

They heard the King's trumpeter blow a blast. He was ready to receive the Kindred of Helvrak. Grya went first, fading into the green forest, before they moved out. As Aina walked by, she made Aina almost leap out of her skin. Grya scolded her, "Pick up your dress, Aina. A proper lady doesn't get her hems wet!" Aina rolled her eyes before she turned to her and bowed. Aina carefully picked up her skirt, just enough to not let it get wet in the morning grass.

Vidarr stayed back in the shadow of the woods, watching for trouble. Grya whispered to Mikkell, "All clear," as she stood just inches from him at the edge of the forest. The Kindred of Helvrak stepped out from the forest to meet their destiny.

First went Vanjr with his huge axe up on his shoulder and a wooden shield with a serpent emblazoned onto it. Then Mikkell, all dressed in white, both leggings and tunic. His long silver braided beard almost shimmered in the morning sun. He had a silver armlet and a silver circlet set on his forehead. He walked with a staff with a tee shaped top with black and red ribbons draping from it. Each ribbon ended in a piece of silver decoration. Mikkell had been saving these from his old days in Helvrak when he was an adviser to the King who was one of the first to perish when the waters turned black permanently. On his shoulder sat his eagle messenger who had fled the tent of King Everett as soon as it had caught the scent of its friend. Mikkell grinned and gave it a piece of jerky.

Holding his free arm was Aina, ward of King Aalfred, daughter of Queen Katyaa. Her hand lightly wrapped with grace around his arm. Behind her was Alva, wearing her full battle armor, made recently by Vidarr and Kal. Black serpents made from metal glistened on her arm bands and sheaths for her sword and axe. Her leather jerkin had battle scars from practice, but they made their point. She knew how to fight.

Vanjr scowled and glared as they walked, he stared down any soldier that looked at them as they traveled down two lines of soldiers to meet the King of Ugrik. Alva took to walking backwards ready to challenge anyone who dared follow. The soldiers were nervous, but they held their places as they were instructed to do. The berserkers were definitely intimidating. Aina had made the right decision.

Just as they reached the tent, Vanjr took his place to the left of the door next to a frightened guard of Ugrik, allowing Mikkell and Aina to enter. Alva took her place at the right of the entrance so she could both watch what was happening inside and what happened out. The King rose and greeted them while his Council stay seated. A quick glance showed that none of them were happy about the presence of berserkers. Mikkell bowed and Aina curtsied. She heard one of the King's advisers whispering to the King. She had been recognized. How could she not with her bold golden

curl.

The King of Ugrik introduced himself as King Everett. Mikkel introduced himself as an ambassador and a guardian of the Kindred, and expressed his regrets for Khorrs' lack of attendance, who was busy with a ship at sea. The King nodded, he understood that better than anyone there. "I am Ambassador Mikkel of the Kindred, I have brought you a gift, Your majesty." Mikkel drove his staff into the ground with a mighty thrust, then asked the Eagle to jump to the perch. "This eagle will become the symbol of our alliance, Your Majesty, if ever you need to contact me, this grand specimen of an Eagle can find me." Mikkel laid a leather training glove and a bag of jerky treats before the King. The King gladly accepted the gift, he had been fascinated with the bird since it first dropped a note on his balcony. The eagle screeched a couple 'kweeks'. Although the eagle was a symbol of his kingdom, none of his falconers had ever been able to tame one of these spectacular birds.

The King shook Mikkel's hand vigorously and they bowed slightly to each other. Aina curtsied again. The King strode over to the bird and caressed its head. The eagle bowed its head and danced happily on its perch. Mikkel thanked the bird quietly for agreeing to be a 'pet' for a while. The King turned and looked toward Aina. He spoke first, before she could introduce herself. He came closer. "You, my lady, look familiar."

Aina blushed and lowered her gaze. "We have met before, your Majesty." She curtsied and kept her head bowed. The King told her to raise her gaze, her silver hair comb glistened in the sunlit tent. She lifted her head with pride, "I'm Aina, ward of King Aalfred of Guttesh." The Council gasped and began to murmur. She didn't yet want to reveal she was Aalfred's step daughter, her mother had always dyed her yellow streak black so she didn't stand out at courtly events. She needed to protect him as long as she could. She silently hoped her birds had gotten to her step-father to warn him of their plans and that he might be exposed.

"Yes, of course!" the King said. "I've seen you with Princess Regin." Aina bowed and thanked him, while making a face that no one could see. The King's face fell, "You're a berserker?!"

"Yes, your majesty. I am." She stood up tall and rested her hand on her sword. "It was I who saved Princess Regin and the others from the marauding thieves."

"I see," he said as he sat back down on his throne. "But Aalfred?"

Aina locked gazes with King Everett, ignoring the glares from the Councilmen around her. She could feel Mikkell's steady presence next to her. It would be up to her to find a safe path out of this discussion using everything Aalfred taught her. "Yes. He knew I was a berserker. He showed mercy when I was but a child and saved me from execution under the old barbaric laws." She knew that would sting, but didn't care. "I am ever grateful for his grace and compassion." The King went on to ask a few more questions, before Aina thought it was time for Mikkell to make their request.

Mikkell caught her gaze and jumped right in with their request as the discussion was drawing on and he knew Vidarr would be getting antsy back in the forest shadows. "King Everett, we have come to ask for your help, while also offering our help to you. A mutual agreement that the Nomads of Rugii must be removed from power."