

The Saga of Turid, Part I: The King's Daughter

By Elisabeth Östnäs

Sample translation by Rachel Willson-Broyles, rachelwillsonbroyles@gmail.com

Prologue

I am sitting in the woods, behind a large stone. I cling to it; rest my face against it. I can feel its rough, sun-warmed side. My belly rumbles and I wonder if I am going to throw up. There is a sour taste in my mouth.

Beside me is Njord. His face is white, whiter than usual. His eyes are large. They look straight into my own.

“Turid,” he says. “Turid, what are the men doing with their swords?”

I shake my head. “Hush,” I say. “If they hear us, we will die. You must be quiet now, Njord. Quiet as a little mouse.”

Then I play that my hand is a mouse and it wants to hide under his shift. That usually makes him laugh. At the same time, I put my pointer finger to my mouth to hush him, so we won't be found.

We hear their sounds. Shouts, laughter. The sound of swords, the sound of tall waves against the shore.

It was the sea that brought the boats in. They had red sails, red as blood. When Father saw the sails he ordered all the men in his hird to stand ready for battle, to receive them. He spit upon his sword and tested its edge. There was a sound, a faint, whistling tone. The sword was singing. Then my father smiled and kissed Ingeborg on the lips. And he stood and his body filled our whole hall. His arms were like the trunks of trees; his shoulders as broad as those of Ymir himself. Father's bones could have been mountains, so mighty he was.

“We are ready,” he whispered to Ingeborg, kissing her again. She turned her face to his, burning from within. She was beautiful, with her fair hair and red cheeks. Her eyes flashed.

“Turid,” she said as she turned to me. “Take Njord up into the forest. You must hide. You must not come out until I fetch you.”

Now we are lying behind the block of stone, Njord and me. The other children of the village have hidden behind the stones on the ridge that encircles the village. I can glimpse their white shifts, but my eyes are turned to the sea, to the village.

Much time has passed since Father and Ingeborg walked to the shore. My belly rumbles again, from hunger this time. Nord grips my shift with fingers that do not let go. He is so scared that he is shaking. I must be brave.

I peer out from behind the stone. The Rooster Stone, we call it. It is large and looks like it has a tail. It is halfway up the slope, and from it one can see both our house and the village. One can see the shore.

The battle is being fought in the village. Father and his hird take on the men on the shore. But the shouts are coming closer, and I understand that they are on their way up.

The men who come in boats with blood-red sails. The men from across the water. The men who want all of our gold, our women and children.

Sebba often tells stories about them, and I shudder every time but still beg to hear her stories again. “Tell about the Varangians,” I say. “Tell about the men with the bloody sails.”

Stories—that’s what I thought they were.

“Don’t come out before I fetch you,” Ingeborg said. “Go and hide; don’t come out.”

Don’t come out.

But I don’t do as she said. I hear a woman howl in fear. I hear children bawling. I hear men shouting with fury. And I hear the sound of flesh being run through.

I have to see what is happening.

I put my finger to my lips again and pry Njord’s fingers loose. I have to see it with my own eyes. Hearing is not enough. So I cautiously crawl out from behind the Rooster Stone. My shift is short; it only

comes down to my knees. We don't wear a tunic or hose until we are ten summers old. But it is fine; it's easier to crawl with a short shift. "Shh," I say over my shoulder, and Njord is quiet. Sometimes he is so scared that he fades away and you can see only the whites of his eyes. Then Ingeborg will take him into her arms and rock him, and he comes back around again. Now he lies with his face turned toward the sky, white as a flower petal. His eyes are closed. I leave him there and crawl down the slope toward the house.

Our house stands with its long side facing the village. It is the home of a king, with a golden roof. The walls are white with black logs to shore them up. There are double doors, so wide that two warriors can walk through them side by side.

I sneak around the corner of the house. Behind me is the slope with the Rooster Stone. Before me I see a tumult.

A battle. A war. Men striking men and ravens flying above their heads and pecking at their eyes. The wind turns into the Valkyries' horses and lashes the enemy in the eye. Swords glitter like waves in the sun, and blood arcs in great, dark sheets.

I see Father. He is in the middle. He is wearing his red mantle and his helmet. It is freshly polished and has wings on the sides. It makes him easy to spot.

He raises his sword. He steps forward as he does when we harvest grain. The same rhythm, the same song. Up, down, up down. His sword rises and falls and every time it falls there comes a stream of blood, and someone before him falls to the ground. Father goes forward, downward. Toward the sea. He is driving them, as we children drive the geese.

Ingeborg is behind him. She carries his axe. Her hair flies around her. She screams, shrill screams that beckon the Valkyries to come to our help. She lowers the axe and a man falls to his knees. His face is turned toward me and his eyes are large and round. He looks straight at me. His mouth opens.

I stiffen. He sees me. He lifts his hand, pointing. His mouth is wide open now and he gives a hiccup. Suddenly a stream of bright red blood pours between his lips. Then he hiccups again and his chin falls to his chest. He slowly falls face-first to the ground, and Ingeborg pulls the battle-axe from his skull with a terrible sound. Then she follows his dead gaze and sees me.

“Turid,” she hisses. I can’t hear any sound; the din of the battle seems to cover my ears. But I know that it is my name, and I know that she hisses it. Her eyes are as hard as the iron she bears. Quickly, quickly. I fall to my knees and crawl back as fast as I can. The path hurts my knees and soon I am bleeding. Sharp stones and nasty ground. I sob as I return to safety behind the Rooster Stone, to Njord who is lying still with closed eyes.

I sob and hug my knees.

The image of that face as life left it.

Ingeborg’s rage, her constant rage.

And the knowledge that there is nothing that I can do.

“Turid?” Njord whispers. “What are they doing?”

“Father and Ingeborg are driving them back. Soon those men will be gone. Ingeborg is like Frigga herself; you ought to see her.” I smile as I tell him this but at the same time I feel the tears dripping down onto my hands. I hide my face against my knees.

“Good,” he says. “Tell me a story.”

I take his hand, his cold little hand, and start to speak.

Chapter 1

I was born in the year my father last went off to war.

He was in the kingdom of the Franks, and he returned with riches so great that he has walked with a stoop ever since, so heavy they were to bear.

Not that I remember this. I was only a child in arms when he returned. But Ingeborg has told me.

I think of that now as I sit and card wool. The sheep have shed their summer coats and I am put to work. The sunlight tickles my nose but I turn my face to the sun and close my eyes. The harvest sun is lovely but not so warm. I burrow my toes into the pile of wool.

“Do as you’re told!” The words reach me along with the smack to my head. I don’t know which hurts worse. My cheek burns. I put my hand to it and look at her.

“You cannot be lazy! I will see it. I am always watching you.”

It is Ingeborg. My foster mother. My father’s wife.

I hate her.

I pick up the carding comb again and start to work. Soon enough there are long wisps, white fibers that glitter like silver in the sun. I am carding wool that will become thread. The thread will then be woven into fabric that will become my wedding mantle.

I sit on the stone fence and card in the sun. I am sitting on a flat slab. This is my special place. I like to sit here. The stone is a soft gray, with little pits in it. Those are the elves’ mills; in bad years we offer butter and oil there to appeal to the old folk.

Behind me is our house. The finest hall in the village. A large room with a thatched roof and the entrance on the long side. My father is chief and king of the village. I ought to be glad for that.

But I am not. My father is a king without power. Since his last raid, the riches he came home with have dwindled. Now they are no more than a silver chain and a little box of coins. Everything else has

gone to the villagers or to Ingeborg. When the Varangians came and Father and Ingeborg together made them flee to their boats and disappear again—that was the last time I saw my father at full strength. Since then he has become bent and twisted, like an old apple tree in a windstorm.

Our village is by the sea. We live on fishing and growing grain. The men of our village hunt on the ridge and come home with deer or moose. The boys in the village snare rabbits. Father has taught me to use both bow and axe, and sometimes Sten and I go on a hunt.

Father is the king of the village, and Ingeborg is his queen. She was Summer Maiden when she was young. She walked around the field with stalks of grain in her hair and a flaxen skirt, with bare breasts. After this she was celebrated at every feast. Only the most beautiful girls can be Summer Maiden, and Ingeborg will not let anyone forget it. Especially not me.

I could never be Summer Maiden. My hair is too coarse, like horsehair. My skin is too dark. My eyes are too small and my smile is crooked. When I look at myself in a bronze mirror, I see that my eyes are dark and my hair is black.

“You have brown eyes,” says Njord. “You have eyes like amber,” says Father. “Real troll eyes,” Ingeborg says with a snort.

The finest house in the village is no longer very fine. It needs to be sealed up. The walls are starting to crack and could use another layer of mud and horse manure. The straw on the roof is colorless and thin in spots. When the rain pours down, it leaks. Then Ingeborg places a pot under the drip and sighs as she calls my father worthless. He always smiles at her, smiles and accepts her words.

“Turid!”

Someone is calling for me. He is standing by the gate. It’s Sten, the smith’s son. He waves. I stand and hurry over to him. I let go of the wool in my hands and let it fall to the ground. I don’t care if it gets filthy.

“We got in a large bundle of skins yesterday. My father let me have a few bits. I can show you how to make vellum.” Sten’s face is aglow. He had a broad, freckled face with blue eyes that sit far apart. His mouth always looks glad and he still has all his teeth. He is a few years older than I am, and we have been friends all my life. He is like his name, which means “stone”—secure and dependable. Solid and constant.

“Show me!” This is what I want most of all. I don’t want to make my wedding clothes. I want to learn to make vellum, to prepare skins so that I can write on them. Then I want to learn the Romans’ alphabet.

“Come tomorrow,” he says with a smile. I nod.

“Has your father said yes?” I ask, and I can hear my eagerness making my voice bright. Sten nods.

“I told you. And he also promised to teach you the letters.” His grin widens as I clap my hand to my mouth.

I want to write. Sten knows. He and Njord are the only ones I have told. Neither of them laughed at me, though I was afraid they might.

The sun disappears behind a cloud. A shadow falls over us. I watch as Sten looks up, and I see his smile vanish. His mouth gapes as he follows something with his eyes. I look up too, squinting.

Three blurry shapes are rushing toward us. I shade my eyes with my hand to see them more clearly. They are the bodies of three large birds, coming from the sky. Soon I can hear the sound of their wings beating; a roar like the sea. Sten hops aside as they strike the ground between us.

They are three swans. The largest birds I have ever seen. Their feathers sparkle white and their beaks are red as blood. Their necks are long and their clear-eyed heads turn toward me. I can’t move.

I think of all the stories I’ve heard. They tell of swans that are really young girls.

The largest of them looks me straight in the eye. Then a film covers its clear eye and it looks like she is staring into something I can’t see. Then she slowly bows her head as if she is nodding. And she opens her beak and gives a shriek. It sounds like nothing I have ever heard before. Not like birdsong in the

spring, not like a warning call. It doesn't even sound like the battle cries of the grouse when they fight for a hen. This sound is piercing, hurting my ears. I think of my favorite story from when I was little, about a swan who took off her suit of feathers to bathe. A hunter found it and hid it from her. Then she was his. I look into the bird's eyes and think of how the swan lost everything that was her own, and had to wed a hunter instead.

Then the swans put out their wide, white wings. They sway a few, clumsy steps toward the sea and rise into the sky. In the air they aren't clumsy; they're beautiful. As they fly away I think about how the hunter took what was most beautiful about the swan and kept it for himself.

"Did you see that?" Sten says, standing beside me. He watches them go. Soon the large birds are just small dots against the sky as they fly across the sea.

"Of course I did," I snap.

"Three swans. My mother always says it's a sign," he goes on, paying no mind to my fury.

"A sign of what?" I ask.

"It depends, she says." Sten looks at me again and his eyes are grave. "But they only appear when something is going to happen. And also they can mean a wedding."

I snort again. "She does not exactly have the second sight, your mother. We all know that I am to be married."

I have been betrothed since I was three years old. To the son of my father's good friend, the king of Hedeby. I have never met the man I am to wed.

He nods. "But still," he says. "Three swans. I've never seen such large birds in all my life. And they almost never come so close to the village. It doesn't just mean the wedding," he says with a frown.

"Maybe it means I'm going to learn to write," I say, nudging him with my elbow. He laughs and I smile back.

I will never forget the look in those birds' eyes. The film that drew across them. Eyes that were so clearly those of an animal. Yet the wisdom in them was human.

I say farewell to Sten and he disappears toward home. He lives in the smith's house, on the edge of the village.

I run back to the stone wall. I must hurry to finish the wool. It has to be carded and spun and dyed. I look with loathing at the pile of wool by my feet and give it a fierce kick.

Kicking wool is not the same as kicking a stone or anything else. The wool rises off the ground a bit and then settles back into place. I think about going down to the shore later to throw stones. I often do that when I'm angry. When I'm done my arms hurt from all the throwing and my throat from the yelling. By then I am usually calm again.

Ingeborg does not let me forget my bridal clothing, not even for a second. And I don't want to wed. Not now, maybe never. But Ingeborg says that I must.

Someone touches my shoulder and I jump. It is Sebba, our thrall. She has long, gray, tangled hair that looks like uncarded wool. Her skin is brown as shoe leather. And her mouth has almost no teeth. But she smiles. She always smiles at me.

"You should come in. It is evening meal," she says, touching my hair. Sebba is always touching me. She pats and smooths strands of hair back into place. She wipes away my tears when I cry. When my mother died, Ingeborg and Sebba helped me survive. Ingeborg's breasts had milk because she had just borne Njord, and he and I shared it.

That is why he is so frail, Ingeborg says. I took all the fat milk from him. Even as a suckling child I knew to help myself.

Njord and I are the same age, but I am half a head taller and much heavier. He has crooked legs and sunken cheeks. His skin is pale and his eyes are edged in red. His voice is faint. Ingeborg will never

forgive me for making her son frail and wretched, and I hear about it every time she is angry. She is almost always angry.

“Sebba,” I say, taking her hand. “I saw three swans. They flew up and landed right in front of me. I looked into the eyes of the largest one. Then she cried, and then they flew off again.”

Sebba’s eyes widen with surprise. “Three swans?” she says, patting my hand. Out of habit, I think, because even if her hands are on my own, she herself is far away. She looks out at the sea. “Three swans,” she says again. “They are three daughters of a king, looking for their own daughter. A man stole the child away and they took the shape of birds to search for their daughter. You know how they sound. They are mothers looking for their missing child.”

I shudder as I think of the sound that comes from a swan’s beak.

“Did the child have three mothers?” I ask, and I see the skin on my arm turn to gooseflesh. Sebba nods.

“They spun the child,” she says slowly. “They spun flax and the blue became her eyes and the yellow her hair. They were locked up in a tower, three daughters of a king. They spun flax and they spun a child who was brought to life by their tears.”

“Did they find her?” I rub my arms.

“No,” Sebba says. “You saw them. They’re still looking.”

I smile at her but she does not smile back. “Now then,” she says after a moment. “Time for evening meal.”

I walk in behind Sebba. She eats in the thrall house with the other thralls. But first she helps Ingeborg with our food.

“Sit,” Ingeborg snaps, pointing at my place. My father sits in the seat of honor with Ingeborg to his right. Njord and I sit at the other end, I on the short side and he on the long side.

I take my seat without a word. The meal is porridge and meat. Ingeborg takes the meat from the spit. It is the old rooster who went lame. I heard him fussing earlier. That must have been Ingeborg wringing his neck. She serves all of us. My father is given the largest portion. Then Ingeborg, then Njord. I am last. On my plate is a pile of mostly bone and gristle. But I don't protest; I just eat. Sebba gives me a smile and I smile back in secret.

"I saw three swans come flying in," I say. Njord looks up but Father didn't hear and Ingeborg is ignoring me.

"Three swans," I say again.

This time Father hears. "Three swans? Up here?" He looks surprised.

"The Valkyries," Ingeborg says. "Sometimes they take the shape of birds." She takes a spoonful of porridge and eats it without any mess at all. When Father eats porridge, most of it lands in his beard.

We scoop the porridge from a bowl in the middle of the table. I have my own spoon, which Father carved my name into in runes. I fill it with porridge to dull the hunger. After a while I am full and I lick the spoon clean.

"Do you think there will be a raid?" Njord asks. His cheeks turn red. After the Varangian raid he had nightmares for months. I remember what it was like to wake up to his screams every night. He says that he does not remember it.

Ingeborg shakes her head. "You never know. They might come back." She cackles and her eyes roam around the hall. I know she is looking at the cracks in the walls, the moldy straw on the floor, the threadbare tapestries.

"There's nothing to take anymore," she says, and silence falls around the table.

"This might be the last of the sun," my father says, looking out the window openings, which we haven't yet covered with skins to protect us from the cold.

“It will be a short harvest, but a longer winter,” Ingeborg says, and her body shakes as if it is freezing. She is done with her meal, but my father is still eating. Njord picks at his food. He looks at me and I nod, so he puts his meat on my plate when Ingeborg isn’t looking. Father sees what we are doing, but he doesn’t say anything; he just shakes his head.

We have always done this. Njord gives me what he can’t manage, and I eat it. This way neither of us is scolded and I can eat Ingeborg’s small portions without protesting the unfair fact that I am always, always given the least.

I thank Njord by telling him stories at night. His eyes are weak so he will never learn to decipher runes or read the Romans’ script.

Njord loves stories, and that makes Ingeborg angry. She wants Njord to grow up to be a chief. A powerful chief who can garner us respect again. But that will not happen.

Njord’s voice is faint as the footsteps of a rat and he stammers and stumbles over words when he speaks. The only time he doesn’t stammer is when we are alone.

Sebba leaves and the door slams behind her. A sudden gust of wind has grabbed the wood and flung it against the doorframe. Ingeborg frowns. Then she shrugs her shoulders.

“Last summer was not good. The seed is already molding in its sacks.”

Father shakes his head. He says nothing. There is not much to say.

“Bury it,” he says quietly, at last. She nods but her frown is still there. Burying the seed will make it sour. It will keep for longer. But it won’t mean more seed in the end. The winter is going to be hard; harvest was warm but the weather can turn at any time. That is what Sebba says.

The porridge bowl is empty. Everyone licks their spoons clean and then I clear the table. I take the bowls outside and rinse them in the rain barrel under the eaves. Then I let them dry in the sun.

The sun sets into the sea. Our hall is on a shelf of the ridge that slopes down to the shore. My grandfather had the hall built. Father has told me how they carried the stones, how the thralls wore out

their backs, and how at last the hall stood ready, splashed with blood and blessed. The hall was long. The roof gleamed like gold; the straw crisp and new. There were double doors that led into the hall, where Grandfather, and later Father, received their guests: kings, petty rulers, priests from across the sea, and rich men from other lands.

Now the straw that covers the roof is gray-yellow and dull and no king has set foot in our hall since Father was young and a warrior. The doors gape open and bang in the wind and the walls leak.

I walk down to the stony shore. The dogs follow me and play in the waves. Fafner is my own dog, a shaggy thing with a long tongue and glad eyes. We were given to each other when we were little. I thought he looked like a dragon with his long body and finely curved snout. So he was named Fafner, like the dragon Sigurd slayed.

Off in the distance is the landing where the boats are moored. Father's karve is the largest of them, but it is leaky and has taken on water.

"Wait for me!" Njord is following me. He limps; his legs are different lengths. But we run at the water's edge and play with the dogs, and soon we are all wet, sandy, and happy. Njord snorts with laughter, and when we come back to the house Ingeborg just smiles. She seldom has the heart to scold him. Father is sitting by the hearth and dozing, and Ingeborg is rubbing his boots with seal oil. It has a sharp smell.

"Your hair," she says in my direction, and I nod. I take out my comb. My hair is matted. It isn't long; it only reaches my shoulders. But even so, it gets snarled and becomes coarse. Its color is black, not a lovely yellow like Ingeborg's. Yet I comb my hair morning and evening. Ingeborg says it will help my hair grow healthy and long. She also says that she had a friend who had black hair, like me. After she combed her hair morning and evening for several years, it turned a beautiful gold.

I believed Ingeborg when I was little. I don't anymore.

Night falls and the hearth glows, but the cold creeps further and further in. Njord's and my bed is closest to the hearth and Ingeborg and Father sleep on the bench across from the door; it is colder there but they have a shelf to sleep on so they don't feel the icy draught on the floor.

"Good night," Njord whispers, and I answer him. Soon I hear his breaths growing even. He is sleeping calmly, so it will be easier for me to fall asleep as well.

Under my pillow I have a little lion made of wood that Sten carved for me. A lion is a dangerous animal from Blueland, and Sten's father has told him about large lion statues in Miklagård. Ragne knows about this; he traveled on raids to the east when he was young. Sten carved the lion out of wood and colored it with red ochre. Its mane is lovely and curly; its teeth are sharp. The lion is both smooth and sharp and it fits in my hand perfectly.

"I will never wed," I whisper with my mouth to the lion's. I think of the swan. How the hunter took her feathers and how she became his wife. I think of Sebba and the three daughters of the king who lost their child. I know that if I wed I will lose myself.

I squeeze the lion until it hurts my hand.

The lion has grown warm and I place it against my cheek. I close my eyes. It is as if something inside me grows slack. Like a bowstring when the arrow is shot.

And then I can fall asleep.

Chapter 2

I try to sneak away after the morning meal, which is yesterday's porridge, but Ingeborg grabs me by the ear and pinches.

"Where are you going?" She gives me a broad smile as I grimace.

"Nowhere." I am planning to go see Sten. He promised to teach me to write.

"I want you to finish the wool from yesterday. It must be carded and spun before the rain comes."

She smiles again at my surly face. The pile of wool is still where I tossed it yesterday, on the floor.

"It's for you, stupid girl," she snaps. "The wool is good and thick from the summer. There are no worms in it. It will make lovely clothes for your wedding. You need a dowry. You don't have much else."

I smile. This is the only thing I have to cling to. That Father's hall and possessions will be so wretched that this Harald, Father's friend, will have second thoughts when it comes to my betrothal.

"I want to go out first." Ingeborg lets go of my ear but gives another snort.

"So go. But then I want you to come back and help Sebba with the washing. And I will need you this evening."

The morning is chilly and the sea is hazy. The dog days have vanished with the rain and now it is the month of harvest. The sun grows more and more distant. I shiver and draw my woolen shawl tighter around myself as I hurry to the village. It lies by the water, near the deeper part of the bay. Poles are driven into the bay in a half circle; this sets it apart and makes the water calmer. Our house is highest up and above it is the ridge, with the stone cairns where the old folk live. But they are small and they hide amongst the stones, so you never see them. Ingeborg gives them cream and butter when we sacrifice, and that is enough for them. Their creatures give no milk, she has explained.

The houses squat along the stony shore. About twenty houses. Some stand empty. Some men never return from the summer journeys and their wives and children move in with someone else. Father and his hird used to go across the water on plundering voyages, but that was a long time ago now.

I knock on the door of the smith's cottage. It swings open and the hinges squeak. Sten's little sister is the one who opens it; her name is Hildur. Her face is full of snot and her cheeks are chapped and red. She holds a rag tight and stares at me with her mouth wide open.

"Is Sten home?" I ask.

She walks off without a word. She is only five, and she doesn't say much. Soon she comes back with Sten behind her. He lights up when he sees me.

"Good," he says. "Come with me."

We walk around the house. The smithy is behind it. This is an open shed that faces the sea. The sea breeze helps keep the fire alive when Ragne forges. And he carves stone and wood, and prepares hides there. He has been many places in the world. He used to go on plundering voyages with Father. They were in Miklagård together.

I have always liked visiting Sten's home. His father has broad shoulders and a black beard, but he has kind eyes and often winks at me. He and his wife have five children, and Sten is the oldest. It is always very lively here. It can be so quiet at our house.

"Here are the skins," Sten says, pointing at the stone vat that stands along the short side of the smithy. The vat is full of milky water and he pokes a stick down into it. Dark lumps float up. They are calfskins that have been soaking for days. The smell is dreadful and I take a step back. Sten laughs. "You see? The hair has come loose." He pokes it with the stick again and I watch as dark fur floats to the surface. The hide is pale in the dark water.

"Father said we should stretch them today. You can help me."

I nod. I would rather be outside stretching skins on frames than sitting at home and listening as Ingeborg nags Father.

We pull up the hides, which are heavy and swollen. They have a sharp smell and we make sure not to touch them. The limewater will gnaw our skin and burn it.

Ragne helps us poke holes into the edges of the hides so we can lace string through them and stretch them on the frames that are attached to the trees.

“As long as it doesn’t rain,” he says, glancing upward. Then he smiles at me and winks. “What do you think?”

The smith always asks for my opinion. He is the only one who does, and I like him for it.

“Sebba says that it will be mild for a few more weeks. But then the weather will turn and winter will come.”

He nods. “Sebba knows,” he says.

We all help pull the skins out and soon they are stretched. They have strange shapes; they hang between the skinny ash trees that grow around the smith’s house. The frames are made of wood, narrow strips full of holes from nails. The smith is the only person in the village who tans hides and he doesn’t do it often.

Soon the trees are full of murky phantoms. You can still see the outlines of the animals, and that makes them eerie. They are like monsters in a nightmare: headless, flat, and dark.

“This is my birthday gift to you,” Sten says and laughs. We don’t give birthday gifts. At midwinter’s end, everyone has grown a year older. But Sten likes to say that he remembers when I was born. It was when the grain was ripe. He was three years old and was allowed to come along when his mother was going to deliver my mother. Then she died and they swaddled me and let Sten comfort me as they washed my mother’s corpse.

He likes to give me things, Sten. A lovely shell, a walrus tusk. A glass bead that I wear around my neck. The wooden lion. And now, hides to write on.

“What will you write?” he asks. “Later, I mean. When you know how.”

I shake my head. I don’t know yet. But hides are valuable. To use one just as you please would be wasteful. So whatever I write must be important.

We scrape the hair from the hide with curved knives. Ragne shows us how. Long, straight cuts. I stretch high up to reach, and I bring the knife down to the bottom edge.

Ragne’s belly is large and hard and he smells like sweat. He turns his face to the sun. “Might as well enjoy these last few beams of light,” he says. Then he shows me how to scrape with long, even motions so I won’t leave marks on the skin.

“It has to be perfectly smooth if you are going to write on it,” he says, winking at me. I smile.

“Will you teach me the Romans’ alphabet?” I ask. I happen to press too hard on the knife and it makes a mark on the hide. I grumble and feel it with my hand.

“Careful,” Ragne says, rubbing it with his large, black-sooted thumb. He makes a few passes with his wide blade and the mark disappears. Then he says “yes” and looks at me gravely. “I will teach you the letters,” he says with a quick glance at Sten, who just laughs. “I think both of you should know how to write.”

I nod. I feel a tingle inside.

“I know your father thinks there is no need. But times are tough. Perhaps you will travel more than your father.”

I nod again. My father traveled as a young man. He was a warrior. He raided to the east and the west. He took a wife from the land in the north. I believe that he has seen everything.

“It is good to be able to talk to people. The runes are useful. But in other lands they don’t read runes. They write letters and laws on vellum. The monks in the cloisters write the most beautiful books

with pictures in all the colors of flowers.” Ragne is earnest when he speaks to me. Sten has come over to us and he is listening too. “Books, you see? Hundreds of sheets of thin skin or parchment. Joined with invisible threads. They bind the books in skins that they gild. Those books can tell the most peculiar stories. And a person who knows stories, he is never in need.”

Ragne smiles at us and ruffles Sten’s hair. Sten ducks away but I can see that it is an old habit, not because he wants to get away. Instead he puts his arm across his father’s shoulders. I notice with surprise that they are the same height now. I have not realized that before.

“Stories,” Sten says with a smile. “But you can’t eat them.”

“Well,” Ragne says. “Maybe not. But Turid will learn the alphabet. And I hope you will get to see other lands. Both of you.”

There is extra force behind those last words. I turn to the hide again. Let my knife keep scraping. It is important not to let the hide dry out. I am going to wed, not travel. But Ragne’s words about those books wake something inside me. I want to write on that skin. Write something that makes me feel rich even if I’m not.

The hide becomes paler as the hair comes off in chunks. When it’s gone, we knead some more lime into the skin. It will stay there to tan one more time. Soon the skins are covered in white grease and I go home. It is evening already. Ingeborg is probably angry. The sun has started to set and I had promised to card the wool.

They are sitting in their places. Ingeborg points at the pile on the floor. She doesn’t say a word.

Hunger tears at me. My mouth waters when I smell the scent of porridge. The usual old grain porridge we usually eat in the evening. Today there are turnips to go with it. I don’t like turnips; they taste like wood, but today I would eat anything.

“The wool,” Ingeborg says, giving me a sharp look. Njord leans over his spoon and doesn’t look up. Father smiles at me, just a tiny bit, but his smile wavers.

I say nothing but crouch beside the pile of wool and start to card it. I card angrily, with quick, long motions. I grip the handle so hard that my hands soon hurt. They will blister. Good.

The others have gone to bed by the time I am done. The rest of the porridge and turnips are on the table. They have grown cold, and the porridge has congealed. My fingers hurt from all the carding. I hear Njord snoring and I know he's asleep, but Ingeborg isn't.

I eat slowly. I'm tired.

"Go to bed," she says from the bed.

I nod but don't look at her.

"Sebba will do the washing-up tomorrow," she says then, and I crawl into my bed and pull the blanket over me. It smells familiar. Fafner lies down on my feet, where he usually sleeps, and he gives a long sigh.

"Tomorrow you will stay home," Ingeborg says in a low voice. She doesn't sound angry; she is more thoughtful. I wonder why.

Njord is merry at breakfast. Father has promised that he can come along to Onstuna. Father is going there to meet Björn, who is jarl there. He will ride there; he will be gone for several nights. Ingeborg doesn't like to let Njord travel; she says he is too frail. But she has promised this time, and he is so excited he can hardly eat.

"Sebba, will the weather hold?" he asks, loading his mouth with porridge. But it gets stuck in his throat and he coughs it back out. Even so, he laughs with tears in his eyes.

"You will make it there and back again," Sebba answers. "Then there will be a storm."

Father nods and ruffles Njord's hair.

"We'll make it home in plenty of time," he says, smiling at me. "While I'm away you must obey Ingeborg. You know that, Turid."

Ingeborg gives me a pointed look.

“What will you do in Onstuna?” I ask, pretending not to notice her.

“It is soon time for the harvest sacrifice, and I haven’t heard from Björn,” Father says, troubled.

Everyone gathers for the great sacrifices. Father is chief and king and Ingeborg is a völvá, a seeress.

In the past we were known for our large and lavish feasts. I know that one year—I was just a small child but I remember—Father sacrificed fifteen horses all at once. The next summer our harvest was bigger than anyone had ever seen.

“Tell Ylva that I want to see her soon,” I say, and I too become troubled. What if they have gotten sick? Ylva is my best friend, and Björn’s daughter’s daughter. “Has there been a raid?”

Ingeborg shakes her head. “No one has heard anything. Don’t worry. Maybe Björn has just been busy with the harvest.”

Father nods, but he doesn’t look convinced. “There are no raids on Onstuna. It is safe beyond the ridge. I will take Ebba and Träl with me. And Njord, of course.” He smiles and looks happier when Njord laughs. For him, this is an adventure. A two-day ride, nights by the fire. And getting out from under Ingeborg’s watchful eye.

“I will pack the food for your journey,” she says, snapping at me to eat up, stop wasting time. The porridge seems to grow in my mouth. I want to go with them.

They ride off and even Njord’s back looks happy. My feet feel as if they have sunk into the ground in our enclosure. It is hard to move them. Now Ingeborg and I are alone.

“Hurry up!” she says, pulling my braid. “The wool!”

The wool. That never-ending wool. I have carded it until my hands blister. Now it must be spun.

“I’ll sit outside,” I say, and I bring the wool to the stone wall. Ingeborg nods, but she looks doubtful.

“As long as it doesn’t make you waste time,” she says, and I put my hand on my chest to show her I am serious, that I will do my best.

"I don't want to!" I say to Sebba, who tugs my braid. She gives a low chuckle. I yank my head away and twist the wool, stick it in my mouth, and fasten it to the spindle. Then I grab the spindle and make it spin. It goes so fast that the wool tangles around my wrist and gets stuck. I grumble and start over. Sebba laughs. "She does all she can to annoy me!" I say.

"She doesn't do it to annoy you, my little chick," Sebba says. "She does it because you are as stubborn as an old brown bear. Because you never give in to her."

"That's what I mean!" I bump the whorl of the spindle again. The yarn is lumpy and uneven. Sebba takes it from me and makes it turn; her hands are light and the yarn starts to run between her old, gnarled hands, even this time.

"If you keep on like that, so will she. It's like a cockfight, watching you two. Both so willful, so headstrong."

I sit beside her with my hands in my lap. I pick at my hangnails. They are ragged and bloody. I stick them in my mouth and bite them off.

"I can't help it. When she tells me to do something, it's like I just can't. Obeying her is the hardest thing in the world."

"I know." Sebba nods with a small smile. I can see all the furrows in her face going up. Her eyes are pale blue and her nose is crooked. One of the thralls broke it once, she told me. He struck her, and she bore his child. But she didn't say much more than that, just that he has been dead a long time.

I turn my face to the sun. After a while I feel Sebba's hands on my face. "There," she says, giving me the spindle again. The yarn she has spun is even and a perfect thickness, and I take the whorl and let it keep spinning. It goes better this time, and I thank Sebba. Not that I need to; she is only a thrall.

By the time Ingeborg comes back, I have spun almost a whole ball. The day has passed and I am dizzy from watching the spindle and the yarn. The sun has burnt the back of my neck, but now it is going down beyond the sea. Ingeborg looks pleased; she nods at me.

“Come in and eat,” she says.

It is only the two of us, and we don't talk to each other. As usual, Sebba eats in the thrall house and I miss her. The other thralls are big and dumb; not Unna, but the others. Ebbe is Sebba's son, I know, but he is rough as a ship's mast and his lower lip is always hanging down. He makes me feel uneasy. It is as if he never looks straight at me, but next to me somewhere. His glances are quick and sly. Sebba, though, she always looks me straight in the eye.

Ingeborg goes to bed. She is quieter than usual. I don't say anything either. It is still warm, but soon it will be harvest. I have trouble sleeping. Ingeborg doesn't sleep, either. I hear the crashing waves and the creaking house. I hear someone singing in a low voice, one of the thralls. I hear the silence and fall asleep as I think about how alone I am. I will learn the letters. I want to have something that is only mine. And later, if I wed, if they force me to even though I don't want to, I will not let him take it away from me. No one can steal knowledge.

Chapter 3

“Wool, wool, wool!” I cry, throwing the skein of spun yarn at her. I hit her right in the face and Ingeborg takes a step back and opens her mouth. My roar stops her.

“I don’t want to! I don’t want to make bridal clothing; I don’t want a mantle. I don’t want to wed and I don’t want to obey you!”

I turn around and start to run off. I hear her quick steps and I hurry out the open door, down onto the stones that serve as stairs; I slip on a chipped part and head for the gate. I feel her take hold of my braid and yank on it, but no—it’s just my imagination. I hear myself panting, my own, furious breaths, and I cast a backwards look. I am alone. The door is wide open but Ingeborg is nowhere in sight. I keep running, but I am calmer now.

Down to the village, down to the smithy.

Sten is outside his house, emptying a pouch of something into a vat of water. He looks surprised to see me coming, but his face lights up.

“I’m soaking hides,” he says. “Help me.”

We take the scraped skins and place them in the tanning vat. Then we add more bark and finally we pour buckets of boiling water in.

“This will preserve them,” Sten says, tasting the water. He makes a face. “Bitter as a skald’s mead on the morning after,” he says, spitting in the grass. Then he dumps in a few more fistfuls of bark. I help him stir.

“I can’t stand it anymore,” I say. “I want to get away from Ingeborg.”

I lean against a half-finished figure stone beside the corner of the house. I saw Ragne chipping out the coiling dragon on it as I passed the house on the way to the shore this morning. He waved and I waved back, and I thought about how if I were his daughter I would be free.

Not like I am now.

Sten says nothing; he just keeps stirring. His shoulders are broad. The back of his neck is flushed red. From the warmth, I think.

“Turid!” It’s Ingeborg. She has come all the way here. She shouts my name with such fury that Sten drops the stick he is using to stir right into the vat.

“Come here!” she shouts. I see that her braid is flying nearly straight out behind her. She is marching with the same strength, the same swiftness I remember from back when I was a child. When she stormed right down to the shore to put an axe in the head of a warrior.

Her feet thunder against the planks that are set on the ground between the village houses.

“Turid!”

I look around. I feel like a hunted animal. The smithy is enclosed by a pole fence. Most of the houses in the village are. But it’s not so high that I can’t jump over it. I shy back from Ingeborg and run for the fence. I lift my tunic and kirtle and leap over it. Behind the house are trees and paths, ones we used to follow as children. I hear Ingeborg’s cries fade. I run until the blood pounds in my ears and I am panting through my open mouth.

I hear steps behind me. It’s Sten. He had run into the house to fetch something, but now he’s right behind me.

We are on our way up into the forest. Behind the village is the path where the goats and pigs are grazed. The path is well-worn, but it is dry from the summer. The animals graze in the forest, and Sten and I often help watch over them, along with the other children. At least, we used to. We’re too old now. Watching over the animals is a child’s task. But I miss the days in the shadow of the trees. The games, the companionship. I was not alone; I belonged.

We are no longer running. Sten has taken the lead.

I trail him and notice how wide the back of his neck has become. His hair is fair and grows in a stripe that disappears into the band of his shirt. I can see small beads of sweat, like white drops of dew early in the morning.

“What happened?” he asks without turning around. I speak to the back of his head.

“She did. I couldn’t stand it. I threw the skein at her.”

He snorts. I smile, too.

“It was so much wool. I couldn’t stand it anymore. Since Father and Njord rode away she has kept me busy. All day. All evening. I don’t have a minute for myself.”

I stop. I can hear that I sound like a child. A little child.

“I got so angry,” I say in a quieter voice.

Sten says nothing; he just walks. His pace is even, but his legs are longer than mine and soon I am sweaty. I feel circles of sweat blooming under the sleeves of my tunic. We are walking uphill, taking the narrowest animal path, the one we used to use when the pasture in the forest meadows is gone. It is more rocky and barren here. Higher up.

Soon we’re sitting on the edge of the ridge, dangling our legs. The slope is below us, and we can see my house from here. Further off is the muddle of houses and then the sea. Sten flicks away some gravel, which rolls down and trails a winding little snake of dust behind it.

“There are honey mushrooms growing on the oak,” I say, breaking the silence. We’re so high up that we can’t even hear the sea.

Sten looks at me. “Is it bad?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Ingeborg says it is. Father says it’s not so bad. But that’s what they always say.”

He nods. He understands. The oak is our sacred tree. The tree my grandfather chose to build his house beside. It was old even then, old and magnificent. With a thick, mossy green trunk and forked

branches to climb up in. A crown that gave shade from the sun and a few branches that would creak in a strong wind. Our sacred tree, our family tree. The tree our guardian lives in, the spirit of our family.

"I don't know what will happen if the tree dies," I say gloomily.

"It won't," Sten says, and he sounds just as certain as his name suggests. "It has lived for so many years. I know your father is old, but you are young. And there is Njord. Ingeborg is a powerful völvá."

I say nothing for a moment. It is easier to breathe here. Ingeborg is powerful. She is a seeress. She can speak with spirits and see the future.

"I must wed," I say. "The family will not live on if I don't have children. I have to wed someone who can set out on plundering raids with the hird again. A warrior. One who struts about with a gleaming sword and has an axe on his belt, even though the most dangerous thing he will come across is an angry crab." I am angry and sad, but Sten smiles at my words.

"Not every warrior is like Tostig," he says, and I give a reluctant laugh. Tostig is the mightiest warrior in the village, and he is part of Father's hird. But he is mostly idle now that Father no longer goes to war. Tilling the earth or fishing is below him. Tostig's coat of mail has rusted and his helmet is flecked with black, but he keeps his sword well polished. At feasts he likes to duel with anyone who offers, and if he wins he receives a coin from everyone who watches. One time he killed a man, and as soon the man was dead he cut up the ribs and pulled out the heart and ate it up. I remember it well, although I was little back then. The steam rising from the man's open ribcage, and Tostig's roar. He was out of his mind with berserk fury. But nowadays he is mostly to be found near the beer barrel. He drinks until he falls over and throws up and then it is hard to see the warrior in him.

I shudder. "No one like Tostig," I say. "I would rather die."

"There are small, frail warriors too," Sten says, poking me in the side with his elbow. "You'll have to hope for one of those."

I smile. My bad mood has vanished. The air up here clears my head. This is my favorite place. Here, I am between earth and sky. The sea before me and the ridge at my back. The sky is so high that I can breathe. I am betrothed. I imagine that the boy is much like Sten. Then I could be brave. But not if he were a warrior.

“Mother is going to have another child,” Sten says; he sounds sad. I pat his arm. We don’t usually touch each other. He is a fisherboy, even though his father is the smith. I am the daughter of a king. But I stroke his arm and am surprised at how strong it feels.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” I say, but I’m not really sure. “When is it time?”

“Late spring,” he mutters, and I grimace. The most difficult time of year. The time when the most little children die. And last summer was not bountiful enough.

Sten turns his face toward me. His blue eyes are so serious that I am scared. Most of the time, they are smiling.

“We can wed,” he says. “I want to.”

His words make a hole inside me. A hole with sharp edges.

“We can’t,” I snap. “You know that.”

He looks straight ahead again and I take my hand from his arm. My hand feels lonely and cold.

“It could work,” he persists. “We could bring life to the village again. I can be king, instead of your father. I will go raiding in the spring and at harvest, and sow and plow in the summer. Our crops will be greater than they have ever been. I will come home with riches and the village will thrive once more.”

He turns to me again and the sorrow I see in his eyes almost turns them black.

I shake my head. “We can’t. I can’t wed you. You are the smith’s son.”

I don’t have to say more. But I do it anyway.

“They would never agree to it. My father. Your father. Ingeborg would go out of her mind.”

“My father is a smith. He was a warrior when he was young. He is a good man.”

Sten sounds resigned. As if he were speaking on an exhale, a long sigh.

I shake my head. "He is a good man. I know that. Sometimes I wish he were my father. But he is not Odin's son."

A long silence follows. A heaviness rests between us.

I can see it plainly now; it is perfectly clear. My village is dying. The crops fail; the fish no longer school. When I was a child we kept watch from the ridge, and when the herring came the whole sea would start to roil. Then we would run down the path, laughing, and then all we had to do was bring up the fish in buckets. The whole shore would be silvered with fish.

Now it is harvest time and the crops were poor. The winter will hit us hard. Like last winter, and the one before that.

Father is old, and the village will die with him.

"We need a strong king, from Odin's line," I say. It is my responsibility now. The village needs a leader who can bring years of plenty.

"Your mother is going to have a child," I say, and it sounds like an accusation.

Sten says nothing; he just shifts to the side. There is a chill between us. I rise. There are small stone mounds along the ridge. The graves of the old folk. The elves and little people live there. I take a piece of bread from my pocket. I took it at breakfast. I crumble it over the mounds and say words in the old language—that they should eat my bread and be happy.

I see a shadow between the mounds. It is one of the old folk peering out. The figure of a girl, almost transparent. She looks at me and bows. A quick movement, toward the earth. Then she disappears among the stones.

"She bowed," I say in surprise, turning to Sten. But he didn't see anything. I can tell from his dark expression. It is still aimed at me.

I can see it clearly now. The village is my responsibility. And I must give the village a king. A real king, a son of Odin. The boy I am betrothed to is of Odin's line, like me. Sten, no matter how good he is, is not from the line of a king. His father is a smith; they come from Völund.

I don't want to. I truly don't want to. But can I watch as the village dies?

"Can you watch as your mother's child dies, knowing that it is your fault?" I spit the words out. I direct them at Sten. But both he and I know that I am really talking to myself.

Sten says nothing. Then we slowly walk back again. We sit down in the clearing and eat the food he brought with him. Now that I know his mother is carrying another child, the bites expand in my mouth. Bread and a bit of cheese. It almost gets stuck, so I wash it down with water from the brook. We eat in silence. A leaf comes twirling down.

"Look," I say. "It's brown." I let the leaf go in the brook and watch it sail away. It is gilded by the sun; it flashes like gold. Like a ship with a dead warrior, a ship on fire.

"It is harvest now," Sten says.

When Father and Njord return, I am finished with the wool. It is rolled up in skeins that hang on the wall in the weaving shed, gray and demanding. I worked without a word. Ingeborg didn't say very much either, so the mood has been icy.

Father and Njord sweep back in with the first fall winds. They come in the evening when we are getting ready for nighttime. Ingeborg is combing her long hair by the hearth, and I am already lying in my bed. She is wearing only her shift, and with her hair down she looks like a young girl. The fire puts roses in her cheeks and she looks thoughtful. I watch her furtively.

Suddenly she turns to look at me and says, "You are fifteen years old. You are old enough."

"Yes," I say reluctantly. I am old enough to wed. I am nearly grown. But no matter what she has in mind, I know that I don't want to.

"I think..." she says, but she is interrupted as the door blows open and Father staggers in with Njord in his arms. She flies up and helps lay him in his bed. She scolds Father with that scared voice she only uses when she is worried about Njord. I jump up and go over to them to see if I can help.

"What happened?" I ask.

Father shakes his head. "Nothing. But we rode hard. The wind was strong and I wanted to get home before the rain came. He said he was fine, that he wasn't tired."

"You know better than to push him. You know that he would never say he was tired," Ingeborg snaps at Father. Njord opens his eyes and looks angrily at his mother.

"I wasn't tired. I just got tired, right now. I want to sleep. Leave me alone." Then he makes a show of closing his eyes and pulls the blanket to his chin.

"Leave him alone now. He needs to sleep." Father speaks to Ingeborg in a commanding voice, and she always listens when he does that. She strokes Njord's cheek but then goes back to the hearth. The cauldron is hanging above the coals, as always.

"The gruel is warm," she says, scooping some into Father's bowl. He nods and sits down in the seat of honor. Then he takes the bowl and stretches out his feet so Ingeborg can take off his leg wrappings and boots. He sighs with satisfaction when he can warm his bare feet at the fire.

"There we go," he says, slurping contentedly. He almost looks happy. "I'm glad we went. Björn was on his way south. If we hadn't traveled when we did, we would have missed him. This way I got to see it with my own two eyes."

"What do you mean?" Ingeborg sounds surprised as she returns from placing Father's boots on the chest where he keeps his clothing. "Are they all well over there?"

Father shakes his head. "I'm afraid I can't call them well."

I grow worried. "Ylva? How is she?" I saw her last summer, and I remember how we laughed until our bellies hurt. I don't recall what was so funny, but I can still feel the ache in my stomach, how the

laughter turned to pain, and how the tears ran down our cheeks. I have never laughed as much as when I was with Ylva.

“Ylva is fine. But Björn has gone mad. His is a Christian now!” Father spits out the word and Ingeborg’s hands fall to her sides. “A Christian?”

He slurps the last bit out of his bowl and gives it to Ingeborg. She takes it slowly.

“When?” she says.

“They have had a Christian living with them. He comes from Osnabrück in Saxony and has been to Birka. Gautbert is his name.” Father spits a gob into the fire, as if the name tastes so horrible in his mouth that he has no choice. “Björn has allowed him to live at Onstuna all summer, and as thanks he has converted them. First Siri, and now Björn.”

Father shakes his head. “I would not guess that Björn would turn to the White Christ!”

“And Siri!” Ingeborg says, and her hands flutter before her face like birds. This usually means she is mad. “She is a völva; no one could imagine that Siri could turn to the White God.”

Father shakes his head. “Everything is topsy-turvy in Onstuna. Siri and Björn are to travel to Rome and they are readying themselves for the journey. They will bring their oldest sons and their families. The youngest is staying home to take care of their farm.” Father spits again. “That Gautbert has told them that the riches in heaven are sufficient. That they should forsake worldly things and beg for salvation. That only the poor can pass through the eye of the needle.”

“What eye of the needle?” I ask.

Father strokes his beard with his thumb and first finger and peers at me. “I don’t quite know. But it is has something to do with the White God, who thinks that riches and treasures are not good for much. The poor man will stand before the god on the day of judgment and he will be greater than any jarl or king.”

I laugh. It sounds absurd. “What about Ylva?”

“She will travel with them to Rome. It is far to the south, just beside the Blue Sea. It will be a long journey for them. Not all of them will return home.”

As I go to sleep, I feel even more alone than before. Soon Ylva will be gone. She won't even say farewell. She might die on the journey; it is dangerous to travel over the sea. And Sten's words, the ones that made such a hole inside me, ring in my ears. He wants me to be his bride. Everything that had been between us is gone now, and nothing new has come in its place. I clutch the lion in my hand, but no matter how hard I squeeze he doesn't become warm.

Chapter 4

Njord recovers slowly from the journey. He is weaker than he was before they left. For days he eats poorly and Ingeborg sends me into the forest to find sorrel, dandelions, and nettles. But they have withered and I come home with a few weary stalks which she tears out of my hands. *It isn't my fault that Njord is sick*, I want to shout, but I don't. Instead I go out and slam the door behind me.

I go to the thrall house. Sebba is alone inside; she is preparing breakfast. Gruel here too, just as in the great hall. The other thralls are out in the field. The harvest has been gathered and now they are gleaning what was left over. Not a single grain must be wasted; the winter will be hard, according to Sebba, who knows.

"Are things difficult?" she asks with a toothless smile, without the slightest break in her motions: her left hand pours the flour in while her right hand stirs, waiting for the gruel to thicken. Her crooked back must be aching, because now and then she sighs and her mouth draws tight. But she smiles when she looks at me.

"She is after me about everything." I stand beside Sebba and take over the ladle. "Sit down for a bit."

I help her sometimes, the way she helps me. But no one must know. Not even Sten. Nor Ylva; she would have laughed at me. *Helping a thrall, what is the use of that? They are meant to work*, she would say. I know that, of course. But Sebba gives me a grateful smile and sinks down on her heels to rest for a while. She rubs her back and takes a breath.

"I went to Holme and got a new salve. One made of snake venom. It helps, but of course it still hurts."

I nod. She is old. She was already old back when she took care of my mother. Ebbe is her last child; she was too old even when she bore him. He was born the same year as my father and was allowed to

live so he could be given to my father as a gift, a boy of the same age to play with. The water was poured on Father and he was given Ebbe, and Sebba was glad she got to keep him. Many of her other children had been placed in the forest.

“Holme asked after you,” she says after a long pause. I stir the cauldron and the gruel thickens; Sebba takes a pinch of ash and stirs it in. It makes the gruel salty, she says, because regular salt is too precious to be wasted on thralls.

“Why?” I’m surprised. I know who Holme is. Everyone does. Our district isn’t particularly vast, and Holme is an old chief who can talk to spirits and mix salves for everything from love to starting birth pains. Certainly he knows who I am. I am my father’s only daughter. But why would he ask after me?

“He wondered if this was your fifteenth summer.”

How strange. Holme remembers when I was born. Many people know that I have seen fifteen winters, because that means it is time to wed and many of the villagers are talking about it. But there can’t be many who remember that I was born in the summer.

“I said it was true. Then Holme said you should come visit him. Alone.”

I stop stirring the gruel and turn to her. “Why do you think he wants me to do that?”

She squints one eye at me and rises, taking the ladle again. The gruel has thickened.

“You’ll find out when you go to see him,” she says, tasting the gruel. A faint grimace. “Hot,” she says, and I give her a hug and laugh. Sebba is the only person I hug. But she gets smaller as I grow bigger.

“I suppose I’ll have to go. Maybe he has something for Njord.” I feel ice in my belly. Ingeborg doesn’t like Holme. She says that he is a chief, not a völva. A chief should sacrifice and appease the gods, but not wander in the world of spirits. She says that Holme angers the gods, that he is a man who does women’s work. Holme doesn’t say anything to Ingeborg, and that makes her angry too. Father mostly just laughs.

We have never sought Holme’s help, but if it’s about Njord...?

I leave when the thralls come in, hungry, and I feel their gazes on me, sticking like spiderwebs to bare feet on an early morning. It is Ebbe, Träl, Ubbe, and Unna. Unna smiles at me, but the others won't meet my eyes. I hold my head high and walk out, brushing their looks off me. I don't like Ebbe. Like most thralls, he is sly. Träl and Ubbe do everything Ebbe says. Unna, though, could have been my friend if she weren't a thrall—she is my age, short and thin, with fair hair and a broad smile.

Holme lives at the edge of the village. His hut is small and squat, like Holme himself. I knock on the doorpost since the door is no more than a hanging skin.

“Come in, girl!” he calls from within, and I realize he knows that it's me.

The cottage is cramped. A single room, with the hearth in the middle and a pot hanging over the fire by a sooty black chain. The pot is smoking, and it smells strange and sour. Not the way porridge or gruel usually smells. Holme himself is sitting on a skin rug with his legs crossed, and he beckons at me to take a seat. His bed is behind him, with animal hides and pillows all over the place. Next to it is a beautifully carved chest with a real lock made of iron. Cups and bowls are stacked in one corner. Herbs are hung from the ceiling to dry, large armfuls of plants. There is also a ham that's stained black from all the smoke, and a few cuts of seal meat.

Holme has matted black hair and a broad face. His mouth is wide and when he smiles it cleaves his head in two—at least, it seems to. His chest is bare but he is wearing leather breeches and has a belt around his waist. His body is tattooed with winding dragons and wild beasts with sharp teeth. Seals, walrus, and fish with human eyes. He is wearing a necklace of teeth. Some of them are definitely from a walrus, but I squint at the smaller ones, trying to get a good look at them. They look like human teeth!

“Sit down.” His smile disappears and I take a seat across from him, cross-legged, just like him. We are sitting very close to the fire and my eyes sting with smoke.

“Turid,” he says slowly, as if he is tasting my name. “Daughter of Hild, who was daughter of Sigyn.”

I nod. Mother and grandmother. But I don't remember either of them.

"You are last in a line of women who come from the north."

I nod again. Father took mother to wed after he had traveled in the north. She didn't want to be his bride, but he paid one hundred marks of gold for her, and her father could not refuse. So, against her will, Mother followed Father here and then died when I was born. Father has told me some things about her family, and I've heard more from Ingeborg, but only when she was angry and wanted to upset me. Then she would laugh at my black hair and dark eyes and tell me that they came from being born of the Rimtursar, frost giants in the winter lands.

"How do you know their names?" My voice sounds choked, maybe from the smoke, maybe out of fear.

He smiles at me. "I come from there as well. I knew both your mother and grandmother."

I didn't know that. Suddenly he looks kind. His hair and his dark skin; all at once his small eyes look familiar. It is like looking at my reflection in a pool of water.

"Now you are fifteen summers old," he says, looking at me with narrowing eyes. "Fifteen. That is grown. That means taking your fate into your own hands."

I am startled. That's not how I see it. I feel more like I am old enough to become a man's wife, old enough to be married off for money and belongings, and old enough to bear children who will hang from my skirts and demand of me everything I have—youth, love, and strength.

"You have your grandmother's hands," he says, and I look down at my hands, which are still, resting on my knees. They are broad and I have bitten my nails to the quick.

"Look inside," he says, and I turn my palms toward my face, holding them so the light of the fire falls on them.

"I saw them when you were born. I was the one who pulled you from the womb. I am sorry she died."

I nod. I have never known her, but I've always longed to.

"When you were brand new I looked into your hands. You have a line across your palm. Your grandmother had it, but your mother didn't. It's a sign."

I bend my fingers and see the line in my left hand deepen and sharpen. Yes. A line from just below my shortest finger all the way to the crease of my thumb.

"A sign of what?" I ask.

I don't know if I want him to keep talking. Smoke burns my eyes and throat. We are very close to the hearth and I am sweating. It's dark; his hut has small windows and he's already fastened skins in front of them. I look around. There are many chests along the walls of the hut. Chests of all sizes. They are made of wood; a few are of birch and one is made of a hard, shiny, black material. I want to touch it with my hand. This is a room full of secrets.

"You are your grandmother's granddaughter. She was a strong, clever woman. She had knowledge. She handed it down to her daughter, who didn't have time to hand it down to you before she died."

"Do you mean that she was a völva?" I am relieved. I am the foster daughter of a völva. Ingeborg is the most powerful woman around, and she leads the sacrifice alongside my father. She can sing the calling songs; she can make drinks that bring many things to pass. But I'm not afraid of her powers. They are familiar. For the most part, Ingeborg is like most other people, maybe a bit angrier. Holme is different. I find him both frightening and enticing.

"Not a völva. Our people don't sacrifice to the gods. We have no gods." He leans forward and extends his hand into the fire. I cry out. He'll burn himself! The fire is hot; the flames yellow, red, and blue closest to the logs. Its heat makes drops of sweat pop out of my face. Holme holds his hand in the fire, resting it on a glowing log that is covered with white ash. When his hand squeezes it, it crumbles and splits in a shower of sparks.

His face is expressionless. His eyes are open, looking into mine. They are black and deep like a forest spring. He slowly pulls his hand back out and I give a shout. He holds it up in front of his face, palm facing me. I lean forward. The fire is just as hot as it was before; I draw back again.

But I had time to see that his palm is unharmed. He brushes it off against his trousers and holds it out again, closer to my face. I can see that it is dark with soot, but his skin is all there. It doesn't smell like burned meat, as it does when we singe the pigs at slaughter.

"Do you see?" he says, and I nod. "You are like me, Turid. You are special. And now, in your fifteenth year, you will get to know your own power."

He has the same line as I do. Straight across his palm—a deep line, sharp as a slash from a sword.

As I walk home I pass the smith. He says that Sten isn't home, that he is out with the livestock, watching over a heifer that is about to calve. I wish I could tell Sten about all of this, but instead I sit beside Ragne for a while as he chips at the stone, which still isn't finished. He is carving out the head of the dragon, which will complete the winding loops. Its mouth gapes open, full of sharp teeth. He tells me that the stone is in memory of a man who died in Miklagård; his widow has paid Ragne four marks for it, and she wants it to be impressive.

It will be. Everything Ragne does is lovely. I sit quietly, listening to his chatter and the even tapping of the chisel against soft stone. Dusk is falling and I am full of questions.

When Ragne grows quiet I start to wander back home.

"Tell Sten I was here," I say, and Ragne nods, but he looks troubled as he watches me. I feel myself blushing without knowing why, and I walk home.

I don't speak with anyone. Not even Njord. He is lying in his bed, eyes closed. But the large new thing inside me is smothering me. I am like Holme! I am special, he said. I have powers from my mother's side that Father and Ingeborg don't know about.

Before we took leave, Holme told me that I am a noajdi. I am wise, a sage. I am my mother's daughter and my grandmother's granddaughter. And Holme promised me, by spitting in the fire and by placing his right hand on his heart, that he will help me find my own particular power. The power I was born to but must learn to master.

My thoughts fly through my head like swallows before I fall asleep. Yet the hole inside me is starting to fill with something I don't recognize. But it feels good.

Chapter 5

Njord has a stubborn cough and he is thinner than before. His skin has always been pale as milk, unlike my own, which is rough and brown. Sometimes I think we're like mirror images of each other—he is the day and I am the night. His hair is silvery white and mine is black, without luster. His eyes are light and mine are dark as holes. Father says that when we were little and curled up together we looked like a vase he once saw in the land of the Franks, with an image of two hatchling snakes coiling around each other, one white and one black.

Njord is my foster brother. We have always known each other. But Ingeborg is his mother and not mine, and she won't let anyone forget it. I love him despite this, and when I hear him coughing at night until he gags and chokes and has to half-sit for a while, ice runs through my whole body. It is a vicious cough, and Njord is not strong. I got all of our strength. I sucked it from Ingeborg as I nursed; at least that's what she says.

Once he finally falls asleep she cries, long, deep sobs that sound like the sea crashing against the stony shore; long, hopeless sighs that never end.

I beg Holme for help. I am resigned. I scream. My eyes are swollen with lack of sleep. Njord's cough kept me awake until dawn.

"If what you say is true," I cry. "If I do have all of this power. Then I must be able to do something with it!"

As usual, Holme is cross-legged. He watches me calmly. I keep shouting.

"What do you think I should do? Am I meant to watch my brother die as I rejoice in being a noajdi? Am I supposed to let him die without a fight?"

Holme is still silent. My throat aches. At last I sit down, cross-legged like Holme.

“Death exists. Just like life. It’s not always so that death is the wrong path for a person to take.” He smiles at me, as calm as ever. I am so angry that I want to hit him.

“He is the same age as I am. He is too young to die.”

“Life is not measured in years, but in experience. Your brother Njord is more than his years. You know that.”

I shake my head. Holme is telling me that my brother will die. That is it time. But I will not go along with this.

“I will do anything,” I say. “Anything!”

I mean it. Every word has weight. Holme looks at me, observant as always.

“I will wed, if that is what it takes.” The words make me empty. All my fury steams out. I have promised not to do this. Not to become someone else.

But it seems as though I am already someone else. A noajdi. And also the daughter of a king, and the ruler of my village. I have to be. Because my father can’t do it anymore.

Holme laughs. “Whether or not you wed, it doesn’t matter. You will be a noajdi, whatever you do.”

“I have to wed the son of a king. A child of Odin. Then our lines can bring new life to the village.”

Holme shakes his head. “Well,” he says. “As I said before. Our people—and that means your people too, Turid,” he leans forward and raises his hand toward me, as if to ask me to listen, “we don’t believe in any gods. Odin and Thor, Freyja and Frigga. It makes no difference. All that exists is life and death. This world and the spirit world. And no one in the spirit world cares if you wed or not.”

I feel like I want to escape. Holme is giving me a way out. I can say I’m a noajdi, nothing more. I don’t have to wed. I could even wed Sten.

“Can you help Njord, then?” I whisper. “Can I?”

Holme looks at me and the expression on his face is tender, almost fond.

Before he has time to shake his head, I leave through the door of skin, fastening it carefully behind me. And then I walk home.