

The Road of Bones

Chapters 1-3

By Demi Winters

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Part 1-flames

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Silla Nordvig believed in the little signs the old gods left for mortals—red skies to foretell surprise, the flíta to usher in change, and the black hawk as a herald of death. Above all else, she knew that bad fortune came in threes, so it should not have come as a surprise when those wretched bells started ringing. She jumped in fright all the same.

Washing the bread dough from her hands, Silla dried them on the coarse material of her homespun skirts. *Ashes*, she thought. This week was truly taking a toll on her.

It had all started to unravel when Olaf the Red had requested tenancy payment a week ahead of schedule, stretching their threadbare budget beyond its limits. Next, Silla had burned her thumb while pulling barley cakes from the embers, dropping the full batch into the cookfire. Grains were growing more and more costly—after three long winters in a row, crops were stunted, and the harvest would be grim. Silla had earned herself a stern verbal lashing for her mistake.

And now, the third instance of ill fortune this week—those froulsome bells.

Silla smoothed the floral embroidery along the belt of her blue apron dress, the same worn by all of Jarl Gunnell's domestic hands, and made her way outdoors. The jangle of iron keys signaled the arrival of Bera, Jarl Gunnell's wife and head of the household. Silla quickly found her place in line, fingers threading tightly together as Bera counted them.

"Twelve. All right on your way, you lot," she ushered them in a gentle voice. "Let us hope this is swift. For all involved."

A light breeze caressed Silla's face and pulled a few chestnut coils from her tightly-

woven braid as she stepped along the path. For a gray day, it was pleasantly warm, the sun obscured by clouds. A wasp buzzed at her face, and she swatted it away. Birds twittered from the gardens of the homestead. It was almost peaceful for a moment. Until the following toll of the bell, long and so loud, it set Silla's teeth on edge.

She matched her steps to the others, keeping her eyes on the blue skirts of the girl ahead of her. They walked in a single line, making their way down the rutted lane. Silla didn't have to look to know Jarl Gunnell and his men—warriors, stablemen, and field workers alike—would be following behind. The jarl was one of the few members of nobility who did not use enslaved thralls brought over from Norvaland, but if he had, they would join as well. The bells were nothing if not the great equalizer, demanding the presence of every Íseldurian over ten winters of age, regardless of class.

Silla glanced toward the stables but could not see her father. He'd be there somewhere, amongst the fieldworkers in his dirt-stained gray tunic. He'd be wiping grime from his face, worrying about her, about *them*, deciding they'd lingered too long in Skarstad. It would be time for a fresh start. Another one.

They walked along the packed dirt road and through a gate in the stockade walls of the village, past timber homes topped with thatched roofs. While orderly woodpiles were stacked neatly before the homes, the cabbage yards overflowed with kitchen herbs and vegetables. Skarstad itself was small and unremarkable, interchangeable with most towns in Sudur lands. Silla should know; she'd lived in so many of them. Neatly laid out and encircled by tall defensive walls, it held two main thoroughfares which intersected in a central, tree-lined courtyard. The mead hall was neatly maintained, the stoops well swept, the square stained with blood.

The bells grew louder as they approached the square, each clang more menacing than

the last. The sounds vibrated through Silla's bones, ratcheting her insides tighter and tighter with each step closer. Men and women, merchants and farmers alike joined them until a throng crowded the road. At last, they rounded the corner into the central courtyard. Silla shuffled toward the towering Klaernar warrior standing by a wagon piled with jagged black rocks; he passed one out to each who entered the courtyard. Silla kept her eyes low as she waited, knowing what she'd see if she lifted her gaze. Muffled voices floated through the square, pleading. Begging.

It is in vain, she thought with distaste.

The oppressive presence of the Klaernar warrior looming before her stifled the air. Occasionally called the Claws of the King, the Klaernar were all physically imposing, and Silla kept her gaze trained on the warrior's boots. They were worn, smudged with dirt, a sight she found oddly comforting—proof he was, in fact, human. If she lifted her eyes, Silla knew she'd see he wore a shirt of black chain mail, punctuated by screaming bear shoulder plates in shining silver. Knew that she'd see three claw marks tattooed along the man's right cheek.

She'd heard rumors the second sons of Íseldur were not just physically changed once they took the claw, but mentally as well. Something happened when they went through the Ritual and pledged themselves to King Ivar and his Bear God, Ursir. No matter how diminutive their stature before the Ritual, they returned transformed—tall and built like mountains, their newly-inked faces etched in permanent scowls. It was said they carried Ursir's blessing in their veins, which only deepened Silla's unease.

As the King's Claw placed a chunk of raw obsidian in her palm, Silla's hand dipped under its weight. She stared at the flat, glossy surface. How could something be so beautiful and yet so ugly all at once?

The resounding chimes startled her from her thoughts, so loud they were near

deafening in the square. Silla lurched forward, eyes darting in search of the blues of Jarl Gunnell's help. Somehow, she had lost them. Silla lifted her eyes, just for a heartbeat, to try to get her bearings.

It was a mistake; she'd known it to be but couldn't stop herself. Three sets of v-shaped columns stretched up from the circular dais in the center of the square, a runic altar stone centrally positioned. Each condemned was secured to a set of wooden pillars, arms stretched wide between them, feet secured together at the base. Iron bridles muzzled their faces and smothered their voices. A pity the contraptions didn't shield their eyes; those unfortunate souls saw it all—the crowd, the rocks, the imminence of death. Anticipation was an equal part of the punishment, Silla supposed.

She stood on shaky legs, her gaze locking with the woman in the middle. Her eyes were wild with fear, the whites flashing. Heart dropping like a stone, Silla realized she was not a woman at all but a girl in her early teens. The girl's face swam, her brown eyes dissolving to Mother's vibrant green, urging her to look away—

No.

With a shaky exhale, Silla forced her gaze to the ground. Now was no time for those memories to surface.

“Next!” boomed the Klaernar, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Eyes searching, Silla finally caught sight of the blues and browns to her right and made her way quickly toward the group.

The little blonde girl was with them, small and out of place amongst Jarl Gunnell's help. Her unkempt blonde hair was plastered to her neck, her face smeared with dirt. Haunting blue eyes, which tilted up at the outer corners, gazed at Silla as the girl fidgeted

with the hem of her torn and rumpled nightdress. “You should pay better attention,” came the girl’s young voice.

Silla had tried to guess the girl’s age, and her best estimate sat at five or six winters. “And you should mind your manners,” she said absently.

“What did you say, Katrin?” asked Bera, her voice stern.

Silla’s gaze shot to Bera’s steely face. “I—it was not you to whom I spoke,” she muttered.

“Who then? Who were you speaking to?”

Her eyes flicked back to where the girl had stood moments before—now nothing but empty space. *You’ve said enough*, thought Silla, pressing her lips together. *Gather your wits, Silla Margrét.*

“So hard to find good help,” muttered Bera. “Lazy or touched in the head.”

Silla inhaled deeply as she looked away. Spotting a familiar blond head threaded with gray, her eyes locked onto her father’s. He seemed to sag when he saw her, as though he’d been holding his breath. Beside him stood the kindly stablehand who’d provided them with furs and a few kitchen provisions when Silla and her father had first arrived in Skarstad—Tolvik, if memory served her. With a grim smile upon his face, Tolvik’s silver head dipped, and Silla returned the gesture.

The clouds parted, sunbeams streaming down from the sky, catching sparkling minerals in the flagstones of the street and warming Silla’s back.

Mercifully, the bells stopped. Several minutes passed, and the crowd grew larger, filling the square and spilling out into side streets. Hushed conversation and restless energy descended into the courtyard; the tension was so thick, you could cleave it with an axe.

At last, the Speaker of the God entered the courtyard. Ursir's Gothi was a tall man, his pale, bald skull glinting in the sun-filled square. He wore flowing brown robes clasped around his shoulders, the hem embroidered with shining golden runes. Two tall Klaernar warriors flanked the Gothi, bear pelts wrapped around their shoulders indicating their rank as kapteins at the very least. Like all of the King's Claws, they wore their beards long and woven into twin braids; handaxes, swords, and daggers were strapped at their hips.

One of the kapteins procured a piece of parchment and began to read, his voice rising loud and clear through the courtyard. "By order of King Ivar Ironheart, of the great line of Urkan Sea Kings, son of King Harald of Norvaland, and great sovereign of the Kingdom of Íseldur, we have brought Agnes Svrak, Lisbet Kir, and Ragna Skuli before us in our sacred duty to pass judgment. They stand accused of the willful use of magic." The kaptein looked into the crowd. "What say you, the people of Skarstad, of these women who so flagrantly disregard the rules of our kingdom? These women who do not believe in our laws?"

"Guilty!" chanted the crowd. It was an empty ritual, these trials. Never did anyone call out for the condemned to be freed.

With judgment passed, the Gothi stepped to the first of the condemned, drawing a sacred dagger and golden bowl from the folds of his robes. The woman pulled against her bindings to no avail, her muffled pleas growing more desperate as the man sliced into the vein of her inner elbow, collecting a stream of blood in the gilded bowl.

"As are all of the Galdra, they are sentenced to death by stoning," boomed the kaptein. "But first, a Letting will pay penance to the King of Gods."

Ravens cawed ominously from the top of the bell tower as the crowd waited in silence, and the rock grew unbearably heavy in Silla's hand. After a long minute, the bowl had filled, and the Gothi dipped his fingers in the blood before dragging them in a series of

lines and circles along the woman's forehead—the runic symbol barring her entry to Ursir's Sacred Forest in the afterlife. The bald-headed man moved to the altar stone, chanting in Urkan as he poured the remainder over the runic inscriptions.

As the Gothi moved to the next condemned, Silla's gaze was drawn to the puddle of crimson on the dais, blood falling in a slow drizzle from the first woman's elbow. How many times would this happen? How many men and women would die before the Bear God's appetite for blood was satisfied—before Ivar Ironheart's hatred of the Galdra was quelled?

The muffled pleas of the condemned grew more desperate, more urgent, and Silla realized that the Gothi had fulfilled his role and had turned to the crowd.

“Now you will prove your loyalty to Ursir, to King Ivar Ironheart, with their blood!” The crowd cheered, though some looked simply resigned to the gory task at hand.

The first stone was cast, thudding through the silence of the square. Silla's vision twinned for a brief moment, her mother's screams ringing in her skull. Gritting her teeth, she struggled to rein in the memories. She could not fall apart, not here, not now.

More stones were thrown. A squelch preceded a muffled cry. Silla kept her eyes downcast and gripped her rock tightly as the cries of the villagers and the screams of the women wove together, a jarring melody that made her skin crawl. Edging toward the dais with the rest of Jarl Gunnell's help, she saw Bera cast her stone from the corner of her eye. But Silla was frozen in place, staring.

Anger sparked inside her like a firestone struck. *Wrong. This is all wrong.*

“Throw it,” said the little blonde girl. “Your skin is too smooth for the whipping post.”

Silla sucked in a deep breath, pulled her arm back, and launched the rock toward the

dais. She did not look to see if it hit its target.

On and on it went, an unending torrent of blood and fury. The ravens screamed overhead; blood pooling on the dais long after the women's screams had faded; long after their battered heads hung limp. The Klaernar roamed through the crowd in search of uncast stones, while the aftertaste of violence hung heavy in the air.

The kaptein's voice rang out. "Let this serve as a warning to those drawn to the temptation of magic. Ursir will set you a fate you cannot escape. You will pay in blood." With that, the spectacle had ended, and the crowd turned to leave. Silla's nerves jangled, her feet heavy as iron.

Think hearthfire thoughts, she imagined her mother saying. *The kind of thoughts that warm you through.*

Baby seals. Sneezing. The scent of books.

A cry rose up, disrupting her thoughts. Silla's eyes darted up with the rest of the crowd, to the sky where a shape crawled slowly across the sun. The light was swallowed, leaving them in ghostly twilight.

"The sun is stolen!" cried a woman, and Silla realized at last—it was an eclipse.

"Sunnvald is angered!" came a man's ragged voice...a familiar voice. "He shows His disapproval for the slaughter!"

Heart thudding, Silla's gaze flew to the Klaernar kapteins, observing a quick succession of hand gestures. Three Klaernar rooted the culprit from the crowd, over where she'd last seen her father. Panic rose within her as the kapteins dragged the man to the dais, and she looked at his face.

It was Tolvik.

Silla exhaled in relief, then chastised herself. It was not her father, no, but Tolvik was a good and kind man. Bile rose in her throat, and she could not look away as the tallest of the Klaernar cut the binds of one of the condemned free. Her corpse landed with a loud thud, limbs protruding at unnatural angles. With ruthless efficiency, the kaptein began to secure Tolvik's wrists to the pillars.

But the old man seemed only to be spurred on. "The old gods will not stand for this! They punish us already with the long winters!"

"Silence!" bellowed the kaptein, his palm cracking across Tolvik's face.

Tolvik blinked, then his eyes flashed with determination. "They will cleanse the lands with fire! It has been done before! It will happen again!"

Silla's stomach clenched tight as the second kaptein stepped to Tolvik, wrenching his mouth open. A blade flashed through the air, Tolvik's screams reaching a shrill crescendo before dampening to choked sobs. The kaptein turned to the crowd, something landing with a wet thud. Tolvik's agonized face came into view, blood leaking from his mouth, and nausea clawed up Silla's throat. His tongue. They'd cut out his tongue.

"Has anyone else pagan thoughts they'd care to voice?" bellowed the kaptein. The crowd grew silent, and the shadow moved from the sun, casting the square into a luminescent golden hue—wrong, all wrong, for the somber mood hanging over the courtyard.

"There is one true God," shouted the Gothi, slicing into Tolvik's vein. Blood drizzled from his elbow into the golden bowl. "The King of Gods. The *Warrior* God."

Deathly silence filled the square as the Gothi drew the runic symbol on Tolvik's forehead, as he poured the blood over the altar stone. A kaptein passed the Gothi a gauntlet, and he pulled it on, steel claws glinting from the knuckles.

“He is the God of Tooth and Claw. And His name is Ursir!”

Look away, Silla urged herself, but she could not. Not even as Tolvik’s tunic was lifted and the claws raked across the soft flesh of his belly. Not even as the older man’s entrails spilled out like pink, twisting eels. Tolvik screamed with agony Silla felt in her bones, in her very soul.

He was still alive when the crowd flowed from the square.

Still alive when the ravens swooped down from above.

Still alive when they began to feast on him.

Silla tried to block all of this from her mind, focusing with all of her strength on the blue skirts of the girl in front of her—tracing the roughspun threads, counting the scattered holes where sparks from the cookfire had landed. Dazed, Silla followed these skirts down the trodden dirt road, through the stockade walls, and up toward Jarl Gunnell’s homestead. It was miraculous that her feet were moving, as numbness had taken over, her mind frozen.

She was not sure how far she’d walked when a dull sound droned in her ears, a small yellow and black creature entering her vision. Another wasp? Silla blinked as it buzzed right at her face, landing on her nose.

“What—” she started, swatting it away.

“Old fool,” muttered Bera, distracting Silla from the insect.

Her thoughts returned to the square. What had come over Tolvik? He’d been clever and kind. To speak of the old gods, to invoke the name of Sunnvald in the presence of the Klaernar, was to ask for death. Silla’s father had made it clear enough to her that while it was their duty to honor their ancestral gods, it must be done behind closed doors. And so long as King Ivar sat on the throne, that was how it must be.

Had Tolvik forgotten himself?

Her mind circled back to the eclipse. There was no doubt now; there was no clearer indication that it was time for them to leave. If history had taught her anything, it was that the eclipse was a harbinger of darkness—bad things inevitably followed.

They passed the outbuildings and reached the door to the longhouse, pausing to wait for Bera to slide a key into the iron padlock. Silla felt as though the single hour had lasted an entire week. Muscles aching as if she'd walked all day, she was a husk of herself.

“Well now,” said Bera, as they entered the longhouse. “Who’s ready for a hot cup of róa?”

Chapter 2

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Silla leaned against the heavy ashwood walls of the stables, glancing toward the fields of stunted barley and rye in search of her father's tall silhouette. Although the seventh chime had sounded, the late summer sunset meant the homestead was still well-lit.

After the eventful morning, a peace had settled, and the air was silent save for the gentle whicker of horses and hushed conversation from within the stables. Despite this, Silla was sick over what happened to Tolvik earlier in the day. Perhaps she was a coward, but she could not bring herself to go into the stables to see the faces of those who knew him well. She simply wished to see her father, hear his calming voice, and reassure herself that he was all right.

Silla pulled the leather tie from her hair, then unthreaded the braid which ran down her spine. Curls sprang loose around her shoulders, and she worked her fingers to massage the ache from her scalp.

The heavy doors to the stables thudded shut, and Silla jumped with a loud gasp.

"I did not mean to frighten you." A dark figure had emerged, changing course and moving toward her. Silla squinted, trying to make out his face. As the figure moved out of the shadows with a slow ambling gait, she recognized him as the farrier. Scratching his beard, the man smiled at her. "You're Hafnar's daughter, are you not? Katrin?"

Silla stared blankly for the span of a heartbeat, before remembering Hafnar was the name by which Matthias currently went. "Gods' ashes," blurted Silla. "I'm twitchy as a

squirrel today. Yes to both questions.” Her eyes locked onto his—dark and kind with creases from smiling. “And you’re Kiljan, correct?”

He nodded, extending a hand. “Well met.”

Silla slid her palm into his, eyes darting down. His tanned hands were large and well-muscled; she supposed one’s hands must grow strong in his line of work. Kiljan leaned on the wall beside her, the faint scent of horses and coal dust meeting her nostrils. “You work the cookfires?”

“Yes. I’ve been assigned breads, which I don’t mind in the least. Did you know there are *nine* different types of bread? With loaves and flatbreads and panbreads, how could you ever be bored?” Noticing the blank look on Kiljan’s face, she paused. *You’re babbling again*, she chastised herself. *Ask him about himself*. “And you work with the horses?”

He nodded.

Silla smiled. “That must be nice. I love horses. I hope to have my own one day.”

“They do make for good company.”

She leaned closer. “Between us, I prefer horses more than some people. Several of them, really.”

“I’d have to agree with you, Katrin.” Kiljan chuckled softly. “How does Skarstad suit you?”

“Oh, it’s lovely,” she replied, then frowned. “Though, this week has not been quite as lovely. How fare the stablehands after what happened to Tolvik?”

Kiljan looked at the ground. “Mood is somber.”

She hugged herself. “I can imagine. Did you know him well?”

“Worked with him for five...six turns of winter now? I cannot believe it.”

She frowned. “How awful—”

“It’s time to leave.”

Silla’s head snapped up at the familiar voice, her gaze locking onto eyes of icy blue. While he moved like a young man, her father was beginning to show his age, through streaks of gray in his blond hair and beard and the lines etched into his pale forehead. She took in the rest of him—dirt-stained gray tunic layered with a leather jerkin, hevrít, handaxe, and daggers sheathed in his belt.

Never unarmed, this father of mine, she thought wryly. As a child, she’d found herself wondering if he slept with his hevrít and had pulled back the blanket to find out—only to have him grasp her wrist and twist it roughly. As sleep had dissolved from his eyes, he’d apologized profusely, warning her never to startle a sleeping man. He’d then shown her the long blade he indeed kept beneath his pillow; his favored bone-hilted hevrít.

The tension inside Silla slid away, and she launched herself forward, hugging her father tightly. His heavy arms wrapped around her, and for just a moment, the foulness of the week seemed to melt away. She drew back, and her father pulled on her elbow, steering her down the lane toward their home on the outskirts of town. Silla glanced back at Kiljan, whose mouth opened, then closed.

“Until tomorrow, Kiljan,” her father said, his voice gruffer than usual.

Silla frowned. It had been abrupt and perhaps a bit rude of a departure. “Well met, Kiljan!” she called feebly over her shoulder with a small wave.

Silla blew a wayward coil of hair away from her face. After twenty turns of winter, she had never kissed another. It had been so long since she’d had a true friend. She loved her

father. She was safe and loved in return. Things could be worse. But they could also be better.

She craved something. She craved *more*. Friendship. To fall in love. To live. How could she do this while always looking over her shoulder, while she and her father floated through life like wraiths in the darkness? They lived the life of survival, doing what they must to earn enough sólas to survive, never staying more than three months in one place. Silla had always found work by the cookfires, and her father usually obtained labor on a farmstead. She admired the way he melded into each new job and each new town seamlessly—he reminded her of the frost foxes, whose fur shifted colors to blend in with their surroundings.

But lately, there had been a troubling weariness to him, and Silla's unease had grown. Long days working in the fields took a toll on him, as did the constant travel. They couldn't keep on like this forever. What they really needed was safety. Somewhere they could rest their tired feet and stay for longer than three months.

"Silla, did you hear me?"

She frowned. "I'm afraid I was dreaming on my feet once again."

"Save the dreams for your sleep tonight, Moonflower," he teased. "I said it is time we leave Skarstad."

Silla sighed as they turned to walk along Vindur Road, back toward the outbuilding on Olaf's steading which they currently called home.

She'd figured they were leaving, but now that he'd spoken the words, anticipation and nervousness mingled together. Of course, there was the fresh start, the promise of something new. But there was also the danger of the road, the empty stomachs, blisters and exhaustion.

She stared at the packed earth road as they stepped along it. “Where shall our wanderings take us next?”

“Kopa.”

Her gaze snapped to him, and she laughed. “Very funny, Father.”

“It is no jest. I’ve received a long-awaited message by falcon inviting us to Kopa.”

She studied his serious face while her stomach twisted. “Kopa? Father, that is...a month’s travel at the very least, is it not?”

She chewed on her lip. Surely he was joking. Perhaps the sun had muddled his mind. But when she looked into his eyes, she found them bright and clear.

“Why not Reykþjod? I believe it is four days walk. Bera has said they make the best spiced mead in the kingdom. We could find work with the mead makers and live our finest lives.”

But her father was stubborn on the matter. “Kopa would be an adventure.”

Silla snorted. Adventure. She’d had enough of that in the last ten years. “Really, Father. If you wish for adventure, we could simply wander into the Twisted Pinewoods. That would be sure to satisfy your cravings for danger. We could hunt for blood-thirsty forest creatures, like the vampire deer or the grimwolves.” She was silent for a moment. “Of all the places in Íseldur, why Kopa?”

Silla was not even sure where to place it on a map. All she knew was that it was north. *Far* north, though not quite as far as the lands of Nordur, which, as she recalled, lay so far north they experienced a single hour of daylight in the cold winter months. No force in this world could draw her there.

He turned to her, his eyes grave. “I’ve had word, Silla. There are shield-homes for those in need. A safe refuge where we could catch our breaths.”

Silla reeled. A shield-house. Could this truly be real?

She approached the topic cautiously. “Assuming we decided to go to Kopa—and Father, please notice I’ve used the word ‘assuming’—we’d have to do it in several stages. Our sólas would run out far before we reached it. Those roads...they are arduous to travel, are they not?”

“Very,” he replied, a wistful look in his eye. “I traveled there myself as a young man. We rode all the way from Kopa to Sunnavík. It took us a full month and a half...but Silla, it was more beautiful than you could imagine. Long have I felt the call of the north, and this message settles it. Fortune takes us to Kopa. To safety.” There was a vibrancy in his voice that was catching.

Silla’s hand went mindlessly to the vial hanging on a leather cord around her neck, caressing the smooth metal. This talk of messages from the north had come from nowhere. What was he doing sending falcons—and whom was he sending them to?

“Well,” she said slowly, breathing in pine and juniper as the woods climbed up on either side of the road, “if your heart is set on Kopa, then let us make our way first to Reyk fjord. We will discuss it while we walk.”

“I’ll sway you, Moonflower,” said her father affectionately, wrapping a brawny arm around her waist and squeezing her tight. Half a head taller than her, he laid his cheek on her hair. “We must leave at first light. Did you collect your wages?”

She nodded, patting the leather purse secured to her belt, sólas and a few kressens clinking together within.

“Good.”

As they made their way along the road, Silla wondered who she would be this time? She’d already been Thordis, Ingunn, Gudrunn, and now Katrin. Perhaps she’d be Atta in this new place. Yes. Atta had a pleasing sound to it.

The clouds dispersed, sunlight catching on damp pine needles and bracken blanketing the forest floor. A bird called from somewhere high above, and Silla craned her neck to see it. Squinting, she could just make it out—long black wings, curved yellow beak, and a streak of white across its feather tails.

Black hawk, she realized with horror. As she laid a hand on her father’s forearm, Silla’s senses sharpened to an alarming point. Twigs cracked discordantly, raising the fine hairs on her arms. The screech of a nearby owl made her jump in fright.

“Silla?” her father asked, but it was too late.

Figures emerged like wolves from the shadows, black-clad and lithe with biting steel blades. Before Silla and her father could react, they were surrounded.

Silla’s heart stumbled as she assessed the situation: six men fortified by shirts of black mail, armed with greataxes and swords. Their beards were twisted into twin braids in the fashion favored by King Ivar and his fellow Urkans.

Her first thought was Klaernar. Had her time run out? Had the whispers of the haunted girl finally reached their ears? The tales of the girl who sees the unseen? She’d been careful in Skarstad, but addressing the little blonde girl in the town square had been a foolish slipup.

But these men did not have the screaming bear shoulder plates, nor the tattoo markings on their faces.

“What is it you want?” demanded her father. “We have only a few coins, but they are yours.”

The tallest of the men stepped forward, hair an unkempt brown and eyes black as night. “We do not want your coins.” His eyes narrowed, lips curving into a malicious smile. “You know why we’re here, *Tómas*.”

Silla’s brows knit together at the unfamiliar name. Then the knot in her stomach loosened—they had mistaken her and her father for someone else. But as her eyes darted to her father, ice slid down her spine.

His face corpse white, he swayed on his feet. “You are mistaken; I’m Hafnar, not *Tómas*. And this is my daughter, Katrin.”

The man laughed, cold and mirthless. He strolled around them, stroking his beard. “Do you think me a fool? We’ve searched many long years for you, *Tómas*, and today, your fortune has ended. There is no escape.”

Silla’s pulse pounded in her ears. Mistake. Clearly, this was a mistake. But why did her father look as though he’d seen a ghost?

Reminding herself of the dagger sheathed at her ankle, Silla gathered her courage. “He is *not* *Tómas*. You have the wrong man.”

“*Tómas*, *Tómas*, *Tómas*,” tutted the leader. “You disappoint me. Have you told her nothing?” He chuckled and turned his black gaze on Silla. “Forget your loyalty to this man. He is not even your kin—you share no blood.”

Silla’s gaze bounced from the stranger back to her father. His eyes met hers, and she saw it—confirmation, regret, and, most chillingly, fear.

The man nodded and two warriors surged forward, seizing her roughly. Her father

roared, lunging at them, but more men advanced. A crack echoed in the roadway as a man struck him with the back of his hand, other warriors restraining his arms behind his back

“No!” Silla thrashed against the warriors who held her, trying to reach her father, but their grip was ironclad.

The leader brought his face to hers, so near she smelled his sour breath. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to recoil, but someone behind her pressed her forward. “She has the scar,” he murmured, his gloved finger tracing the tiny crescent-shaped mark beside her left eye. “It’s her.”

The man released her, and Silla blinked, sucking in desperate breaths to calm her racing heart. What in the eternal fires was going on?

Staring at Silla, there was a cruel smile upon the leader’s lips. “Queen Signe has been searching for you, girl.”

She blinked.

“You’ll take her over my cold corpse,” spat her father.

“It can be done, Tómas. Your death is long overdue,” replied the black-eyed man, turning to him.

But her father had already wrenched free from his captors, unsheathed his hevrít, and rolled on the ground. He slashed his blade upward with smooth and fluid movement, as if he’d done it a thousand times before. The leader escaped the hissing blade by a hair’s breadth, and with quick, spry movement, her father was on his feet, hevrít swinging toward a new adversary’s neck. The warrior twisted, narrowly dodging the blade.

Silla watched the man who had raised her in complete disbelief. His movements were agile, powerful, practiced. As he swung his hevrít in an aggressive flurry and easily

evaded his opponents, she could not reconcile this man with the one she knew, the gentle giant who worked the fields and brought her heart-shaped rocks.

The woods exploded with shouts and frenzied motion. Her arm was released as one of her captors lunged at her father. Silla scrambled to action, shoving her foot down hard upon the boot of her remaining captor and wrenching free from his grip. Crouching down, she gripped the dagger sheathed at her ankle and tugged—to no avail. With a grunt of frustration, she yanked again on the stubborn handle, but it would not budge.

On the edge of her vision, her father battled four men, hair flying, hevrít singing through the air quicker than she could track. A sickening squelch captured her attention, a man falling to the ground. Quicker than lightning, her father grabbed the fallen man's axe, slashing it down upon a new opponent with such strength it sheared through the warrior's shirt of mail. The man crumbled with a keening wail, and her father was already pulling the blade free from the broken rivets, kicking back a third man who lunged at him.

Through the panic, the turmoil, the pounding in her ears, Silla heard the memory of her father's words.

Promise me, Moonflower. If we are attacked, you will run. Do not try to fight. Do not let them take you.

Silla looked to the shadows of the pinewoods, then sprang from her crouch toward the trees.

She made it two steps.

An arm came from nowhere, wrapping around her throat and squeezing tightly. Momentum kept her feet going, swinging them off the ground as the arm yanked her back against a hard chest.

“Where are you running to?” rasped a voice—the leader. Frost spread through Silla’s veins. “Worry not. The queen will not kill you. Not right away, that is.”

Silla’s eyes bulged as she gasped for breath, her hands clawing desperately at the arm around her throat and the face behind her. Nails sinking into skin, she pulled. The man cursed, but his arm only tightened around her throat, a second arm encircling her waist, pinning her hands. She kicked, flailed, an animal desperate for freedom, but nothing loosened his hold.

The sounds of battle faded. Time ceased to have meaning. Her entire world honed in on the pain in her neck, the frantic need for air. Shooting stars danced before her, the edges of her vision darkening, closing in on her.

She was falling.

Her vision bloomed red.

And then, darkness surrounded her.

* * *

The smell of earth. A coppery taste in her mouth. A great weight upon her. Ragged, gasping sounds.

Awareness returned to her, sudden as a summer storm. They were *her* sounds. She sucked in desperate, wheezing breaths as lights popped in her vision. Her neck and face were red hot and throbbing.

Silla assessed her situation. She lay in a ditch, trapped beneath something heavy. Turning her head, her stomach lurched—black eyes, open and lifeless. She wriggled, her father’s handaxe coming into view—buried in the man’s skull. Silla held herself very still then. Had the others not seen her? Did they believe her dead? But the clash of swords, the

grunts and shouts had faded. Now there was only unearthly stillness.

Silence so loud it hurt her ears.

“Father,” she croaked. A frenzied burst of energy forced her limbs into movement. She squirmed until she freed herself from the man’s weight.

Getting to her feet, Silla took in the scene on Vindur Road.

Death. Everywhere.

It was a nightmare, a horrid nightmare from which she could not awaken. Corpses were strewn across the road, ravens feasting upon them, the low buzz of carrion flies vibrating the air. She stepped over a severed hand, sending the birds into an angry retreat—walked past a man with a hevrít buried halfway through his neck. A wet, choking noise caught her attention, and Silla scrambled to the middle of the carnage, where a familiar figure lay motionless.

Rusted red oozed from at least four wounds in her father’s torso. Bodies surrounded him, one sprawled across his legs, impaled on a sword so thoroughly it protruded from his back.

Relief surged through her as her father’s chest rose and fell, blood seeping from his wounds with each breath. “Father!” she cried, trying to heave the man from him, but the body wouldn’t budge.

Silla fell to her knees beside her father, placing a hand on his cheek. This man did not look like her father at all. His face was smeared with gore, his hair matted and red. Her peaceful, gentle giant of a father. How had this happened? Tears spilled over, leaving wet tracks down her cheeks.

“Father!” she whispered.

Her father's eyelids fluttered open.

"Silla," he rattled. His voice was wrong—all wrong.

"Father," Silla sobbed. "Father. You're alive! You will be all right. I will find a healer and bring her to you."

"Moonflower," said her father. "No. My fate is set."

A sob built in Silla's throat. "No, Father, you must not—"

Her father lifted a crimson-stained finger to her lips, and she forced herself to hush.

"My hevrít," he rasped, and her gaze bounced from corpse to corpse until she found it, the polished bone hilt severing the man's neck. It took several attempts to tug it free, making a sickening wet sound as it came loose, but she swallowed back the bile rising in her throat and rushed back to her father. The salt of her tears pricked her tongue as she clasped his hands around the ivory hilt—a weapon to protect him as he traveled the afterlife and settled amongst the stars.

"You must know," he whispered. "I loved you like my own kin."

Shock rippled through Silla at his confession. He coughed, hot blood splattering across her cheek.

"Mattress," her father's eyes fluttered as he took a ragged breath. "Bed...go to Kopa." He labored with another breath. "Do not let the queen take you. You're...survivor." A wet rattle escaped him, shivering across her skin and clawing down her spine. Silla watched in horror as the life faded from his eyes.

"No!" She pulled his head into her lap, smoothing the hair from his face. A quiet sob broke in her chest as she held the only person she had in this world. Tears dripped onto

his blood-marred face, clearing paths as they rolled across it.

A twig cracked, Silla's gaze leaping to the woods. Probably an animal or a mischievous forest spirit, but she couldn't take any chances. And while she wished to hold and mourn her father, to give him a proper burial, there was urgency.

You must run.

A primitive part of her mind took hold. Silla pulled the coins from her father's pockets, then rose.

And then, she ran.

Chapter 3

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As the door of the outbuilding slammed against the wall, Silla's legs collapsed beneath her, and she fell to the packed earth floor. The energy surging through her blood had faded, her senses now muffled as though she were underwater.

The hut on the edge of Olaf the Red's property was small, formerly used to house field thralls, until fresh quarters had been built for them. A single room, it had a central rectangular hearth above which an iron cookpot hung. The rest of the room was sparse; on one side, a trunk and straw mattresses were heaped with furs and a few woolen blankets, on the other, a trestle table was flanked by benches, shelves housing food supplies overhead. The top shelf served as their makeshift altar. Low burnt candles sat before bread heels and two cups of mead—one for the gods, one for the spirits. Silla looked around the room with despair. It was drafty and sparse, but it was theirs...*had been* theirs for a few short months.

With prodding fingers, she assessed her face and neck. Sharp pain beneath her eye and along the swollen flesh of her throat suggested she'd have substantial bruising to deal with. She allowed herself a few minutes to gather her thoughts, to allow what happened to sink into her bones. She knew her father had died—she'd seen his chest rise and fall that final time, had watched the life leave his eyes. Despite this, she listened for him. Any moment now, she'd hear the thud of his boots on the landing. He'd wrap her in his arms, and all would be set right.

Tears flooded her eyes, spilling down her cheeks, and she frantically swiped them away. *You must leave this place*, she reminded herself, but her thoughts were so hazy she

could scarcely think.

“You could not unsheathe your dagger,” said the girl from the corner of the room, snapping Silla from her thoughts. She cast an irritated look at the girl, then glanced at her trembling hands in the dim light of the hut. To her great dismay, they were smeared with her father’s blood.

The queen will not kill you. Not right away, that is. The warrior’s words rang in her skull and Silla squeezed her eyes shut.

“Why does the queen wish you dead, Silla?” asked the little blonde girl.

The very thought made Silla’s chest tighten. “Stop,” she growled. “I must focus. I need to move quickly.”

Moving to a bucket of water near the hearth, Silla scrubbed the blood from her hands, then her face. She patted her cheeks dry with a nearby scrap of linen, then stared at it numbly. She’d dried their bowls from the daymeal with that linen earlier this morning, and there it still lay.

Everything in their rustic hut was the same, just as they’d left it that morning. Her father’s blue tunic lay sprawled across his bed, his wolfskin gloves draped from the table to dry, the heart-shaped rock he’d brought her from the field sat beside Silla’s bed. How could these details remain unchanged when everything else in her life had been brought to such ruin?

She bunched the linen up and flung it, but there was no time for anger.

“The mattress,” said the girl, pointing to the beds.

Silla chewed on her lip. “Something...hidden under the mattress?”

“I love a riddle,” exclaimed the girl, clapping her hands together.

Moving toward the beds, curiosity nipped at Silla. She pulled the furs from her father’s bed and set them aside. Her fingers moved beneath the straw mattress, searching for something out of sorts along the pallet beneath, but finding nothing. After searching beneath her own to no avail, Silla began to wonder if the words had simply been the ramblings of a dying man.

“What about *inside* the mattress?” asked the little blonde girl, scratching her elbow.

Yanking at the dagger sheathed in her boot, Silla grew irritated as the blade pulled free with ease. “Foulsome thing,” she muttered, glaring at it.

She ran the blade along the edge of her father’s mattress, then reached her hand into the straw bedding within. Almost immediately, her hand closed around something, and she pulled out a rough-spun bag.

Silla crossed the room and dumped the contents onto the table. Sólas and kressens bounced out, and as she tilted the bag up, she spotted something lodged in the bottom—parchment folded into a small square. Unfolding it carefully, she read the words aloud.

“*Tómas,*

My sincerest apologies for such a late reply. The Mossarokk message post has long been abandoned, and patrol riders stumbled by chance across your letters—thankfully allies of ours. Eystri lands have many refuges for those in need. Come to Kopa before winter’s turn, and we will get you and your daughter situated in a shield-house.

Ask for Skeggagrim at the house with the blue shutters, beside the Dragon’s Lair Inn, Kopa, Eystri.

Best of luck on your journey.

Your friend.”

“Skeggagrim?” asked the blonde girl, clutching the edge of the table beside Silla’s elbow. “It has the sound of a character in a skald’s tale. A troll, perhaps.”

Silla flipped the parchment over in search of more information, but it was blank. As much as she loathed the idea of traveling such a long distance, the prospect of safety was alluring. More than alluring...it was the thing she most desperately longed for in life, written in ink.

“I suppose I’m going to Kopa.”

“*We’re* going to Kopa?” exclaimed the girl. “An adventure, how fun!”

Kopa would be an adventure, her father had said earlier. Tears began to gather once more, and Silla forced her body to move.

Folding the parchment back up, she placed it into the bag with the coins from the table and those in her purse. She tucked the bag down her linen underdress, fingers prodding for the pocket she’d sewn on the inside next to her hip. After traveling the roads of Sudur long enough, Silla knew that one always kept valuables secured and hidden.

Moving back to her father’s bed, Silla’s fingers wrapped around the scratchy woolen material of his tunic, and she couldn’t resist. Bringing it to her nose, Silla breathed in his scent before crushing it to her chest. This tunic held the last remnants of him. It was foolish, she had limited space, but she stuffed the tunic into her hemp sack anyway.

Pulling the heart-shaped rock from beside her own bed, her fingers ran over the smooth surface. Into the bag it went. From the trunk beside her bed, Silla pulled underdresses and a thick woolen apron dress, an antler-carved comb, and her red cloak. Her fingers smoothed along the fur-trimmed hood. Red was not a color in which to disappear, but it was

thick and quilted, and where she was going, she'd need warmth.

Silla moved to the cook shelves, grabbing a skin for water and wrapping up blackened bread in a scrap of linen. She plunged apples and carrots, hard cheese, and smoked elk into the sack. Staring at the offerings at their makeshift altar, Silla paused. *What a lot of good these did*, she thought to herself, then frowned.

The gods do not work as we expect them to, Moonflower, her father would tell her.

With a heavy breath, she whisked the bread crusts onto the floor, and moved the candles to the food supplies shelf—erasing any evidence that they worshiped the old gods.

Silla grabbed the small wooden box that sat next to a stack of weathered bowls. Pulling it down, she flipped the lid up and looked inside. Her eyes settled upon the green leaves, gnarled and piled upon each other. Lifting the vial from where it rested against her collarbones, she removed the stopper and pressed as many leaves as she could fit inside, then added the box to her sack.

“You could have one right now,” suggested the girl. Longing slithered through Silla’s veins.

“Soon,” she whispered, surveying the room. The outbuilding was still and quiet, dim light from the fading day pouring through the opened doorway.

A loud crack sounded from outside. Silla dropped the sack, diving under a bench and pulling a sheepskin down to shade her from view. An apple wobbled across the floor, her heart beating like a war drum.

She counted her breaths as she waited.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Nothing. The building was silent. It was nothing. Silla forced breath into her body, then pushed herself from under the bench.

She wondered about the animals on Vindur Road, the grimwolves, whose howls she'd heard during the last full moons, and the bears, who left the tree bark scratched up along the road. Worse yet, the creatures said to haunt the woods, the stuff of nightmares. The vampire deer who hunted in packs, draining victims of blood. The wolfspiders and others whose names she didn't care to learn.

"You need a weapon," said the girl with a scowl, her thin arms crossed over her dirty nightdress.

Silla glanced down at her ankle, where the dagger was sheathed once more.

"Useless, loathsome thing," muttered Silla bitterly. How meaningless it was to carry a dagger when she could not unsheathe it in her hour of need. It was an illusion of protection, a false sense of security. Slinging the sack over her shoulder, she took a last look around the building. Despair and grief were beginning to scratch at her throat, but she swallowed them back.

Walking through the open doorway, Silla's eyes darted right to left, then down the packed dirt trail that led to Vindur Road.

The sky had darkened but the clouds had cleared and the setting sun cast golden light upon the path before her. Silla veered left, rounding to the back of the hut where her father kept the tools supplied by Olaf. She ran her fingers along the iron tongs, the axe, the hacksaw. They fell upon the hammer, feeling the smooth curve of the wood, measuring its weight. Not too heavy, but enough weight to do damage.

"Perfect," encouraged the girl. "Best to get walking."

Rounding to the front of the structure, Silla took one last breath on the hut's steps, on this threshold between the comfort and familiarity of her old life and the dangerous unknown of the new. Then, she stepped away from it. She walked down the glowing pathway and onto Vindur Road, hurrying away from Skarstad, away from her father, and away from her shattered life.