



# SKY IN THE DEEP

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ADRIENNE YOUNG

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# ONE



"THEY'RE COMING."

I looked down the row of Aska hunched against each other, ducking behind the muddy hill. The fog sat on the field like a veil, but we could hear it. The blades of swords and axes brushing against armor vests. Quick footsteps in sucking mud. My heart beat almost in rhythm with the sounds, pulling one breath in and letting it touch another before I let it go.

My father's rasping whistle caught my ears from down the line and I searched the dirt-smeared faces until I found a pair of bright blue eyes fixed on me. His gray-streaked beard hung braided down his chest behind the axe clutched in his huge fist. He tipped his chin up at me and I whistled back—our way of telling each other to be careful. To try not to die.

Mýra's hand lifted the long braid over my shoulder and she nodded toward the field. "Together?"

"Always." I looked behind us where our clansmen stood

shoulder-to-shoulder in a sea of red leathers and bronze, all waiting for the call. Mýra and I had fought for our place at the front.

“Watch that left side.” Her *kol*-rimmed eyes dropped down to the broken ribs behind my vest.

“They’re fine.” I glared at her, insulted. “If you’re worried, fight with someone else.”

She shook her head, dismissing me before she stood to check my armor one last time. I tried not to wince as she tightened the fastenings I’d intentionally left a bit loose. She pretended not to notice, but I caught the look in her eye.

“Stop worrying about me.” I ran a hand over the right side of my head where my hair was shorn to the scalp under the length of the braids.

I pulled her hand toward me to secure the straps of her shield onto her arm by memory. We’d been fighting mates for the last five years and I knew every piece of her armor as well as she knew every badly mended bone in my body.

“I’m not worried,” she smirked, “but I’ll bet my dinner that I kill more Riki than you today.” She tossed my axe to me.

I pulled my sword from my scabbard with my right hand and caught the axe with my left. “*Vegr yfir ffor.*”

She settled her arm all the way into her shield, lifting it up over her head in an arc to stretch her shoulder before she repeated it back to me. “*Vegr yfir ffor.*”

Honor above life.

The first whistle cut into the air from our right, warning

us to get ready and I closed my eyes, feeling the steadiness of the earth beneath my feet. The sounds of battle rushing toward us bled together as the deep-throated prayers of my clansmen rose up around me like smoke from a wildfire. I let the words march out under my breath, asking Sigr to guard me. To help me bring down his enemies.

“Go!”

I reared back and swung my axe, sending it deep into the earth and launched myself up and over the hill, flying forward. My feet hit the dirt and I ran, punching holes into the soft ground with my boots, toward the wall of fog hovering over the field. I kept track of Mýra in the corner of my eye as we were swallowed up by it, the cold rushing past us like a spray of water until dark figures appeared in the hazy distance.

The Riki.

The enemies of our god ran toward us in a swarm of fur and iron. Hair tangled in the wind. Sun glinting off blades. I picked up speed at the sight of them, tightening my fingers around my sword as I pushed forward, ahead of the others.

I let the growl crawl up the inside of me, from that deep place that comes alive in battle. I screamed, my eyes settling on a short man with orange furs wrapped up around his shoulders at the front of their line. I whistled to Mýra and leaned into the wind, running straight for him. As we neared the line, I turned to the side and counted my steps, plotting my path to the moment when the space between us was eaten up by the sound of heavy bodies crashing into each other.

I bit down hard as I reached him, my teeth bared. My sword came up behind me, my body lowering to the ground, and I swung it up as I passed, aiming for his gut.

His shield lifted just in time and he threw himself to the left, catching me with its edge. Black spots exploded into my vision as my lungs wheezed behind my sore ribs and the breath refused to return. I stumbled, trying to find my footing before I fell to the ground and came back with my axe, ignoring the bloom of pain in my side. His sword caught the blade above his head, wrenching it back, but that's all I needed.

His side was wide open.

I sunk my sword into it, finding the seam of his armor vest. His head flew back, his mouth open as he screamed, and Mýra's sword came down on his neck in one smooth motion, slicing through the muscle and tendon. I yanked my blade free, pulling a spray of hot blood over my face with it. Mýra kicked the man over with the heel of her boot as another shadow appeared in the fog behind her.

"Down!" I shouted, letting my axe fly.

She dropped to the ground and the blade plunged into the chest of a Riki, sending him to his knees. His huge body fell onto her, pinning her to the dirt. The blood bubbling up from his mouth poured out, covering her pale skin in a stark shining red.

I ran to her, hooking my fingers into his armor vest from the other side of his body and sunk down, pulling him with me. When she was free, she sprang to her feet, finding her

sword and looking around us. I gripped the handle of my axe and pried it up, out of the bones in his chest.

The fog was beginning to clear, pushing back in the warmth of morning light. From the hill, down to the river, the ground was covered with fighting clansmen, all pulling toward the water. Across the field, my father was driving his sword behind him, into the stomach of a Riki. I watched him fling it forward to catch another in the face, his eyes wide with fight and his chest full of thundering war cries.

"Come on!" I called back to Mýra as I ran, leaping over the fallen bodies and making my way toward the river's edge, where the fighting was more concentrated.

I caught the back of a Riki's knee with my sword, dropping him to the ground as I passed. And then another, leaving them both for someone else to finish.

"Eelyn!" She called my name just as I slammed into another body, and wide arms wrapped around me, squeezing so hard that the sword slipped from my fingers. I grunted, trying to kick free, but he was too strong. I bit into the flesh of the arm until I tasted blood and the hands shoved me to the ground. I hit hard, gasping for breath as I rolled onto my back and reached for my axe. But the Riki's sword was already coming down on me. I rolled again, finding the knife at my belt with my fingers as I came back up onto my feet and faced him, the breath puffing out before me in white gusts.

Behind me, Mýra was fighting in the fog. "Eelyn!"

He lunged for me, swinging his sword up and I fell back again. It cut through my sleeve and into the thick muscle of

my arm. I threw the knife, handle over blade, and he dropped his head to the side. The knife narrowly missed him, grazing his ear, and when he looked back at me his eyes were on fire.

I scrambled backward, trying to get back to my feet as he picked up his sword. The hilt was forged into the head of a bear. My eyes fell to the spilled Aska blood covering his chest and arms as he stalked toward me. Behind him, my sword and my axe lay on the ground.

“Mýra!” I shouted, but she was completely out of sight now.

I looked around us, something churning up inside of me that I rarely felt in a fight—panic. I was nowhere near a weapon and there was no way I could take him down with my bare hands. He closed in, gritting his teeth, as he moved like a bear over the grass.

I thought of my father. His soil-stained hands. His deep, booming voice. And my home. The fire flickering in the dark. The frost on the glade in the mornings.

I stood, pressing my fingers into the hot wound at my arm and saying Sigr’s name under my breath, asking him to accept me. To welcome me. To watch over my father. “*Vegr yfir fjör,*” I whispered.

He slowed, watching my lips move.

The furs beneath his armor vest blew in the damp breeze, pushing up around his angled jaw. He blinked, pressing his mouth into a straight line as he took the last steps toward me and I didn’t run. I wasn’t going to be brought down by a blade in my back.



The steel gleamed as he pulled the sword up over his head, ready to bring it back down, and I closed my eyes. I breathed. I could see the reflection of the gray sky on the fjord. The willow bloomed on the hillside. The wind wove through my hair. I listened to the sound of my clansmen raging. Fighting in the distance.

“Fiske!” A deep, strangled voice pierced through the fog, finding me, and my eyes popped open.

The Riki before me froze, his eyes darting to the side where the voice was coming toward us.

Fast.

“No!” A tangle of wild, fair hair barreled into him, knocking his sword to the ground. “Fiske, don’t.” He took hold of the man’s armor vest, holding him in place. “*Don’t.*”

Something twisted in my mind, the blood in my veins slowing, my heart stopping.

“What are you doing?” The Riki wrenched free, picking his sword back up off the ground and driving past him, coming for me.

The man turned, throwing his arms around the Riki and swinging him back.

And that’s when I saw it—his face.

And I was frozen. I was the ice on the river. The snow clinging onto the mountainside.

“Iri.” It was the ghost of a word on my breath.

They stopped struggling, both looking up at me with wide eyes and it dove deeper within me. What I was seeing. *Who* I was seeing.

“Iri?” My shaking hand clutched at my armor vest, tears coming up into my eyes. The storm in my stomach churned at the center of the chaos surrounding us.

The man with the sword looked at me, his eyes running over my face, working hard to put something together. But my eyes were on Iri. On the curve of his jaw. His hair—like straw in the sun. The blood smeared across his neck. Hands like my father’s.

“What is this, Iri?” The Riki’s grip tightened around the hilt of his sword, my blood still thick on its blade.

I could barely hear him. I could barely think, everything washed out in the flood of the vision before me.

Iri stepped toward me slowly, his eyes jumping back and forth on mine. I stopped breathing as his hands came up to my face and he leaned in so close that I could feel his breath on my forehead.

“Run, Eelyn.”

He let me go, and my lungs writhed and pulled, begging for air. I turned, looking for Mýra in the mist, opening my mouth to call out for my father. But my breath wouldn’t come.

He was gone, devoured by the fog, the Riki disappearing with him.

As if they were ghosts.

As if they were never there.

And they couldn’t have been. Because it was *Iri*, and the last time I saw my brother was five years ago. Lying dead in the snow.

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