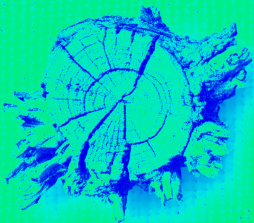


Niðavellir



Elisabeth Wetter

~Niðavellir~

She ran through the dark woods, branches clinging to her like a lost friend, thorns tearing at her skin, cloak and hair, snow soaking her boots with every step. Her rich green dress, which moments before was beautiful, was now ripped and soiled. The sounds of battle faded behind her, swords clashing, cries of pain and agony, as she ran deeper into the forest. Tears streamed from her blue eyes, blinding her from the ancient roots on the ground, but she forced herself to keep going. Soon she could only hear her ragged breathing and decided to stop. On the side of a slope, she saw an odd stump lying on its side. Everything around her was dark and haunting, but the stump was golden like honey and seemed to radiate a light of its own, which made it stick out. As she moved closer to it, she saw dim blue runes floating around the stump. She was right on the slope's edge when she heard a growl from behind her. Startled, she tripped over herself and tumbled down the slope, landing next to the stump. It was bigger now she was next to it, she could comfortably fit inside. A twig snapped from above. She crawled in as quietly as she could, making sure what was left of her dress and cloak was tucked in. After a mental evaluation, she decided her injuries were not deep or life-threatening. She stayed there like that, ignoring the pain in her body, listening for any signs of her attackers.

As the night grew darker, the air temperature dropped. Soon she found herself in the back of the stump, as if she could hide from the cold. As her eyes adjusted to the last bit of light the trees above offered, she saw an odd nub coming from the bottom of the stump. It

almost looked like a handle. She reached out a shaking hand and pulled on the handle. The stump shook, and then the bottom swung open, revealing a passage.

“Why not?” she muttered to herself. Her voice was hoarse and her throat felt like sandpaper. She silently slipped through the crack of the entrance and into the tunnel. She expected it to be dark, but to her surprise, lanterns hung from the ceiling, casting warm but dim shadows on the walls, and it was tall enough for her to stand in. Her back protested in pain as she stood up straight. She rolled her shoulders a couple of times, ran her fingers through her snarled red hair, adjusted her cloak to cover both shoulders, smoothed her tattered dress and started down the tunnel.

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After an eternity of walking, the tunnel opened up into a giant cavern. It was a beautiful site. A mix of lanterns and candles hung from the ceiling on chains. The walls were a mix of metal, dirt and wood, and buildings were constructed into the walls of the cavern and extending tunnels. The floors were stone bricks, each one handmade and laid. Tunnels branched off the main cavern into what looked like city streets. Odd multicoloured lights hung from shop doors. In the distance, she saw short, dark figures darting in and out of the shadows. They were no doubt aware of her presence, as some of them stopped in the road to stare, then skittered out of site.

Right in the centre of it all was a giant copper tree that met the ceiling. It resembled Yggdrasill, the tree of life. Runes danced in the branches, flickering from purple to blue, mimicking leaves. There were carvings on it but she could not make them out. Even with all

the lights, it was dim, and she figured she somehow entered Niðavellir, the realm of the dwarfs. She was so caught up in the thought that she didn't see the group of dwarfs starting to surround her.

"Excuse me miss, who are you?" a young voice asked. She turned and found a little girl standing not a foot away from her. Her skin was grey, like the stones beneath their feet, her hair was the same colour as copper and was pulled back in two braids. She barely came up to her waist. She cleared her throat.

"I am Astrid, daughter of Alruna, and you are?" Astrid said. She wasn't sure whether to crouch down to the little girl's height or not.

"I am Raglia, daughter of Doda. What are you?" the little girl said, looking straight into Astrid's eyes. Before she could answer, a woman who looked like Raglia came up and grabbed the little girl by the arm.

"How many times have I told you not to talk to strangers? Go back to the forge by your father." the woman chides. She too had grey skin like the rocks and copper eyes, but her hair was a golden colour with a streak of white, like quartz. This must be Doda. The little girl grinned at her mother then at Astrid, then ran off to one of the shops that must be her father's forge. Doda turned to the group of dwarfs just standing there in a trance and shouted at them. In unison, the dwarfs snapped out of their trance and ran off to any shop or shadow that was closest. Doda then rounded on Astrid.

"Who are you? What are you?" she asked.

“I am Astrid, Daughter of Queen Alruna, I am a half-blood,” she answered honestly.

The forbidden words felt strange on her tongue, she had never been able to utter anything close to the truth for as long as she'd known about it.

“That explains the aura around you. I am Doda, one of the daughters of Tyshdish. What are you doing here half-blood?” Astrid inhaled and paused to decide on how to start her story.

“My stepfather, one of the 7 kings of Midgard, sent me to a nearby kingdom to meet my future husband. Halfway through the journey, my wagon was attacked by a band of rebels from a rival kingdom. They killed the guards and stole the horses. I ran before they found me and hid in a stump in the forest. It was surrounded by floating runes and had Yggdrasill carved into it. At the back was a door that led to the tunnels that lead me here.” Once Astrid finished her tale, Doda cursed under her breath.

“That Kronidiot boy left the entrance to the Bifrost open.” She started to walk towards a door, then realised Astrid was not following her. “Come half-blood, I'll see what I can do.” She turned again and walked to the shop Raglia disappeared into. The door was smaller than Astrid was accustomed to, so she had to duck around the frame. The shop smelled of metals, food and mead. Astrid looked around and saw a table where little Raglia and a boy were sitting, playing with two handmade metal dolls. A stove and counters also occupied the area. There was a fireplace in the next room with a workbench and tools filling up every surface. This wasn't a shop, it was their home.

“Astrid! I knew they wouldn't kick you out!” Raglia said, running up to her and hugging her. The little girl looked up at her with her big eyes.

“Do you want to play with me and my brother? Mama is making dinner soon. I bet you could stay for it” the little girl rambled on, making Astrid laugh.

“Raglia, calm down. You can play with Astrid later.” Doda said. The little girl sighed. She tugged on her brown dress, as if debating to start a tantrum, but ultimately went back to her dolls. Doda went into the room with the fireplace and beckoned Astrid to her. A man was in the room. He looked just like Raglia and her mother, except for the fact that his copper hair was speckled with white and black.

“Astrid, this is my husband, Ívaldi.” He looks at me and nods. I return the gesture.

“Yes, I am one of the brothers of Ívaldi. I made golden hair for the lady Sif, Lord Frey’s chariot and Gungnir, the spear for Lord Odin. How can I be of assistance?”

“I am Astrid, Daughter of Alruna. I need help getting back to Midgar.” He sighs and rubs his head as if this was a task too easy to bother him wi-

“ASTRID, CARRIE NEEDS YOU!” Carter pounds on my door, making me jump a little. I sigh and look away from my story.

“IN A MINUTE!” I shout through my door, taking off my headphones. He says something on the other side of the door and his footsteps retreat. I close out the tab on one of my monitors, climb out of my nest of blankets on my black gaming chair and cross the cold wooden floor to my closet. Sifting through the pile of clothes on top of my dresser, I grab a big green hoodie with runes on it and pull it over my Sif t-shirt and shorts. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror

and I look like a troll, so I pull my red curls into a bun on the top of my head and pull down some strands so I don't feel bald. Satisfied, I close the closet door.

"What do you think she needs this time, Magnus?" I ask my golden lab who is lying on the futon. He moos in a sleepy response, shifting so his stomach is facing her. Smiling, she rubs his stomach a few times and leaves the room. The sound of folk songs drifts from the kitchen, and I find my stepmom, Carrie, cooking dinner. Her curly golden hair is up in a ponytail and she is hunched over the stove. My little sister, Raegan is playing at the counter with Carter and his old action figures, her wild copper hair contained in two lopsided braids.

"What's up?" I ask, pocketing a granny smith apple.

"I saw that, Astrid, put it back," Carrie scolds. Her cheeks are pink from the heat coming off the stove. "I need you to get your dad, dinner's almost ready." The meat starts sizzling, making Raegan squeal and run out of the room. Carter laughs and chases after her.

"Why couldn't Carter do it? I was in the middle of writing." Carrie just gives me a look. I sigh, put the apple back and head outside to the garage. The air outside had a metallic scent to it, and I could hear Dad welding, so I waited on the cold cement, watching the snowflakes spiral around my head until he turned off the machine.

"Hey Papa," I call, coming through the door while rubbing my bare legs a little to try and warm up. Papa looks up and jumps a little, pulling out his earplugs.

"Hey kiddo, didn't hear you. What's up?"

“Carrie sent me to tell you dinner is ready. Oh, you have stuff in your hair again.” Papa chuckles and reaches up to brush the ash from his salted red hair, creating black streaks in it.

“Okay, I’ll be there in a minute, I gotta finish this order quick, okay?” I nod and go back outside, entering a cold winter night. I stand there for a second, breathing in the cool air and listening to the sound of machines starting up again. The sun is starting to set which makes the snow in the yard glow golden. Goosebumps start to form on my legs again, so I head back into the house. As I enter, I hear my brother and sister laughing in another room. Breathing in the smell of food and wisps of what could be mead, I smile to myself and enter the kitchen where my family is waiting.