

# PROLOGUE



## SIGURD

MY SWORD RIPPED through the tender flesh of an enemy soldier, and he crumpled to the blood-soaked earth with a thud. Turning away from his body, I wiped my blade free of blood on my leather trousers and took in the scene around me. Flames licked up the homes of our village as the sound of steel clashing against steel died down. Only a handful still fought, but it was a lost cause. The battle was all but won. Our home defended, if not a little worse for the wear.

I searched for Kara among the few still fighting, but she wasn't among them. Once I would've worried about her, but I'd learned she was far more capable than most of the men I fought beside.

I moved through the village, looking to aid anyone who might need help. To my left, Leif threw a bucket of water on the flames, trying to lick up the healer's front door. And a few feet ahead of me, Astrid knelt over someone, wrapping a bandage around their leg as three men rounded the corner, locked in battle.

Someone gripped my shoulder, and I turned to find Kara, a secret smile curling the corner of her lips. A spray of blood stained her chain mail, and with the sun behind her silhouetting her wings, she looked like a Valkyrie right out of the legends.

“Hello beautiful.” I pulled her against me and her wings vanished in a wisp of Magik, waiting to be called upon once more. She wrapped one arm around my neck, and I pressed my forehead against hers. There’s nothing I loved more than the rush of battle, but this woman, my Valkyrie, could make me walk away from everything with one word.

I brushed my lips against hers, and she melted into my arms, deepening the kiss. She tasted of dust, sweat, and the honey mead we had with breakfast. Her hand found its way into my hair, and her lips parted as she deepened the kiss.

My fingers slid down the middle of her back, following the same path as last night. The memory of her supple skin was still fresh in my mind despite the armor separating us.

The air was ripped from my lungs and agony tore through my chest as if someone had lit my blood on fire.

I pulled away from her and tried to suck in a breath. A warm trickle of blood oozed down the inside of my shirt. I stared down at the dagger shoved through my leather chest plate and into my heart. My vision fractured at the sight of Kara’s hand holding the hilt in place. I looked back up, only to be met with a smirk on the lips I’d just kissed.

My sword slipped from my hand and clattered to the dirt. I met her eyes, but the vibrant, lively green I’d fallen in love with was replaced with a stone cold grey-green that left me hollow.

“Why?” I coughed. I didn’t know what hurt more, the weapon piercing my heart or the knowledge that the woman I loved and trusted above anyone else had just shoved a dagger into my chest.

She pulled the blade free, and I took a woozy step backward, trying to maintain my balance. The heaviness of her blade was replaced with a scorching fire that ripped through me. Tears stung my eyes as my ears rang. *How was this happening?* Even with her hand wrapped around the hilt, my heart refused to believe what I was seeing. She wouldn’t do this.

Her gaze didn't break from mine, but it wasn't the look of a lover, nor an assassin. It was predatory. Unnatural.

"Kara." I wheezed as I tried to fill my lungs with fresh air. My vision doubled as pain thundered through me. My heart beat wild and irregular, pumping more and more blood down my chest. I gripped the wound, a feeble attempt to stay the bleeding.

Not that it would do any good. Her aim was true, and I had only moments of my mortal life left.

A chill akin to a frozen lake expanded in my core. I... was... dying. My life forfeit too soon. I'd yet to make a name for myself, or leave my mark on the world. No one will remember my name. No one will sing songs about my heroics. Everything I'd worked toward, fought for my whole life, gone in an instant. She'd taken everything from me in the space of one breath. The future we planned, the home we'd build together, the love we shared. All of it gone.

I searched her face as a wave of torment crashed on the shores of my heart. Every word out of her mouth, every memory we shared, stared back at me, taunting me. Was it all a lie?

She moved toward me, her eyes racking over my face and down my body. Something deep and eternal broke free inside me, and reached for her in a way that left me empty.

My legs gave out, and I fell to my knees, joining the bodies of the fallen. The world tilted and spun around me in a cacophony of colors and sounds. The distant shouts of celebration, the glint of sunlight off a blade, the red paint of a shield, the crackle of wood burning. I couldn't grab onto any one thing as I swayed and fell onto my side.

A shadow moved over me, followed by a ripple of auburn warmth I knew all too well. Kara. She rolled me onto my back, sending a bolt of agonizing pain through my chest. A tear rolled down my temple as she leaned over me.

"I don't... understand." Each word sent a lightning bolt of

agony through me, as if Thor himself was abusing me for each word I spoke.

She placed a hand on my face, a familiar caress that once warmed me to her advances. I shivered at the touch, unable to reconcile the affection in my memories with the coldness of the woman above me.

Something in me stirred as her eyes bore into mine. It was like I was being called to her. I tried to resist the urge, tried to ignore the siren call singing from under my skin, but the more I wrestled against the tide, the stronger it pulled on me.

A cough rattled through my body. “You... wouldn’t... do this.” My words tasted like blood, like death. I struggled to breathe, each breath short and clipped.

She leaned closer, her cheek brushing mine, and the warm, floral aroma of her hair filled my nose. “Why? Because I love you?” A deep, humorless chuckle rumbled through her.

A fissure opened up inside me and my heart shattered into more pieces than all the stars in the nine realms.

She repositioned herself, and for the first time, I saw her for what she was.

A harbinger of death.

As she stared at me, a look of hungry lust flitted across her face. She was no longer my Kara, no longer the woman I loved and trusted. She was a stranger to me, cold and unfamiliar. Her hand slid up my chest in an act that would seem intimate to anyone on the outside.

“Was it”—pain radiated through me, stealing my breath—“all a lie?” I searched her eyes, desperate to find even a sliver of the woman I’d welcomed into my heart.

She leaned closer, her face an inch from mine, and my soul cried for release. My mind shattered, and the world spun as if I’d finished an entire cask of ale. A lightness settled over me and the pain from my wound fizzled into a fuzzy warmth as I lost all sensation in my arms and legs.

*I never considered that my heart would be my undoing and not my blade.*

She brushed her lips against mine, and the nine realms shifted above me. A low hum buzzed under my skin, and the hairs on my arms rose. Her Magik galloped over my bones as if her power were my own. A deep ache settled in the pit of my stomach, and I wanted nothing more than to become one with her. The fight left me, the pain, the heartache. The betrayal.

“Kara!” someone yelled from the other side of Yggdrasil and pulled her off me.

The siren song of Kara’s Magik vanished, leaving me empty and cold as the pain in my chest returned. I lay among the dead and dying. Alone as my mortal life slipped through my fingers. No more plans to be made. No more wondering what the future might hold. No more battles or glory.

Soft brown eyes and iridescent wings so bright they were like the sun reflecting off a lake, filled my view. “It’s time.” The Valkyrie’s voice was a balm to my frayed nerves and battered soul. “Are you ready?”

I nodded. There was nothing left for me here.

She placed a hand on my chest and her wings folded around me. Midgard shook, each piece falling away as we rose into the sky. The echo of Kara screaming hit me like a blast of cold air as the last remnants of Midgard fizzled into nothing.

We moved through the dark, and it was as if I could reach out and touch the beginning of the universe. Wind whipped around me once more, and we were soaring over fields of green. My life in Midgard had come to an end, but my life among the Gods had just begun.



## KARA

“Kara.” Rough hands grasped me by the shoulders. “What in the name of Yggdrasil is the matter with you?”

I felt like I was waking from a dream before I was ready to.

“Kara, this isn’t you.” Her words were muffled and slowed down as her fingers dug into my flesh. “Look at me,” she demanded as she shook me. “Kara!” she screamed, and smacked my cheek. The sting of her assault barely registered.

I could hear her, feel the grip of her fingers on my skin, but it was as if I was trapped in my body behind a wall.

“Kara, for sordinn’s sake.” She slapped me and pain sliced across my face, blood filling my mouth as the heaviness in my rib cage softened.

A sharp ringing pierced my ears and cleared my head. Chills ran down my arms as dread replaced the intoxicating, primal hum of Magik that had been coursing through me a moment ago.

I let out a shaky breath as the world around me rushed into focus. Everything was too bright, too loud. I blinked against the sun, and my ears adjusted to the cheers of celebration, the groans of men yet to pass into the afterlife, the screech of a bird, and the crackle of flames around me.

Talon’s grip on me loosened. “There you are.” Russet eyes stared back at me.

As my mind cleared, I noticed she was dressed head to toe in battle armor. Her box braids were pulled up into a crown atop her head, and the gold filaments she weaved into her hair caught the sun and shimmered like drops of dew at first light.

“What happened?” I wiped a hand over my face. “And why are you dressed for a fight?”

“You’re joking, right?” Her brow knit together as she studied me.

“And why do I feel like I’ve been drinking for days on end?” I rubbed my temple.

“I don’t know how to tell you this...” Her eyes darted over my shoulder, and I turned to follow her gaze.

Si lay motionless in the dirt. *No, no, Gods, no.*

The nine realms turned upside down and my heart clambered into my throat. I ran to his side and fell to my knees next to him. Panic burned through me like a cornered animal.

“For the love of Yggdrasil, please.” My hands hovered over him, unsure of where he was hurt or how badly. Blood covered most of his torso and pooled under him. “Si?” Tears blurred my eyes as I shook his shoulder and begged him to wake up.

Tearing my gaze from the blood, I searched his face for something, anything, that would tell me he’d be okay. But his body was too still, and all the life had drained from his eyes.

He was already gone.

I could feel it now, the emptiness, the absence of his soul, as I placed my forehead against his. The Magik that connected us, Valkyrie and her charge, was an empty void. He was gone, his soul taken to the afterlife without my guidance. My love, my charge, stolen from me.

A sob broke from my throat and I screamed. Unyielding grief poured into me, drowning out everything and everyone until every heartbeat ached, every breath burned, and every tear felt like acid on my skin.

He was gone.

I reached out to the nine realms once more, searching for the familiar song of his soul, but there was nothing. Not him, not the smell of Folkvang, not the chaos of Asgard, nor the chill of Niflheim.

There was only Midgard, this mortal realm, that answered my call.

My mind raced, searching for an explanation. I opened up my senses, tapping into the Magik inside me, looking for a glimmer of another realm. Why couldn't I feel anything?

Why couldn't I feel him?

"Kara." Talon touched my shoulder and I flinched.

"Why can't I feel him?" My voice broke on the last word.

"You don't remember, do you?" She held her hand up like she was approaching a coiled snake.

"Remember what?" I shook my head. "I have no idea how I got here." Tears burned my eyes, and the lump in my throat made it hard to breathe. "The last thing I remember is falling asleep last night."

"Oh, Kara." Worry creased her brow.

"What aren't you telling me?" My chest tightened as I recognized the pity in her eyes. "Who did this to him?" I pushed to my feet, my soul screaming for revenge. "Tell me," I shrieked like a wild animal. My vision blurred through my tears as fury tore through me.

I'd rip whoever did this, limb from limb.

Talon held my gaze as she lifted my hands between us. "I'm so sorry." She glanced down and back up at me. "But it was your blade that was his undoing."

Shaking, I looked down at my hands covered in blood. "No." I stumbled backward and struggled for every breath. The amount of blood coating my fingers, and beneath my nails, couldn't be from trying to wake him. "I don't understand." My stomach rolled as Talon stepped aside. My dagger lay in the dirt next to Si, cover in blood.

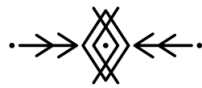


His blood.

Tears burned my eyes, and the lump in my throat made it hard to breathe. “I... I wouldn’t... I...” I fell to my knees, the jolt of hitting the ground barely registering.

“I’m so sorry, Kara.” Talon knelt in front of me.

Bile rose to the back of my throat, and I turned just in time to vomit into the dirt.



Si’s mortal body lay before me, ready for his send off into the afterlife. I placed a hand on his, still in disbelief that this wasn’t some horrible dream. The fact that he was gone hurt more than words, but the knowledge that his death was by my hand made me sick to my stomach.

It didn’t matter that he was with the gods now. That he’d be happy and cared for until the last star blinked out of existence. He would never walk this realm again. Never see his mother, never achieve his dreams, or build the life he wanted. He would live on in the afterlife, but for a man like Sigurd, it would never be enough.

He’d given me his love and trust, but I didn’t deserve it. Nor did I deserve the freedom Freya’s Magik granted me. I understood why Folkvang, Freya’s domain over fallen warriors, was taken from me. And Valhalla, Odin’s own army of worthy men and women. And the nine realms. I deserved to be stranded in Midgard for breaking the one law placed upon Valkyrie.

Never kill your charge.

Soft footsteps sounded behind me, but I didn’t care to see who had come to say their goodbyes.

I adjusted the hood of my cloak to hide my face. I'd become the most hated woman in the village in a matter of hours. True, I deserved their ire, the insults they threw at me, but for just a moment, I wanted to be alone with him and my pain.

"He was something else." A male figure came to a stop next to me. His gruff voice grated on my nerves. "A true warrior through and through."

I didn't acknowledge him. I'd learned long ago, some people grieved out loud while others, like myself, preferred to suffer in silence.

"Do you have any remorse for killing him?" His words struck me like a knife to the gut.

I snuck a glance in his direction. He too, wore a cloak, his face hidden in the hood. I could just make out the smirk on his face and it took everything in my power not to knock him into next week.

"You think I wanted to kill him?" Tears stung my eyes. The image of his blood on my hands flashed in my mind, and I flinched at the memory. I pulled my cloak tighter, as if it could protect me from what I'd done.

"Then why?" He stepped up to Si and placed a hand on his chest.

The words sprung from my mouth as if Magik had compelled me to speak. "I don't know. I have no memory of the act."

He shook his head. "I warned her this might happen."

The familiar cadence of his voice scratched the back of my brain. "Warned who?" I asked as I studied him a little closer.

He continued to look down at Si as if the two of them were having this conversation. "Freya wouldn't listen to reason. She never does."

"Freya?" I furrowed my brow in confusion. *Who was this man?* Very few mortals had the privilege of speaking with the Gods.

I tried to get a glimpse of his face, but he was careful to keep himself hidden from my view.

“She’s a stubborn woman.” His voice was laced with vitriol.

Alarm bells went off in my head, and I took a step back. I swallowed the lump in my throat. “You shouldn’t speak ill of the Gods.”

He turned to me, his bright sapphire eye meeting mine. Not for the first time today, I wished I was the one who was dead. “It’s good to hear you still have some sense left in that head of yours.”

“Alfather.” His name escaped my lips, and I inclined my head.

“Kara.” His smirk faded as he removed his hood. The bitter taste of his Magik filled the small space, making it hard to breathe.

I closed my eyes, bracing for the end. *I deserve to pay for what I did.*

His deep chuckle startled me, and I opened my eyes.

“Death would be too sweet a release for what you’ve done. You deserve to suffer.” He took a step toward me. “And so does Freya.” His eye brightened as he said her name. “She took one of mine, so I shall repay the favor.”

“I don’t understand? One of yours?” I choked on the last word as my eyes slid back to Si.

“Sigurd was meant for Valhalla. He was mine.” Odin seethed as he stalked toward me, forcing me to take another step backward. I wasn’t scared to die, but Odin could do far worse than kill me. “You and Freya have conspired against me, and I won’t allow it.”

“I didn’t—”

“I don’t give a dwarf’s ass what you have to say.” He rushed me, forcing me against the wall. “You’re a disgrace to your kind, killing your charge.” His face scrunched up in disgust. “You’re an abomination that should’ve been put down the moment you were born.”

The endless cavern of pain inside me swallowed his words, their meaning registering before disappearing into the screaming agony of my heart.

“I don’t know what game Freya is playing, but let’s see how she does without you to help her.” A short, clipped laugh escaped his throat.

“I—”

He raised a hand, and the words died on my tongue. “You don’t deserve the wings Freya gifted you to serve the mortal world.”

Terror gripped me. I’d rather die than give up my wings.

“Freya’s Magik may have barred you from traveling the realms temporarily, but it’s not enough. You don’t deserve to be a part of the nine realms.” His eye glowed and his Magik crackled in the air. He turned me around and ripped through my cloak and clothes, exposing my back. He placed his hand on my spine, in the middle of my wing tattoo, and recited a spell in the Aesir tongue.

Blinding pain seared through me like a hot knife, and I bit back the scream that threatened to escape my throat.

*I deserve this.*

He continued the spell, his Magik battling for control inside me. Light exploded behind my eyes and I screamed.

I screamed for the man I loved. I screamed for the loss of the nine realms.

“A mortal life, with an immortal soul.” His voice echoed around me, through me. “You’ll spend the next hundred years without the nine realms, without Magik, without your home.”

My heart faltered, and a sob stuck in my throat.

“It will be as if you died with him.” Rage roiled off him, thick and heavy, making it hard to breathe.

Each word felt like it would be my undoing.

He shoved me harder against the wall, his Magik burning away any last shred of a connection I had to the nine realms.

I could feel him in my mind, flicking through memories, feel him in my blood, my heart. A scream tore through me again as he battled for control of the Magik inside me. My soul felt like it was being shredded into a million pieces. Every bone in my body was at the point of breaking.

Thunder rolled overhead, and the hairs on my arms rose as Magik crackled through the air.

“You will be nothing,” he growled.

He continued the spell, and my wings erupted from my back. He took hold of Freya’s Magik in my soul, the Magik that gave me my wings, and twisted.

I heard the snap before I felt the mind numbing pain radiate across my back. With my face pressed to the wall, I watched as my wings, the one thing that had always given me purpose, catch fire and disintegrated to nothing. Their presence within me vanished, leaving behind a shell of who I once was.

I fell to my knees, his hand still on my back as he dug through the tattered remains of who I was.

The pain gave way to a cold numbness, and I no longer cared what he did to me. He could steal every memory, destroy every part of my heart and soul. I had nothing left to live for, nothing to hold on to. He pulled at the last shred of my tattered soul and a door slammed closed inside me.

He let go, as if he’d been forced to, and I collapsed to the ground. I gasped for air, but each breath burned down my throat and scorched my lungs as if I was inhaling the flames of Muspelheim.

Odin’s shadow fell over me, and his eye held mine. Something passed over his face, and the calm mask I was used to fell over his features. Some decision had been made within himself, and I tried not to think of what that meant for my fate.

He leaned down and brushed the hair off my face. “You’re lucky Freya’s Magik binds me from making a true example of you.” He pushed to his feet and within a blink, he was gone.

ALLISON SIPE

I looked up at Si, still lying a few feet away from me as a new brand of sorrow cradled me.

*It is done.* A voice said from the shadows as my mind snapped and everything went dark.