

# MARK ◊ OF THE HUNTER

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*THE LORDS OF ALEKKA : BOOK 2*

## CHAPTER ◊ ONE

A.E. RAYNE



## PROLOGUE

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‘And you won’t raise her? Bring her back?’

They stood in the tent, eyes on the frozen body of the dead dreamer.

‘You think I should reward *failure*?’ Alari spat, turning to her sister, Vasa, who towered over her like a tall tree. ‘She’s dead for a reason.’

‘She’s dead because of Valera!’ Vasa was angry. ‘That bitch is always interfering, and now the Vettels are running away like frightened children from a fight they were destined to win. A dead dreamer can’t help them or us!’

‘You think I had just the *one* dreamer, Sister?’ Alari laughed. ‘That the Goddess of Magic had only one old woman to assist her?’ She was just as angry as Vasa, but her fury smouldered like embers. ‘Though after what happened, why should I trust any of them to do what needs to be done? We must fight against Thenor himself now. Thenor and his pet dog, Ake Bluefinn.’ She turned, slipping out of the tent, black coat sweeping behind her, long white braid hanging down her back. Alari had been beautiful in her youth, until her father, Thenor, had punished her insolence, taking her right eye, hoping to dilute her power. Though the loss of her eye had done nothing to diminish Alari’s anger, nor her desire for vengeance.

Vasa followed her sister, an angular, gaunt figure with sunken eyes and skin as dark as the depths of her famous cave. She had no hair, just a shining ebony head. Her cloak was made of raven’s wings, and it shimmered darkly as she walked.

The sisters emerged into the abandoned campsite, littered with snow-covered corpses, weapons, supplies; all of it abandoned in the Vettel army’s retreat.

‘We must fight against Thenor,’ Vasa agreed, stroking one of the two ravens that perched on her shoulders, both of them cawing loudly, seeking her attention. ‘So it is time to choose whether to keep seeking victory here or abandon the field altogether.’

'Meaning?'

'There are other contenders, Sister. Others who may stand a far greater chance of taking Stornas, of claiming Alekka.'

Alari's eye sparkled with indignation. 'You think I would abandon the Vettels? But they are my blood! I gave birth to their line. They may choose to claim Thenor if it makes them feel like mighty warriors, but I know the truth, and so does he. I cannot abandon that which is mine. I won't.'

Vasa was bored. Impatient to leave the revolting place.

It reeked of failure.

'No, we have a clear path ahead of us now.' Alari could see it in her mind; dark with night, shot with moonbeams. 'A path back to power, here, in the South. And once the Vettels rule in Stornas again, there'll be nothing to stand in my way.' She felt Vasa stiffen. '*Our way.*' And smiling now, she headed for their horses, one white, one dark, both of them shadow spirits. 'Mother Arnesson was a greedy, self-centered witch. I should never have relied on her to do what I'm perfectly capable of doing myself.'

Vasa smiled, knowing exactly what Alari was capable of. 'Well, then, let us begin.'

PART ONE

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*The Forest*

## CHAPTER ONE

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Some things were undeniable.

The feel of Reinar's lips...

The look in his eyes as he bent his head, leaning in close, his cold hand brushing hair away from her face.

Alys rolled over, sensing movement, but not wanting to let go of her dream.

It wasn't the dream she needed to be having. It didn't tell her where her grandfather was. It didn't show her how to find Magnus and Lotta. It wasn't a dream that warned of danger lurking.

It was a dream of longing.

Pointless, hopeless, soul-crushing longing.

Eddeth sneezed, and Alys opened her eyes, blinking, watching clouds of breath smoke hovering above her face. She stared up at the trees, gnarled branches fighting each other in the chill breeze. The ground was thick with snow, wet, soaking into her back.

She hadn't felt her toes since they'd left Ottby two days ago.

Stina was talking to Eddeth as they wrapped bed furs around their shoulders and set about organising breakfast. The horses shuffled around, nickering softly in the distance, looking for something to eat, and soon they would be on the road again, trying to find Jonas and the children.

Alys closed her eyes, seeing Reinar's face, feeling his lips pressing against hers, then stopping, lingering, waiting.

Why hadn't she kissed him back?

Eddeth shook her shoulder. 'Are you unwell, Alys? Is something wrong? You have a very odd look on your face. Could be that stew. My belly's been griping all night long. Oh, the smell! Reminded me of my second husband. I had to make him sleep outside many nights, snow or not!'

Alys opened her eyes, surprised once again, to find Eddeth leaning over her,

noses almost touching. 'I...' She edged away, wanting to get up, out of the snow. Stina had worked quickly to bring their fire back to life, and Alys could hear the flames crackling invitingly nearby. 'No, I feel fine.'

Eddeth continued to peer at her, picking her wart as Alys slid away, wrapping her frosty fur around her shoulders, heading for the fire. 'Fine?' she muttered. 'I don't think so, dreamer.' Alys was too far away to hear her, Eddeth was sure, but in the next breath, she spun around, staring at her, a sad look in her eyes.

And holding her gaze for a moment, Alys turned away.

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Reinar sat on the bed, ready to head outside. There was so much to do, so much waiting for him beyond his chamber door. He could hear the murmur of activity in the hall steadily grow louder, knowing that his mother was likely rushing around, fussing over Ake, struggling without Agnette.

Sighing, he stared down at the scrap of vellum in his hand.

Alys had left it for him, with the green dress.

He'd slept with it for two nights, slipped under his pillow, trying to decide what to do. But what could he do? The fort was broken, devastated by Hakon Vettel's attack. The king was still in Ottby, making plans for what would come next. More pyres needed to be built. His brother was still missing, grieving Tulia.

What could he do?

'Reinar?'

Agnette popped her head around the door, smiling.

He was surprised to see her, but pleased, for she carried her newborn daughter in her arms. Liara. A pretty name for a squawking baby, he thought with a sigh. 'I'm coming. Just needed a moment.'

Agnette sat down beside him, wincing, still uncomfortable after Liara's birth, which had been both terrifying and draining. 'Gerda's already high-pitched out there.' She leaned the baby towards her cousin. 'This one doesn't seem to mind it, though.'

Reinar peered at the baby, her eyes closed, lying so peacefully in Agnette's arms. He tried not to think of his own sons, though it was impossible not to. Looking away, he rubbed his eyes. 'Well, I expect she'll only get worse. It's still early.'

'What's that?' Agnette wondered, inclining her head to the vellum.

'Alys...' It felt strange to say her name out loud. 'Alys left it.' And opening up the note, Reinart showed Agnette.

'Oh.' She stared at her cousin, seeing the pain in his tired eyes. 'What will you do?'

Reinart turned to her. 'What should I do?' He looked back down at the vellum, which read: *Reinart, I dreamed of your wife. She is alive and well in Lundvik.*

Agnette sensed that her daughter was growing restless; Liara's little face had turned from pink to red, her forehead furrowed as she started wriggling, trying to escape her swaddling cloths. 'You have a lot to do here. I'm not sure you can leave Ottby. Not now. And there's Sigurd. We need to know if he's alright.' She shook her head, tears in her eyes. 'Poor Sigurd, of course he's not alright. He loved Tulia. I know he loved her, no matter how many problems they had.'

Reinart nodded.

'And Ake wants the fort repaired, and he has plans for Hovring and Vika, that's what Bjarni said. He won't stomach their treachery for long.'

Reinart nodded.

'Not to mention Hakon Vettel. He's still out there somewhere, isn't he? So, I don't know what to advise. Elin was not right before she left. Though in truth, I don't think she was right for a long time.' Agnette's voice faded away, knowing Reinart didn't like to hear that sort of talk about his wife.

'I need to tell her about Torvig.'

Agnette could see it in his eyes: that desperation to know the truth; to hear from Elin herself why she'd left him. He would never be able to move on until he heard it from her lips. And feeling decisive, Agnette stood. 'You should go then. Go to Lundvik. Ake will be gone tomorrow. Leave Bjarni in charge of the fort, and go. Find Elin. Talk to her. Tell her about her brother. Things will be clearer for you then.'

Liara burst into tears, mouth open, and Agnette lifted her up to her shoulder, kissing her head. 'I think someone's hungry. Someone besides Bjarni!' She grinned at her cousin. 'You'll know what to do, Reinart. When you see Elin, you'll know what to do.'

Reinart watched her go, eyes drifting to the green dress, still draped over the end of the bed. He reached out a hand, touching it, knowing he should pack it away.

Elin's dress.

But when he saw it now, he no longer thought of Elin.

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'Did you hear those wolves last night?' Eddeth called from the trees. She was on her hands and knees, collecting mushrooms.

Stina was packing her saddlebags. 'Wolves?' Her eyes darted to Alys, who shrugged as she wrapped Tulia's swordbelt around the waist of her faded green dress. 'I didn't hear any wolves, Eddeth. Perhaps you were having a dream?' Though she was quickly scanning the forest, ears open. She could hear the soothing babble of the mist-touched stream, the industrious chirping of the birds out searching for breakfast.

No wolves.

'Or perhaps it was that old dreamer you killed, wanting her revenge?' Eddeth wondered, emerging from behind the tree, carrying a mound of mushrooms in the hem of her tunic. She wiped a dirty hand down her dead husband's trousers, grinning.

'Do you think that's possible?' Alys wondered, feeding Eddeth's horse, Wilf, a half-frozen carrot. He was an old, muddy-brown stallion, small in stature and flighty in temperament, though always in a much calmer state when he was well fed. There wasn't much for the horses to eat in their snow-blanketed campsite, and she wanted to give them all a little energy for the day. They had brought along small sacks of barley and oats to supplement what the horses could dig up themselves, though if Wilf had his way, it wouldn't last long.

'Oh yes, evil spirits are always lurking in the shadows, especially in the dark depths of the forest!' Eddeth announced gleefully, pleased to see the water was boiling in the tiny cauldron she'd brought along. Depositing her mushrooms onto the ground, she set about organising cups. 'Who knows what we might meet on our travels? Or who!'

'Who?' Alys joined her by the fire, crouching down, warming her hands over the flames.

'Well, after what you did at Ottby? Killing the old bat like that? With Valera's help? I imagine the gods are watching. Following us, even. Valera knew you!' Using the cloth tucked into her trousers, Eddeth lifted the cauldron off its hook, pouring boiling water into three wooden cups. 'She was waiting for you to come to her, that's what she said, so those gods are certainly watching us now, waiting to see what will happen next! Or perhaps, not waiting at all...'

Stina's eyes were heavy. The night had been cold, and her dreams had tortured her. She couldn't escape the nightmares of Torvig and Tulia and what



had happened in the shed. The relief of knowing that Torvig was dead could not erase the pain of what he had done to her. It was a wound that burned and stung, and Stina knew that no salve or tea would give her any relief.

There was no cure, but time.

‘Don’t drink yet!’ Eddeth warned, handing Stina a cup of licorice and lavender tea. ‘But do inhale! The aroma is powerful. Oh yes, just smell those ancient herbs! They will calm your mind and soothe your ragged spirit!’

Stina eyed her doubtfully, watching as Eddeth twitched, hopping around the fire, the least calm person she had ever met, despite the amount of herbs she brewed in her teas.

Alys turned her head, Eddeth’s voice disappearing in the distance. She stared into the trees, trying to remember if she’d seen anything else in her dreams.

It was unhelpful to dream of Reinar.

Pointless.

Dreaming of Reinar and Ottby would not help them decide where to go next.

Alys’ heart ached, knowing that Magnus and Lotta were so far away. She needed to feel them against her, holding them close, smelling their hair, knowing they were safe with her.

‘Alys?’

Blinking, Alys turned around, eyes on Eddeth, who had shoved her fur hat over her wild grey hair and was back on her hands and knees, sorting out her mushrooms. ‘Where will we be heading this morning, then? What did you see for us?’

Alys’ eyes skipped to Stina, who was braiding her long dark hair, looking her way. She didn’t know what to say. She’d seen nothing.

Nothing of her children at all. Not since leaving Ottby behind.

Not since her last glimpse of Lotta riding through the forest with that man.

Everything she so desperately sought to know was shrouded in darkness.

‘I...’ Alys stood with a shrug. ‘We must continue on to Slussfall, I...’ She stopped, spinning around. ‘Did you hear that?’

Eddeth froze, mushrooms in hand, eyes jumping. She’d heard something too.

Alys’ right hand flexed above the hilt of Tulia’s sword, poking out of its scabbard as she glanced around. Shivers ran up her spine, down her arms as she edged towards Eddeth, whose body remained oddly still, eyes fixed on the trees on the opposite side of the stream. Stripped of their leaves by the coming winter, they were a maze of spindly grey trunks and branches snarled together. It was almost impossible to see through them, but Alys thought she saw something

move.

‘What is it?’ Stina hissed, abandoning her braid and creeping around the fire towards Eddeth. ‘A bear?’

Eddeth didn’t answer. Her eyes were on the dreamer, knowing she’d felt it too.

Something was out there.

Watching them.

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Ake Bluefinn was the King of Alekka.

The southern half.

Two thousand years ago, the gods had broken Alekka in two, wrenching the North from the South, determined that no one man or woman would ever wield ultimate power over the land again.

There had been high kings for thousands of years before that. High kings of malice and cruelty, who wielded their power as soulless tyrants, crushing those who displeased them, who did not bend and break and give their lives in service of them and their allies. They were vengeful and capricious men, motivated by greed, indulgent of every whim and vanity.

Murderous.

Ruling from their great towers in Orvala in the North, they had worshipped Eutresia, Goddess of the Sun, sacrificing their people and their livestock to their golden patron. And she had bestowed upon them her favour, granting them fertile land of bounteous wealth, warmed by the sun. The winters were cold, the summers bright. The land was rich and moist and nurturing of its crops.

In her eyes, the kings were righteous and worthy of her loyalty. They adored her, and their sacrifices pleased her, so she was happy to watch them rule with iron fists and empty hearts.

The rest of the gods were not...

Ake smiled at Reinar, who was scowling as he stomped across the square in his black bear-fur cloak, barking orders. Snow was falling again, and Reinar’s hands were red with cold, pointing his men and women to work. The snow didn’t matter. What mattered was that they had gates off their hinges, ramparts in need of repair, cottages burned, pyres to build, weapons’ stores to replenish, and a king who had warned them of a coming war greater than any they’d faced

in their lifetimes.

And yet, despite all of that, Ake smiled, because it was good to have loyal men on his side. Men like Reinart and Sigurd Vilander, who had kept Ottby safe until he arrived, stopping Hakon Vettel before he could claim the valuable fortress. Ake frowned, realising that if he had dealt with the Vettels before now, they wouldn't have been roaming the Eastern Shore causing problems for them all.

A king always had problems, his dreamer liked to remind him, but none greater than the ones he made for himself.

'Any sign of that brother of yours?' Ake wondered as Reinart approached. He glanced up at the sky, conscious of the snow clouds, which appeared to be dropping lower, thickening with intent. 'Not the sort of weather to be lost out in the wild.'

'No, it's not. I've sent Ludo after him, though I doubt he's gone far.' Reinart felt worried. It wasn't like Sigurd to just disappear, though the shock of Tulia's death had tipped his life upside down, and Reinart didn't blame him for wanting to run away. 'He just needs some time.'

Ake nodded. 'Well, while the snow blows and the Vettels make their way back to Slussfall, there'll be time. Time for us to start again. If we can't keep Ottby safe, Stornas may as well open its gates and welcome all our enemies in.' It was only partly true. The bridge Ottby guarded led to Alekka's capital, but it was not the only way into the walled city. Though anyone attempting to scale the mountain ranges that led from the North into Ennor was going to have a terrible time of it, especially in winter. And the Huuka Sea was freezing fast, making any attack by ships less likely.

And yet...

Reinart stared at his king, who, despite his increasing troubles and the weight of the crown upon his head, still had a twinkle in his dark-blue eyes. He felt both affection for him and fear of him, and most of all, the worry that he would let him down. 'We'll secure Ottby as quickly as we can, though the damage to the walls was extensive in places. And the gates...' He saw Bjarni out of the corner of his eye, arguing with Bolli. They were almost the same height and shape, arms flailing, faces red with irritation, and Reinart smiled, pleased that they'd both survived the battle.

'Mmmm, so I saw. Though once the gates are back on, the walls will hold. I have some ideas about how we can reinforce the new gates further. More beams will help. And eventually, perhaps another wall too?'

'Another wall?'

‘Why not? We can make our enemies go through three sets of gates. Give them some climbing practice! Exhaust them before they get anywhere near the square!’

Reinar laughed. ‘I’m going to need a lot more men if you want another wall, my lord.’

‘You are, Reinar. And you’ll find them. Once they hear about the curse being lifted, about your luck changing, men will return. They will, and quickly too. They’ll want to fight for the Lord of Ottby when he defeats the Vettels.’ Ake clapped him on the shoulder, remembering too late that Reinar had dislocated it. ‘I must be getting old,’ he cringed, ‘forgetting about that.’

‘It’s fine,’ Reinar lied, shutting away the throbbing pain.

Ake glanced around, eyes on the singed branches of Valera’s Tree, which stood to one side of the square, snow-dusted now, and he walked Reinar towards it, wanting some privacy. ‘We need to end Hakon Vettel and his idiot cousin quickly. Once you’re secure here, I want you to go North and finish them.’

Reinar nodded; there were few things he wanted more.

‘You’ll have the men you need, I assure you of that. Algeir will take care of Hovring and Vika before he returns to Stornas. He’ll install new lords, and once you’ve taken Slussfall, we’ll find someone to command that fort too.’

‘I still can’t believe Alef and Erlan went in with the Vettels. They’re not the men their fathers were. To have broken that quickly?’ Reinar shook his head, having known both men since they were boys. They had never been close friends, but their arrogance and stupidity had surprised him.

‘No, though greed has a way of corrupting a man’s soul. Or perhaps, it merely reveals it? But in any case, Reinar, we need to talk about the Vettels.’ Ake stepped closer, watching flurries twirling down around the tree, feeling enclosed beneath its ponderous branches. ‘About what you’ll need to do.’

‘Do?’

‘I want you to kill Hakon and his cousin. But once that’s done, you’ll have to kill Hakon’s son too.’

‘What?’ Reinar looked horrified.

Ake knew how he felt. He’d been faced with the same decision twenty years ago, yet he hadn’t been able to go through with it. Another mistake coming back to bite him, he thought, scratching his stubbly cheek. ‘We can’t leave any Vettels alive. Not one. If you can’t stomach it, find someone who can, someone you trust. The boy is young, not a year old, from what I hear. It won’t be easy, doing a thing like that.’

Reinar was speechless, never having imagined those words would come from his king's mouth.

'It's not something I wish to order, trust me, but while there is Vettel blood in Alekka, our land stands no chance of being free. We must remove every threat to peace if we wish to protect our people. And for now, the Vettels are the most immediate threat we face. We have to eradicate them once and for all. Every last one of them.' Ake felt odd, staring at Reinar. 'I know what Ragnahild foretold about your destiny. Perhaps one day that will come to pass, and you will become the high king somehow? Perhaps my end is near, and you will rule in Stornas...' He ran a hand over his short dark hair, brushing off traces of snow. 'If that ever happens, then take this lesson from me, please, Reinar. Kill your enemies. Crush them. End them. Never leave a loose thread, not a single one, for there is nothing more motivating to a man than a desire for vengeance.'

Reinar waited, certain there was more Ake wanted to say, but the king merely grunted, turning away, uncomfortable with the conversation.

He walked to the edge of the tree's branches, stopping, glancing over his shoulder. 'Don't run from this, Reinar. I demand it of you, as I would demand it of your father if he still commanded this old fortress. I trusted him, put my faith in him, and now, I put it in you.' And turning back around, Ake headed into the square, slipping his hands inside his cloak.

Reinar watched him go, shivering.

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They muttered in a corner, talking about him.

Sometimes their voices were as intrusive as thunder, other times as gentle as a purring cat, curled up by the fire.

Hakon couldn't make out what they were saying.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, the pain in his belly like a burning poker, spearing him in agony. Writhing around, he cried out, and they hurried back to him, peering down at their lord.

Falla stooped low, placing a hand on Hakon's forehead. 'He's hotter. Much hotter.'

Ivan looked worried, eyes on his cousin's chattering teeth. 'But he's cold.'

'The fever will do that.'

'And what can be done about it? How can we stop it?' Ivan wanted to know,

tension gripping him like claws. His body ached, bandages swathed around his chest. His wounds stung, and his head pounded, thoughts swirling around it like the smoke from Ottby's field. He was frozen with cold, unable to think. He stared at Falla, who looked pale and tired and ready to bolt out of the makeshift tent, away from their mounting problems.

'I...'

Falla stepped away from Hakon's bed of furs as he groaned, reaching a hand to her, trying to grab her cloak. 'I don't know how to help him. We have to find a healer. There must be someone who knows herbs? Some servant?' Her eyes were frantic as they sought her husband's advice.

Lief looked reliably calm and emotionless despite his frustration that their journey back to Slussfall had been halted by Hakon's injury; despite the snow threatening to bury them in a frozen grave; despite their humiliating defeat and the fear of what would come next. 'Go and ask again, my love. Ask the servants. There'll be someone who knows what to do.' He wished Falla knew. He wished she'd learned something from all her time spent with that horrible old crone, Mother Arnesson. He wished they hadn't run away from Ottby in such a disorganised mess, not caring to check what or who they'd left behind.

It was only now becoming apparent just how many people and supplies they were without – none of greater importance than their healers.

Ivan watched Falla leave the tent without even a hint of interest in his eyes. His pushed his braids away from his face, scratching his head. 'We can't stay here for long. We need to keep moving. Ake's army might be right behind us. We can't trap ourselves in the forest.'

Lief nodded. It was an odd series of events that had led him and Ivan to the unexpected place where they were of the same mind. Without Hakon standing in between them, everything suddenly seemed so much clearer.

Ivan could hear snow pattering on the tent roof, getting heavier. He dreaded to think how much worse it would become, his thoughts returning to their dead dreamer and their sudden lack of insight. Though had Mother ever really had real insight, he wondered absentmindedly? Or was she merely trying to further her own interests? He sighed, needing to focus. 'We can't travel while Hakon is like this, though. We have to hunker down. Get everything secure. Wait out the snowstorm. He may be better by then.'

Hakon didn't appear to even recognise them as he stared somewhere past Lief's shoulder with glassy eyes, hand out.

'Mother...'

And hand dropping down, brushing the ground, Hakon's eyes closed.

Ivan lifted up his cousin's hand, gently placing it on the furs, horrified by how cold it was. Hakon's body was on fire, but his hands were like ice. 'I'll stay with him for now,' he said, turning to Lief. 'Hopefully, Falla will find someone with healing skills. If you see Rikkard, send him back in.'

Lief nodded, heading for the tent flap, lifting the hood of his cloak over his dark hair.

Ivan watched him go before turning back to his cousin, sighing.

'Mother,' Hakon whimpered, shivering violently, eyes still closed. 'Please, Mother!'

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Sigurd stared at the body of the old woman.

She stunk.

Blue-faced and rigid, her corpse lay in the middle of a snow-heavy tent, abandoned by Hakon Vettel and his men as they'd run out of their campsite, no doubt heading straight back to Slussfall.

Alys had killed her, Sigurd remembered; stopped her from torturing them with illusions of wolves, screeching ravens, and smoke; saved them from whatever the old dreamer had been planning next.

Alys had killed Torvig too.

He swallowed, pain searing through his chest.

Torvig, who'd killed Tulia.

Turning away from the bloated corpse, Sigurd ducked his head, slipping out of the tent. He heard a horse blowing, snow crunching, and spinning around, sword drawn, he saw the familiar figure of Ludo Moller sitting astride his white horse.

And he sighed.

Ludo dismounted quickly, hood hanging over his face, guiding his horse forward, through the abandoned campsite, littered with firepits and tents, a few bodies too. 'Didn't think I was going to find you!' he called, feeling relieved, though Sigurd didn't look pleased to see him. 'Reinar's worried about you. He sent me to bring you home.'

Sigurd stared at his friend, blue eyes dull, frown digging a deep rift between his eyebrows. 'Surely he's got enough worries without thinking about me?' It was hard to speak. He wanted to cry. Or scream. He'd done both in the two days

he'd been trekking through the forest, and he wanted to do more.

It didn't feel real.

He could almost see Tulia, sitting naked in the chair by the fire, cup of wine in her hand, scowling at him, the flames burnishing her skin with a deep bronze glow.

She was beautiful.

She *had* been beautiful.

Soon she would be ash, and he would never see that scowl again.

Dropping his head, Sigurd burst into tears, his body heaving, his heart breaking.

And then he felt Ludo's arms around him, pulling him close.