



The Viking's Bride (Heartsong Presents)

By Darlene Mindrup

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MIST EGILSDOTTIR IS A WARRIOR...NOT A WIFE

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Valdyr doesn't know what to make of his fiery Icelandic bride-to-be. Mist refuses to be enthralled by him. But despite their differences, he's intrigued by her resilient spirit and flashing green eyes. Can this arrangement between two families turn into a lot more...maybe even a match for the ages?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Darlene Mindrup has always had a love of writing and an active imagination. Years of journalism classes and homeschooling her children gave her the tools to make her writing better and more professional (and with fewer errors). She has a love of history that comes through in her novels, especially Bible history and World War II.

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Iceland, AD 982

Mist Eg ildottir stood on the crest of a craggy hill warily watching the busy scene below. Her long red hair blew about her from the fierce autumn wind, a precursor to a brewing storm that, from the look of the dark clouds in the distance, was still a few hours away. She slowly took in a deep breath of the ocean air and tried to still her trembling limbs.

The horn warning of an approaching ship had sent them all hastening to the inlet that acted as a harbor for their family farm. For unknown years, glaciers had etched away the land below the water of this fjord, making it perfect for incoming ships. Unlike the waters around her old home in Norway, these waters stayed free of ice year-round because of the strange warm current that surrounded most of the southern and western side of Iceland.

On the banks of the fjord below, her father anxiously awaited the incoming longship coming from Norway. He was still a fine figure of a man, his snugly fitted tunic showing that he was still powerfully built; though his advanced years were beginning to tell on him. His beard had long since gone gray, his eyes slowly dimming. But she loved him, as did her sister, Astrid, who was standing close beside him.

It was because of that love that that ship was now sailing into their safe harbor. On board was the man destined to be her husband. Her heart began to pound with dread, her lungs growing tighter as anxiety shortened her breath. For a woman who had faced death many times without a twinge, it was odd that the coming confrontation had turned her insides into a quivering mass of jelled curd.

The ship itself was impressive, its dragon head lifted high above the water, its planking painted in bold colors that stood out against the darkening sky. More impressive was the man standing at the prow who caught her attention. He exuded power and confidence, things she was decidedly lacking in these days.

Even from this distance she could see the width of his broad shoulders, his stature above most of her kinsmen, though they were no small lot. Also, unlike her kinsmen who took pride in their long beards, this man's blond beard was short and neatly clipped, his honey-colored hair barely touching his shoulders. As he folded his arms, the girth of his muscles was evident in the tightening of his leather vest across his chest. He was an imposing figure of a man. She swallowed hard, wondering if perhaps he was her intended. The thought caused her hands to curl into fists at her sides.

As the ship moved into the channel, he glanced up and his gaze landed on her. For a moment, it was as though they were totally alone in the world, like Ask and Embla, the first two people created by the gods. How long they stared at each other, she was uncertain, but she lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. She could see the light of challenge enter eyes so vividly blue they were visible even from a distance.

Without conscious thought, she found herself massaging her left arm, a habit she had developed since it had been injured last year. If the frown on his face was any indication, he was less impressed with her than she was with him.

When his attention was taken by the young man at his side, she turned away from his disturbing regard and made her way down the hill, away from the harbor. Let her father greet their guest. As for her, she needed a few moments alone to gather her wits after having them scattered to the four winds. Something about the man had filled her with a foreboding and at the same time an unfamiliar feeling that left her unsettled, her heart thumping madly like a war drum. She needed to get away so she could think clearly.

Valdyr Svensson, tired after the long voyage from Norway, was pleased to see the small harbor that meant the end of his journey. He stood in the prow of the ship and allowed the wind to dry the perspiration that was a result of temperatures much warmer than what he was used to at this time of year.

He took stock of the land that would be his home for the next year. The area around the harbor was promising; farther away though, volcanic mountains rose majestically in the center of the island. He had heard many strange tales of this land that others called *fire and ice*, and he was anxious to explore it.

A figure standing on a hillside not far from the harbor caught his attention and he straightened, his eyes narrowing to get a better view. A woman with flowing red hair, her kirtle molded to her tall, thin frame by the wind, appraised him with unflattering regard. As they drew closer, he could see defiance in her stance that, despite himself, his whole being responded to. The blood warmed in his veins, his gaze reciprocating her challenge as he wondered just who the woman could be.

"Ho, brother," Bjorn said, his voice a near whisper at his side. "If you choose to forego this marriage, I will gladly take your place."

Valdyr followed his brother's intense stare and found the reason for his interest. A woman was standing on the shore next to an elderly man that Valdyr recognized as his host and he, like Bjorn, assumed the woman was his betrothed.

The woman was one of the most beautiful he had ever seen, surely an incarnation of Freya, the most beautiful of goddesses. Her flaxen hair hung to her waist, her eyes modestly lowered. She seemed much younger than he had been told, and his father's description of "acceptable" where her appearance was concerned was, indeed, a great understatement. Despite that, his appraisal was only momentary before he returned his gaze once more to the hill.

The intriguing woman was gone. The sense of deprivation he felt brought a frown to his face. Although she no longer stood on the hill, her image was indelibly imprinted in his mind. It had been a long time since a woman had caught his attention and he determined to find out who she might be.

The ship drew to shore and the crew hurried to pull the sail and make it fast while Valdyr and Bjorn swung themselves over the side and waded through water up to their knees to reach the old man and his daughter.

The old man's bearded face creased into a smile. "Welcome, Valdyr. It is good to see you again." He turned to Bjorn, who was studying the presumed daughter rather intensely. Valdyr saw the older man tense, the smile quickly fading. "And you, Bjorn."

Bjorn had to drag his gaze from the woman to greet his host. "Lord Egil. It is good to see you again, as well."

His attention quickly returned to the beauty at the old man's side. "And this must be your daughter Mist."

The girl's eyes flew upward, shimmering blue depths steeped with apprehension. Her rose-red lips parted in surprise, and Valdyr frowned, wondering if the girl knew nothing about the planned marriage. Before he could say anything, the old man stepped forward and moved his daughter aside.

"You are mistaken, Bjorn. This is my younger daughter, Astrid." Egil's eyes narrowed at Bjorn's rapt expression, and Valdyr realized that the older man was not happy with Bjorn's interest. Her father turned to the girl and bade her harshly. "Go find your sister and tell her to come immediately."

Hesitating, Astrid eyed Bjorn with equal interest, and Valdyr hid a smile as Egil pushed her with a little more force than necessary. She broke eye contact with Bjorn and hurried off, his brother's longing gaze following her until she was out of sight.

"I am sorry that Mist is not here to meet you," Egil apologized, and Valdyr wondered if Mist might be the woman he had seen on the hill. The thought made his blood warm once again. He was looking forward to meeting this headstrong daughter, who had broken with decorum and refused to meet her future husband.

Valdyr and Bjorn followed Egil as he led the way up to the turf-covered house built into the hill. The front face of the house was made of planking, a rare find here where there were few trees left after they'd been felled to create the farms dotted along the shores.

Valdyr ducked his head to follow his host through the small door and entered a spacious hall. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness that was relieved only by the open door, a perpetual fire and a small aperture in the roof for the smoke. The interior of the house was much simpler than his home in Norway, yet the setup was still familiar.

Through the smoke from the fire pit, he could see, lining one side of the house, rows of tightly packed dirt-covered in animal pelts that were used for sleeping. On the other side of the house, there were designated areas for storing weapons and tools, a loom, where a woman was steadily working, and a large wood-framed bed that he assumed belonged to his host.

A long table ran from one side of the house to the other, separating the front of the building from a smaller area in the back that Valdyr presumed was used to house some of the animals in the winter, but was filled now with storage goods.

Several people he assumed to be thralls were scurrying about the hall attending to various duties. The smell of a lamb roasting over the fire made his mouth water.

Turning the roasting spit was a woman who looked like the one who had met them at the harbor. She smiled at them as they passed, and Valdyr wondered if this, then, was his intended. If so, his father's description of her looks as being acceptable was again sadly lacking. Although older than Astrid, she was equally as beautiful.

"This is my daughter Brita," Egil informed them, and Valdyr realized that she was not his intended. Valdyr nodded in confirmation of the introduction, feeling uncomfortable under the woman's steady blue-eyed appraisal.

Egil motioned for them to have a seat at the table, and a young man brought them each a horn of imported

mead. Egil stood and lifted his high in the air. "To Odin, for your safe journey."

Valdyr and Bjorn stood and joined him in lifting their drinks.

Taking a long, slow draught, Egil wiped the back of his hand over his bearded mouth and added, "And to the joining of our families."

Since Valdyr had yet to be introduced to his betrothed, he assumed she wasn't present. Frowning, he glanced around at the females but decided that, although some of them were rather becoming, not one caught his attention. Unlike the flame-haired siren he had seen standing on the hill who had set his pulse to hammering.

If she was his recalcitrant bride, Valdyr suddenly decided that the trip might have been worth it after all.

Mist huffed along the narrow pathway through the rocks that had resulted from her constant treks inland. Her father would be upset that she hadn't come to the harbor as he commanded, but this marriage was all his doing anyway. Since she had no say in it, she saw no reason to be involved with the covenant they would be arranging.

If not for her injury a year ago, there would have been no necessity for this marriage. Even now she had tried to persuade her father that it wasn't necessary. Land was becoming scarcer in Iceland as more people migrated from other countries where farmable land was already taken. There was only so much farmable land available here, as well. As a result, raiding had increased, as had land feuds. The peace of the island was steadily being chipped away by the greed that seemed to live everywhere.

Before, her father would have trusted her to take care of the matter, but since being injured in her last battle in Norway and then having accepted Christianity, he no longer had confidence in her ability to do so. Thus the reason for this rather hasty marriage.

The wind caused her woolen kirtle to twist around her legs. That, along with the threat of tears from frustration and self-pity, made her stumble over the rocky ground. Despite the fact that the land close to the fjord was less treacherous, she headed inland toward her favorite place within the realms of the great ice sheets.

She skirted one of the small lakes that dotted the island and reached the small ruins of what had at one time been the home of Christian priests who had lived here in times past.

She had stumbled upon the spot one day when she had been out exploring. The area was a perfect sanctuary, a small green oasis within the rocky terrain caused by a bubbling hot spring that warmed the ground. A slight overhang in the side of a rocky hill created a little cave that hid her most treasured possession. She ducked beneath the small opening and reached to find the cross that had been carved into the wall.

Placing her trembling hand on the carving, she bowed her head and allowed all the feelings that she had been holding in check to come forth. She tried to bring forth the image of a man hanging on a cruel Roman cross but, instead, a vivid image of the man in the boat forced its way into her mind.

Help me, Lord Jesus. I want to be an obedient daughter, but I am afraid. If the man I saw today is the one my father has chosen for my husband, he is a man who will appeal to that part of me that I yielded when I became a child of Yours and gave up my sword.

She groaned in frustration, seeing once again that bold challenge in the man's ice-blue eyes, a challenge that she very much wanted to respond to.

Help me to fight against those feelings that are constantly at war within me. There is no one here to teach me more of Your ways, so I do not know if I am following Your will in this matter or not.

"What do I do? How can I know?" she whispered.

She allowed her fingers to glide over the Celtic runes that had been carved into the wall next to the cross, and felt once again the awe those words inspired. For years she had not known what they said. It was only when she had brought one of her father's thralls from Eire here that she had found out what was written. In the Celtic language it read, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

When the thrall had translated the words for her, she had felt a place deep inside her open and something had flown forth like an eagle released from bondage.

She had heard those words only once before, in Norway when she was being healed by a monk who had found her dying on a battlefield. To have found them in this small cave had given her comfort that she hadn't felt since she had returned home. Those words connected her to that monk who had not only saved her life, but her soul, as well. To think that men of God had been to this island long before her people gave her a feeling of destiny, a destiny that had yet to be fulfilled.

How long she sat with head bowed in prayer searching for a peace that had eluded her since learning of her father's arranged marriage, she had no idea. It was her sister calling her name that brought her out of the deep meditation.

"Here," she answered, scrambling from the hiding place she did not wish to share with her sister.

Astrid found her sitting on a large rock, chewing on a piece of wild grass, apparently doing nothing more than enjoying the view. Mist lifted one brow in inquiry, noting the ire twisting her sister's face as she placed her hands on her hips.

Mist sighed with no small amount of envy. No matter what mood her sister was in, nothing could thwart her beauty. Astrid's hair was the color of the moon on a cold winter's night, while Mist's resembled an iron sword after it had long been in the elements. Astrid's features were perfect, her complexion without flaw, her eyes the color of the icy-blue fjord, while Mist's mouth was far too wide and her eyes the green color of the lichen that covered much of the hillsides.

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