

The Heart's Choice

It was the night of the blood moon. Astrid knew that she couldn't escape her fate any longer. This evening her future would be decided by The Heart, and once it made its wishes known, no one could refuse. Not even the daughter of a jarl.

And yet, the ceremony could have been avoided if she hadn't refused all the suitors who'd come calling ...

'Select a husband before the moon that marks the end of your eighteenth winter or the Heart will do it for you,' her father had warned. But how could she when there was no one worthy to choose from?

Not that she held herself in such high esteem, but she'd seen through them, every last one. They had no interest in her as a person. No, it was the lure of her father's gold and influence that attracted them. And who could blame them? Ulv Bearslayer's domains were vast and his connections unrivalled. The man she married would inherit it all in time, but was it really too much to ask that he should notice her without the sheen of Ulv's gold blinding him? She thought not.

To his chagrin, Astrid's father had no sons. Not for want of trying but through sheer misfortune. They had all perished young and he was left with just her, the 'contrariest' of daughters, as he called her. She'd tried to fill the void, learning the arts of warfare and husbandry, as well as all the womanly skills necessary to run his household. It wasn't enough, however, and her only perceived use was to give him the grandsons he yearned for.

As she hurried back to the hall, night was falling and it was becoming properly dark. The reddish moon hadn't yet risen high enough to bathe the landscape in its glow and it was

difficult to see. She started to open the door and failed to notice someone coming from the other side who'd had the same intent. In the semi-darkness they bumped into each other, and she came into contact with a hard chest before one of her shoulders connected with the door frame.

'Ouch!' The pain radiated down her arm and she drew in a hissing breath.

'I'm so sorry!' The stranger's voice was low and pleasant, and Astrid looked up to find him eyeing her with concern. 'Are you hurt?'

Intense blue eyes, their colour deepened by the light spilling out from the hall, held her pinned to the spot for a moment and something shifted inside her. Mesmerised, she studied his handsome features and shoulder-length blond hair.

'No, it was nothing,' she murmured, ignoring her throbbing shoulder. She'd had worse knocks and bruises aplenty.

Another moment of acute scrutiny, then he let it go, clearly taking her at her word. 'After you then.' He swept a hand to indicate that she should precede him. She detected no particular fawning in his manner, just common courtesy. Unusual. And he didn't take the opportunity for flirting either, the way most men would have done.

As soon as they were through the door he walked away, paying her no more attention than he would anyone else. Odd, but refreshing. Perversely, that meant she wanted to know more about him, but before she could ask someone, her father beckoned her forward.

'There you are! I was about to send out a search party.' Ulv's displeasure was clear, as if she'd stayed outside longer than necessary on purpose. 'Vendela is here and eager to begin the *seiðr*. Fetch the casket if you please.'

So soon? She wanted to protest that it was a bit early for the ritual and she'd prefer to eat first. She'd had nothing but a bite of dry meat since *dagverðr*. But the look in Ulv's eyes told her it wouldn't be any use voicing this request. The time for procrastination was over. Astrid swallowed her frustration and went to do as she was bid.

With the key her father handed her she headed for his chamber and unlocked the kist that contained the special casket. Carved of apple wood and decorated with swirling designs inlaid in silver, it was a beautiful object in its own right. The contents on the other hand were repulsive. She'd only seen it once and didn't particularly want to do so again, but it wasn't up to her. With dragging steps, she returned to the main hall and offered the casket to the woman who waited next to her father – Vendela the *vōlva*, the resident wisewoman.

'Thank you.' The woman's gaze lingered on her for several heartbeats and there was a small smile playing about her mouth. She was one of the concubines who had tried to give Ulv the son he craved, but even her powers had not proved enough to persuade the gods to grant this boon. Astrid had a feeling she was about to suffer for that, even though it was in no way her fault. There was hatred lurking in Vendela's gaze.

The woman clapped her hands and shouted, 'Let us begin!'

A brazier was brought and placed in the centre of the room in front of a carved chair. Vendela took up position between the two and raised her arms. In one hand she held a black iron staff, in the other a small leather pouch. Her dark garments shimmered in the light from the brazier and a hush fell on the room as she began to chant. Quietly at first, a mere growl deep in her throat, then the notes slowly building. It was like the howling of a wolf, the whining of the wind and rumbling of the earth all combined, the sound eerie and unearthly as though a magical creature had taken possession of Vendela's voice. The contents of the pouch – henbane seeds – were emptied onto the brazier with a flourish and the room began to

fill with smoke. It was all-encompassing and impossible to avoid breathing in. Astrid didn't fight it. She knew from previous rituals that it changed your perceptions, gilding the occasion with magic.

Everyone began to add their voices to the chanting. As it built to a crescendo, they all stamped their feet in unison. The entire hall shuddered, the walls and rafters shaking. Astrid felt dizzy but stood immobile next to her father's seat. Anxiety built inside her and for some reason she searched the room for the stranger. Her gaze collided with his and something flared between them, visceral, primitive and terrifying. Then he turned away and a feeling of disappointment washed over her but she wasn't sure why.

In the midst of the rising frenzy of chanting and stamping, all eyes turned to the casket as Vendela opened the lid and took out a desiccated old heart. It was supposedly that of Astrid's ancestress, another *vǫlva* who'd shared her name, but it was hard to see that it had once been part of a human being. Now, it looked like nothing more than dried meat. In the light from the oil lamps the lump suddenly appeared to pulse with an inner glow and expand. Astrid felt her eyes widen at this sight and blinked, sure that it was an illusion. And yet, it seemed to be real.

Vendela held the Heart aloft, together with a flat polished piece of silver. 'Give us guidance, Heart of this clan, to choose a husband for Astrid Ulvsdóttir. Shine a light on her intended.'

A collective gasp whispered round the room when a sudden bright beam fell on the stranger. It appeared to be emanating from the heart itself, but since she was standing much closer than anyone else, Astrid could see that it was really light reflecting off the piece of silver in Vendela's hand. The brightness illuminated the stranger's blond hair, giving it an

unearthly brilliance, and made his eyes glitter. He blinked, startled, and frowned as everyone roared '*All hail, Astrid's intended!*'

Vendela beckoned him forward and he came, but he didn't look pleased and moved reluctantly. Astrid had expected triumph to shine in the eyes of the chosen one, but he gave no sign of satisfaction. Quite the opposite. She could have sworn his eyes narrowed and shot sparks of fury at Vendela.

'There must be some mistake. I'm not worthy of the jarl's daughter.' He looked from Ulv to Astrid, then back to Vendela. 'I am but a man in the employ of another jarl. I have nothing to offer but myself.'

The look on Vendela's face told Astrid that she had purposely chosen a nobody, a man with no family or connections; a fitting revenge on the girl who had outlived her sons. But ... was he really unworthy? The mere fact that he was protesting made him more desirable than anyone she'd come across previously. She could understand his fury though. He would be beholden to Ulv for everything, dependent on his whim.

Unless they joined forces.

She moved to stand face to face with him and looked into his eyes. 'The Heart has spoken. No one can gainsay it.'

Vendela gave her a push, none too gently, which almost propelled her into the stranger's chest again. At the last moment, she reached a hand out to steady herself. It landed over his heart and she felt it beating, slightly faster than was normal. He was agitated but was it all anger? Did he not want her even a little bit?

‘Kiss her to plight your troth,’ Vendela demanded. The stamping started up again, accompanied by cheering and whistles of approval. The atmosphere in the room was highly charged, but Astrid focused on the man in front of her.

His expression was still grim, but those extraordinary blue eyes were searching hers as if trying to see into her soul. He bent to whisper in her ear. ‘Do you not wish me to refuse?’

The mere fact that he was trying to give her a way out made her want him. A quick glance over her shoulder showed that her father’s face had settled into a scowl. Any moment now he could declare the *seiðr* null and void and his own word as law. He had the power to change whatever he felt like and he might smell a rat if he caught sight of Vendela’s smug expression. Astrid had to act quickly.

‘No. You go against the Heart at your peril,’ she hissed back. ‘It has been the protector of our family for generations and I’m prepared to do its will.’

An expression she couldn’t read crossed his features, but he nodded. ‘Then so be it.’ He bent to place a feather-light kiss on her lips, lingering a touch longer than she had expected, and the hall erupted in deafening cheers.

Astrid felt her lips tingling and stared at him. ‘I don’t even know your name and why you’re here. You clearly didn’t come to ask for my hand.’

‘I’m Falkr, sworn to the service of Gorm.’ He leaned closer again so that only she could hear his words. ‘And he’s going to hate me now. Ulv Bearslayer had better be as powerful as he thinks he is.’

Her eyes flew round the room and she had no trouble locating Gorm, one of the oafs who had importuned her, sulking when the answer was no. Judging by the death glare he sent

her way, he wasn't best pleased. For some reason this made her blood sing and she decided to show the man that his temper held no fears for her.

Standing on tip-toe, she grabbed Falkr's face and pulled it down to hers again, giving him a long smouldering kiss that made her whole body fizz. She could only hope it was having the same effect on him. When she had finished, she grinned at him. 'As long as we give him a grandson quickly, my father will protect us by any means necessary.'

Surprised laughter huffed out of Falkr at her boldness. 'It will certainly be my pleasure to try.'

But Astrid already suspected the pleasure would be hers as well. As she caught the look of calculation in Gorm's eyes yet again, she hoped she would conceive quickly, but she wasn't unduly worried. The Heart and the gods had shown themselves to be on her side tonight, despite Vendela's machinations, and happiness fizzed through her veins.

Falkr was exactly the man she'd been waiting for.