

# A JACKDAW'S FEATHER



# A JACKDAW'S FEATHER



NATALIE THORPE

*Copyright © 2024 by Natalie Thorpe*

*All rights reserved.*

*Cover design by Aron Koehoorn / Evolve Agency*

*Book design by Natalie Thorpe*

*No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.*

*This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

*TRIGGER WARNINGS: (mentions of) Ableism, Alcohol, Animal cruelty, Childbirth, Death and dying, Medical emergencies, Profanity, Sex*

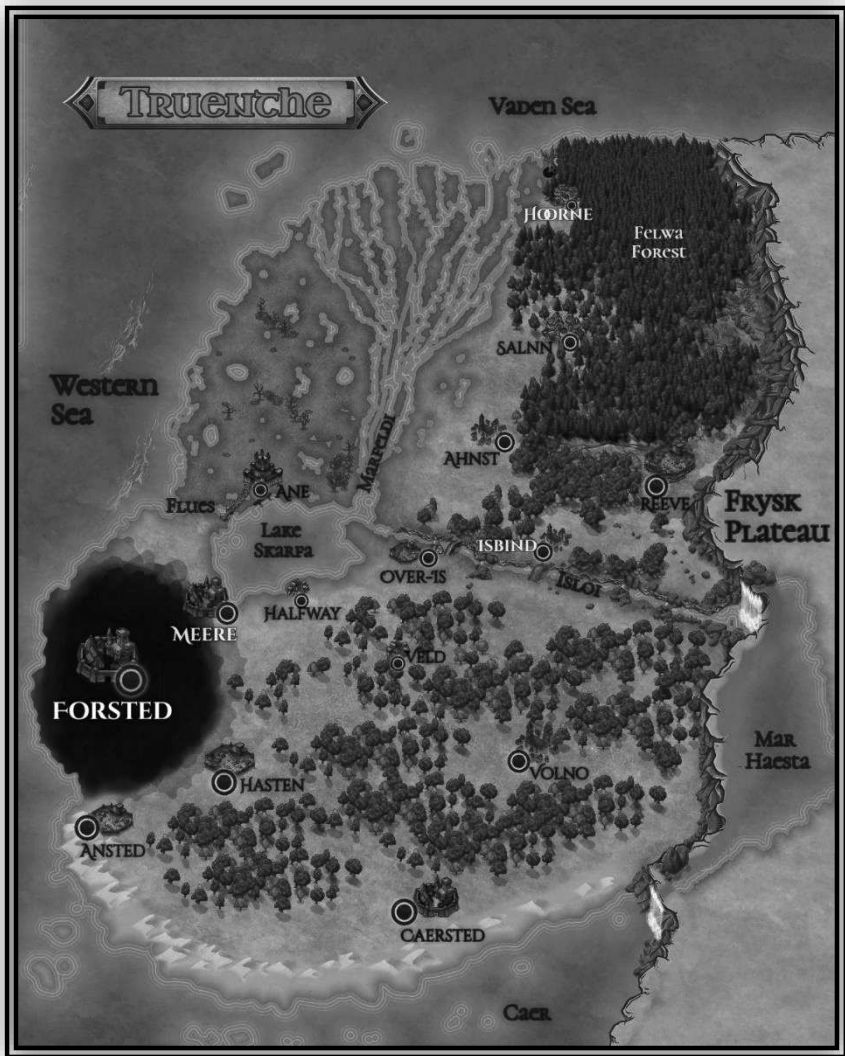
*Visit my website at [www.NatalieThorpe.com](http://www.NatalieThorpe.com)*

*First Printing: September 2024*

*ISBN 978-94-651205-9-1*

*To Stace, Mat and Laura  
without whom this book would have been so much worse*









## PROLOGUE

*13 years ago*

He's doing it again... one of his 'monologues of grandeur'. His chest puffed, head held high, arms flying wide as his gestures illustrate his grand visions for this kingdom. Visions of not only saving it from the current recession but also of restoring it to its former greatness. Visions he turned into plans and then turned into reality by doing the hardest but most realistic thing—according to him—getting rid of the ones who not only stood in the way but may very well have been at the root of it all; the Monarchs and the Mages. The general turned apostate turned King. He really did what he promised to do. Everything is... great.

And so are his steps. I swear, his strides are getting longer with his increasing fervour and I'm starting to struggle to keep up. I up my pace to a near jog and that's when he finally notices me. He

casts a quick glance my way but it's enough for me to see a flash of disappointment in his eyes.

"Keep up," he says curtly before resuming his stride across the long corridor.

I know he's disappointed in me.

He *must* be.

He's like... a bear instead of a man; big, strong and powerful, with a thundering voice and a head full of thick, golden locks. A picture-perfect king who carries his crown—his kingdom—like it costs him no effort at all. And *I* should be the one to fill his shoes? I can't even keep up with his steps; a skinny kid with sleek dark hair and a pasty complexion who's all elbows and knees and couldn't hold on to a sword if his life depended on it.

The times that he carried me around on his shoulders telling me what a great general I would make some day, are long behind us. As are probably his hopes of me following his footsteps or growing up to be a 'great' anything being as scrawny as I am. Greatness doesn't come in small packages.

Though... I'm not *exactly* small—just incredibly thin and ungainly—and I'm still growing at a fast rate. At least that's what Tailor says.

Well, his exact words were: "Didn't I just lengthen the hem last week?" But for all that it's worth, I'll never have the physique or the strength the King of Truenthe has.

Upon our approach the guards outside the Hall open the grand, oak double doors that bear my father's Royal Cypher—the letters W and R—and give access to the throne room, but where my father confidently strides in, I halt just past the threshold. Councilmembers inside mean I'm not allowed in.

"Run along now, boy," he booms, his long strides having taken him more than halfway across the immense stateroom. Then I see one of the councillors stepping away from the group and heading my way in an attempt to gently guide me back out the doors.

"Please excuse me, Your Highness..." he begins, bowing his head in deference, but when he looks back up...

I see him.

Then I don't.

I don't understand. He seems to *flicker* in and out of view... and then I *do* understand. My eyes widen in shock, not just at *what* I'm seeing but also *how* I am able to see it and I take a stumbling step back, knocking into the door with a bang. My father pauses at his throne as he sees me falter, annoyed by my ineptitude at first, until he catches the look of horror that can undoubtedly be seen on my face, even from this distance. The same look I find mirrored on the councillor's face as he too realises what I now know. And before I even have the slightest idea of the implications and condemnation that come with them, three words escape me louder than I intend

them to...

“You’re a *Mage*!”

As if struck the man stumbles back, hands shooting up in defence and I see him flicker again like he’s about to disappear altogether. But there’s nowhere for him to go.

“Mage?” I hear my father’s voice echo in a low rumble before booming: “Guards, seize him!”

In a split second the guards that were at the doors flank the stunned man and haul him out of the entrance. I try to look over my shoulder to see where they take him when a flash of pain shoots up my arm and I’m surprised to see one of my father’s big hands gripping me by my elbow.

“*Out!*” he roars, shocking the rest of the Council out of their stupor and sending them scrambling to get out of the Hall. The bang that follows when the double doors close behind them makes me cower even more.

Too afraid to look up I brace myself for the inevitable because how could I have known the councillor to be a Mage? In condemning him I have condemned myself.

The moment seems to stretch on and on and I can’t take this feeling of impending doom anymore. I glance up to where I expect to see my father’s face—the King’s face—contorted with rage for not only having a *Mage* hide among his trusted councillors for so long, but to

have one for a *son* as well...

His features, however, are disconcertingly bland as he searches my face for something unknown to me. His voice soft and low he says: "Now boy... tell me what just happened."

*Boy.*

*Never Haine.*

*Not anymore.*

*Does he even remember my name?*

"I-I don't k-know," I stutter, "I saw... and t-then... I didn't! I... I *knew*! I saw the magic!"

The pressure on my elbow lessens and I see a corner of my father's mouth lift ever so slightly, making the words tumble out at his supposed approval. His face takes on a kinder, more fatherly expression that lights the dark corners of my mind. No longer stuttering while I speak, I tell my King how I not only knew a member of his privy council to be a Mage but also exactly what I think his type of magic can *do*.

He interrupts me only once to ask me if I *saw* anything with anybody else, but I haven't. This has been the first time, the *only* time I felt and saw any kind of magic and it disappeared when the councilmember was hauled off.

While I speak, the look in my father's eyes changes into the one I've been wishing to see for a long time. Ever since I became aware that

for all the years I spent looking up to my father for his strength and his might, he would forever look down on me for the lack of them.

It's *pride*.

And I revel in it.

# PART ONE





## CHAPTER ONE



“Can you hand me that cloth there, Ard? Yes, step over here. Come on now.”

Smilla’s face floods with relief as she pries her lover’s hands from her own and he reluctantly lets go to pick up the cloth I asked for to bring it to me. He startles when he sees what I’m doing.

“Isn’t it...? I mean it’s... it’s... *quiet.*”

The last word comes out in a whisper while I quickly wipe and wrap the tiny body in my hands, prompting it to draw first breath with a little gurgle followed by a wail.

“*He,*” I say, handing over the small human with a tired smile. “It appears you have a son, Ard. Now take him to Smilla.”

“Is he all right?” Ard asks, still a little unsure. I make sure to give Smilla, who is just coming out of her focused daze, a reassuring smile before I answer her lover.

“He’s absolutely perfect.”

Smilla gives me a tired smile in return and stretches out her arms to be handed the little baby.

I only spare a little moment to look at the new family of three before I quickly get back to work with helping Smilla in the final stages of birthing.

It hasn’t been a particularly difficult birth, but it has been a lengthy one and I’m eager to return home and get some sleep. There’s also a familiar pressure rising within me, making my arms heavy, movements slower and I know I need to hurry up and get out of here.

When I’m finally ready to leave, Smilla is nodding off and Ard, holding the swaddled infant, settles in the chair next to the bed.

“Alvar—we’ve decided on Alvar.”

“That’s a good name,” I say as I move to the door.

“Thank you Svea. For everything,” Ard adds, but I don’t reply as I quickly step out into the night. Thanks are not needed; this is what I do and now that it’s done, I need to go—*quickly*.

The outside air is warm but less stifling than in the tiny cottage and I take a couple of deep breaths whilst I wrap my shawl loosely around my shoulders. Dawn isn’t too far away I see, and I quicken my pace because I would very much like to *not* get caught by an early riser who will undoubtedly have something for me to ‘swiftly have a look at’.

*Curse of the village healer.*

But I needn't have worried; there is not a soul in sight and instead of getting lighter it actually seems to get darker as I hasten up the road that leads out of the village and draw closer to the woods at the edge. I've past the last houses on this road a little while ago and there is just one more that looks like it's about to be swallowed by Felwa Forest. But instead of turning towards the wooden door with the chipped green paint, I veer left towards the line of trees that, when you travel far enough, leads to the Marfeldi Floodplains. The path is narrow and can be treacherous at points; solid ground suddenly giving way to patches of swamp that herald the dangers of the floodplains and the marshes of Ane beyond it.

Luckily, there's no need for me to go quite that far, though it takes me some time to reach my destination: a solitary oak on the edge of a sea of tall, straight pine trees standing close together. Hit by lightning a long time ago in a fierce thunderstorm, the oak's wide trunk is now blacker than a moonless, starless night and the dead branches curl like clawed hands to the sky. I spread out my shawl on the dark and arid soil in front of me so my knees won't get dirty as I lower myself to kneel on the ground. The pressure inside me has been building rapidly and an unpleasant buzz has grown so loud it clogs my ears. I dig my hands in the dark earth and relief washes over me as I open

wide the doors of the confinement within me to release the flood of pent-up magic that has been raging inside me since I helped Alvar into this world and keep him there.

I let my mind wander back to the events from the past day—or was it two days? Smilla did wonderful though, despite her baby taking his sweet time to be born, her complete faith in me and my abilities to assist her never once caused her to waver. Since she appeared *Gifted* when it came to delivering babies, Smilla has been handling most births in the village for the past few years, taking over from me, and it had been some time since I helped with a delivery myself. It was fortunate the one birth Smilla couldn't handle by herself was her own and my hands were the first to touch little Alvar, because as the hours ticked by and Smilla's lover, Ard, grew increasingly more anxious, his concern proved to be just.

Ard's hovering didn't make it easy for me to do my work though; thank the Stars my darling Esben stopped by to offer some distraction—and some of his homebrewed *likör*! It's amazing how he always seems to know exactly when I need him or how he can help me, even though I never ask him to come with me on my visits to the sick and ailing people in the village.

I take a few moments to gather myself and wait until the last of the buzzing sensation has dissipated before I dust off my hands and pick up my shawl, shaking off the soil.

*Alvar... It's a good name.*

Then I turn and head towards home.

I try not to make a sound as I lift the latch of the door of our home and slip inside the cosy little cottage where I drop my shawl over a chair and kick off my shoes.

It's just a tiny thatched cottage with a small kitchen area beneath a window overlooking a garden that seems on the verge of being swallowed by the forest. Although there is a sitting area in front of the hearth, with comfortable chairs and a large, fluffy sheepskin rug, the kitchen table in the middle of the room is where we spend most our time. To the left and the right of this one central space are two more rooms; the smaller one is a bedroom for my spouse and me while the larger one used to be my grandmother Tove's bedroom and workspace. All in all, it may not seem much, but to me it's my whole world; the smell of the wood burning in the hearth mingling with the scents of the drying herbs, the soft creaking of the doors and the loud groaning of that one chair that I've forbidden Esben from roughly dropping down on in case it might break, it's all so familiar. It's home.

There is no fire in the hearth but the water in pitcher on the washing basin stand beside it is lukewarm, nonetheless. I quickly

wash my face and hands, then I make my way to the bedroom where I halt in the doorway, taking a moment to look at the beautiful man sleeping there, splayed out on his back. His dark curls are tousled, and his broad, muscular chest is gloriously bare and sun kissed. Although I strongly dislike these muggy late Sommer nights, they do have their advantages.

Esben shifts in his sleep and starts snoring a little. I quietly take off my blouse and tug down my trousers, leaving only my undergarments to slip into the bed where I snuggle up to the left side of my sleeping love who hums contentedly.

“There you are...”

“Ssh, go back to sleep,” I whisper as I gently kiss the stubble on his jaw and settle in for the remainder of the night.

*Now I'm home.*

~

I wake alone to a familiar sound coming from outside. A tiny opening in the window shutters only lets in a sliver of daylight but it is enough to tell me it must be well past midday. I wash and dress then go in search of something to eat. While I butter a few slices of bread in the kitchen I admire the view from the small window and

decide it is entirely too small for me to truly appreciate what I'm seeing. I quickly finish my cup of milk and fill a second one for Esben, taking it with me outside along with the rest of the buttered bread. I set it all down on a tree trunk and take place beside it.

I get in a few good moments of relishing the sight of all the exquisite shapeliness—the chiselled muscles rippling underneath his tunic, the swathes of slightly bronzed skin glistening with sweat—before I'm caught looking.

“Admiring the view?” Esben asks, the corner of his mouth turning upwards and a mischievous glint in his eyes. If I'm not mistaken he seems to flex his muscles just a little bit more for my viewing pleasure.

“Very much so,” I answer while I wet my lips salaciously as I continue watching him pick up pieces of timber, place them on what's left of a tree chopped down long ago—the stump left standing—and cleave them in half with a single blow of his axe every single time. His tunic clings to his back and chest, clearly defining every tense, powerful muscle of his upper body. I can't imagine there is anyone in the whole Kingdom who could match Esben's magnificent body and tremendous strength, and it's hypnotising watching him pick up a log, place it upright, pick up the axe, heave, cleave, put down the axe and do it all again. It seems like slow work this way—one would think someone with two arms could

do it a lot faster—but his strength more than makes up for Esben missing half his left arm and he tends to get the job done faster than most.

After a while, Esben puts down the axe but doesn't pick up a new log; instead, he casually saunters over to where I'm sitting.

"I thought I'd better let you sleep for as long as you needed." His fingers lightly graze my jaw as he bends down for a kiss.

"Hmm, thank you," I mumble against his mouth, and I intend to show him just how much I appreciate him letting me sleep in. He tastes salty and smells like pine resin and sawdust and he is absolutely irresistible.

"I'm starting to regret not waking up when you did," I say huskily.

"I knew you needed the sleep more than you needed me but *curse me* if I didn't think about all the things I could have done to wake you up," he says, voice purring with delight as I pull him closer.

"We could go back to bed and you can show me all those things," I whisper as I brush my lips over his.

"I'm covered in sweat and dirt," he grunts but I ignore his protests and deepen the kiss.

"So, wash first," I say, pressing my body against his. He wraps his one arm around me tightly, but I push him off again



because I hear his stomach grumbling loudly.

“Oh no: first you eat. Here, I brought food.”

With a disapproving sound Esben lets go—eyes glinting fiercely—and reaches over for a piece of bread of which he takes a big bite while I sit down again.

“Vryfing ‘righ—?” Esben asks with his mouth full.

“A beautiful, healthy baby. They’re naming him Alvar.”

Esben hums and gives an approving nod, then washes down the bread with the milk, making haste with both eating and the small talk so we can go back to bed.

“That’s a good name.”

Silence stretches between us while Esben quickly devours the rest of the bread, allowing me to sink back into my own thoughts.

“Mote’s tonight,” Esben shakes me from my reverie.

“Hmm? Oh, yes... I suppose it is.”

“I know I said I wouldn’t be going but I’ll come with you anyway.”

I shoot up and with my hand at the nape of his neck I pull him in for another kiss.

“Thank you,” I say, “that would make it almost bearable.”

And I press myself against him once more.

“Still dirty,” he chuckles.

“Still don’t care,” I reply against his mouth. “Forget about

washing, I'll have you dirty." And I slide my other hand from his chest via his neck to the back of his head to bury my fingers in his damp, golden brown curls, then I suck his bottom lip between my teeth eliciting a groan on his behalf. Esben moves his hand to the small of my back where he splays his fingers and I'm just about to drag him back inside, back to bed, when a sudden voice shouting *Folk!* shakes us from where we are engrossed in each other. We both simultaneously but reluctantly take a step back, having recognised the voice.

"Come 'round," Esben calls back, voice a little hoarse as he gives me a last, lingering look before turning to the side of the cottage. A moment later Kaspar comes lumbering around the corner, leaning on his cane as he comes to a halt beside us.

"Did you need me?" Esben asks as the old man catches his breath.

"Not you boy," Kaspar chides, "never you."

Esben laughs while he steps away to head inside our home, but just before he disappears around the side of the cottage he shouts over his shoulder: "One day you might, old man!"

"But not today," Kaspar rumbles back while shaking his head, but I see the smile curving up his moustache and the twinkle in his eye.

Esben's well liked throughout the entire village, but Old Kaspar may

just have a softer spot than most for my love, which is saying a lot as the old battle-hardened Fryskan doesn't seem to *have* any soft spots.

When Kaspar looks up at me that hint of a smile is gone though. He just holds my gaze with a wearied look, not saying anything and I break first.

"I know," I sigh, stepping backwards to lean back against the log again.

"It's not going to help for much longer. The time for salves and ointments to do their work is coming to an end," he says in his thick Fryskan accent.

"Then there's nothing more I can do, Kaspar."

"There is *one* more thing you can do..."—his voice trails off ominously—"I *know*," he says, lifting a hand in a placatory gesture at seeing my shocked expression. "Your grandmother entrusted me with your secret so I could keep an eye on you. On both of you. And I have kept my promise *and* my silence." He sighs heavily before continuing. "But you have each other, and I cannot do *this* anymore"—he waves a hand dismissively—"this *life*. The constant pain... It was hard coming here, leaving my homeland knowing it would be forever... but Lars made life here good. Without him, well... I had the boy to keep an eye on of course..." Kaspar's voice keeps trailing off as he puts his thoughts into words. I know better than to interrupt him or to remind him that when Lars died three

years ago, Esben was—and still is—a grown man who doesn't need anyone to look after him.

“Yes. Well. It's time. Soon anyway,” Kaspar continues resolutely and then, narrowing his eyes at me; “I know what you've been doing and all I ask is that you stop doing it.”

“I don't know what you mean,” I reply evasively, crossing my arms, but I can tell by Kaspar's narrow-eyed glare he doesn't fall for it.

“It's not that simple,” I object.

“I have seen the tree, *Mage*. I have seen what your magic makes you do and I'll have no more of that 'decay' because of me.” I still, not knowing how to possibly turn the conversation away from *this* and the old man continues. “I know what will happen next and it I am at peace with it. I *welcome* it as I wish to see my Lars again.”

“Fine, I'll stop trying to keep you alive,” I yield, “but I advise you to keep using the ointment; it's just herbs that will soothe the pain at least a little bit.”

Kaspar nods, appeased.

“Thank you, Svea. Oh, and one more thing; let *me* tell the boy. Allow me to tell Esben in my own time. Promise me that.” I nod in agreement although I don't like that there is yet another thing I can't tell my spouse.

After Kaspar has left, I make my way back into our home to find a bare-chested Esben standing at the kitchen table washing himself with a cloth he dips in a basin of water.

“Someday that old man is going to need *my* help,” he quips, but when he sees my frown, his face takes on a worried expression.

“Is he all right?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Asked if I would bring him some more ointment tonight at Mote.” It astonishes me how quickly that lie rolls off my tongue.

*I hate that I can't tell him, but Kaspar made me promise.*

Kaspar, gruff old Kaspar the war veteran, came here having fled his homeland after he was gravely wounded in one of the very first Fryskan battles. He never deigned to share anything of the horrors he had experienced serving in the army or of his life prior to that, and what little I *do* know is because I'm the healer, charged with alleviating the lingering pain his former injuries still caused him. The physical pain I could remedy, but there was no cure for the hurt in his soul, which made him surly and stand-offish to all but one.

For all the years he lived in Hoorne, Kaspar's kindness had always been reserved for one person only; the love of his life, Lars, who took him in when he first arrived in Truenthe, but after Esben had his accident, Kaspar tended to him for a while and came to care for him

as he would for a child or grandchild of his own.

I'd have thought seeing a boy so gravely injured would have put off the old man as it would perhaps remind him of his own suffering in the war, but Kaspar was never deterred by any of it and was, in fact, the one to save Esben's life by removing the lower half of his arm and staunching the bleeding. The hardships both of them suffered brought them close together.

I can only hope Kaspar won't wait too long before telling Esben he hopes to die soon; the longer it takes the more hurt Esben will be for being kept in the dark about this.

*Curse me, there's no way he won't be hurt; he cares for him so much...*

*I wish Kaspar hadn't made his request. That I could just...*

*Oh, get a hold of yourself, Svea! Tove would say 'Don't wish for won'ts'. It's better to learn to live with the things that will be, rather than regret the ones that won't be changed.*

Shaking my head to clear it of its intrusive thoughts, I walk over to my love to take the wet cloth from him and wring it to draw out the water.

"You're making a mess," I chide.

"Very deliberately, so you'll come help," he jests.

I crack a half-smile and tickle his neck.

"Bend over, I'm going to wash your hair."

Then I roughly push him down over the basin. He chuckles as he braces himself with the stump of his left arm on the table.

I pour water from the pitcher on his head and lather his darkened curls with soap. Esben's hand curls around the back of my thigh and I pinch his neck in an attempt to warn him to stop tickling me. Either he doesn't get the message, or he chooses to ignore me, so I pull my leg out of his grasp.

"Don't make me drown you," I warn him playfully, prompting another chuckle on his part.

I thoroughly rinse Esben's thick curls but before I can squeeze all the water out, he comes back up and turns to face me. Water drips from his hair on his broad shoulders, forming rivulets down his strong muscles until the droplets catch in the hairs on his chest. With slow, deliberate movements I draw the cloth over his powerful upper body, following it with my eyes and my lips part involuntarily.

*By the Stars, how beautiful he is...*

"Ah," Esben drawls, his voice a low rumble, "I see my trap has sprung."

Placing my left hand in his neck, I abruptly pull him into a fierce kiss as I drop the cloth in the basin, knowing *this* will be able to stop my thoughts from tumbling in all the wrong directions.

Without a moment's hesitation his strong arm winds tightly around

my back and he deepens the kiss. I let my, now empty, right hand rove over his slightly damp chest, all the way down to the waistband of his trousers, eliciting another low rumble.

“*Curse me,*” he swears, breaking off the kiss, “how do you always win?”

“Win?” I question.

“Yes,” he growls, “I meant to seduce *you*, but you’ve turned me all soft and mushy once again.”

“Surely not *all*?” I taunt, to which he instantly replies by pressing his hips against me, making clear exactly which part of him is the exception. He backs me up against the table and starts kissing my neck. I sit down on the edge so I can wrap my legs around him—tightly—and as he hums his pleasure deep within his broad chest, I feel it vibrate right through me, tickling all the right spots. As I’ve pressed him too tight to be able to undo the buttons on his trousers, I push him off a bit to create a little more distance between us and he stops trailing kisses down my neck.

“*Svea...*” he breathes, “curse me for all eternity but I need to go... I promised Ard I’d drop off a bundle of firewood before Mote.”

“*Esben Annder!*” I exclaim, pushing him off me further and jumping off the table, “I *do* curse you!”

I stomp over to our bedchamber and return with a clean tunic for him to wear, which I toss at his bare chest. “One day you must learn to



say no to all those people asking you for help!”

Shamefaced, he tugs on the tunic.

“Like you do?” he asks dryly and I snap my jaw shut.

“Like I wish I could... Curse of being the village healer,” I say gritting my teeth.

“Svea...” he says admonishingly. “You don’t wish that. You love these people, this village, just as much as I do. I only wish I was half as useful as you are—”

“You *are*!” I cut him off. “You don’t have to prove your worth. You take on too much, honestly. And you can call me selfish, but I just want to have you to myself for a while...”

“If that is being selfish, then I am as well”—his eyes darken as he pulls me flush against him—“Ard can come get his own wood. Which, in his defence, he never asked me for; I offered.”

My love takes my bottom lip between the both of his and I gasp as his tongue flicks across it. A deep groan reverberates in his chest, tickling the palm of my hand as I gently push him away.

“I’ll feel awful causing you to break your promise and knowing Ard has to leave Smilla and their newborn this evening just to pick up his own wood...”

“See?” Esben says smugly but with a twinge of regret, “You hate the thought of letting people down just as much as I do.”

I really don’t but I know how much *he* does. He must be the most