

S. T. BENDE

PERFEKT
ORDER

Book One

THE ÆRE SAGA

Perfekt Order
The Ære Saga: Book One

by
S.T. Bende

Praise for *Perfekt Order*

"Like macaroni and cheese with bacon, *Perfekt Order* provides the perfect comfort from a hard day. Snuggle up to Tyr and Mia's story of warmth and love mixed with adventure and excitement that will keep you turning the pages until the end."

- Kristie Cook, International Bestselling Author of the *Soul Savers* series

"*Perfekt Order* has everything you want in a book filled with HOT Norse gods: The swoon-worthy hero, the sweet yet strong heroine, the humorous Norse-god sidekicks, and the page-turning suspense."

-Stina Lindenblatt, Author

Back Cover Copy

All's fair when you're in love with War.

For seventeen-year-old Mia Ahlström, a world ruled by order is the only world she allows. A lifetime of chore charts, to-do lists and study schedules have helped earn her a spot in Redwood State University's engineering program. And while her five-year plan includes finding her very own happily-evah-aftah, years at an all girls' boarding school left her woefully unprepared for keg parties and co-ed extracurricular activities.

So nothing surprises her more than catching the eye of Tyr Fredriksen at her first college party. The imposing Swede is arrogantly charming, stubbornly overprotective, and runs hot-and-cold in ways that defy reason... until Mia learns that she's fallen for the Norse God of War; an immortal battle deity hiding on Midgard (Earth) to protect a valuable Asgardian treasure from a feral enemy. With a price on his head, Tyr brings more than a little excitement to Mia's rigidly controlled life. Choosing Tyr may be the biggest distraction—or the greatest adventure—she's ever had.

CHAPTER ONE

“CHEESE AND CRACKERS.” NEEDLES shot up my pointer finger. I freed the pinned appendage from my bureau drawer and cradled it to my chest, willing the pain to stop. My digit was an unfortunate casualty in an overzealous unpacking spree. Excitement made grace something of an enigma, and today was pretty much the most exciting day of my life.

In the twenty minutes since I’d pulled up to 121 Daffodil Drive in Arcata, California, I’d unloaded the contents of both of my suitcases and done a moderate amount of decorating. The upstairs bedroom I now called home was just a short walk from the school I’d worked so hard to get into—Redwood State University. Now, after three thousand miles of driving and roughly seven thousand calories of road food, I was itching to explore my new neighborhood. I crossed to my little dormer window and looked at the wall of evergreens standing sentry outside. Since my roommates still weren’t home, it wouldn’t be rude to pop out for a quick run. Five days without exercise left me stiff and cranky, and it seemed prudent to run off a little anxiety before meeting the ladies I’d be living with for the next year. First impressions took a heartbeat to make, but a lifetime to break, and I wanted mine to be impeccable. I threw on my workout clothes and jotted a note to the girls.

Just got in and went for a run. I’ll be back by dinner time—can’t wait to officially meet you!
XO, Mia

I left the note on the table in the entryway and closed the front door behind me.

A quick search on my phone told me there were two main hiking paths that picked up just behind my house. The review of one said it offered “the most pristine ferns this side of Jurassic Park, nestled amidst redwoods too beautiful to be missed.” *Winner*. I committed the map of the trail to memory—straight at the end of the pavement, turn left at the top of the hill, and stay north at the fork near the big boulder—pocketed my phone, and jogged toward the forest, taking in the late afternoon air. It smelled of fall, like a pile of newly fallen leaves baking in the warm sun. At the end of the block I turned right, then crossed the street and entered the woods that bordered campus. The air was thicker in here, the dense trees acting as a sieve against the sun’s filmy rays. My footsteps padded softly on the dry dirt as I ran up a steep slope. At the top of the hill, I hung left, making my way through the gently swirling fog. The mist was cool—it tickled my nostrils and chilled my lungs as I sniffed the familiar scent of earth and pine. This smell was one of my favorite things about our family camping trips. It was nice to snatch a bit of recognition in an all-together foreign world, and besides green leaves and dirt, there wasn’t much familiar about my new home.

To start with, the trees in this forest were much taller than the trees in the forests of New England. Hundreds of feet taller, to be exact. Their trunks were a warm reddish color, and an emerald green moss was draped like a blanket covering the bark from base to lower limbs.

And the air...

I skidded to a stop as the trail came to an abrupt end. Since I hadn't seen any big boulders, I must have taken a wrong turn. Somewhere along the way, the air had dropped ten degrees in temperature, and the fog morphed from a soothing cumulus mist to an oppressive cloud of smoke. The backs of my arms prickled. Fear took hold in my gut, gripping my stomach in its iron manacles as my gaze darted around the densely packed forest. Between the hovering sequoias and the intricately woven ferns, the woods were so dark I couldn't see much of anything. But I didn't need to see to know the only thing that mattered—I wasn't alone. And judging by the low snarl coming from the foliage in front of me, my visitor was madder than a wet hen.

"I'm leaving," I offered softly, hoping to placate the unseen creature with a gentle tone. My voice cracked just enough to betray my panic. What was I thinking going into a strange forest alone this close to dusk? Things got hungry at dusk. Big things. Carnivorous things.

God, I hoped whatever was growling was a herbivore.

I waved my arms at my sides to make myself look bigger, and slowly placed one foot behind the other. There wasn't time to think about the blades of terror piercing my gut, or the numbness settling in my hands. All I had to do was make it back to the top of the hill. Then it was a clear shot back into town. Just a little fun run. I could absolutely do this.

With my arms still moving, I inched backward up the hill. The snarling continued, but I ignored the impulse to flee. The creature hadn't come out of the ferns yet; I didn't want to give it any reason to chase me. Toe to heel, I continued my climb until I was halfway to the top. *Breathe, Mia.* I consciously drew two slow breaths, willing my heart rate to stop its frantic tango.

And then I couldn't move.

Two blazing red eyes emerged from behind a fern. They formed crimson and orange swirls, like the fun-house décor at my boarding school's fall carnival. But there was nothing amusing here. The eyes locked me in place, immobilizing my feet despite the urgent bulletin running across my brain—*run*. I fought against their hold, struggling with every ounce of power I could summon, and lifted one sneaker then the other from their invisible stronghold. Panic willed me forward. I barely registered the grey fur covering an enormous head and the ears framing frightening eyes. I just turned and bolted for the top of the hill.

The beast bolted right after me.

The creature's labored breathing grew louder—it was closing in. My toes pushed against the cushion of my Nikes as I lengthened my strides, working as hard as I could to reach the safety of the clearing. But I still had a quarter mile to go, and the snarling was right at my back.

"Arugh!" I shrieked as the beast's fangs snapped around my arm, pulling it behind me and dragging me backward before releasing its bite. My arm tugged again as the sleeve of my hoodie tore—the fabric must have been attached to the animal's canines. My wrist throbbed as pierced flesh met cold air. Something hot and wet trickled down my fingers, but I didn't dare look; I was afraid of what I'd see.

"Help!" I jerked forward as my sleeve finally ripped away. The moment I was free, I bolted for the top of the hill, putting as much distance as I could between that awful animal and me. My

arm was on fire, and I was afraid one more bite would break it clean off. Bile rose in my throat, but I willed it down. *You can freak out later, Mia. Now you have to run.*

I was so focused on reaching the summit that I almost didn't see the man in the shadows. He leapt across my sight line just as I cleared the top of the hill. His intense blue eyes forced me to a stop as they held my gaze for the briefest of moments. The connection was broken as the man's guttural cry bounced off the evergreens, and he flew thirty feet to tackle my attacker. The sound of bodies colliding thundered throughout the forest. I whirled around just in time to see a mass of claws and fists, blond hair and grey fur, as the man and the beast catapulted into the brush. Both were unnaturally large. The creature, whatever it was, had to be ten feet, with the long tail and sharp ears I'd seen on foxes back home. And the man... though he wore a hooded sweatshirt, it was obvious he boasted the kinds of muscles not seen outside UFC gyms. He wrenched the creature's head to one side with ease, although I was sure the beast had a few hundred pounds on him.

They disappeared into the woods before I could take a breath. I doubled over as the snap of cracking bones came from behind the ferns, and when I heard the agonized cry of a wounded animal, I dropped to my knees.

Then everything went to black.

Learn more about the Ære Saga and the rest of S.T. Bende's books at www.stbende.com .
Mange takk for reading the first chapter of Perfekt Order!