treat out of his pouch and proffered it.

Surtr took it without snatching, swallowed, then repeated the sentence.

‘Yesss!’ Storm punched the air with his free hand. ‘Brilliant! Now all we have to do is try to make you say it at the right time. But I have a plan ...’

Two days later Freydis stood with her husband and young son at the edge of a forest near the property of Hrafn’s friend Haukr. Storm had said this was the best place for them to travel to the future as he knew exactly where they’d end up. They had said their goodbyes to everyone earlier, including Surtr, her pet raven, although she assumed the bird was sulking as she hadn’t seen him since that morning. Just as well – she would probably cry if she had to bid him farewell again. Better to try and remember that she’d see him next time they visited.

‘Are you ready, *ást mín?*’ Storm was holding the magical battle axe that would hopefully transport them all to his century. He was making sure to keep it well away from their inquisitive son who was into everything, quick as lightning, and likely to touch whatever he could reach.

‘Yes, I think so.’ Freydis felt slightly nauseous, but that could be morning sickness rather than nerves. ‘I just hope this works.’

Storm leaned over and gave her a fierce kiss. ‘It will, *unnasta*. As long as Wolf says the words with us. He’ll hardly feel the small nick I will give him with the axe, I promise.’ The love and certainty she saw in his eyes steadied her and she nodded. She believed in him and would follow him anywhere.

‘Very well. Let’s do this. Wolf, hold my hand, sweeting. We’re going to play our game now.’

They’d been practising diligently and the little boy knew that if he said the sentence he would receive a reward in the form of a piece of honey cake.

‘You hold on tight to me, please, Freydis,’ Storm ordered. ‘And for the love of all the gods, don’t let go of Wolf.’

‘Of course not! I’m not a halfwit.’

He grinned at that. ‘I know. Far from it. Ready? Wolf, what do we say? On the count of three. *Ein, tveir, þrir ... Með blöð skaltu ferðast.*’

Both Freydis and Wolf repeated the words together with Storm and he hurried to slice the very sharp edge of the axe across their fingertips. Wolf jerked and opened his mouth as if to protest, but when he saw a drop of blood well up, he blinked at it instead, intrigued. Soon after that, the entire world began to spin and none of them were capable of speech. The vortex of time carried them into the future, mercifully making them black out for a while.

When Freydis opened her eyes again, she was lying on soft grass, one hand holding on to Wolf for dear life, the other with a steady grip on Storm’s belt. The three of them groaned in unison, attempting to sit up while the world tilted on its axis. The vertigo soon passed, though, and they smiled at each other.

'We did it!' Storm was looking up towards a house that wasn't built in the style they were accustomed to. The side they were looking at had a multitude of glass panes that glittered in the late afternoon sun. 'That's my grandparent's summer dwelling.'

He gathered both Freydis and Wolf into a bear hug, making them all laugh.

'Want treat now,' Wolf declared, pushing at his parents. He never liked to stay still for very long and he was obviously keen to explore this new place after he'd received the promised reward. Hugging could wait.

'Good boy. Treat, treat!' another voice demanded.

Freydis's head came up and she scanned the nearby trees. Was she hallucinating? She really thought she'd heard her raven, but how could that be? In the next moment, the big bird came flying down and landed on her shoulder, gripping the material of her cloak.

'Surtr!' Wolf exclaimed, pointing at his friend with a huge grin. He loved the bird who in turn appeared to be protective of the little boy. Surtr was always gentle with him and wouldn't hurt him in any way.

'So it is.' Freydis frowned at Storm. 'Does that mean we didn't make it after all? I ... I don't understand.'

Storm pulled her close again, smiling widely. 'No, we're all here in the twenty-first century. I managed to make him learn the special sentence and I transported him here earlier today. My grandparents have been keeping an eye on him. Are you pleased, love? I didn't want you to be sad and I know how much you were dreading leaving him behind.'

'Pleased? You have no idea! Oh Storm, you're the best. I love you so much!' She threw her arms around her wonderful husband, making a disgruntled Surtr flap out of the way and down to the ground.

'And I love you too, more than I can ever say.' He kissed her tenderly. 'I really hope you're going to enjoy living here in my time, but if not, we can go back. As long as you're happy, I'm happy.'

'Anywhere you are is fine with me.' She kissed him back and lost herself in the moment until she felt Wolf tugging on her belt.

'Treat, Mama. Wolf and Surtr need treat.'

'Yes, of course. You definitely deserve it, both of you.' She dug around in her pouch and found a honey cake. 'Share that with him, will you?'

'Mm-hmm.' The boy and the raven had no problem devouring it.

In between mouthfuls, Surtr repeated the magical sentence over and over again. '*Með blöð skaltu ferðast, með blöð skaltu ferðast ...*'

'That's enough now,' Storm told him sternly, but the bird paid no attention and Wolf was encouraging him, giggling as they chanted the words together.

Freydis burst out laughing. 'Just make sure you keep the axe away from them and they can say it to their hearts' content.'

'Trust me, I'll be hiding that somewhere neither of them can find it.' Storm stood up and pulled his wife to her feet. 'Let's go and see Grandma and Grandpa. Look, they're waiting on the verandah and if I know them, there will be a small feast laid out for us.'

'Of course. Wolf, Surtr, come!'

She took her son's hand while Storm held out his arm for Surtr to perch on. Together the little family set off up the slope towards their new life. It was another adventure and Freydis was looking forward to this next chapter. Happiness and anticipation fizzed inside her. With Storm by her side and a new baby on the way it was going to be glorious.

Every day with him always was.