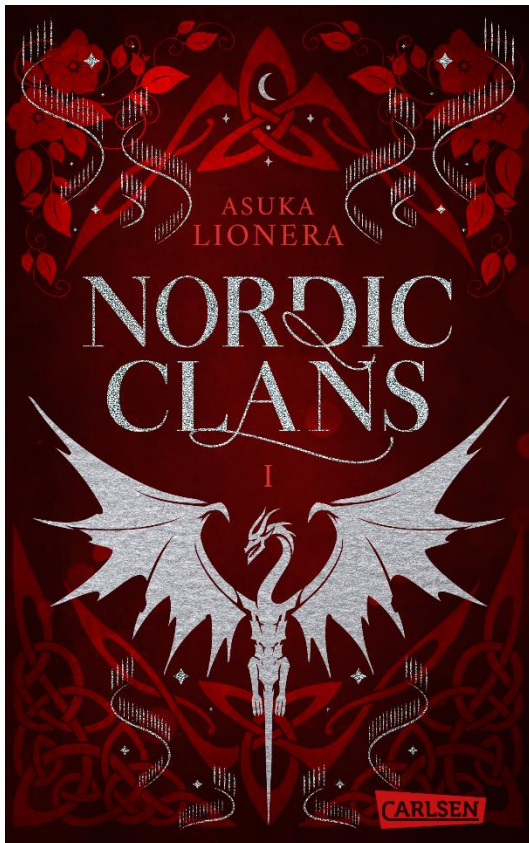


Asuka Lionera: Nordic Clans – My Heart, So Lost and Proud

Nordic Clans 1: Mein Herz, so verloren und stolz

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PROLOGUE



It is said that the goddesses of fate keep our most important memories safe - the good ones, but also the bad ones. They always bring them out when we need to remember them.

Or when they want to torture us.

It is not news to me that the gods are cruel. Nor that they enjoy torturing us mortals.

What I didn't understand, however, was why they kept choosing my family for their games.

As I wrap one arm tightly around my sobbing mother to keep her upright, I ask myself again and again what we have done to fall out of favour with the gods. The ritual chants of my twin sister Elvi only faintly drown out our mother's wailing.

As the crescent moon slowly rises over the edge of the sea, Elvi's songs come to an abrupt end. Dying, the last note lingers for a moment before it too dissolves and disappears into the gathering night.

The crashing and breaking of the waves is now the only sound apart from Mum's sobs. The whole village is there, watching us. A large part of me wants to hiss at her that she should pull herself together, but that wouldn't be right.

She is allowed to mourn the love of her life and the man she cared for for almost ten years. Even in public.

The goddesses of fate choose this exact moment to send me my earliest memory of my father. Elvi and I sit on his knees while he tells us sagas of the gods by the crackling fireplace - adapted to young ears. He always laughed when he was with us, and never looked at us in the same waiting way as mum. He was not only a loving father, but also a fair and respected clan leader. Even as a small child, I knew that I wanted to be like him. Being the eldest, I was to be his successor and I looked forward to learning everything from him and one day follow in his footsteps.

But my dream of this future ended when Elvi and I were six years old.

The goddesses of fate robbed me of the beautiful memories and replaced them with those of the day my father returned from the trials: on a stretcher that rested on the shoulders of four men and was followed by men and women I had never seen before. There were also a few children among the arrivals, but I only had eyes for my father. I wanted to run up to him, greet him and ask why he was so tired, but someone held me back. I can't remember who it was. It was only when mum walked towards the procession with a swaying step that I realised something was wrong. When I saw her shaking shoulders, I felt for the hand of my twin sister, who was always so close to me that she grabbed it immediately. We silently comforted each other and watched just as silently as the stretcher was carried into the longhouse and then into our parents' bedroom. The door closed behind Mum.

Elvi and I stayed behind. Overlooked and forgotten. And even though we didn't understand what was going on, we still sensed that something terrible must have happened to our father.

While other women took care of the catering for the arrivals, we heard Mother's crying muffled through the door, as well as unknown voices talking quietly to her.

It was a long time before the door to the bedroom opened again. Mum's face was as white as snow and her eyes were red from crying as she stepped out, her posture tense. She walked slowly over to the pedestal on which four chairs stood. The two in the centre were richly decorated and covered in furs. The smaller ones at the sides belonged to Elvi and me.

I remember frowning at the fact that Mum sat in Dad's chair.

A murmur went through the nave before those present raised their mugs and drank to Mother's health.

Only later were we allowed to enter the bedroom. Father was lying in his bed, buried under far too many furs. He must have been sweating terribly. Besides, it was already broad daylight.

I went to him and shook his shoulder to wake him up. "You have to get up, Dad," I said when he didn't move. "You promised me you'd go hunting with me."

"Your father," Mum murmured, her voice rough from crying, "will only wake up when the gods want him to."

At the time, I didn't understand what she meant. Confused, I watched every day as she poured him water, mead and pre-chewed food. Dad's inexplicable condition demanded all of Mum's attention. Elvi and I were brought up by other members of the clan.

I had to grow older to learn that there had been an incident during the trials of the clan chiefs, which take place every fifteen years. A rival clan - the Wing Clan - is said to have caused Father to fall during a trial and injure his head so badly that he never woke up.

Despite our mother's devoted care over so many years, he never opened his eyes again and showed no other signs of movement.

The following years were difficult for us; the gods put us through further trials that would probably have broken other families. But not us. Perhaps that was also the will of the gods - to test us and make us stronger. At least I'm clinging to the thought so that I don't collapse completely, like mum did at that moment.

For on the night before last, the gods thought they had tormented my father's spirit enough and summoned him. He died without telling us another saga or seeing the young women his two daughters had grown up to be.

He did not die honourably in battle, as he should have been destined to do, but bedridden and in constant need of help. A dishonourable death that I wouldn't even wish on my worst enemy, let alone the man who shaped my childhood and whom I have emulated for as long as I can remember.

If it weren't for the fact that he had once been the clan leader, he would not have been entitled to a ritual burial. It is reserved for the brave and courageous alone. I am glad that my sister Elvi, the spiritual Valkra of our clan, has taken matters into her own hands. While Mum was still sobbing on her knees next to Dad's dead body and I had to inform the other clan members of his death, she made preparations.

I only wish she could see with her own eyes what an honourable funeral she organised for our father. But since her childhood, Elvi has only seen visions.

After she has finished singing, she stands at my other side and feels for my hand. I squeeze it while I hold Mother upright with my other hand.

"They're pushing the boat out to sea now," I whisper to Elvi. She nods as if my meagre description conjures up images in her mind. Maybe it does. Although she is blind, she sees more than most. More than me.

"He shouldn't have died like that," she whispers back.

I share her opinion. The reputation of our clan has suffered greatly in recent years. Since father wasn't really dead, no new clan leader could be officially elected. So mum took over his position, for which I was intended. I was still too young and lacked training, so I was happy to get a bit of a reprieve. But now there will be no further delay.

A woman as a leader is not unusual as long as she has the right qualities. I love my mum; she is a kind and considerate person, but these very traits made her unsuitable as a leader. She was too often blinded by the crying eyes of children or the wailing of other mothers and did not distribute our little amount of food fairly. The strong died while the weak somehow survived. There were disputes within our community, some of which degenerated into feuds; Elvi and I were not always able to settle them.

Most of the young men and women left our clan and sought their fortune abroad. Only those who were loyal to my father remained, or those who were too old or too frail to be taken in by another clan.

The other clans laughed at us and attacked us like locusts to steal the last of our supplies. And our dignity. I did my best to defend us, but the few fighters I had at my side were too old or too weak to do anything.

So at some point we gave up and let the others plunder so we wouldn't lose any more inhabitants.

Our once glorious coastal clan is on the brink of collapse and oblivion. And all because another clan ensured that my father withered for years. It would never have come to this with him at the helm. He would have known what to do. Even though he was gentle as a father, as a leader he wouldn't have let himself be softened, but would have kept the big picture in mind.

And unlike me, he wouldn't have given up. The other clan not only robbed me of my father and my reputation, but also robbed our people of their future. All that could have been, now lies dead and cold out there in a boat on the sea, ready to be swallowed up by the tide.

I whisper to Elvi that she should stand on Mum's other side and hold her. She doesn't ask what I'm up to, and I'm grateful to her for that. As a Valkra, she probably knows anyway. I'm sure she already knew before I made the decision.

As four archers hold their arrows in the flames to shoot them at the boat with my father's body, I press one of my axes against the palm of my right hand. So deep that I have to grit my teeth with a petrified face to keep from making a sound. Mum's wailing next to me reaches my ear from far away as I mumble the old words that nobody had to teach me because I listened to them countless times as a child in the longhouse. Words in the old language that made no sense to me back then, but now form in my head as easily as if I had spoken them all my life. Sacred words with which we invoke the gods to ask for their support, or make a promise to them that we seal with our blood.

While my blood drips to the floor and between the coarse

dark grey stones and my father's boat goes up in flames on the horizon, I take an oath that will bind me forever.

I will not rest until I have avenged my father's death and restored the honour of our clan.

Whatever the cost.

A dark shadow flits past the edge of my field of vision and at the same time I am shaken by a chill that is not caused by the cool wind. I hear a high-pitched giggle, as if from an ancient woman, which no one else seems to hear. I realise that the gods have accepted my oath, because even before the fourth drop of my blood sinks between the stones, I can feel something clawing at my heart and nestling in my chest. Something dark and powerful.

And I won't get rid of this something until I've fulfilled my oath and avenged my father's death.

Although her eyes were blinded years ago, my sister turns to me, her milky eyes fixed directly on my chest.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I nod without taking my eyes off the burning boat, which is gradually sinking into the water. "Me too."

CHAPTER 1



ABOUT FIVE YEARS LATER

I move so slowly that no twig cracks under my weight and reveals where I am. Quiet as a breeze, I stalk closer, my goal firmly in sight.

She sits in the clearing with her back to me, lost in herself and her activities, but I know that doesn't mean anything. I've never managed to sneak up on her unnoticed before, but I'm determined to do it today.

This is my self-imposed final task before I set off to change the future for me, her and all the other members of our clan.

I try not to think about the endless weight on my shoulders, which almost pushes me to the ground, but instead concentrate on her narrow back. I adapt to her breathing and only put one foot forward when she exhales. She lifts her head and I freeze. Only when she turns her attention back to the wreath of dried twigs and small bones she is weaving in her lap do I dare to move again.

Just as I am about to enter the clearing and announce my victory, she murmurs almost casually: "I noticed you when you were still over twenty metres away."

I exhale in frustration. "You can't have noticed me," I protest. "I didn't make the slightest sound!"

"Maybe not you," she replies, and when she turns to me briefly, it's as if I'm looking in a mirror for a blink of an eye. "But Bran will always be heard, no matter what. And where he is, you're not far away, sister."

I roll my eyes before I tell my animal that it can join us. Bran's huge paws make such a noise in the dried leaves and fallen branches, which are already covered in the first hoar frost of the approaching winter, that my ears are ringing. He pushes his massive, bear-like body through the bushes without a second thought, their thorns not having the slightest chance of piercing his thick dark brown fur. If they did manage to get past his fur, they would only hit his armour-like skin, which would even bounce off most arrows.

His snorting and protesting growls, because I have left him behind, can already be heard from several metres away.

"Can you hear?" asks my sister Elvi, without turning in the direction of the noise.

"I told him to wait at the edge of the forest," I reply.

"I heard him anyway." She taps her ear.

"At least I can do that better than you."

I can't disagree with that. Elvis' hearing is blessed by the gods. Unfortunately, that's not the only thing ...

As my twin, she was born on the night of the red lights, just like me. On one of those fateful nights when Árorá, the goddess of heaven, can no longer contain her anger at the fact that she is the youngest of the goddesses of fate and is therefore never allowed to walk the earth. Most of the time, she is considered to be the most benevolent of her kind and, in the darkness, gives us

green and blue lights that show us our way. But when her anger comes out, her lights turn red, and with them she sends some of her magic down to us. To bless us, some say. To punish us, others say.

When Bran has caught up with us, he nestles his powerful body against mine and almost knocks me off my feet. Only when I stroke his fur does he stop growling accusingly at me.

I was lucky and can call the magic Árorá gave me a gift, because that's how I got Bran. My special animal creature, who was also born in a night of red light and is not only bigger and stronger than an ordinary bear, but can also communicate with me. I am a whisperer, blessed with a powerful creature who will stay by my side for the rest of his life.

However, I wouldn't describe my sister Elvi's magic as a gift. As if she has heard my thoughts, she lifts her head and gives me a smile. Looking at her beauty, I often forget that we are twins, because I shed the delicacy years ago that still characterises her features. Any single man would turn round to look at my sister if he crossed her path in the village or anywhere else, were it not for the scars that radiate around her milky white eyes and mark her for what she is.

I sit down next to her on the grass and bow my head to her. Today is the last day before my departure. For the first time, I will leave the safety of my village. I will go further than I have to on the hunt, and even sleep away from home, because the journey and the trials will take several weeks.

I feel a little queasy about leaving my familiar surroundings and my familiar bed behind. More queasy than I would ever admit. Maybe that's the reason why

I forget an old vow that Elvi and I made when her magic was revealed.

"Blessed Valkra, what future do the gods have in mind for me?"

After I had to listen to Elvis' vision of injuries and deaths as a child, we made a promise to each other: I would never ask about my future, and she wouldn't tell me if she saw anything. But this is not just about me. My fate is too closely linked to that of my clan. All eyes are on me. Everyone's hopes rest on me. If I fail, I will burden all the inhabitants of our village with another fifteen years of hunger and deprivation.

After a brief hesitation, Elvi places her right hand on the top of my head with astonishing accuracy for a blinded woman. Like every time, I shudder briefly, as I think I can feel the power that lies dormant in her through this touch.

Whilst I am a whisperer and can form a deep spiritual connection with my pet, Elvi is a Valkra who proclaims the will of the gods and can sometimes see into the future. Her word carries at least as much weight as that of a clan leader, but not every leader is prepared to share his power or even admit a mistake if the Valkra's opinion differs from his.

How fortunate that the ungrateful task of saving our clan from certain death has fallen to me for some years now. It would never occur to me to doubt Elvi's words. When I make a decision, she is the first person whose opinion I want to hear. Our actions are not always well received; the elders of our clan in particular shake their heads at us. At some meetings, I'm afraid they'll have a concussion or burst with suppressed rage. But none of them would dare to question us in public. They would probably rebel against one of us, but not both.

It pisses me off that they're just holding their feet still because of our gifts, not because of our deeds. Because Elvi and I haven't achieved all that much. Our clan is starving. Every winter feels colder, longer and harsher than the last. People freeze to death and die of disease or malnutrition.

And we can do nothing but stand idly by. At least that has been the case so far. But this year, the Merthing takes place once again: a gathering of all the clan heads of our realm. Only every fifteen years do the leaders make their way north, far out into the white lands, where there is even more snow than in the depths of winter, to enter the sacred place of the highest gods and pay their respects to them.

But the real reason for the Merthing is not fear of the gods. During the gathering, a competition takes place in which the supreme leader of our clans is appointed.

Ages ago, the widely scattered clans began to fight as a unit under a single leader in the event of an attack by a foreign tribe. However, as they were never able to agree on one, our people were almost completely wiped out a few generations ago. To ensure this never happens again, the clan leaders gather every fifteen years at the Merthing to elect the strongest, brightest and most skilful among them as their new leader in case of an attack. When the last Merthing took place, Elvi and I were just six years old. I can only dimly remember that time, but my family's excitement can still be felt. Our father was the head of the clan at the time and was proud to be travelling to the Far North to compete with the other leaders. The night he left, Elvi had her first vision of the future, which was so terrible that our mother locked her up for three days so that no one from the clan would hear her words. For not every Valkra is welcome; those whose visions are too horrific or who merely have a horrible vision of the future are not welcome.

Those who predict the future are often banished from the clan and die alone in the harsh cold of our realm. I remember that Elvi's eyes were still intact back then, even shining in the dark. And I remember covering my ears crying so that I wouldn't have to listen to her anymore. Although I understood at the time that Elvi - just like me - had an inherent power, I couldn't understand that this power forced her to predict our father's terrible accident.

At some point, Elvi fell silent because her voice was failing. Only then did mum let her out of the room, not without looking at her daughter with fear in her eyes.

About two weeks later, the men who had travelled to the far north with my father brought his lifeless body home. Mother's wailing disturbed me almost more than Elvi's visions. Her voice didn't sound like her, but was distorted with grief and fear.

I honoured my father and still do today. He is the one I want to be like. I mainly feel pity for my mother. A young widow, beaten with two children of the red lights and no male heir. While Elvi's gift emerged early, I felt mother's watchful eye on me more clearly with each passing year, but my gift didn't show itself until shortly after my twelfth birthday.

While her hand is still on the top of my head, Elvi's dazzled eyes, whose irises were once the same dark blue colour as mine, light up slightly. I shudder again. During my training, in a duel or when hunting with Bran, I boast that I'm not afraid of anything, but my sister makes me want to become invisible and not stand out.

After a while, her hand slips from my head and moves to the other, which lies quietly in her lap, before Elvi sighs.

"I'm Sorry, Yrsa, but I only see fog when I want to look into your future. It's as if the gods themselves haven't yet decided what they want to do with you."

I give her a forced smile, even though she can't see it, to cover up my own insecurity. I tell myself that I am perfectly prepared. When it comes to fighting with two one-handed axes, no clan member has been able to hold a candle to me for years. I'm faster and more agile than anyone else my age. What's more, Bran and I form an unbeatable unit. I know all our customs and rites, as well as their origins, so I'm not afraid of the knowledge questions during the Merthing.

And yet the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach just won't go away.

When I was officially appointed clan leader after my father's death, the Merthing couldn't come soon enough for me. I was eager to prove that I was my father's daughter and would not make up for his failure at the last Merthing. Even if no one said it publicly, this disgrace hung over our family like a dark shadow - in addition to the fact that my mother had given birth to two children during a red light night. Quite a few people thought that our family was cursed by the gods. I think mum secretly thought so too, looking into her daughter's blinded eyes as she anxiously waited for the others daughters' gift to show.

But I will not fail! I will bring all the rights and privileges that come with the Thane of the Thane back to our village, so that no one has to starve anymore. It will be my name that remains unforgotten in the sagas of our clan for generations to come.

But above all, I will silence all those who believe my family is cursed. Never again will they whisper behind our backs or give my mum pitying looks that she dismisses with a smile. Never again will I see my mum's hopeless expression when she thinks I won't notice.

I will prove to her and everyone else that I am destined by the gods to lead our clan into a glorious future.

A little support from the Valkra would have been nice, but I can manage without a clear prediction. Even if Elvi had predicted certain failure, I would have set off for the far north, because giving up is out of the question for me.

I stand up and offer my sister a hand, which she grasps. I stopped marvelling at things she can't actually see or notice at an early age. Although my sister was still a small child when she was blinded like all Valkras, she never seemed in need of help. Her other senses sharpened so much that she only had to rely on others in a few situations, and in those, mum and I were there to help.

She still lets me help her to her feet, even though she doesn't need my support. While the years of weapon and endurance training have moulded me and I am proud of every muscle and scar I have borne, Elvi has the graceful body of our mother. An appearance that men and women alike would fall at the feet of, but as a Valkra she will never start a family, instead dedicating her entire life to the gods.

So it's up to me to carry on our line; another burden on my shoulders that doesn't get any lighter with the years. All the girls we grew up with are now married and have children, while I face an uncertain future that not even the Valkra can decipher for me.



The hoarfrost crunches under our feet and Bran's paws as we walk back to the village. My lungs sting with every deep breath. Without the fur cloak wrapped around me, I would shiver.

If I believe the elders, the coming winter will be merciless and claim many victims. Thanks to Bran's and my hunting skills, our family rarely goes hungry, but I do not forget that I am breaking ancient laws if I kill a stag or hare outside of our territory.

Only the Thane of the Thane and their clan are allowed to hunt in forests outside their territory, while the others must be content with what the gods provide them in their own land.

Which is next to nothing here, especially in winter. Our clan is lucky enough to settle right on the coast, so we live from fishing all year round, but as soon as the sea freezes over, we are robbed of our livelihood. No matter how much fish we have caught and preserved beforehand, our supplies will never last for a long winter.

"You're brooding," says Elvi, without sounding reproachful.

And that hits a nerve with me. I always ask myself whether she's the only one who notices or whether everyone else can see through me just as easily. I hope not. As head of the clan, I have to radiate confidence even in the face of hopelessness.

But I don't even try to deny it to Elvi. Instead, I stop and let my gaze wander over the coast and the dark beach lined with countless stones. Today, the waves are only gently crashing, as if they are just waiting for the air to get cold enough to freeze them into ice so that they can go into their winter rest.

Sometimes I wish we could do the same. That we could fill our bellies like bears, that we could get to a safe high altitude and only wake up again when the worst is over.

"Winter's not far away," says my sister. "I can smell it on the wind." She tilts her head in my direction. "Have you made preparations in case the first snow comes while you're away?"

I press my lips together. "Mother will take care of the food distribution."

It wasn't easy for me to make this decision. Rationing our food is a thankless task that has driven me to the brink of despair over the past few winters. I couldn't let crying mothers or emaciated children influence me for the good of the entire clan. The fact that I secretly distributed most of my own rations among the starving is a secret I will take to my grave. Still, it wasn't enough.

The elders said that this was the way of things when you belong to the inferior clans. I, on the other hand, stared at the graves dug carelessly in the hard earth and condemned the winged clan that prevented my father from emerging victorious at the Merthing and made my mother a widow.

"Do you think it's a good idea to ask mum to do it?" asks Elvi. Once again, there is no accusation or doubt in her voice.

She is the only one in the entire clan whose trust in me is unwavering. She and Bran are my closest confidants, and if I have to, I will unhinge the world to protect her.

Our mother loves me, I know that, but her faith in me is low. She is too caught up in the illusion that the gods are punishing her for a deed that only she knows about and that she would never say a word about.

"I don't trust the elders," I reply to Elvi's question.

"They would become the new clan leaders in my absence. They already know my mother in the position of chief. By the time they have made up their minds to overthrow her and thus evoke the angry spirit of our father, I will certainly be back."

"Victorious, I hope."

I nudge her with my elbow. "As a Valkra, you shouldn't just hope, you should know."

She raises her head as if she wants to look up into the sky. "As I said, your future lies in the mist. And I haven't forgotten who you'll meet at the Merthing."

I swallow hard before I press out between clenched teeth: "I haven't forgotten either. But that doesn't matter. After all, I'm not a young girl anymore." I clench my hands into fists so tightly that my fingernails cut into my palm. "I will defeat him."

"Just remember that you are on holy ground in the far north." Elvi raises her index finger in warning. "No bloodshed outside of the competitions!"

Grumbling, I turn away. "That cowardly dog didn't care when he murdered our father from behind!"

"Sacred ground," Elvi repeats calmly. "Blood feud or not, you must not attack him there."

I wave her off. "Then he just has an unfortunate accident on the way to the competitions."

To my astonishment, Elvi starts to laugh. "How good it is that I know you, sister. You wouldn't sleep another night if you didn't defeat him in an honourable fight to the death and avenge my father's murder."

I expel my breath. Of course she's right, because a blood feud can only be settled in this way. Neither we nor the restless spirit of our father would be helped if I were to kill the leader of the winged clan from behind.

I want him to look me in the eye and, with his last breath, tell me the reason why he took our father. Only then will my oath be fulfilled and the gods will be satisfied with me.

I'm ten minutes older than Elvi, so it was up to me to take the blood oath. If I fail, my sister will carry it on. After her, it will pass to one of our more distant relatives, even if we have little to do with them. An oath sealed with blood is sacred; the wrath of the gods themselves will fall on those who fail to honour it.

"Have you decided who's going with you yet?" asks Elvi as she takes my arm and pulls me towards the village.

"I asked Astrid and Vangar. They felt honoured."

Each clan leader is allowed to take up to five of their best fighters with them to the Far North. It was easy for me to choose my companions, partly because we don't have more than two outstanding fighters to offer. The two shieldmaidens Astrid and Vangar are three years older than Elvi and I and are not just a couple on the battlefield. They are almost my equal in battle. With them by my side, I have nothing to fear on the road. Besides, they will bear witness to my deeds and report on them as soon as we return. Or tell my sister and my mother about my failure.

I shake my head to banish this thought. For weeks, I have been thinking of nothing but my journey to the holy site, my upcoming trials and the victory I will carry from it. It was only when Elvi couldn't see my future that doubts crept in. My victory was suddenly no longer irrevocable. The trials were no longer so easy that I could pass them with ease. I do my best to banish the nagging thoughts and give them no room in my head, but they always come back, getting stronger with each new appearance.

"I'll be expecting you three outside my hut tomorrow morning before sunrise," says Elvi, as if she knows exactly what's going on inside me.

Bran hums next to me.

A smile appears on my sister's lips as she tilts her head towards my pet. "And you too, of course. As if I would let one of you go to the Far North without the blessing of the gods!"

CHAPTER 2



The few villagers we pass on our way bow their heads respectfully to Elvi and me. While I silently stand by, she has a kind word for everyone. Not for the first time, I wonder whether she would have been a better leader if she hadn't lost her sight.

Elvi's hut is a little remote. Like all the other housings, it is made of wood that has turned dark grey over the years. I can smell the spicy scent of her herb garden from several metres away. Her hut might seem cosy if it weren't for the structures made of bones and branches, that sway in the light wind and make an eerie rattling noise.

Elvi only needs two handholds on the low fence surrounding her hut to orientate herself. As I know how much she hates it when I lead her inside, I wait until she has found her way on her own.

At the door, she turns to me. "You will come back." There is such certainty in her voice that even I believe it.

After saying goodbye to my sister, Bran and I walk to the longhouse in the centre of the village. The largest hut by far is the home of my mother, Bran and I and the cultural centre of village life.

Not a day goes by without a petitioner asking me for advice or a ceremonial rite having to be performed to appease the gods.

Even today, it smells of fresh blood and old embers inside.

My rooms are at the back of the building, but I never have a feeling of privacy. It's an honour to live in the longhouse, but I often wish I had a little hut like Elvi, where I could close the door behind me and shut the whole world out.

I pass through the large hall, which seats almost the entire village, the burnt-out fireplaces in the centre, the elaborately decorated high chair at the front of the hall, where my father once sat and where I now have to sit whenever I am asked to do so, and head straight to my rooms.

I won't be taking much luggage with me on my journey; I've already collected what little I have and tied it up in two bundles.

As there's nothing more to do, I throw myself onto the bed. Bran curls up on the large carpet in front of it and almost immediately begins to snore softly. Accompanied by this soothing sound and the cosy warmth that his body radiates, my eyes soon fall shut too.



It's still pitch black outside when my mum enters my room with a candle in her hand. I can hear her as soon as she catches one of the creaking floorboards. As if of its own accord, my hand glides to the axe lying next to me on the bed and I only relax when I recognise her familiar stride.

"You have to get up," she says as she remains standing in the archway.

I sit up and run my hand through my tousled dark blonde hair.

"Let me help you."

With a small sigh, I beckon her closer. As she circles Bran so she can put the candle down on the bedside table, I try to remember the last time I allowed her to help me get dressed and do my hair. It must have been the day I took Dad's place. My fingers were shaking so much that I would never have been able to braid my hair myself, and Elvi, who I would normally have asked for help, was busy preparing for the ceremony.

"Are you excited?" she asks as she gathers the necessary utensils from my chest of drawers.

I exhale deeply. Even as a child, I tended to take after my father and was closer to him than my mother. Apart from my deep blue eyes and my blonde hair, which is a little darker at the roots, I have inherited very little from my mother. Elvi got her slim, graceful figure. Or would I look like this if I hadn't trained like a berserker from an early age? I can't imagine a life like that, just as I can't imagine one in which I talk openly to her about my feelings. As a leader, that's not my place; not even with my mum. Nevertheless, I give myself a jolt.

"A little," I say evasively.

Mum nods indulgently as she looks at me and waits for me to get out of bed. I do her a favour and take off my simple clothes from yesterday. With skilful hand movements, she helps me into the more elaborate garments, which are intended to protect me from the cold in the far north as well as emphasise my status. Mother has hand-embroidered the woollen tunic with gold at the hems, showing bear paws.

She puts a leather bodice around my waist, as well as a belt to which I can attach my two axes. After I have slipped into the lined leather trousers and knee-high boots, which are also lined with fur, my mother puts my father's coat on me. The soft wolf fur clings to my cheeks and I think I can still faintly smell my father's scent if I breathe deeply enough.

Mum looks me up and down and finally nods approvingly. "This time the costume suits you better than three years ago."

"I don't think I've grown since then," I counter.

"You haven't," she says, indicating that I should sit on the stool by the chest of drawers. "But you fill it out better."

She gently brushes the tangles from the last few days out of my waist-length hair, before plaiting it, starting at the temples. We don't say a word during the procedure; I'm still thinking about what she's just said. It was probably the best praise I've ever heard from her. As the wife of the clan leader, Mother was never a woman of many words, but full of expectations that I was never able to fulfil growing up.

Or I believed I would never be able to fulfil them. But I thought I recognised pride in the look she had just given me. Not the fear that was always there when I was younger and my gift had not yet manifested itself. Nor the sadness when I sat in the high chair and not my father.

For the first time, I have the feeling that she sees *me*. Not her daughter, who, unfortunately, was born during a red light night, and not the new clan leader, who is supposed to replace her husband and will probably never be able to match him.

"I won't let you down," I blurt out before I can stop the words.

Mum steps in front of me, puts a finger under my chin and waits until I raise my eyes to her. "I don't want your promise not to disappoint me."

My heart skips a beat and for a moment I am once again the young girl who longs for the recognition she had to work hard for. Even now it seems to be denied to me, even though I want to make an effort.

Only when my mum puts her other hand on my cheek and the warmth of her touch flows through me do I calm down.

"I want you to return to me, to our clan, in good health," she says gently. "I would gladly accept that promise. Because your life and everything you do for our people is worth a thousand times more than your victory at the Merthing." She lifts the right corner of her mouth into a smile that almost makes her look like me. "Even though I don't doubt for a second that you're vastly superior to those old, well-favoured men who haven't risen from their chairs in decades."

Hesitantly, I return her smile. "I'll do my best."

"I know." She leans forward and kisses me on the forehead. "I've never met a person who does their best at every activity, no matter how mundane, like you do."

She sounds like she's not happy about it, but I don't want to spoil this rare moment, so I don't ask, but enjoy having my hair and make-up done. Using black colour made from roots and ash, she frames my eyes all the way to my temples.

As her fingers brush over the bulging scar on my right eye, she murmurs: "I still remember the night you came home with the injury, covered in blood, and held a little bear in your arms."

My gaze flits over to Bran, who no one would call small anymore and who is still sleeping peacefully.

"It was freezing cold," Mum continues, "and I was beside myself with worry because you just disappeared."

"I heard his voice," I say. "Brans. He called for help. He was calling me."

Mum lets out her breath. I explained it to her back then, but even now she doesn't seem to be able to understand me. Probably no one who isn't a whisperer like me can.

It was a harsh winter. The icy wind whistled around our longhouse and penetrated even the thickest of furs. Elvi and I were snuggled up together asleep when I suddenly woke up and was pulled out into the freezing cold night as if by some magical force.

"What was it?" mum asks, running her fingers over the scar that runs from my eyebrow down over my eye to halfway down my cheek. "A hawk?"

I shake my head slightly. "An eagle. He wasn't happy about me stealing his safe prey."

Mum drops the subject with a sigh. When I brought Bran along, she wasn't keen on having to feed another mouth. But after he got bigger and Bran and I went hunting, she also recognised his usefulness. As my animal creature, he was spared the fate of ending up as a carpet or a mantle or a special trophy.

Unlike us humans, who are born on a red night of light, the difference in animals is not reflected in a gift, but in their appearance. I have heard of a whisperer from another clan whose animal creature is a horse with a fish tail that can swim so well that he uses it to pull his fishing boat out to sea.

If I win the Merthing, I will be able to travel to the far-flung clans and see all the wonderful animals that exist there.



When Mother, Bran and I leave the longhouse, most of the clan has already gathered in the village square directly in front of it. They fall silent when they see me. Elvi is also there and stands out from the other villagers in a spotless white dress. I walk towards them with my head held high. Astrid and Vangar, the two shieldmaidens who will accompany me to the far north, nod at me before falling into line behind me.

I bend my knee in front of Elvi. Astrid and Vangar follow my example, and even Bran lowers his head.

"Valkra, I ask for your blessing for our journey," I say loud enough for those present to hear me.

One of the maidens under Elvi's command, dressed similarly to her, hands her a bowl of fresh chicken blood, sacrificed in the name of the gods. A bull or horse would normally be sacrificed before such an important journey, but with winter approaching, I have ordered that no large animal was slaughtered. There is a part of me that is struggling with the decision, hoping not to anger the gods.

Elvi dips two fingers into the bowl of blood and uses the still-warm liquid to draw the symbol of our supreme goddess on my forehead: two semicircles merging into one another to represent the morning sun rising over the hills. She repeats this with my three companions before sprinkling the rest of the blood over us. "The gods look down favourably on your project, Than Yrsa," she announces, "trust that they will guide your steps and those of your followers."

I remain kneeling for exactly two more heartbeats before I rise.

Without saying goodbye or looking back, I turn around and begin my journey to the far north to fulfil my destiny.

CHAPTER 3



The first two days, the journey hardly exhausts me. After leaving the plains of the coast, our route takes us past or between some mountains so that we can conserve our strength. We find sufficient shelter from the wind and weather between the fissured rocks of the mountain ranges. We only rest as soon as night falls; we eat our meals as we walk throughout the day. On the evening of the second day, Bran hunts a scrawny deer for us, which we roast over a fire.

Only when we start our ascent on the fourth day do I feel a vague sense of exhaustion, but it's overlaid by excitement. I can't see the summit of the sacred mountain, but I still feel the awe that this place exudes.

It is said that the mountain is so high that it almost reaches the cloud realm of the gods, from where they observe and judge the actions of mortals. Only the most upright and brave of us will be allowed to enter their realm after our end. The rest of us are given another chance by being reborn. If we fail again in our attempt to please the gods, our souls disappear, as if they had never existed, into the oblivion of the underworld, where they are used by the dark forces to one day overthrow the supreme gods.

My soul doesn't need another chance.

I will impress the gods and one day, when they take me in, I'll be sitting next to my father, to whom I can proudly report on what I've done.

Even as a child, I was fascinated by our sagas and couldn't get enough of them. Even later, I never saw it as a burden to read them to Elvi so that she could memorise the stories and quote from them as Valkra.

The path up to the summit is steep, but fortunately we don't have to climb, otherwise we would have had no choice but to look for another way. Without Bran around, I feel equally empty and restless. Even if he can't always support me during the tasks, his presence helps me. And leaving him behind would never be an option for me.

Like me, Astrid and Vangar are not women of many words; most of the time we keep quiet. We've known each other since childhood, so there's not much we need to talk about. Although Vangar is even quieter than her partner Astrid.

I am familiar with their merits during the last raids on other islands, as they had to perform them several times during a celebration in the longhouse. Their skill with the short sword and shield is so outstanding that the reigning supreme clan leader regularly wanted them to accompany him on his raids - as the only fighters in our clan. I couldn't have found better and more experienced companions among my people than these two women, who understand each other perfectly in every situation.

The higher the path winds up into the mountains, the thinner the air becomes. I am grateful for my father's cloak, but I still have the feeling that the wolf's fur is also choking my air. Several times, the urge to tear the cloak from my body and risk freezing to death becomes almost overwhelming.

We discover some tracks in the snow that the other clans must have left behind, but we don't meet anyone. I can only hope that we are not the last to arrive.



We complete the final section of the ascent on the morning of the sixth day. The muscles in my legs burn like fire, while the skin on my face is almost numb from the cold. The icy wind whistles through our hair and clothes, unhindered by other mountains, but I don't hear a sound of complaint from anyone.

When we finally reach the plateau at the top of the mountain, my legs are trembling so much that they almost give way under me. Only the other clans, who are already present and watching our arrival, keep me upright.

I return their stares as if I'm unaffected, but inwardly I want to hide behind Bran. It's one thing to head a clan whose members I've known from my first breath, but quite another to be exposed to the stares of strange and potentially hostile clans whose members I neither know nor can assess.

I can't help noticing that some of them seem to be particularly interested in Bran. It's no wonder: whisperers with a large and powerful nature like mine are rare. Most whisperers have to make do with simple farmyard animals that they can influence. Only the most powerful of us can bond with a predator like a bear. If that bear was also born during a red light night and has unique physical features, it's only natural that it will cause a stir.

As if oblivious to the scrutinising glances and murmurs swelling around us, I walk over to the reigning supreme clan leader, for whom a high seat was erected in the centre of the plateau.

I don't want to imagine how strenuous it must have been to heave this monster of dark brown wood and richly carved decorations up here ... It must have taken several men.

While we wait for our turn, I furtively observe those present. Many of them look strong and battle-hardened, but it's like my mum said: Most of them have already passed the zenith of their lives. They are not old, but they are no longer young. Most of them are probably my late father's age.

For most of my life, I have battled these types of men during my training. They tend to underestimate me - or overestimate themselves - are sluggish and almost all use the same style. And they have something else in common: when they lie defeated on the ground in front of me, they all look at me with the same surprised, angry look. I've seen it so often, but it never gets old.

While I'm waiting, I hear from a passing group that only eight of the ten clans have agreed to take part. The leaders of the remaining two clans were either too old or too young to take the test.

I continue to look around and discover a kind of village on the edge of the plateau: several small huts are lined up there and a large campfire has been lit in front of one of them. During our journey, I had already wondered where we would sleep and eat between tasks, but in the end it didn't really matter. However, seeing a small village here in case a merthing takes place is reassuring.

When the group from another clan in front of us has finished greeting the supreme clan leader, it's our turn. As is expected of me, I bow my head to him. Only in front of a Valkra, the voice of the gods, would I ever kneel.

"Thane of the Thane," I say. "I am Yrsa of the Coastal Clan and I am honoured to answer your call."

The supreme clan leader must have been about my father's age when he took over this honourable post; now, fifteen years later, he is an old man with a patchy grey beard resting on the base of his belly and deep, severe furrows on his face. Nevertheless, he exudes such an aura of honour, as if our supreme god Noren himself were sitting in front of me.

"Yrsa," he repeats, stretching. I look up at him. "You remind me a lot of your father. I never questioned the will of the gods, but when they called him before he could accomplish the great things he was undoubtedly meant to do, I struggled. But now you are here. Will you be the one to inherit me?"

A tingling sensation on the back of my neck makes me shiver even more than the cold around me. "I'll do my best."

The supreme clan leader nods. "I am convinced of that."

He dismisses me with a wave so that I can make way for those who have appeared after us, and I hurry to get away from him. Never before have I faced someone who intimidated me so much by his mere presence. Has he always had this kind of demeanour? Or has his position as Thane of the Thane enabled him to be like that?

While I'm still thinking about it, I almost run into another group. Only at the last moment do I stop my stride and look up.

Up here on the plateau, the sun is barely shielded by clouds, but its warmth still doesn't reach me. I squint against its rays, but can still only dimly make out the outline of the man I almost collided with.

Just as I'm about to step aside and let the group through, he says: "If it isn't little Yrsa."

My gaze shoots back to him. I know I have never heard his voice before, because I would remember it. Its rough yet soft sound goes straight under my skin, tingling for a moment as if it wants to nestle there. I quickly rub my arms where the sensation is strongest to banish the tingling.

To cover up the movement, I raise one hand and put it to my forehead to block out the sun.

It's not just his voice that I don't recognise, but also the features of the man I'm now tearing away from the brightness piece by piece. He's tall; that's the first thing I notice, because I have to tilt my head back a little to avoid staring at his collarbone and neck.

Yes, I'm staring. I'm fully aware of that, but I can't do anything about it. The desire to find out who he is and how he thinks he knows me is too pressing. It is widely known that I am the leader of the coastal clan, but I have only attended a few gatherings before. Mostly only those of the clans that live in my immediate vicinity. And I would bet my life that the man before me has never been to one of those gatherings.

The raspy, high-pitched laughter of an old woman can be heard from somewhere, but I don't turn round to hear it.

Gradually, the sun reveals a sharply cut face with prominent cheekbones and a broad jaw. It is precisely this jawline that captures my attention. There isn't a man in my village who has left his childhood behind and doesn't have a beard. Even the old men, whose beards are even more patchy than the supreme clan leader's, wear them with pride. But this man in front of me is beardless. When was the last time I saw a man like that who no longer was a boy?

As I dwell on this confusing thought, he leans forward a little, allowing me to see the colour of his eyes.

They remind me of moss in spring after it has made its way through the snow cover. I have never seen such a clear, rich green colour in irises. It must be the light, because green eyes often look dull, like the leaves of a tree that are about to change colour. But with him, it's as if ...

The old woman's laughter now sounds closer than before. I'm about to turn my head towards her to see what's amusing her, but I don't get the chance.

The man in front of me raises an eyebrow, which is divided into two uneven halves by a small cut, disapprovingly. "Shall I take a step to the left so you don't have to squint at the sun while you stare?"

I draw in a sharp breath and curse myself for quickly looking elsewhere.

There is something else that captures my attention. I can't really grasp it. It's like a dark flicker in the outer corner of my field of vision. Together with the old woman's raspy laugh, it almost drives me mad.

The climb was probably more exhausting than I thought. The beardless man moves into my field of vision again. "You really are Yrsa, aren't you?"

His lips twist into a grin. I don't understand why this movement of his mouth captivates me so much, but my gaze is literally glued to him. And my mind keeps trying to answer the question of when I last had a beardless young man in front of me, on whose face I could have even appreciated this movement.

"The last time I saw you, you were ..." he thinks for a moment and finally raises his hand to waist height, "... about this tall." A little quieter, so that only I can hear him, he adds: "And a lot cheekier."

There's that rough sound in his voice again, which makes my skin tingle with excitement.

I hastily straighten my shoulders, tear my gaze away from his mouth and look him in the eye as calmly as possible. "People grow. That's the normal course of things. Hasn't anyone explained that to you?"

He looks me up and down, almost lazy, before returning my gaze. I struggle to breathe evenly.

"Fortunately, they don't just grow upwards."

I ignore his comment, even though it does strange things to me. It's far from the first time that I've felt lustful looks on my face. I can deal with it and it doesn't bother me. At least it didn't before. Not now either. Actually ... It's ... different. Not unpleasantly different, but ...

Something is pulling at my heart; so hard that it hurts. I try to banish the feeling by rubbing my chest. And can the old lady please stop laughing?

"And who are you?" I ask more harshly than I intended. This time it's just one corner of his mouth that moves upwards, into a wry grin. It's not that I've never seen it on other young men before. But none of them had this effect on me. With him, it looks fascinating and skilful, as if he had spent years perfecting this tiny movement.

My chest tightens again and the latent feeling of admiration I had for his grin disappears abruptly.

"It offends me that you don't recognise me." He taps his eyebrow, which is parted by a scar. "After all, I owe you these. At how many boys do you throw stones, hitting them on the head, that you've forgotten me?"

I frown as I feverishly rummage through my memories. My head is so busy trying to analyse my childhood encounters that it loses control of my mouth, which opens without my conscious intervention. "Many," I reply. "And I always hit the head."

He takes a step towards me and is now so close that I can smell him. It's such a wild mixture of odours that I can't possibly identify it. He smells of stone and wind and freedom, although that makes no sense at all. The woman's laughter now turns into a scream, but I can't understand her words. I can't manage to turn round to her either.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how good your aim has actually become," he whispers.

His words take far too long to get through to me because I am still preoccupied with identifying his scent.

Only a deep rumble behind me brings me back to the here and now. Bran doesn't seem to like the fact that a stranger is standing so close to me, which is why he has positioned himself next to me.

The young man takes a step back. Not hastily, as almost everyone would do when confronted by my angry Bran, but at a reasonable speed so as not to further irritate the animal. His gaze flits from Bran to me and back again.

That wry grin appears on his lips again before he turns away. "I'll see you at the tasks, Yrsa."

He strolls calmly back to his group.

"Who was that?" asks Vangar, who has also joined me. I shrug my shoulders. "I have no idea."

Now that he is no longer in my immediate vicinity, I can concentrate on important things again. The question of who he is and how he knows me will keep me busy for a while. That's how it usually is with me: I don't give up until I know the answer to my question.

During training, a fight or when I am doing my job as clan leader, my mind is clear and focussed. Everything that is not related to my current task fades into the background. But as soon as I have nothing to occupy me or require my full attention, my mind goes wandering.

I sigh and brace myself for a sleepless night, tormented by the question of who on earth this guy is.

CHAPTER 4



We are allocated one of the smaller huts, which has the advantage that we don't have to share it with a foreign clan. The disadvantage is that Bran can't fit through the door and has to sleep outside. I'm not worried that he'll mind, but I don't feel comfortable when he's not in my immediate vicinity. I briefly toy with the idea of setting up camp outside as well, but discard the idea again. Unlike Bran, I don't have thick fur to keep out the whistling wind.

As we move into our hut, I notice out of the corner of my eye that some men are building a large campfire in the centre of the square.

"What a lucky coincidence that tomorrow is not only the start of the tasks, but also the Merwa festival," says Astrid, who has followed my gaze.

I sigh quietly. I have successfully suppressed the fact that the festival of the goddess of fertility is coming up again. Our people pay homage to her as the year draws to a close, to make her show her favour in the coming year, with lavish celebrations, and after the end of winter, when the new seeds need to be sown.

Elvi once told me that this is not the only reason why Merwa's festival is celebrated just before the start of winter.

Children who are conceived during or around this day are born towards the end of spring, when there is enough food for them and their mothers to keep up their strength.

I understand the meaning behind this holiday and would never allow myself to question it. Nevertheless, I have rather less fond memories of it ...

"You don't look very happy," Vangar comments on my expression.

"I won't be taking part," I say curtly.

Astrid's head swings round to me so quickly that her blonde hair flies. "What?"

I ignore her surprised expression. "And I'm sure you won't be attending either."

Vangar frowns. "What makes you think that?"

Now I'm the one who looks surprised. "Well, because you two..." Astrid, the taller of the two, lets out a laugh, bright as a bell, before going over to her wife and kissing her.

"Just because we're a couple doesn't mean we're against celebrating in Merwa's honour. That would not only be blasphemy, but also a waste."

Before I can ask what she means by that, Vangar says in a calm voice, as if she's talking about the weather: "It's nice to have a cock inside you every now and then."

Baffled, I blink and open my mouth to say something back, but no sound comes out. Maybe because I wasn't expecting this statement. Maybe because I disagree with her but would never admit it publicly. Or maybe it's because it's none of my business what they do or don't do.

"You *must* attend," Astrid admonishes after we have looked at each other in silence for a while. "It will raise questions if a clan leader stays away from the celebration."