Winter's Bane: Part One

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Winter's Bane
Part One: Beasts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
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WINTER’S BANE

PART ONE:

BEASTS
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1 THE BEAST AT HRÚNAN

A battle between man and beast. The warriors – no more than matchstick men, scores of them holding swords aloft, faces alight with the noble ire of battle. And the beast – twelve feet tall, reared on its hind legs, spitting and drooling in anger. With its jawed mouth open, clawed forelimbs spread wide, and hunched back drawing it up to full height, the barghest seemed to dive down upon its prey. Its size enveloped their sight; its rage erased their noble cause. It tore at their heads from above, while they struck uselessly at its heel.

King Ceawlin traced a row of the barghest’s jagged teeth with his thumb. The masons of old had created a masterpiece. Even hewn in stone by the tools of men, the eyes of this great monster of Amrendeth seemed to glitter and move.

Dozens of stone carvings lined the four walls of Hrúnan, noble mead-hall of the ancients. They stretched from floor to ceiling, adorning the columns and the King’s own throne, and told the legends of Braigh Amren’s mightiest warriors. The King always found himself drawn to this one: Ecferth Blood-Bringer and the Barghest. He knew the beast’s eerie, lifelike quality was only a trick of the firelight, reflecting on the dark stone. But he could not shake the feeling of foreboding that had been with him all evening.

"Old fool you are, Ceawlin," he muttered to himself, thumbing the curved edge of a stone warrior's sword. In Amrendeth, he had cause enough to feel foreboding every night.

A polite cough behind the King’s shoulder drew his mind out of its reverie. He turned toward the noise. Two of his Thanes stood at attention: Deor, fixing the King with his serious eyes; and self-possessed old Vidar, hand resting on the pommel of his sword.

"What is Bjorn's report?" the King asked.
"Another incident on his estate," said Deor, leaning in close so that the chatter of the room masked his voice.

"Any injured?" the King asked.

"Two of his guard will be unable to fight for at least a week," answered Vidar. “Bjorn himself earned another gash to the cheek, the rash bastard. His farm slaves seemed shaken, but none killed."

"All well, all well," the King grumbled. He took one last look at the carving, then dropped his hand and moved back toward the festivities at the center of the room. Two long feasting tables flanked either side of a roaring fire. Ceawlin's court laughed and ate, and the scop's lute echoed up to the high rafters of the mead-hall of the ancients, noble Hrúnan. The King passed slowly through groups of drinking nobles, inclining his head to those who bowed, surveying the scene. Deor and Vidar followed.

"What of the situation at the North Gate?" he asked.

"Contained," said Vidar. “The thing claimed two men at the Gate, and a hunter along the forest path, probably as it fled. I had my coroner examine the bodies, and we think it was a barghest, now, based on the bites. Pity it turned tail before we could avenge them."

"If it was indeed a barghest, it'll be in its nature to come back for its own retribution – nasty, vengeful creatures. Can you spare a team of warriors to finish the job?"

"I'd have to pull men from the South face."

"Do it. Ask the farmers to fill in – but I want trained soldiers back on the Wall by sundown. If they can't kill it by the end of the day, they'll have to give it up and turn back."

"Aye, my lord."
The King took his place on his throne, which looked down along the two feast-tables.

The sounds of the feast swelled beneath the mead-hall's cavernous ceiling: raucous talk, the slam of drinking horns against the wood, the reedy sweetness of the scop's peans.

"Now Yngmorne of old Hjalmar begotten, 
did birth the bitter world that beasts encircleth. 
lo! Amrendeth, stone-forest of hands and teeth, 
and mighty Braigh Amren, city-vigil of light, 
strong-walled against the blood-evils without ..."

Deor knelt at the King's right hand. "My lord, there is one more matter which requires your attention," he said, shifting his weight.

To their left, the King noticed his wife lean toward them as she poured ale for a few other commanding guardsmen. Her eyes glazed over, as they usually did when she was listening hard. The King raised an eyebrow at Deor.

"We think old Stieg's wife was carried off by something in the middle of the night," Deor said, shooting a glance at Vidar, who nodded. "Didn't even wake Stieg or his sons. No body, only a lot of blood."

The King made a noise through his teeth, like a dog that had been kicked. The guardsmen were not so large a blow; they were men; they had sworn the oath of Hjalmar and pledged their lives to battle. But the woman? She relied on their protection ... on her King's protection ...

He gripped the arms of his throne. Deor clasped his shoulder. Sighing, the King relaxed.

"What a shield-brother you have both been to me, men," he said. "I sleep a bit more soundly knowing my twelve Thanes patrol the Gates. Even so, this bodes most unwell for the Sacrifice."

"The High Priestess remains confident," Vidar said. "She tells the people the gods have sent her promising signs."
"Perhaps they have, but what signs are they sending us?" The King said, taking a swig from his drinking horn. "Every day another attack, and every night the beasts grow more bold, more hungry. In my father's reign, nothing ever like this..." he trailed off. "In less than a fortnight we will know the face of the Eidolon, and she shall hold all our hope. She must walk boldly and with strength to the altar at Gehwelcne, for indeed the gods are wrathful this year..."

"In winter, the gods teach us suffering so that we may love the spring," replied Vidar. "My men are glad of the chance to prove themselves against the beasts of the long night, and gain glory in battle as our forebears did."

Vidar patted his own stomach, looking around the room contentedly. But Deor, the King noticed, held something darker in his eyes. He was the youngest of the Thanes, Ceawlin thought, but serious far beyond his years. The three fell silent. They watched as the scop went from lady to lady at the long table as he sang, down toward the window at the end of the hall; and they giggled as he met their eyes.

"Brushed by Wyrd-wind, men of Braigh Amren, those folk of blood and boldness, beast-slay, and do glory gain by sword-terror feats. O, how their spirits fly ..."

The King sighed. The old exhaustion was creeping into his bones, the tiredness that had nothing to do with sleep.

"I'll make reparations to Stieg tomorrow eve," he said finally. "In the mean, go and increase the garrisons at the Gate and along Bjorn's length of the Wall."

"We've enough men for one, but not the other," Deor said. "If I move any more guards away from the South face, we'd have a breach within a day."
"Well – as many as you can spare to the Gate, then. Bjorn has enough private guard to hold him out for a little while. As for Stieg's wife, tell the party going after the barghest to keep an eye out for her body."

Vidar and Deor bowed and left. Vidar clapped his hand on the shoulder of a wealthy landowner, who laughed; Deor returned to his seat, where his young waif of a fiancée waited for him with a horn of mead. The King's own wife, Aethelred, straightened up from the men to whom she had been attending, brow slightly furrowed.

"Fair lady, your courteous soul has heartened us in our fight against the beasts. We shall defend you and our King whom we love, or perish in the attempt!" One man declared, lifting his drinking horn. His companions followed suit, sloshing foam over the table.

"My thanks, lords. You have well pleased me with your words," the Queen smiled. "Praise be to Hjalmar that he has sent such fine warriors to defend peace among men."

_She could rouse a crowd even among mutineers and madmen, my Aethelred_, the King thought. The soldiers drank to her words, and she smiled on them, but as soon as she turned her back to them, a grim resignation replaced the glittering graciousness in her eyes.

"There ought to be as many men on the Wall as possible," she said in undertone, taking her place at the king's right hand. "Defending the people, not scouring the forest for the husk of a smithy's wife."

“I thought you were listening,” the King murmured, eyes distant. "It's the least I can do for Stieg. Something to bury. A show of care, of loyalty to one of my good men."

"The good-feeling of one man matters little to the hundreds who depend on your guards for protection," Aethelred said evenly. "You ought to show the people loyalty, and keep your men at the Wall. And," she continued, raising an eyebrow, "you ought to go about and speak to
your court sometime tonight. Stir them with a story – give Cadoc a ring; the boy slew a huldra two moons ago. Silent brooding does not cement allegiances, my King – 

"Men do not pledge fealty to a King who allows their women to rot, ungodly, in the nest of a beast!" the King burst out, rubbing his eyes. "What good is it to spin empty promises over cups of mead if the beasts will take us surely, one way or the other?"

“I only mean,” Aethelred began, but the King waved his hand to show he understood.

“I know what you mean,” he said, leveling the irritation in his voice with great difficulty. “You speak better sense than half my advisors, as always. But I cannot speak of this now. You must allow me time to think.”

“Think you should, my lord,” Aethelred sat back in her throne, looking pleased. He sighed, and brought her hand to his lips.

“My sweet Queen,” he murmured. “My wise wife.”

She softened somewhat. Not entirely. No, never, Ceawlin thought. But somewhat. His joints creaking, the King stood again and walked slowly back over to the far wall.

At his seat at the table, Deor watched his King rise.

“Deor?” his betrothed, Eilun, looked up at him.

“Just a moment, love,” he said, swinging his legs over the bench.

The King had once again found the carving of Ecferth and the barghest when he heard a soft voice sound behind him.

“Does something trouble you, lord?” Deor said.

The King ran his thumb over the jagged outline of the stone barghest, tracing the spikes in its matted fur, the curve of its hunched back. “Do you know this story, Deor?” he asked.

“A bit of it, I suppose. From my father’s old tale.”
“It is Thane Ecferth Blood-Bringer, fighting the barghest who tore down the South Wall in my great-grandfather’s time,” the King murmured. “It had breached our every defense and was wreaking havoc in the very heart of the city. Ecferth and his men saved Braigh Amren by baiting it back into the forest from whence it had come. The city was safe. But the beast was too strong.” The King drew his fingers over the scene. The warriors leapt around the central figure of the beast, brandishing swords and spears. “This is the moment of their defeat.”

“They fight still,” Deor said.

“Aye, they do,” said the King. “But look at their faces. Such craftsmanship, that you can see it only in the closest study of their eyes – the tide of the battle has turned past victory. Look at Ecferth. He holds his sword aloft, though the beast’s maw is poised inches from his head. His expression,” the King’s voice died to an awed whisper, “…uplifted. This is the very instant he realized no hope remained. The moment he chose glory and sacrifice instead of surrender.”

The King’s eyes had glassed over, his movements stilled. Deor stared at him.

“Of course, we now know much more about the beasts than they did in my great-grandfather’s time,” the King continued softly. “Barghests, for instance, do not devour their victims immediately. They drag a straggler or two back to their nests and play with their food. It probably took Ecferth weeks to pass on. Starvation. Blood loss. The moment itself was likely a quiet sleep … a last little breath from a body already made skeletal.” The King dropped his hand from the wall and turned away angrily. “What a hero’s death,” he spat.

A great boom echoed through the cavernous hall.

The chatter around the long tables died away. Deor placed his hand on the pommel of his sword. Dead, terrified silence filled Hrúnan for a moment. Boom. The King drew his own
weapon, and the men of the hall mirrored him, turning their heads to locate the source of the noise. *Boom. Boom.*

A little noble-girl, some Thane’s daughter, screamed. Her mother quickly clamped a hand around her mouth, but she pointed, eyes wide as saucers, at the small latticed window above the King’s own head. He turned just in time to see a red-brick chimney, previously affixed to the wall of the estate on the opposite side of the street, toppling directly toward him.

*Boom!* The chimney slammed against Hrúnan’s wall, showering Deor and the King with hunks of brick and shards of glass. The King felt his cheek connect with the stone floor and tasted blood in his mouth. His first thought was of Deor – but he had no time to throw out a protective arm, for a final *BOOM*, louder than all the rest, resonated through the hall, followed by a blood-curling shriek Ceawlin knew came from no genteel lady of the court. Its issuant was twelve feet tall, hunched at the back, and drooling hot, bubbling saliva onto the King’s face. A heaving, massive, fully-real barghest filled the gaping hole it had bust through the wall.

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It had been a long time since Deor had gone a night without dreams. It was true for most men on the Wall: beneath the closed eye of sleep, talons and teeth and coarse black hair rose to greet them; they woke in their bunks, feeling their own eyes, ensuring they were still tucked safely in their sockets. For three days following the attack at Hrúnan, Deor woke screaming. He could remember only bits and pieces of them. The crush of glass and brick and stone cascading over his body, burying him. The strain in every fiber of his being as he fought to crawl from the rubble. Blood gushed down the side of his head. The room slid in and out of focus. It would not hurt to rest his eyes, sleep just for a moment …
A man fallen into the fire, twitching, not quite dead. The skid of swords against scabbards. Ladies caught by their dresses and thrown, their bodies skittering across the flagstones. The room swam before Deor’s eyes as he lay watching. Men and women running in all directions; the baleful groan of Hrúnan’s wooden columns bending, preparing to give way; claws; yells; blood; sobs. Deor couldn’t recall freeing himself from the rubble. The next moment, he was running with his sword drawn, pulling aside shrieking ladies as the barghest’s jaws snapped at the air. He remembered the slick movement of his right bicep as it flexed around an embedded shard of glass. The feel of his lips as they silently shaped the word Eilun, his voice lost in a din of screams. He turned on his heels, trying to find her – and then an enormous force knocked him over from behind, flipped him on his back, and pinned him flat between two swordlike talons.

The terrible face of the barghest, inches from Deor’s own. The putrid stink of its breath, the awful, intelligent black eyes as it considered its prey. It raised its claw to strike – And then the King was there, on his feet, eyes blazing. He swung his sword just as the barghest’s arm careened downward. The beast screeched, its forelimb gushing hot, black blood. It relinquished its hold on Deor, who scrambled backward on his elbows, and turned angrily toward its new assailant.

For a single moment, the monster and the King stood in almost perfect tableau of the image of Ecferth. The barghest, hunched and enormous, its mouth roaring open, seconds from enveloping its prey. The King, firm in his stance, armor gleaming and features alight with fury, holding his sword aloft with two hands – as if daring the beast to do its worst –

The barghest’s jaws clamped tight around the King’s middle and lifted him up into the air. The King hacked at the beast’s face and neck, but to no avail. With one shake, Ceawlin’s
sword fell from his hand and clattered against the ground. Deor remembered a final, bloodcurdling roar – muffled by the King’s kicking body. And the barghest bounded off, through the hole it had torn in Hrúnan’s wall, and into the darkness of night. Deor’s vision swam once more, and his limbs shook. He felt his head hit the ground, and saw no more.

Deor awoke to the sound of shifting rubble, the touch of moonlight on his face.

“Oh, thank the gods,” breathed a familiar voice – Eilun. With a heaving breath, she lifted up a wooden beam, and Deor felt his chest expand. He coughed, but managed a smile, and reached out a hand to cup her cheek.

“A more pleasing sight for tired eyes, a fallen soldier could not wish,” he said.

“Perhaps it would bode you well to stop looking and start moving,” Eilun grunted. “I cannot hold forever.”

Deor realized she was lifting up the wooden beam just enough so that Deor could crawl out from under it. Muttering an apology, he kicked away the stone rubble that covered his arms and legs – part of the ceiling seemed to have caved in – and wriggled free. With a great crash, Eilun let down the beam behind him. They both stood, panting. They were the only things that moved in the whole of the wrecked mead-hall.

“We ought to look for more,” Eilun said, glancing around.

“No,” Deor said. “It will be safer to wait until the morning. The beast may yet return.”

They joined the other stunned courtiers on the Stone Temple, trading whispers, offering condolences. They learned the details of what had happened, the story sweeping through Braigh Amren in horrified whispers. How the barghest had appeared at the West face as if with no warning, easily overwhelming the tired, understaffed guardsmen there. How it had torn a hole clean through the Wall and wrought havoc on Braigh Wräcca, the beggar-town on the West side
of the city, then torn a path straight through to the heart of the city, where Hrúnan lay unaware. How it had bounded back through the destruction it had wrought, through the hole it had torn in the West face. It had vanished into dark depths of Amrendeth, the King’s tiny form still clamped between its jaws.

"I know your hearts are hurting, as mine sorely weeps," Queen Aethelred addressed the people from the base of the great tree Gehwelcne, in the holy heart of the village's main square. "My husband and lord, the great King Ceawlin, would have commanded his people to stand steadfastly strong against the horrors of the outside. To hold dear his memory, and to carry on in the bloody fight he waged so valiantly. True warrior was he!"

The crowd cheered for the veneration of their lord, but panicked voices shouted over the din, unnerved by the Queen’s use of past tense to refer to their King. Deor and the other Thanes, linked arm in arm before the Queen, pressed in, fighting back a surge of people.

“I saw him!” a villager shouted, “Alive and fighting even in the mouth of the beast, as it dragged him back out into the forest!”

"Alive or not, he is gone. A village bereft of her King cannot withstand the hordes outside!" another called, as the crowd in the main square roiled, whispering and afraid.

"The gods show the signs of their displeasure!"

“Are we really so quick to abandon our King? Our hope? We must find him.”

"More maidens must come forth on Midwinter's Eve – two, three, ten!"

The people's outcries reached such a crescendo that, on the third day after the King’s disappearance, the High Priestess herself appeared to give a rare public address. Her image atop the long, high steps of the Temple, cloaked in regal bloodred and flanked by several stern-looking members of the Council of Onela, sent a hush over the crowd.
"The gods have indeed sent death upon us this winter, and in greater numbers than usual," the High Priestess said, her voice echoing alone across Gehwelcne Square.

It was difficult to discern her features from so far away, as the crowd was not allowed past the foot of the steps. She seemed faceless, and for that, somehow more powerful.

"They have taken our King from us," the High Priestess continued. "In this, they bid us suffer their wrath: and we, children of the gods, must allow ourselves to be made humble by their hands. In a month’s time, the moon will be right for me to Crown the Eidolon among us: the maiden of the Midwinter Sacrifice. We must not lose faith in this rite," she pronounced each word with its own weight. "The Sacrifice has delivered us through a millennia of winters. It is the best hope we have, in these times of darkness, to show our devotion to the gods and to beg benevolence of them. I urge you all to walk piously in these next months: our King and our city, as ever, lie at the mercy of the gods' displeasure."

With no more to say, she turned in her regal robes and vanished into her cloister. For Deor and for many others, it was the closest they had ever been to this figure of power. Her reassurances bolstered the people’s morale somewhat, at least enough to keep them from rioting. Over the next few days, they trickled back toward Hrúnan, windswept and covered in blood and stone-dust. With his shirt held over his nose, Deor and the other men turned over the wreckage. The far wall was all but obliterated, its latticed windows shattered, the oaken front doors smashed to splinters. The whole structure creaked unsteadily, ready to cave in at any moment. Rubbled stone and wood from the walls and tilting ceiling lay strewn about like child's blocks. An ownerless hand stuck out, horribly dark and swollen, from beneath a fallen beam. Seventeen stiff bodies were pulled from the wreckage, laid in the open for the families to view. They lay quiet and stone-still in the place of laughter and mirth.
The Council of Onela, the holiest priestesses of the Temple save for the High Priestess herself, presided over the funerals at the Queen's command. The dead went to rest in the overcrowded graveyard just outside the wall, the men with their swords and shields between their knees, and the women shrouded in their finest weaving. The priestesses decided to bury the ownerless limbs together in a mass grave.

In the King’s absence, the Queen was quick to gather her husband’s Thanes around her. One of the commanding officers volunteered his home for their meetings. She looked around the long table, surveying each of the Thanes carefully. Deor found himself caught beneath her powerful gaze.

“It would seem I spoke too quickly at Gehwelcne Square,” she said. “Far too many beheld the sight of their King, alive and fighting in the mouth of the beast as it leapt back out of the city. They would riot in the streets if we were to hold funary rites in his memory. But all is not lost, loyal Thanes…”

Deor swallowed, glancing around at the faces of his shield-brothers. They seemed similarly unnerved by the Queen’s tone. She laid her fingertips upon the table, issued several commands. Within hours, Deor and his fellow Thanes were organizing their men into twelve well-armed search parties, bound by the singular goal of retrieving the King from the depths of Amrendeth. After all, the fact that no body had been found, and that meant hope. And Aethelred, always calculating, knew what a waste it would be to fail to capitalize on hope.

2 INTO AMRENDETH

One week after the attack on Hrúnan, the sun set over the East Gate, casting the dark shadow of the wall over the guardsmen’s barracks. A crowd of men was already gathering
outside. Deor stood at the head of the throng, shouting the names of warriors and their assigned posts over the din of voices. He was badly shaven, dark circles ringing his eyes; the Thanes had been awake the past three nights, sleeping in shifts, trying to assemble their men into search parties and gather up farmers and shopkeepers to man the wall in their stead. He had just finished reading off his list and turned back to brief a few senior soldiers, when a face in the crowd caught his eye: Svanna, bow in hand, elbowing past men twice her size, her flushed face open and yearning.

"Absolutely not," he said, before she could even push past the last man between them.

"You need me!" Svanna retorted.

"Giermund is a more than capable marksman, and he will cause no trouble if he were to accompany us into the forest – or scandal, I might add – "

"Giermund's leg is off," Svanna said. "You need a marksman on your team who knows the woods and the beasts – "

"Hold on, hold on, lass – Giermund's leg is what?"

"Off. He and his daft brother Alfred were wrestling in their pa's mill while the quern was going, and Alfred pushed him a little too hard – his mother just came over to tell ours this morning – Giermund's trousers caught in the grindstone. They had to chop it clean off. So now you need another marksman, one who's capable, reliable, and has experience in the woods. Me."

She said all this very fast. Deor blinked, then waved to dismiss the senior soldiers.

"Svanna, Svanna, I am not sure I understand – are you trying to capitalize on the serious injury of one of my men to suit your vaulting ambitions?"

"No – I am thinking quickly and practically, as a soldier must," she breathed. "Soldiers suffer wounds, soldiers die; their fellows must adapt, even in heat of battle, to close their ranks."
Deor took Svanna's arm and walked with her through the crowd. The commanders were shouting the names of their best men, who were clamoring to push past the unruly rejects: every man in the village wanted a spot in the search for the King, though countless many needed to stay home and man the wall. "Svanna, you are not a soldier," Deor said. "You are a hunter, and ought to be grateful for that alone."

"Grateful!" Svanna exclaimed. "Grateful that a fragile girl such as myself should be allowed to hunt rabbits and voles? I want glory, Deor. I want to do my duty to my King."

"You speak like an ignorant child," Deor said gruffly. "You know I have no choice in the matter, my personal opinions aside. If I put a woman on my team, the village would be in uproar. I must answer to them. And – you're my sister. I must answer to our mother, as well."

"If you do not replace Giermund with me, whom shall you choose? One of the lower men, alongside whom you have never fought, whose skill and trustworthiness is unknown to you?" Svanna countered. "You know me, you know how I fight! I have your trust, and you have mine. I could walk every path of Amrendeth in my sleep, and I am just as deadly with a bow as any of your men. It is purely logical. I would not ask if I were not the best one for the job."

Deor turned away with a growl, only to spin around and grasp Svanna’s shoulders.

"This is not some waltz into the woods, looking for glory as if it hangs like fruit upon the trees!" he exclaimed. "Even if the King is still alive – which he might very well not be – it could take us weeks to find him. Men attain glory when they lay down their lives for their lord and for Braigh Amren, and they do so by the jaws and teeth of living nightmares. You would see such death, Svanna!"

"I would brave it!" Svanna said. She stepped up to Deor, her nose almost to his, and fixed him with a glare. "I am tired of waiting for my chance, Deor. I will serve my King and my
people no matter what you – or anyone – says. If I cannot fight alongside you and your men, I will go and search for the King myself."

Eye to eye, the two stared each other down. Deor knew she meant what she said, and he knew she could do it, too – Svanna had been sneaking past the wall with that damned bow since she was barely old enough to hold a proper grip, and had proven herself a fierce fighter in her two years with the hunters. But the hunters never ventured more than a mile from the wall; a beast-slaying trip deep into the forest alone meant death, sure and swift. And Deor could not tell his mother that he had forfeited a chance to protect her only daughter.

Deor let out a long, slow breath of frustration. He pointed his finger sternly at Svanna. "You are not to slay anything save for deer, elk, rabbits and the like. You are joining this outfit to help hunt for our food."

"But – "

"You know the rules of the Temple," Deor said dangerously. "Beasts are for the men to kill. You have sworn no oath to Hjalmar, and indeed I do not believe the High Priestess would administer one to a woman if we asked. And I would ask you, Svanna, to put your grandly selfish dreams of battle-glory aside, so that your brother, Thane to the King and captain of the guard, does not need to answer to a tribunal of priestesses for allowing sacrilege to occur on his watch."

Svanna set her jaw angrily. "Very well," she muttered after a moment.

Deor raised an eyebrow. "Stand straight, soldier. I demand respect and obedience from those under my command. You will receive word when we are ready to leave. Expect no special treatment. Now go. There is much else which needs doing."

Svanna breathed in, pulled back her shoulders, and said, "I will not disappoint you, sir."
But as soon as Deor gave her a nod of approval, she smiled, spun on her heel, and dashed off like a child who had been given a sweet. Soon she vanished into the crowd. Deor turned away, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He looked around at the chaos that had swallowed up his sister: the shouting men, the dozens of tasks that needed attending to before sundown, and felt suddenly untethered from it all. Handing his checklist to Hadvar, his second in command, he moved through the crowd toward the stoop of the officers’ quarters, sat on the bottom stair, and pressed his palms to his eyes.

Three days without sleep. One week of staggering about the city with his fellow Thanes like flustered chickens, trying to scrape together a plan without their King. Little Svanna, who seemed to exist only in his mind as a twelve-year-old girl gleefully batting a hoop of wood down the street with a stick, now seventeen, about to wander into dangers she cannot imagine… and Deor, warrior and protector by blood and by oath, emasculated by helplessness. The image of the King trapped within the beast’s maw swam again to Deor’s mind. King, beast, sword, fire. Eilun screaming in Deor’s arms. What a shield-brother you’ve been to me, Deor. His feet carrying himself and Eilun to safety, leaving mead-hall and liege-lord further and further behind.

Beneath his palms, a few tears burned in the corners of Deor’s eyes. In his mind, he swore an oath by the sword of Hjalmar, mightiest of gods: I will not fail you again, my King.

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Eilun woke well before dawn, her mind racing. She tossed angrily beneath her quilt, trying to calm herself back into sleep, but it was no use. Eventually she threw the covers back, set her feet against the cold dirt floor of her family’s home, and, throwing a fur around herself, rose to stoke the fire. Nearby, Eilun’s parents slept soundly in their bed. Eilun thought how she could occupy her time: set some barley meal on a boil for breakfast, feed the cows, or spin, there was
always spinning to be done; that impish chore seemed to only need more doing the more one did it. But none of that busywork would quell the pit in her stomach: today was the day her fiancé Deor would venture out into the terrors of Amrendeth in search of their King.

A soft meow from the corner: the tabby cat, who sometimes snuck into their barn to catch mice and steal a nap in the warm, arced his back and sauntered over to Eilun.

“I must go,” she said, scratching its ears. “I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t say goodbye.”

Suddenly determined, Eilun rose, went to the door, and threw her warmest cloak over her shoulders. She took one last look at her parents – they could get along for one morning without her – and swept outside only to find herself face-to-face with the very man she’d hoped to find. Deor jumped back in shock, then leapt forward again: the nervous bubble in Eilun’s stomach burst into giddiness as she felt his strong arms wrap around her waist and lift her off the ground.

“Deor! Deor, my father shall hear,” Eilun laughed as he twirled her around; he heeded her warning by carrying her a few paces around the corner of the building, past their frozen vegetable garden, where he pressed her against the wall of her father’s workshop. But then he kissed her, and something in it was too desperate, too afraid; Eilun knew Deor sensed it, too.

They broke apart, and she looked up at him, eyes wide.

“I’m scared for you,” she breathed, “and yet – so proud.”

Eilun saw creases appear at the edges of Deor’s eyes. Surprised at her own daring, she flushed, and cast her gaze down to the shoulder-brooch of his cloak.

“I praise the gods that I may send my lord and love to battle,” she continued, tracing the gold-and-garnet bear carved into the brooch. “I feel fear for you, Deor, make no mistake … but my heart also knows that you shall return, and slay many beasts and save our King, and bring glory on our family name,” she caught his eye. “The name we both soon shall share.”
Deor took her face in his hands, his expression hungry, and kissed her once more.

“I swear to you by my father’s sword, Eilun,” he said fiercely, when they broke apart, “I shall return with the carcass of the greatest beast of them all slung upon my shoulder; and I shall not so much wipe the sweat from by brow nor the blood from my sword before I have wed you.”

Joy swelled in Eilun’s heart. She closed her own thin fingers around Deor’s rough hand.

“Come,” she said, eyes blazing. “I shall paint your brow with huldra blood.”

☆ ☆ ☆

The warriors arrived in the ceremonial hall of the barracks shortly before dawn, their eyes ringed with the signs of bad sleep, and spoke little as they donned their armor. Deor threw a fur over his stiff leather chest-piece and tied it down. Beside him, Hadvar eased his foot – still swollen and blue from the last hunt – into his boot. The air smelled of snow, and carried with it the trepidation of another day’s fight. When they were dressed, Hadvar removed the pot of charcoal paste from the nearby table. He knelt before Deor, bowed his head, and allowed Deor to raise him up with his sword-hand. Brow furrowed, he painted Deor’s face with the mark of the bear. Neither man spoke. The other guardsmen, outfitted in their own gear, hushed as Deor and Hadvar entered the barracks’ antechamber. Deor waved a hand, and the men bowed their heads.

“Hjalmar, hear you that we, the humble shield-brothers of your holy service, ask your blessing over the great slaying,” said Deor. “Great god of all gods, send your blessing over our spears; send it over our swords and shields; guide our hands and guard our bodies, Hjalmar, so that we may one day offer sons to do you honor in battle, also. So be it said.”

The guardsmen murmured in assent. The invocations begun, they gripped their spears and fell in line behind their commanding Thanes, who led them out into the fresh daylight of the courtyard outside. A crowd of onlookers, Eilun first among them, had gathered before the Gate
to bear solemn witness to their departure. The Gate-priestess, wizened old Gudrun of the Council of Onela, stood waiting in the empty ring they had left, her scarlet robes flapping in the frigid breeze. Stone-faced, the warriors aligned themselves before of her. Then the hunters, two for each company, came forth from the crowd. Svanna, her head held high and a knot set in her throat, hands locked tight around her bow, took her place behind Deor. She peered sideways at him, and saw that he held himself stiff as a petrified tree, his expression inscrutable.

Gudrun raised her arms, her crimson sleeves trailing, and began to sing. For several mournful verses her rich voice pierced the cold air alone; then, as members of the crowd began to join in, the women came forward to anoint the warriors’ brows with the blood of a slain huldra. Svanna watched Eilun dip her hands in the bucket and step forth to attend to Deor, her face alight with savage pride. They exchanged a few words Svanna could not hear, and then – Svanna’s heart jumped to her throat – Eilun turned to her, her fingers still damp with blood.

Eilun touched Svanna’s elbow with her clean hand. Her eyes were kind.

“Protect him, my sister,” she said, and she smeared the blood across Svanna’s forehead. A thrill passed through Svanna’s body; she could feel the beat of the drums deep in her ribcage, the hot blood upon her brow: so this was what it was like to be a warrior! She met Eilun’s gaze with a blazing look.

“I will,” she said.

The women fell back; Gudrun’s wild song reached a fever pitch; and then the warriors turned to face the East Gate, and all fell silent. The solid black mouth of the great wall loomed before them, fifty feet tall and ten feet thick, foreboding and immutable. On its other side, the strange beasts of Amrendeth lurked amidst the boughs of petrified pines, eager to rip and kill …
Two enormous crank-wheels flanked either side of the Gate, each manned by three broad-shouldered men. At Gudrun’s signal, they heaved with all their might, and the Gate creaked slowly open. Opaque white mist spilled into the city, damp and freezing. Svanna stared at the Gate, daring it to move faster, wild fear and fierce joy burning alike in her heart. Beside her, Deor gripped his spear tighter, jaw set; with a final clink of chains, the Gate stopped, fully open.

In unison, the Thanes raised their spears over their heads and shouted praise to Hjalmar. The warriors answered in yells and cheers, pounding their chests; Svanna joined in, shaking her bow, blood pounding in her ears. They marched through the aperture and into the dangers of the outside. Behind them, the Gate cranked slowly shut, until, with a deafening boom, the great maw slammed into the earth. A hush fell over the company as the impossible silence of Amrendeth pressed in on all sides. They were alone.

“Out to the Southeast for us, men,” called Deor, as the other companies branched into different directions. “Stay close, stay in formation. Tonight, we bring back our King.”

They began their trek, holding their spears and bows aloft. The march was easy at first; the forest closest to Braigh Amren was sparse and light, the paths well-worn by Svanna’s fellow hunters. But as the party ventured deeper into Amrendeth, they began to pass gnarled, enormous dogwoods and blackthorns that grew twisted around each other, shooting out dead branches into the grey sky above. Most plants were dead, but they stripped what little fruit, herb, and nut they could forage. The air, shrouded in winter mist, seemed twice as cold as within the village, and heavier and stranger to breathe. Svanna whispered a quick prayer against wind and air spirits, but the weight on her lungs did not lift. Once, a strange, guttural call pierced the darkness; Deor whipped around and signaled for everyone to flatten themselves to the ground. They did so,
Svanna face-down in the dirt and not daring to breathe, while Deor and his naturalist, Hadvar, crouched and whispered urgently to one another until they decided that the danger had passed.

By the time Deor declared that they had found a suitable spot to set up camp for the night, Svanna was bone-tired, soaked up to her knees from wading through the snow, and nursing a crick in her neck from glancing over her shoulder so often. The warriors slid their bedrolls and rations from their packs, and some of them sat down to start a small fire. Soon, low voices and crackling flames mingled in the air with the smell of dried meat and buttered bread. As Svanna and the other hunter who had been assigned to Deor’s party, Engeth, would not need to kill fresh game until their rations had been depleted, she took her meal while sitting cross-legged on her own bedroll, chewing hungrily and eyeing Deor from across the fire. She longed to be able to speak to him – just a few words from her brother, something familiar to ground her in this strange place – but he was surrounded by men, coming and going, maps and swords, muttering into the firelight. Eventually, Svanna finished her meal and crawled beneath the warm deerskin of her bedroll. She slept for a few troubled hours until the watchmen shook them awake at dawn, and they began their march once again.

Five more days passed much like the first. The trek began at dawn, with Deor, Hadvar, and the navigator at the fore, the forest growing thicker and darker and more foreboding around them as they marched. They checked off several known monster nests, revealing nothing: scattered bones, too old to be the King’s, caves and hiding holes long abandoned by their foul inhabitants. On the first day of the second week, they arrived at the nest of a barghest that warriors in years past had marked on their travels. Deor stalked off through the brush with most of the warriors to ambush it, while Svanna stayed back at the camp with Engeth and a warrior who had tripped on a tree root and injured his ankle.
“No woman shall taint her spiritual purity by touching the blood of a beast,” she muttered, kicking at the ground. “No woman shall make herself distant from the gods by slaying a beast as does a man.”

A gurgling scream went up from the trees beyond, followed by the roar of the barghest. Svanna listened to the shouts of the men, the thud of their spears as they entered the beasts’ body, the monster’s spits and snarls, feeling as though she might burst with anticipation – were they defeated? Or had they already fought their way to a glorious victory without her? A rustling came from a nearby copse of poplars. A wild-eyed warrior emerged from behind the brush, holding his own severed arm in his hand.

“Help,” he said.

Svanna swallowed and lowered her bow. She ran to get a tourniquet from her pack, while Engeth caught the warrior as he fell.

The others began appearing a few minutes later, several boasting gashes and claw marks across their chests. Deor, his chest and arms spattered with blood, carried the body of one man over to the fire and stuttered a prayer for his spirit. Three uninjured warriors dragged the shaggy, blood-soaked corpse of the barghest with them, a dozen throwing-spears lodged in its body. The men began to reclaim their weapons: each time a warrior yanked free his spear, a putrid, bubbling black liquid poured out of the wound like a fountain. Svanna was asked to stand away, so as not to contaminate herself. She held her shirt over her nose; the men practically bathed in the foul blood as they gutted the animal, searching for the King’s remains. After a while, they declared its stomach empty of human flesh or bone. Someone passed around a waterskin. They sat, exhausted, and drank hands covered with blood. Water was too precious to use for washing.
The process repeated itself as the days wore on. At each nest, a beast waited, possibly holding King Ceawlin in its clutches, or else in its great swollen belly. Deor led his men in the attack, and each time, they came back drenched in blood and filth, their eyes round and vacant as saucers, dragging the unconscious wounded behind; and every time, they declared the King was not there. As the search party trudged further into the forest, the beasts no longer stayed close to their nests, but prowled freely between the trees; dark shapes leapt out from between the branches, fast as arrows, and claw at an unsuspecting warriors’ neck. Or worse. Bite it.

Svanna saw it happen for the first time on the tenth day of the trek. A flash from the trees, a blur of something streaking overhead: and then Cadoc, the warrior marching in front of Svanna, was not in front of her any more, but writhing on the ground, his hands over his face, which bled through his fingers. A horrible, spindly-legged something stood over him: it cocked its glistening head as if in curiosity, and plunged its jagged pincers at Cadoc’s neck and head again, and yet again. Then, growing bored, it turned its eight milky white eyes on Svanna. She recoiled in horror, stringing her bow, but Deor pushed her back, tossing his own spear into one of the eyes, which burst like a pustule—the thing screamed—and the warriors descended with their weapons, yelling, dodging the shearlike spikes on the beast’s long legs; they fought until with a sickening scream the thing reared its ugly head and ran off, black blood pouring from its flank. The men lowered their spears, panting, and turned their eyes to their fallen comrade.

Cadoc lay barely stirring, hands still cupping his face. Faint, gurgling moans escaped his lips. Blood poured from between his fingers. Deor pushed through the crowd and knelt at his side. He spoke softly to the man, words Svanna could not hear. Gingerly, Cadoc removed his hands from his face. The onlookers winced.

Deor looked down at Cadoc with amazing sadness in his eyes. “A bite?” he whispered.
A slit opened in the stretch of torn flesh that was Cadoc’s face. Deor leaned closer.

“Kill me,” Cadoc said.

“You have another choice,” Deor said softly. “We can take you to the High Priestess. You may ask her blessing. It is not an easy life among the outcasts … but it is a life, Cadoc …”

“Kill me,” he repeated.

Deor closed his eyes and nodded. They all understood. To return to the village tainted by the blood of a beast was to be cast out as wraecca, dishonored and unclean, consigned to the filth of the West city for the rest of one’s days. Cadoc’s choice was one few warriors failed to make. Deor drew his ceremonial knife, its handle inlaid with scenes from the Annals: it was meant exclusively for beast bites. The men bowed their heads in prayer.

“In the name of Onela, I cleanse you of your impurity,” he whispered.

He raised his arm over Cadoc’s chest. Svanna looked away.

The warriors laid out all their dead with stones over their eyes and their spears clutched in hand. There was a prayer, short and perfunctory, and then they burned them. Svanna had never known how strange a person could look in death: skin blushed azure, mouth slightly agape. At once recognizable as a man she had once known, and yet swollen and waxy and wrong.

As two weeks without sign of the King wore into three and then four, bandages appeared on more and more men, yellowed with pus, attracting flies as they rotted. All of them developed an outer crust of dirt and sweat from lack of washing. Svanna and Engeth caught what meager game they could find to feed the twenty or so of their number who remained, but what rabbits, voles, and occasional deer they could snare turned out scrawny or strangely malformed – some sprouted extra limbs, tumorous growths, or razorlike rows of extra teeth. Each night Svanna went
to bed shivering and hungry, stinking like sweat. Rotting wounds and bluish, bloated bodies swam in and out of her dreams as she drifted into uneasy sleep, dreading the arrival of dawn.

And then one day, dawn came with an announcement.

“Gather round, men,” Deor called, as he, Hadvar, and two other high-ranking men broke their usual council around their hand-drawn map of the forest. Another warrior, one Svanna did not recognize, stood beside them – a messenger, perhaps? The soldiers gathered round, still rubbing sleep from their eyes. Deor dug into the ground with the butt of his spear.

“We’re turning back.”

Svanna let her mouth fall open; she caught Engeth’s eye, who mirrored her shock.

“They’ll call us cowards to return without our lord!” shouted one warrior.

“Is this how we honor Ceawlin the Merciful? Who stood at the battle of the North Gate until every last one of his men had fled to safety behind the barricade? Forget the whisperings of the women – I’d rather die amidst the forest of beasts than abandon my King!” another said. The others shouted in agreement.

“I hear you, I hear you!” Deor shouted, raising his hands. The voices died down. “I don’t like it any more than you,” he said bitterly, “but Thane Vidar’s men suffered an attack two nights past. What few remain are too wounded to continue. We’ve borne our share of hardship in these woods, too,” Deor looked sadly at his men, who stood listening with filthy bandages wrapped around their heads and limbs, flies buzzing about their unwashed hair. “It won’t do our King any good if we die of exhaustion because we put warriors’ honor before sensibility. We’ll return, tend to the wounded, and head out again fresh enough to give a proper fight.”

The men knew better than to challenge their superior, but grumblings passed through the camp all morning as they packed and headed out, for even Svanna knew there was something
unspoken in Deor’s address. Four weeks had passed since the attack on Hrúnan. Four weeks alone in the cursed forest of Amrendeth. Was it time, finally, to put fealty aside and admit that precious little hope for King Ceawlin’s survival remained?

Svanna tried to calm her nerves with a bit of whittling. Engeth interrupted her.

“I’ve just spoken to Hadvar and your brother,” he said. “We’re to go off on our own for today’s hunt. We make our way to Thane Vidar’s camp with our catch by nightfall.”

“Have they bothered to send a navigator?” she asked. “A naturalist?”

“The former. But he won’t speak much,” he tossed a hastily drawn map into Svanna’s lap, marked with an X.

“No breakfast, either?” she asked Engeth dully.

“Not until we kill it,” he replied.

Within half an hour the camp had been demolished. Svanna and Engeth rolled up their pallets and handed off their packs to two of the warriors, who would carry them to the meeting place, enabling them both to walk nimbly and carry as much game as they could. As she did so, Svanna caught a glimpse of Deor, talking urgently with the messenger from the other search party. She longed to be able to speak to him; it had been so long. She tried to catch his eye – it had been on his orders, after all, that she and Engeth would head out alone – but to no avail. Engeth gave her a nudge, and, slinging her bow over her shoulder, she followed him through a gap between two pines, out of sight.

Svanna and Engeth made slow progress throughout the day; the trees of Amrendeth grew so close together that they were forced to claw their way through brambles and branches, and creep carefully over the gnarled roots that lay in tangled masses over the ground. Within a hundred paces, the noise of the camp had died behind them, leaving only the hammering of
Svanna’s heart in her ears. Overhead, the sun moved West as they progressed North toward the inky X that marked their destination. Time passed; they snagged a few rabbits and squirrels, which they strung to their belts with lengths of twine. Svanna kept her bow taut in her hands at all times, her eyes raking the dark spaces between the trees.

And then – the tiniest rustle somewhere out of sight. Svanna held up her hand and heard Engeth freeze behind her. Barely daring to breathe, Svanna lowered herself to a crouch and crept forward, eyes scanning the underbrush. The gleaming tusks and bristly fur of a common boar emerged from behind a bush. Baring her teeth in a grin, Svanna pulled back her bowstring – she was so tired of squirrel meat –

The boar turned and bolted. Svanna fired, but with a soft *thwuck*, the arrow buried itself in the knot of a hazel tree. “No, you don’t!” Svanna said through gritted teeth; and before Engeth could stop her, she bounded forward and gave chase. Branches tore at her face and arms as she ran, but the adrenaline pumping through Svanna’s veins sucked the pain away. She could hear Engeth calling behind her, but Svanna paid no notice; she tore on, notching another arrow, and sending it flying toward the boar’s rear. Another miss – her breath was coming fast now, she could not run forever – teeth gritted, she sent one more arrow soaring through the air as the boar leapt to the side, eyes wild –

The iron point of the arrow sunk squarely into the back of the boar’s neck. With a squeal, it thrust its tusks at the air; Svanna quickly loosed two more arrows into its flank. It stumbled, pouring blood, and ran into a tree. Svanna approached at a quick walk, removing her serrated knife as she did so, and slashed the blade across the boar’s neck. With a final cry, its stout legs gave way. It shuddered and bled for a few more minutes, and then was still.
Svanna wiped her mouth on her sleeve, breath coming in short ragged gasps, and broke into a triumphant smile. She and Engeth would have to carry back the boar together, but it looked scrawny enough to manage between the two of them. She leaned against a gnarled oak and looked around. Engeth’s calls had long faded behind her. Her grin slid away.

“Engeth?” she called out, but the sound of her own voice frightened her – what besides Engeth might hear it? The silence of Amrendeth pressed in once more, as the excitement of the hunt leech out of her body, giving way to fear…

Leaving the boar – she could find it by its blood trail later – Svanna pushed through the tangles of branches, muttering Engeth’s name in a low voice. Still there came no sound. Heart beating, she desperately pushed through a swathe of thorns, only to find it was quite a dense thicket indeed, full of brambles. She fought harder to make her way through, regretting coming this way already, calling Engeth’s name a little louder. As she tunneled deeper, she felt a strange sensation pass over her, like a gust of cold wind blowing through her insides, but she had far more pressing matters on her mind – and then, as quickly as the feeling had come, it was gone. As if the thorns themselves had decided to allow her passage, Svanna pushed aside a final branch and found herself blinded by sunlight.

Caught off guard, Svanna recoiled; her eyes, so used to the dim of the forest, stung at the touch of light. Soon, a small clearing came into focus. It was large enough for ten men to stand in, covered in soft grass and – Svanna stepped forward, hardly daring to believe her eyes.

Bones, knives, knitting needles, woven charms, copper instruments, dried herbs, and empty flasks and bottles littered the clearing. Woven cushions sat here and there in piles, as did furs and blankets; and from the tree branches, tied by bits of twine and clinking in the wind,
dangled more bones: rat spines and skunk skulls, little ribs and femurs, browned and picked clean. In the center of it all, a black cauldron with a great swollen belly rose from the ground.

Svanna stepped further into the clearing, her brain churning to process what she had just found. She lifted a strange object from the ground, a smooth, palm-sized stone carved with an unfamiliar, jagged rune. Someone had made this. Someone – a human being – had placed these things here, a month’s journey from the wall of Braigh Amren. But it was impossible. No person could survive such a journey… and what were these objects? A fluorescent liquid filled one glass vial. Dried blood spattered a long, curved knife, discarded in the grass. She hadn’t noticed it before, but now that Svanna stood in its center, the air in the clearing felt as warm and comforting as a spring evening. Though every voice in the back of her mind was screaming at her to run, leave, never return, Svanna brushed her fingertips experimentally along the cauldron’s brim; a cool, clear ring sounded through the air, like the peal of a deep bell. Its sound was strangely pleasant … she did not feel so afraid anymore …

A silver glimmer from the bottom of the cauldron caught Svanna’s eye. As if in a dream, she peered inside, the ringing growing louder. A delicate amulet, carved with the shape of a strange animal, lay curled at the bottom of the cauldron. Its reflection glittered in Svanna’s eyes. She longed to touch it. Slowly, she leaned over into the great stone belly of the cauldron and picked it up. A gentle warmth flowed through Svanna’s fingers at once, up her arm and throughout her body. She turned it so that the silver eyes of the carved beast glinted in the light.

“Svanna … Svanna!” Engeth’s distant voice called through the trees.

Svanna shot upright, took a step back, and crushed a small animal skull underfoot. Her heart hammered in her chest: what had come over her?

“Svanna?” Engeth shouted again.
“Here!” Svanna answered; and without fully knowing why, without even thinking about it, she jammed the amulet into her pocket and ran from the clearing. Svanna emerged on the other side of the thicket of thorns to find Engeth standing beside the boar’s corpse, running his hands through his hair. Relief flooded his features as he saw her.

“You are the worst fool alive, Svanna,” he breathed. “Where were you?”

“Let’s just go,” she found herself saying. “Let’s take the kill and get out of here.”

They bound the boar’s front and back legs together and hung it from a sturdy branch broken from a nearby maple. With an end each balancing on their shoulders, Svanna and Engeth set off away from the mysterious clearing, the silver amulet warm in Svanna’s pocket.

3 WINTER IN BRAIGH AMREN

The flurries of fall snow that had fallen over Braigh Amren during the warriors’ departure soon gave way to the heavy blizzards of the fast-approaching cold season. The first downfall came quicker than expected, even for a people who had known many centuries of hard winters; most growers were forced to shut up their plows for the season without laying down the last batch of frost-hardened carrots, as one night’s sudden storm could blanket their fields in three feet of smooth snow. From then, the city shut down for the winter. Those farmers wealthy enough to keep livestock took their animals indoors to sleep amongst their babes and wives during the freezing nights, their smell and noise an easy price to pay in exchange for the warmth they brought to their cold wooden huts. Townspeople shut up inside, praying they had dried enough meat and jellied enough fruit to carry them through to spring. They all knew, however, it was not long off until the first poor family, unable to purchase a proper burial, carried the stiff, blue body of a starved child out to the shallow grave-pits on the outskirts of the poor West city.
Such was winter in Braigh Amren, Eilun understood as well as anyone. But the King’s disappearance had cast a dark shadow over the city even in its most dire season. The priestesses began holding nightly rituals at the temple, which the women of the village attended while their husbands and brothers waited, praying, outside. Men were not allowed past the Temple steps; it was a tradition dating from ancient days, when the first man slayed the first beast. The touch of the beast’s blood to his skin brought him strength and glory, but it also dirtied his soul and inflamed his animal desires. Woman, who remained pure, became the steward of holy things, and so it has remained through the millennia.

The Temple was an enormous, grand building built into the hillside itself, its stone walls carved with scenes from the Annals. Eilun normally enjoyed attending Temple ceremonies, for their peaceful feeling – but as the Midwinter Sacrifice approached, the rituals began to take on a more ominous tone. The Council of Onela led twelve young deer into the Temple that day, mouths muzzled, soft ears flicking nervously. The priestesses let the women come forward and throw wreaths of flowers around their thin necks. When this was done, they bound the first of the deer to the stone altar at the center of the temple with thick ropes.

A hush went over the crowd as the doorway to the High Priestess’ private chambers opened, revealing the High Priestess herself, clad in imposing scarlet, her chin held high. She approached the altar, lifted her hands, and began a song from the Annals, the word of the god Hjalmar:

\[
\begin{align*}
\textit{Shackled by cold were their souls, bound by frost} \\
\textit{In cold clasps, where then sadness seethed hot about their heart,} \\
\textit{And the people of Braigh Amren wept and exalted the gods.} \\
\textit{So sounded their life-cry: “Mighty Wyrd, Fate-King, he of} \\
\textit{Mystery, why curse you us to bury our babes in the frost?} \\
\textit{Wyrd, give us food and warmth that we weather the snow-season!”} \\
\textit{And the word of the god thundered down:} \\
\textit{“Ye of Braigh Amren, shall you beg of the gods without}
\end{align*}
\]
Thought of recompense? So be it said, the price of our Protection is pure blood!” And from their midst his hand Did pluck a worthy maid, brave and true, and she was called Bergljot.

“Shall we receive of her, in glory and honor, in our kingdom Beyond, this we promise: ye and your people shall see The turn of spring safe from beast-maw and frost-bite. Yet should she shrink in cowardice when Midwinter’s day comes, Winter’s wrath we promise in death, chill and swift.”

Filled was she with the spirit of fate and rose boldly To the Gehwelcne tree. Said she, “Look to me, Braigh Amren, For no coward am I; the heat of valor runs in me, and as the Men slay beasts before Braigh Amren, so shall woman give of her blood For her people in strength and courage.

And glory and honor such as the greatest warrior shall I attain At the heavenly feast of fallen heroes, for I am Bergljot the Eidolon.”

The High Priestess opened her eyes and cast her stern gaze over the gathered women.

“In ten days’ time, the Crown of the Eidolon shall fall on the brow of another worthy maid. She is here among us now, ignorant of the glory she soon shall attain.”

The High Priestess cast her gaze over the crowd, and Eilun could not help looking sideways at her neighbors, wondering who it could be. To be Crowned was the greatest honor a woman of Braigh Amren could attain. Eilun and her girlhood friends once whispered hopefully about it, imagining what it might be like to wear the Eidolon’s fine robes, to achieve glory on par with great battle-Kings of old. But as it did every year, a tendril of fear still snaked its way through Eilun’s heart. If she were chosen, could she really find the courage to fulfill such a calling? She set her head down, trying not to think sacrilegious thoughts. Deor would return soon, she knew it, and he would marry her before the Eidolon was chosen, rendering her ineligible.

The High Priestess stepped up to the deer, removing an iron dagger from the folds of her robes. The animal’s eyes bulged, kicking against its binds. The High Priestess raised her dagger.
“Great and mighty Hjalmar, father of all gods, we call on you to cast on our Eidolon courage and ferocity as she gives of her blood to Braigh Amren!”

She brought the dagger swinging down.

Eilun and her mother, Iseult, left the Temple with the other women some hours later, walking in silence. Eilun’s father stood waiting for them at the foot of the steps.

“Twelve deer,” Iseult said, answering her husband’s worried look. “One for each of the gods. They believe the gods may have sent a beast for the King as a sign of displeasure. They talked as if the Eidolon’s sacrifice were the only way to save him.”

“They must think matters very dire indeed, then,” Eilun’s father, Adalbert, muttered, staring at the priestesses silhouetted at the top of the stair. “Far more so than they let on.”

More signs of grim times appeared throughout the city as the weeks wore on. The beast who had kidnapped the king had left a gaping hole in the West face of the wall, and the harsh winter storms that delayed repair efforts did little to deter more forest monsters from crawling through the opening and wreaking havoc on the West side of the city. Eilun’s father forbade her from crossing the stream into that part of town, but she heard the whispers on the wind: farmers gobbled up where they stood in their fields, tools devoured all; grazing animals mauled and eaten, leaving the families who owned them without milk or eggs for the harsh winter; the milliner’s twin babies plucked from their cribs; the blacksmith’s family crushed in their sleep by a jötunn’s enormous footfall, and several more homes destroyed when the beast finally fell dead by the guardsmen’s arrows. The guards did what they could to fend off the beasts, but there always seemed to be more following behind – stronger, bigger, and more bloodthirsty than anyone in Braigh Amren could remember. Every day more and more injured and homeless turned up at the steps of the Temple, shivering in rags and begging for alms.
Town criers materialized in the squares of Braigh Amren, shouting the decrees of the Queen:

“All men with skills in carpentry and stonemasonry are ordered to report to the West Gate to make repairs! Pay from Hrúnan’s stores shall be two pounds of grain per week. In accordance with the law, he who shirks his duties shall endure a gauntlet of stones in Gehwelne Square!”

With most of the warriors gone on a search party and defenses thin amongst the guardsmen stationed at home, Eilun thought the Queen had little option but to call upon the townsmen for help, but even so, jeering crowds soon swarmed the criers’ pulpits. Two pounds of grain per week could barely keep one man from starving, let alone the family who might depend on him.

“What of our farms? Our stores gone to rot? Let our husbands provide for us!” Eilun heard a woman jeer as she entered the wind-blasted marketplace one morning. A crowd of at least three dozen people had assembled around the nervous-looking crier, brandishing hoes and pitchforks and yelling over the wind. The merchants along the sides eyed them warily.

“Three handfuls, please,” Eilun said, trying to ignore the noise, and placed three copper coins on the counter of the grain merchant’s stall. While the man scooped a meager helping of grain into her burlap bag, she looked over her shoulder and added, “They are bold to speak against the Queen in a public square.”

“Likely why they’s out in such weather,” said the merchant, pulling down the thick scarf he wore to reveal the bottom half of his face. “Freer to act out when the guards are huddled by the barracks fire instead of on their rounds. Been here just about every day the past week, clamoring to that poor fellow about tyranny and the like. As though he has any say in it.”

“Two pounds of grain per week! Yngmorne’s mercy, I bring home four times that binding barrels. Your Queen would ask us to let our little ones starve while their papas work to death in the bitter cold,” said a thin, tired-looking man.
“For the safety of all of us, the Queen—” the crier stammered, trying to remain standing as the crowd began jostling the barrel on which he stood.

“No right has she to sit upon the throne of a man, of our great King Ceawlin!” shouted another, and it was as if the approaching wave finally broke. The crowd roared, and someone grabbed the crier and pulled him down to their level. In a moment, he was lost in a swarm of flailing arms and kicking legs, his yelps of pain drowned out by a cacophony of angry voices.

“You should get home, miss,” said the merchant, pulling his scarf back over his mouth. Eilun, sensing the wisdom in his words, tucked the bag of grain in her pocket and hurried away, as a new booming shout joined the din at her back.

“By order of the Queen’s guard, disperse—or be slain!”

Another wave of jeers rose up from the crowds; Eilun heard the thud of rocks connecting with the guardsmen’s shields, and the guardsmen’s angry shouts of retaliation; she pulled the fur of her mantle tighter around her neck and hurried her pace, almost running, as the sounds of chaos behind her grew louder and louder, now accompanied by screams of pain and the clash of metal on metal.

More and more dissenting voices filled the city squares in the coming weeks. Men muttered to one another in the corners of taverns and inns, talking of organized protest, lines of kingly succession and a woman’s place in government. Protesters, members of a group calling itself the King’s Men, began setting up their own pulpits to match the town criers’. They brought barrels of hot spiced mead and passed around tin cups to help draw a crowd, and when those gathered had drunk enough, engaged in angry quarrels with guardsmen or sometimes looted nearby homes. The Queen ordered a swift crackdown: several confrontations between guardsmen and
civilians stained the snow in the streets pink. Eilun’s father, worried for her safety, wanted her to give up the household duties which took her outdoors and keep to her spinning for the winter.

“I will not,” Eilun said, as she stirred the pot for midday meal. “I will be married in a matter of weeks. A wife is no child who must be shielded from the outside world – she must run her household and protect her own babies, which I shall do, without fear from warmongering fools who’d like to see us all dead at each other’s hands rather than the claws of the beasts.”

“You are my child until the moment you are married!” Adalbert thundered.

“I belong to no one,” Eilun said, eyes glittering. She slammed down a bowl of stew before her father. “Eat. Now, I am taking the pig to market, and hopefully he will fetch enough coin to keep us from starving this winter.”

With that, she tied her cloak around her shoulders and shut the door behind her. Her father leaned back in his seat, at a loss for words, and exchanged a glance with his wife.

“She’s got fire in her, Adalbert, she always has,” Eilun’s mother said, stirring her soup.

Eilun marched through the snowdrifts outside her home, turned the corner, and wrenched open the door to their barn. Two goats and a pig prowled about amid piles of hay.

“Come on,” she huffed, tying a rope around the pig, who squealed. At least, Eilun thought sulkily as she tugged it outside, a few of the hunters (she’d heard) had managed to make it into Amrendeth since the storm had cleared. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of fresh pheasant. Their runty pig would have made delicious ham, but the poor thing was worth much more than his weight in barley. Better to let some Thane’s family enjoy a pork dinner.

Arriving at the marketplace, Eilun found a great crowd occupying its center. As she moved closer, she realized that sinister muttering accompanied the usual yells for fair prices. Even more, guards and civilians alike were standing together, some stone-faced and darkly serious, others
shouting in rage, all facing the center. Eilun tugged halfheartedly on the pig’s tie, ill at ease, but found herself pushing through the crowd, eager to know what everyone had gathered here to see. The spectacle soon came into view: a middle-aged woman, clad in black, knelt before the public stocks. One of the men closest by kicked her in the stomach, making her spit upon the ground; his fellows cheered; her hands were bound, her face bowed to the dirt, invisible.

“That’s enough, that’s enough!” said a voice in the crowd. Onlookers shunted aside, revealing a man Eilun recognized as Fafnir, one of the King’s Thanes, flanked by several other guardsmen. The crowd hushed. Fafnir walked up to the woman, iron-tipped boots crunching in the trampled snow with each step.

“Aslaug Gerssdóttir… won’t you meet my eyes, witch, when I stand before you?” he said, and tipped her chin up with the toe of his boot. Eilun glimpsed the face of a pale, tired old hag with bright blue eyes – but the woman jerked away, teeth bared in anger.

“Show us your fangs, then, you beast of the woods!” Fafnir said, and the crowd laughed.

“How am I accused?” the woman called Aslaug spat. “There is nothing.”

“It’s weird-women like you who bring the wrath of the gods on all of us,” a man said. “She stalks about in the dead of night, muttering funny things – none act stranger’n her – it’s a result of beastliness in the bloodline, it is.”

“She’s an apothecary, Thane Fafnir,” added a haughty-looking housewife. “Her shop straddles the border of Braigh Amren and Braigh Wræcca on the West side; she caters even to the unclean outcasts banished to those abominable streets. Such evil stuff does she mix under the guise of medicine. Draughts for to make boils appear, and hives…”

“Wandering about at night, mixing strange elixirs?” Fafnir said. “Have you ever even set foot within temple walls, woman?”
Eilun expected she would answer *yes, of course* – any self-respecting woman of the village would – but surprisingly, the woman set her jaw, eyes flashing. The crowd roared in accusation.

“T’would boil her impure blood where she stood!” the housewife said.

“Tell me, witch, did a hairy-backed djinn seduce your father? How many legs did dear mother have?” Fafnir sneered. The crowd pushed further in, laughing.

“Liars and fools,” Aslaug growled. Fafnir’s men wrenched her up by the elbows.

“Let’s see how much you have to say after a day in the stocks,” Fafnir sneered. The crowd closed in to ensure Aslaug received a few kicks to the shins as the guardsmen dragged her to the stocks. One of them forced her head and hands down, and the other slammed shut the board over her. Aslaug neither struggled nor spoke: she merely looked out on the crowd with unbridled hatred as they began to throw handfuls of snow and ice.

The pig grunted beside Eilun, and she blinked, remembering the task at hand. She sold the animal at a nearby market stall and walked home in the blistering cold, the image of the so-called witch’s wrathful blue eyes burned into her vision.

**4** **THE CROWNING**

Once again, Eilun found herself awoken well before dawn by her own racing, fearful heart. This time, however, she was not alone. Her mother, wrapped in a quilt, knelt over the smoking kindling in the fire pit, beating together two flint-stones. She looked up and, as though she knew what troubled thoughts swirled in Eilun’s head, held open the quilt with one arm. Wordlessly, Eilun slid out of bed and nestled herself beneath her mother’s arm, who drew the quilt around her shoulders. They leaned forward and blew on the kindling until the smoke burst into a true flame, then sat back in its warmth. In the corner, the cow brushed her tail against the
dirt ground, chewing her cud, and Eilun’s father’s gentle breathing mingled with the sound of falling sleet on the rooftop.

“When I was a young girl, even though I feared it above all things,” Eilun’s mother began softly, “I prayed every day that it would be me who was Crowned Eidolon. Just as you once did, just as all girls do. Though woman cannot raise a weapon against the beasts, that longing to protect, to fight for her people and for those whom she loves, burns just as brightly in her heart as in any man’s. We dream of glory and purpose in death that one woman only in a thousand can possess. Instead, Wyrd, that mysterious master of fate, chooses, for most of us, life.”

Eilun could not answer. Her jaw seemed to have clenched shut. Instead, she nodded.

“Women are stewards of new life; so we were made by the gods. When we marry, our desire for glory passes instead to our children. We hope fiercely that one of the babies we nurse and wean will one day fight for the life of their people, by beast-battle or by Midwinter’s Sacrifice, so that we might be mothers of glory, so sharing in it. Today is your last Crowning. After today, you shall pass into this stage of longing, and I shall leave it forever. The yearning to give of your own blood shall turn to the yearning to give of the blood you bring to this world. It is a difficult time, Eilun. You must be confused, afraid. I want you to know I am here to help.”

Even as fear held Eilun in its grip, her heart swelled at her these words. “Thank you, mother,” she said. Her mother smiled and squeezed her arm.

“Your four brothers and sisters went to their graves before their little mouths could speak, and you – you, my littlest treasure, proved strong enough to survive. I confess the selfish part of me wanted to keep you all for myself, and the gods have blessed me so. I rejoice that when today’s sun sets, my worrying for your life shall finally come to an end.”
Eilun snuggled closer to her mother. She thought of the babies she would bring into the world with Deor; the possibility that their lives might one day hang in the balance as hers did now, as their future father’s did. The thought filled her with a strange mix of emotions. Such as it was to exist in Braigh Amren: to live a life looking always to death.

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A distant thud echoed through the misty wood of Amrendeth. Some hundred meters away, a flock of birds crowed and took flight. Instantly, Deor’s company drew close, their backs to one another, weapons readied and heads turning in every direction.

“One … two … three ...” Deor muttered.

Another thud.

“Jötunn!” whispered a younger warrior, voice shaking.

“Three leagues to the north,” Deor breathed. “A little too close for comfort, I’ll agree. Best to give it a wide berth.”

The thuds continued, dissipating into silence. As his men relaxed, Deor turned to face them, stamping his spear-shaft into the ground for effect. “Right, I’m diverting our path. We’ll take the southern trail back to Braigh Amren instead. Onward, men.”

As they set off down a faint trail to their right, Hadvar came to Deor’s side.

“Iona ran this trail ten moons ago and said he thought he spotted a dweogar den along by the pond,” he said. “They’re breeding this time of year.”

“I know. But I don’t like the sound of that jötunn, do you?”

“No,” Hadvar sighed. “But as your naturalist, I’d warn –”

“I know the risk, friend. Keep a vigilant eye.”
They fell into silence as they walked. After nearly four weeks in the forest, the men trudged with bowed shoulders, exhausted. Deor glanced behind him: even Svanna plodded along with her eyes on the ground, dead rabbits and squirrels swinging by twine across her chest, the spit carrying the boar resting on one shoulder. She had looked especially uneasy since she and Engeth had returned from the last hunt. With a sigh, Deor let down his pack.

“Here’s good for the night, lads,” he said. Groans of relief went up from the company; the men dropped their loads and weapons and fell to the ground, spreading their bedrolls across the forest floor. “Hadvar,” said Deor, his eyes on Svanna as she eased herself down onto her pallet, “see to things for me for a little while, will you?”

Svanna saw Deor approaching from afar. “Shirking your duties?” she muttered, as he took a seat on the bedroll next to her.

“Just for a little while,” said Deor. Dark circles marked his gaunt face; he looked more exhausted than any of them. “I saved you some supper.”

He tossed two crabapples into her lap: though tiny, they were still a lucky find in the winter.

“You have them,” she replied.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

She took the first apple and tore into it. The bitter taste seared her throat, and the tiny fruit was gone in a few bites, but once she started eating, she couldn’t stop. Deor watched her chewing ravenously, his eyes dull as old coins. After a moment, he put an arm around her and hugged her close to his chest, as he’d done when she was small. Svanna nestled into him automatically, too tired to protest the childish pose. They stayed there, silent and still, listening to the snowcapped boughs bristle in the wind.

“They choose the Eidolon today,” Svanna said eventually.
She felt Deor sigh, and knew that he, too, had been watching the skies for the full moon. He didn’t need to tell her what he was thinking about. His fearful eyes said it all.

“Eilun will be all right,” she reassured him.

“The gods only know,” Deor said. “Eilun told me she was proud to send me off to the fight … but she has always been of stronger constitution than I, though she is a woman. If she is chosen, I think I would feel only terror, in spite of my pride.”

“The High Priestess may speak my name, too, you know, though I am not there.”

“You?” Deor said. “No. Even the gods mistake you for a man, sometimes, I swear it.”

Svanna pulled away and punched Deor in the shoulder. Then she cracked a smile, and they both broke into laughter.

The camp rose at dawn the next day slightly more optimistic than the day before: they were set to reach Thane Vidar’s search party by nightfall, and the opportunity to aid their comrades felt purposeful after so many weeks without sign of King Ceawlin. Even Svanna seemed brighter than the night before.

“Look, a hulder – not so tough is she, now?” one of the warriors said, breaking off from the group to jab his spear into the mossy knot in a chestnut tree. The others chuckled. Hulders, sinister tree spirits, sometimes took the form of a woman and beguiled unwary men; but a mossy tree-sore always remained on her back as a mark of her curse. Deor looked around and saw the spear-wielding man was one of the younger warriors, Bersi, barely older than eighteen.

“That’s unwise, boy,” hissed Hadvar. “A man never knows what lurks, or where, or in what form, when he walks the Stone Forest.”

“We’re here to slay,” Bersi replied. “Why wait for the great beasts to sneak –”
But he stopped short, as all the other men froze: a rustling sound had just issued from behind a gnarled oak. Bersi, nearest, whirled around with his spear-arm high above his head. Grey branches twisted all around them, dead and lifeless, knotting together into a dark copse in the distance. Deor crept forward, hoping to get himself between the boy and whatever thing lurked behind the trees. But Bersi had already extended himself to full height, poised to strike –

A frightened-looking doe stumbled out of the brush. Bersi laughed softly, and the warriors relaxed, grinning at one another: supper had just wandered straight into their midst.

"Not so terrible, are you, little girl?" Bersi said, waving his spear playfully at her.

But Deor took a second look at the doe. It should have been stiff, frozen with fear at the sight of men – but the doe nodded its head at the ground, eyes cloudy and unfocused, legs trembling. Deor gasped and raised his spear once more – a great chunk had been torn from its hind haunch. As the poor thing collapsed to the ground, exhausted, an enormous dark mass burst from within the thicket and wrapped its jaw around Bersi’s upper half.

Chaos split the silence of the forest. Acting on instinct, Deor dove back, missing the swing of the beast’s claw by inches, and tasted dirt. His men stumbled and scattered, scrambling to raise their weapons. Bersi’s flailing arms beat against the beast’s head, blood spreading down his lower half, his screams muffled within its mouth. It was like a six-legged bear, but the size of a mammoth: four weird, black eyes marred the sides of its head, and a long, wet snout protruded over a set of razor-sharp teeth.

“A dweogar!” Deor heard Hadvar shout.

Blood pounding in his ears, Deor launched himself from the ground, aiming his spear at the dweogar’s neck. He made contact, but the point barely sank a few inches into the beast’s flesh;
its hairy hide seemed thick as armor. One of the eyes on the side of the dweogar’s head focused on Deor and narrowed with rage. Deor tugged, but the spear was stuck –

Svanna appeared as if from nowhere and dragged Deor back, just as the beast’s claw came swishing through the air. Both of them collapsed to the ground as the dweogar shook its head, shaking Bersi within its maw. There was a sickening crack, and Bersi’s kicking legs went limp. The dweogar opened its mouth to toss down its prey whole.

“Get back!” Deor shoved Svanna away. “Do you want to go the same way as Cadoc? Its blood cannot touch you!” She shouted something in retaliation, but he could not hear.

Spears flew through the air over Deor’s and Svanna’s heads as they stumbled back out of range of the beast’s teeth. Some of them stuck, but none seemed to pierce deeply; the flesh wounds only angered the dweogar, which, finishing its first meal, fell back down onto all fours and unleashed another horrific roar.

“Aim for the underbelly, the eyes!” shouted Hadvar.

The beast took a great leap over Hadvar’s head, landing amidst the men, who surrounded it with spears. Out of the corner of his eye, Deor saw Svanna notch an arrow in her bow.

“No!” he shouted, knocking the bow out of her hand; both of them ducked as the beast’s claw swiped overhead. Thoughts wiped clean by adrenaline, Deor spun around, pulled his shortsword from his belt, and met the beast with a slash across its snout. The dweogar howled, its fleshy nose split open, and black blood poured down over Deor. Spears danced in the periphery of Deor’s vision; Svanna was shouting behind him, and he thrust and arm out to keep her back, but the dweogar was nearly on top of him. It roared, revealing three rows of jagged yellow teeth, and a mad idea suddenly gripped Deor. He poised himself with his sword pointing upward,
waiting, praying – the beast lunged with another roar, and Deor thrust sword straight into its open maw, burying it to the hilt in the soft roof of its mouth.

Black blood gushed from the wound. Deor felt a searing pain in his arm, but had no time to think on it, for the beast gave a great shake of its head and Deor found himself flying through the air, sword slipping from his hand. He slammed hard onto his back, gasping for air. He knew by the stream of blood pouring over him that the dweogar stood over him like a cat pinning down its prey. Deor shut his eyes, and all at once he realized how afraid he was to die –

And then the creature gave an almighty scream, not of anger, but of pain. Deor could sense movement above him, hear the shouts of alarm issued by his men, but the falling blood blinded him. Someone gave a great yell, like a warrior’s cry – but the voice was a woman’s. The heavy beast suddenly fell limp upon Deor. Deor gasped, neither able to breathe, see, nor extract himself. He could tell something was wrong: deadly quiet filled the clearing. Deor felt the weight of the beast begin to shift, and he gasped for breath. He reached out and grasped the arm of one of his men, who pulled him out from beneath the dweogar’s body. Coughing, Deor sat up and opened his eyes. Immediately he wished he had not.

Svanna stood over the dweogar, chest heaving. Deor’s own sword glittered in one of her hands, and in the other, a silver amulet dangled by a chain. Though not a speck of blood seemed to have fallen on Svanna, deep wounds pierced the beast’s eyes and stomach. It was dead.

Deor stared at her, his brain whirring: she had done as no woman was bidden. This meant dire consequences from the Temple, from their people, from their parents…

“Come on, now, men,” Deor said, trying to summon his most authoritative tone. “We shall deal with this back in the village.”
He realized suddenly that the other warriors were staring at him, too, with expressions of shock and fear. Deor shifted uncomfortably beneath their gaze. Some were whispering. Frowning, he moved to get up, but sharp pains shot through his chest and right arm; he groaned and fell back. Hadvar and Engeth hurried forward to help him to his feet.

“I’m fine,” Deor muttered, leaning on them for support. “Just a claw-mark.”

“Deor…”

Deor did not like the hesitant note in Hadvar’s voice. Hadvar gripped Deor’s injured arm and held it gently out before them both. An anxious knot growing in his throat, Deor looked down at the wound. Dark, sticky lines of exposed flesh crisscrossed Deor’s arm, crowned by an unusually deep puncture just below the bicep. The skin had pulled together around the wound, pale white and infected. The bottom dropped out of Deor’s stomach.

“No claw could have made that mark,” Engeth said in a deadly whisper. He backed away.

“Hold on, now,” Hadvar cautioned Engeth.

“Hadvar,” said Deor in a choked voice.

“I cannot touch him,” Engeth said.

“What is it?” said Svanna, marching forward. At her approach, Hadvar backed away, too, causing Deor to sway, unsupported. Svanna stepped up and shouldered his weight, swinging his uninjured arm around her. Deor saw her blazing eyes widen at the sight of his wound, then swivel around at the others, who were all backing slowly away.

“He is your commander!” she shouted.

“No, Svanna,” Deor said. He could feel a burning sensation beginning at the corners of his eyes, and fought against it. He unsheathed the ceremonial knife he had used to kill Cadoc. “I won’t be. Not any more.”
Svanna’s mouth fell open. “You are speaking nonsense, Deor … I won’t …”

She clutched him, her voice going thick with emotion. He tried to look away, but she pulled his face back to hers, so that he had to look into her wet, miserable eyes, and hear her pleading voice.

“I am dishonored,” he said.

“It needn’t be like that,” she said. “A priestess can bless you. You can live, Deor.”

He pushed the knife into her hand.

“Please, I couldn’t – I can’t,” Svanna whimpered, tears falling down her cheeks.

“Then I shall.”

Deor grabbed at the knife, but Svanna yanked it back from him; they struggled, but Deor had little strength left to overpower her. The burning sensation was in his throat, now, too.

“Deor, look at me,” Svanna whispered, and pressed her grimy forehead to his, crying in earnest. “Don’t leave me. Deor, don’t leave me. Please, stay for me. Please st-tay. I couldn’t stand it if my brother, m-my only brother … Deor, don’t, please …”

And Deor knew as soon as the word brother left her lips that, for Svanna’s sake alone, he could not bring himself to die. His grip slackened on the sword, and the first racking sob tore through his body, and all the warriors watched them, the two unclean ones, as they collapsed into each other’s arms and sank to the ground.

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As the sun rose behind the snowy clouds that morning, Eilun and her parents wrapped their cloaks around their shoulders and joined the steady crowd streaming through the streets toward Gehwelnene Square. The morning was dark and quiet, fat snowflakes drifting through the air. Few spoke as they poured into the square and assembled around the Gehwelnene tree. The
High Priestess and the twelve priestesses of Onela stood already on the plinth before Gehwelcne. Behind them, the stone altar on which the Eidolon would die sat ominous and cold, nestled between the great tree’s twisted roots. Silence fell over the people as the last of them assembled. The High Priestess spoke.

“O gods, your people gather before your sacred tree, tired and hungry and cold. We cannot survive the winter without your blessing. We beg of you, let us renew our commitment to you by the blood of one of our own. May her sacrifice prove our devotion, and may you smile upon her, and grant her people safe passage into spring. O Yngmorne, Mother of Earth, grant me the truest of sight, that I may find one who pleases you.”

At this, the High Priestess knelt to the ground and lifted her eyes to the sky. A priestess came forward and tipped an elixir into her mouth – boiled amantia and datura, to induce visions. The priestesses arranged themselves around her and began a song from the Annals. The crowd lent their voices to the effort as the High Priestess sat very still and stared silently up to the snowy sky. For nearly an hour, the crowd and the priestesses swayed in song, the timbre of their voices growing louder and wilder. The High Priestess began to sway, too, her eyes rolling up in her head; the voices swelled around her, and the other priestesses gripped her body as she shook and gasped. As time wore on, Eilun found herself slipping away into the song, her hands tight on her mother’s and father’s shoulders, one with her people and with her gods: one of the priestesses beat violently on a drum, and all seemed entranced by the power of the song. Then, as the music reached a crescendo, the High Priestess gave a great rattling gasp and threw herself forward on her hands and knees, her hair falling over her face. Instantly, the crowd fell silent. Only the sound of the High Priestess’ heaving breaths filled the air. Then, like a body possessed, the she lifted her head slowly up, turning a pair of pure white, unseeing eyes on the crowd.
“*Vessel of honor, ye shall be known,*” she said, and her voice echoed unnaturally.

Lithe as a ghost, the High Priestess rose from the ground, descended the steps of the tree’s plinth, and entered the crowd. Her unseein eyes fell cold on every woman in the crowd, and all shrunk beneath her gaze: something human had gone from her, replaced by a terrifying, ethereal stranger. The High Priestess judged silently, passing over many. She came closer to where Eilun stood, and Eilun gripped her mother’s hand, focusing on her breathing. *Calm,* *calm... it shall soon be done...* the crowd parted, and the High Priestess turned to Eilun. A second’s silence rang through the air as Eilun met that terrible stare.

Then the High Priestess bent her knee and sank to the ground.

“*Glory to you, for you are judged pure,*” came the horrible, godly voice.

Eilun froze. Dimly she registered her mother’s stifled gasp, her grip suddenly viselike on her hand – the surge of whispers as it passed through the crowd – the absurd image of the High Priestess, the most distinguished woman of their village, prostrate before her, Eilun, the wheelwright’s daughter. Only the feel of blank, adrenalized disbelief coursed through Eilun’s veins … it could not have happened, it was not supposed to have happened …

Eilun tore her gaze from the High Priestess and looked around, mouth agape, to find the whole of the village bending to their knees before her. She turned to her mother, grasping for some comfort, but Iseult could not speak: she looked at her daughter with shock in her wide eyes, released her hand, and knelt, too. Then Eilun stood alone.

“*Hail and honor, Eidolon of the Sacrifice,*” said the High Priestess.
5 WOUNDS

Eilun could do nothing but open and close her mouth. She knew the Eidolon was supposed to say something here, but the familiar words had gone from her head. Then she felt the gentle tug of her mother’s hand at the hem of her skirt. Blinking, Eilun gasped out, “By the gods, I am elect,” and the High Priestess rose from the ground. Wordlessly, she led Eilun by the shoulder through the parted crowd, and together they ascended to the plinth beneath Gehwelcne. The crowd swam before Eilun’s eyes, singing, their words garbled and confused. When the High Priestess finally lifted her arms over Eilun’s head and bid her kneel, Eilun dropped hard to the ground; she thought she could hardly have remained standing a second longer.

The High Priestess placed a crown of soft white lilies on Eilun’s head, woven from flowers that grew in the sacred grove at the deepest heart of the Temple. Then from the High Priestess’s lips burst forth, again, the song of the first Eidolon, the words of the Annals, which Hjalmar bid every godly man and woman commit to memory. The High Priestess’ voice rose and fell, recounting Wyrd’s fury, the people’s suffering, and finishing with Bergljot’s impassioned declaration: glory and honor such as the greatest warrior shall I attain at the heavenly feast of fallen heroes, for I am Bergljot the Eidolon ...

As the last sound died on her tongue, the High Priestess gave a great, rattling gasp and fell backwards into the ready-waiting arms of two lesser priestesses. She twitched, her eyes rolling in her head, as the spirit left her and her visions ended. Then Eilun knew it was her turn. Heart pounding, she pushed herself from her kneeling position and addressed the crowd with the strongest voice she could muster.

“And I am daughter of Iseult, blood of my father Adalbert. Honor is mine today, and glory shall I attain. Priestess of my people, gods of my forebears, I accept the fate which our lords and
ladies above have given to me. My blood runs hot with valor and courage, for from this m-
moment,” she paused, her voice cracking. “I am Eilun the Eidolon!”

The crowd’s roar lifted the feebleness of her voice and drowned it out. Her words were
prescribed ones, uttered every year by the new Eidolon – words every mother in the village
taught their daughters from rote, should the day of her Crowning ever come. How many times
had Eilun said them as a girl? They tasted suddenly so strange on her tongue. She felt as if she
had just run a thousand miles – every part of her body shook with phantom exhaustion.

“Mother,” she whispered, her words drowned out by cheers and song; the priestesses
gathered around her now, guiding her back down into the crowd, which parted before her.

“…twenty-four hours’ time with your family,” one of them was saying, “to make peace.”

Eilun found herself suddenly enveloped in her mother’s embrace. She collapsed into it, her
knees weak. Iseult said nothing; her tight grip spoke enough for them both.

“Cloister her within the home, to keep her pure. Do not allow guests. Use this time to put all
your family affairs in order. She shall report to the Temple steps as the sun rises tomorrow,”
another priestess addressed Eilun’s father. Eilun, though her head lay buried in her mother’s
shoulder, could perfectly see his set jaw, his terse nod, in her mind’s eye. The people were
throwing handfuls of soft snow into the air; they would feast later that afternoon. But not Eilun.

“Come, child, easy now,” said Iseult; Eilun felt her father’s steady hand on her shoulder
guiding them both away. The crowd parted around them, letting them pass.

And then a voice, clearer and louder than all the rest, cut through the din.

“The soldiers have returned!”
Eilun shot out of her mother’s grip as if electrified. The whole of the crowd turned toward the source of the shout: a watchman from the Wall had just burst into the square, a messenger’s signet brooch glinting at his shoulder.

“Come, and bear witness!” he called. “Two search parties have been sighted on the eastern edge of the forest – among them, gods willing, may be King Ceawlin!”

A second great roar went up through the crowd as people poured out of the square and into the streets which led to the East Gate. Eilun lifted her chin like a dog scenting a rabbit, her eyes fixed on the distant Wall.

“Eilun, we must keep you at home,” said her mother sternly. “Eilun –”

But her words fell on deaf ears. Without a second thought, Eilun ducked beneath her father’s arm, knocking her crown from her head. She sprinted off, soon lost amidst the sea of people.

Confused stares followed her as she ran, as those in the crowd who had stood close enough to Gehwelcne recognized her; several hands reached out to grab her, keep her from her transgression, but she slipped deftly around them, taking the shortcut she’d followed so many nights to Deor’s barracks in simpler times. Down one winding alley, a turn at the bricklayer’s workshop – Eilun dodged a pair of reaching arms, her mind empty of all that had just happened, of all the religious rules she was breaking right now. Somehow the soldiers’ return and her Crowning were connected: if she could just see that Deor was alive and well, all that had happened to her – to them both, to their future family – would be made right …

Clutching a stitch in her side, Eilun turned a corner and, suddenly, the slowly rising East Gate burst into view, a hundred yards ahead. She could see the distant soldiers marching through the aperture into the city, their shoulders sagged with defeat.
“Eilun, you get back here this instant!” boomed her father’s voice over her shoulder; Eilun pushed herself faster, faster! She shoved past the people gathered around the Gate, craning her neck for a glimpse of Deor –

And as she burst through the front ranks of the crowd into the clearing of the barracks, she saw him – lank, dirty, bandaged, and bloody – bringing up the rear. As if in a dream, their eyes met across the yard; and she supposed her pain and confusion must have shown in her face, for something sparked in Deor’s eyes, and he began to run toward her.

“No!” Eilun heard Svanna shout, seizing him. He wrestled her off, eyes fixed on his betrothed; but more of his fellow warriors pounced on him in an instant, pulling him back, though he fought them with every fiber of his being. In the same moment, Eilun’s father burst forth from the crowd and wrapped both his arms tight around his daughter’s waist.

“Let me go, let me go to him!” she cried out, tears forming in her eyes.

“No, Eilun,” Adalbert said, his voice quivering with anger.

“Deor!”

“Remember your station, you foolish girl – can you not see he has been bitten?”

Eilun’s shout caught in her throat, and she stopped struggling against her father’s grip. For the first time, her gaze fell on the dark, purplish stain marring the bandage on Deor’s arm.

She felt her knees finally give way beneath her, felt her father tighten his grip to support her weight. She could not speak, only look to Deor, watch helplessly as his eyes fell on the crown of white flowers, knocked askew in Eilun’s race to the Gate, that Adalbert held in his hand.

“Oh, gods,” she could see Svanna mouth the horrible words. “She’s Eidolon.”

“I will go to him,” Eilun said, her strength failing her. “I don’t care … I don’t …”
“It is no longer yours to decide, Eilun,” said her father, his tone softening. “You of all people cannot touch him.”

It was too much. Eilun’s eyelids fluttered, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

☆ ☆ ☆

Deor never made it past the barracks at the city’s Eastern edge. His fellows cordoned him off in a small quarantine room, and afterwards washed their hands with heavy lye soap. He sat there nearly half a day before a priestess finally arrived from the temple to assess the wound on his arm. Her examination was brief. Brutal.

“The poisons of sin and vice course through your veins,” she said, taking one glance at the diseased, purplish puncture in his arm. “As the god Skal’s betrayal turned the creatures of Hjalmar’s forest feral and wicked, so has his curse tainted your being. For the safety of the rest of the village, and on behalf of the Temple, I strip you of your title of Thane and deem you wraecca, unclean. You shall live out your days in Braigh Wræcca, amongst the beggars and tainted who are now your kin. Never shall you touch one who is pure; the penalty is whipping. Never shall you cast your eyes on the Temple door; the penalty is a gauntlet of stones. Never shall you marry or know a woman carnally; the penalty is death. Only through prayer and piety may the gods choose to heal you. Redemption is possible,” her eyes glinted, “but be warned – you must fight mightily and suffer greatly for it. The gods present many mysterious trials to the unclean.”

Deor swallowed.

“In conclusion, I give you this blessing in the stead of our High Priestess,” the priestess raised her hands over Deor’s head – hovering close, but not touching him. “Peace be unto you, he whose blood boils with corruption. Braigh Amren weeps for you, best of us, warrior and
protector of our people now fallen to ruin. May Onela’s mercy touch you in the next life. Go, and be saved by your penitence.”

She clasped her hands in prayer, then left as quickly as she had come. Deor stayed there for a long while, her words thundering through his head. She hadn’t shown the slightest trace of emotion, let alone wept for him. Neither, Deor knew, would Braigh Amren.

The next day, a soldier escorted Deor to his home to gather his things. Deor glowered with shame as his guard, no more than a young boy, strutted behind him, prodding him like an animal with the butt of his spear. *I knelt four winters at the King’s right hand while you were still learning to hold a sword!* Deor wanted to spit. But all that was gone. His former title, the respect as a warrior he’d worked so hard to earn, meant nothing now. He was only *wrecca*.

The soldier rapped sharply on the door of Deor’s family home. Trembling, Deor tried to decide what to do with his eyes. Should he look up imploringly, to try and communicate sorrow, his regret? Or ought he to stare at the ground, expressing penitence? Before he could decide, the door opened. A man appeared in the entryway, his eyes red. A heavy silence solidified the air.

“Say a consecration over the doorway, first, will you,” Deor’s father said finally, in a choked voice. “I can’t have him tainting my home.”

The words struck Deor like a blow to the gut. After the soldier said a prayer, his father stepped aside without meeting Deor’s eyes, as if his own son were a grimy tramp trespassing in his home. Deor wanted to cry out, but knew he could never find the words. His dishonor would bring shame and sadness on all his family, for no fault of their own. He could not blame them for hating him. Quietly, Deor gathered up what little things belonged to him: his hunting knife and old woodcarvings, the bedroll on which he slept, the spare sets of civilian clothes his mother and
Eilun had made for him. His father stood in the doorway and watched, expression as unreadable as stone, and closed the door behind Deor without a word.

☆ ☆ ☆

The Queen had designated the anterior portrait gallery of the royal chambers to be Hrúnan’s makeshift throne room during the reconstruction of the main hall. Svanna, returned from the hunt, stood at the room’s center with her clothes pooled on the floor around her, shivering and humiliated. Two priestesses poked and prodded her body with thickly gloved hands, lifting her arms, inspecting her teeth. The Queen’s empty throne sat before them. At last, they told Svanna to dress, and left the room. For a long several minutes, Svanna stood there, alone, hardly daring to breathe. Then a grand mahogany door opened and the Queen entered, the priestesses trailing respectfully behind. The Queen seated herself on her throne and rested her hand on her chin. The priestesses bowed before her. Svanna, cheeks blotched an angry, embarrassed red, felt her heart pound inside her chest as she waited for their report.

“Miraculously, it seems,” the priestess paused in her bow and glanced sideways at her partner. “Not a drop of the beast’s blood has touched her skin.”

Shock and relief spread through Svanna’s body like a bolt of lightning. So she had escaped dishonor by mere inches! It seemed impossible, but she had no time to consider how it could have happened before the priestess continued.

“The girl’s purity, whatever her intent, is still intact. She requires no blessing from the High Priestess, and is not marked outcast. Her insurrection, the slaying of a beast, is a political matter subject to your Majesty’s discretion.”

“You may go,” the Queen told the priestess.
Svanna heard the door open and close, and she knew she knelt alone before the Queen. A long silence echoed throughout the empty chamber.

“Svanna the huntress,” the Queen’s eyes surveyed her thoughtfully, like a jewel held up to appraisal. “Members of your sex are not typically allowed beyond the Wall of our fair city. I remember two years ago, when your now-superiors made the case to my husband the King for your inclusion. Prodigious with the bow, they said. A detriment to the whole of Braigh Amren to bar her from the hunt. And yet, whatever your skill, the law of this land can make no exceptions for those who prove themselves untrustworthy with the freedoms of their station.” The Queen leaned forward, and Svanna shrank back. “For the unseemly act of beast-slaying, I bid thee dismissed from the hunters of fair Braigh Amren, and forever barred entry into Amrendeth.”

Svanna left her hearing with the Queen feeling as if she had swallowed a pile of stones. Dismissed from the hunt, stripped of her freedom to leap and bound beyond the stifling Wall of this city – she thought nothing could be worse. But then she arrived home.

“What a petty, self-centered fool you are, Svanna!” her father thundered, while she cowered, speechless. “Thinking only of your own glory, paying no heed to the dishonor you would cast on this house, on your brother. I am the laughing stock of the noble class, my son disfigured and outcast, my arrogant daughter grasping far beyond her place! You have shamed us all, Svanna!”

“Deor would have died, Father – ”

“And you should have let him!” he roared. “My son would have perished in the throes of sword-terror feats, defending his city and his men honorably in battle. He would have had a hero’s burial. Yet you begged him live. He is consigned now and forever to poverty and disgrace in the wracca’s hovels. Do you know how I had to consecrate the door before he came in this
morning? My own son, the great warrior and pride of my life, made untouchable to me. Have you any conception of such pain?”

Hands shaking, Svanna looked up at her father. He stared menacingly back at her.

“Give me your bow,” he growled.

“Papa—”

“Do not speak to me like a pitiable child! Give it here.”

Tears splashing from her cheeks to the floor, Svanna pulled the bow and quiver from her back and held them out to her father. He took them in his hands, growling with malice.

“When the leaders of the hunt came to me two years ago, frothing at the mouth over your skill at the bow, I swallowed my misgivings and granted you my blessing because I trusted you to keep your ambitions in check. Now I see what a fool I was. You are banned from the hunt by the Queen’s command. And by my own, you are never to lay so much as a finger on any weapon from this day forth. I will not see you in man’s clothing again. You will take to women’s work and women’s work alone. You will spin and sew and serve meals in your skirts, and you will never again reach beyond what is yours. You will learn the humility befitting your kind.”

With thunder in his eyes, Svanna’s father grasped the pliant yew bow she had carved herself on acceptance to the hunters and bent it over his knee until it snapped clean in two.

6 Blood-Gift

A bitter wind blew through the emptying market square, disturbing the skirts and capes of straggling shoppers and merchants as they wound down business for the day. The iron-gray clouds above, finally empty of the day’s snow, had dissipated to reveal the last vestiges of a pale winter sunset. At the bend of the street, two watchmen stood warming their hands before a torch
as they kept watch over the emptying marketplace. Every few minutes, their eyes darted toward the lone figure bound in the stocks at the center of the square.

“I say dead,” said the first. “Has to be. Done froze.”

“That’s a witch, Nils, I’m telling you,” the second insisted. “There’s nothing on this earth can kill ‘em, but for the wound of a dagger rubbed with the blood of a blue goshawk.”

“Then how come she hasn’t moved all day, you dolt?”

The second guard scratched his head, and did not answer. Nils rolled his shoulders, looking pleased with himself. In the distance, the woman in the stocks knelt as still as ever, hunched over so that her dark hair obscured her face.

“Blood of a goshawk,” Nils chuckled. “Two days out in the snow and cold; that’s a stiff corpse right there. Glad we aren’t the ones who have to pry her out the stocks and bury her, good riddan – ah, evening, sir.”

The two guards stood at attention, for four approaching figures had just appeared around the corner: Thane Fafnir, striding alongside the Constable, who carried a set of heavy brass keys, and the two watchmen who took the night shift on this street.

“Gentlemen,” Fafnir said, nodding to Nils’ bow. “I wonder if we could extend your watch a moment longer? The hag in the stocks there is free at sundown. We could stand to have a few extra men present to ensure she does not try to spit poison or curse us into frogs.”

“Not sure there’s any need, sir. You see –”

But Nils’ voice was lost as his companion gave a triumphant shout: for at the very moment the sun set behind the Western face of the Great Wall, as if the last ray of vanishing light had triggered it, the woman shifted like a statue come to life. Calm as could be, she flexed her fingers, wrists trapped in her restraints, and lifted her eyes to survey the first stars of dusk.
“Five copper, that’s a good lad,” the second guard chuckled, as Nils gaped. “Told you she didn’t freeze. That’s a witch, that is.”

“One most dark and depraved,” said Fafnir grimly. “Come, men.”

Across the square, the woman heard the muttering of voices and the crunch of approaching footsteps on snow, but kept her gaze trained on the sky. The Boar constellation twinkled faintly in the North, just barely edging into the house of Skal. It would reach its zenith on the day of the winter solstice, then travel back, out of the ominous alignment. But not yet.

“Aslaug Gerssdóttir, by the law of the King, your time of penance has ended with the setting of the sun,” came the voice of the city Constable, beside her. “Have you any word of remorse?”

Aslaug did not respond. She watched the stars of the Boar brightening slowly above them, her lined face bearing the signs of little sleep, but no emotion.

“The King’s laws,” she spat at last. “By none of those was I placed in these stocks.”

“Count your blessings that I did not spill your dirty blood on the snow of this square instead,” Fafnir snarled.

“Murder on grounds of petty superstition,” Aslaug replied. “Ceawlin the Merciful would not have allowed it. But of course, the laws are changing under our fair Queen.”

“Right you are, witch,” Fafnir smirked. “Old hags such as yourself should count your days.”

Slowly, Aslaug lowered her piercing eyes and fixed Fafnir with a deadly glare.

“Death comes to all,” she said, voice cold as the ice on which she knelt. “Only a fool sleeps without a sword beside his bed.”

Nils and the other guards exchanged a puzzled glance, then looked to Fafnir, wondering what he would do; but their Thane merely hissed through his teeth and waved an impatient hand.
“Release her,” he said to the Constable, turning away. “I have better ways to spend my night than entertaining the heresies of a beast-born whore.”

The Constable bent forward and placed his brass key into the lock on the stocks. With help from the guards, he lifted the wooden yoke from Aslaug’s neck and hands, and she stood at last, rubbing her wrists, her knees groaning from disuse. The guards dispersed.

“Bleedin’ witch,” one scowled as he left, and spat upon the ground.

Another gust of freezing wind picked up, but the pit of anger writhing in Aslaug’s stomach made her cheeks flush hot and red. Braggarts and fools, falsely arrogant, hands on their swords as if they know true power! She thought she might burst; she could feel her own power building. They have no idea… how I long to show them real pain...

But the urge receded even as she felt the heat of her passion swell and begin to take shape within her. Soon, soon, she consoled herself, turning away. The stars are nearly right.

☆ ☆ ☆

Aslaug opened the creaking wooden door to her home, letting a flurry of snow into the tiny thatched hut, and was greeted by the wan, dirty face of her oldest daughter.

“The baby’s sick,” Eadlin said, without pretext. “I can’t get the ginger down her throat.”

She pointed, and there in the little woven cradle lay infant Rannveig, Aslaug’s youngest, her chest flushed, sleeping fitfully. Aslaug laid a palm across her stomach and forehead. The two middle girls padded across the floor, naked, squabbling over a ragdoll.

“You boiled the gingerroot mashed it with goat heartstring?” Aslaug asked.

“Yes, but she only spits it up. She needs something stronger.”

Aslaug sighed, removing her cloak. She pulled her snow-soaked overdress over her head, hung it by the fire to dry and began peeling away layers of sodden undergarments. “Take a vial
of wortroot from the panel in the floorboards and give her four drops. I have spent too much of my energy keeping warm in the stocks; I must rest.”

“A Bearsleep?”

“Nothing so drastic. Meditation and prayer to slow the heart. But it takes its toll. You can tend to her, Eadlin. I trust you.”

“Her whole body’s inflamed with fever, Mother. She needs more than I know how to give,” her daughter pressed her. “You must go to the Stone Forest.”

Aslaug eased herself down on the single bedroll she and her three oldest daughters shared and closed her eyes, feeling the chill of the day creeping back into her bones as the last vestiges of her hibernative spell left her. Bitter wind whistled in through the walls; the frost caked in Aslaug’s hair began to drip down her back.

“I will take her,” she sighed. “But she will have to hold out until dawn.”

☆ ☆ ☆

Aslaug rose early from her bed the next morning, careful not to disturb her daughters as they lay sleeping beside her, and tiptoed across the cold dirt ground to peer into Rannveig’s crib. She was already awake, sniffing fussily, her cheeks red.

“Shh, shh, quiet now,” Aslaug murmured as she reached into the crib and undid the handkerchief tied between Rannveig’s legs. A dark, red stickiness stained the inside: it had not been there the night before. Fear welled in Aslaug’s stomach, but, biting her lip, she willed herself to stay focused. She lifted Rannveig from her crib and swaddled her several times around in a thick ream of cloth, tying the ends around her own torso, so that the babe lay snug against her breast.

“You shall not die,” she said, throwing her cloak around them both. “Such is my will.”
Aslaug left their hut and glided silently up their crooked little alley, over snowdrifts and slicks of black ice, past the poor farmers’ and laborers’ homes that made up most of the West side of the city, known colloquially as Braigh Wræcca, for the number of beast-bitten who lived destitute on its streets. Caked in dirt and dried blood, some with missing limbs and deep gashes across their bodies, the wræcca crouched in the mud at the side of the road, begging for alms, howling that their homes had been destroyed by beasts; shivering farmers’ wives tore past indifferently, baskets in arm, aprons threadbare and filthy. The frame of the occasional ruined house, capped with fresh snow, sat like a skeleton picked clean on the side of the road.

The crooked huts of the West dissolved into farmland, frozen over for the winter and mostly empty of workers. As Aslaug walked, a dirty-faced orcharder stepped out of his house and dumped a pail of slop into the pigpen. Aslaug caught his eye and signed him a solemn blessing, which he returned with a nod. Stearc Gundermann: his wife and marriageable daughter were sympathetic to her cause. As he leaned casually on his staff, keeping a beady eye on the two guards on the path in the distance, Aslaug passed silently through his little plot of winter carrots and ducked into his barren orchard and vanished amid the snow-laden boughs. The trees grew right up to the Wall which marked the village limits, shielding her from view. She laid her hand upon the weak stone and pushed, feeling it slide out of its mortar. A tiny gap opened up at the ground, just large enough for Aslaug to slither through, tucking Rannveig against her chest.

Aslaug straightened on the other side and waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, for she had stepped into a forest so thick and wild that its snarls of branches, winter-dead and packed with ice and snow, all but blotted out the watery morning sun. No empty fields by this face of the Wall, as in the East – the guards patrolling above could never see her come and go. Aslaug let the cool, pure, spirit of Amrendeth wash over her like a wave, and closed her
eyes at the familiar rush. Unbound now by the yoke of the stocks or by the high Wall of Braigh Amren, she could feel her soul expand with the freshness of the air.

Reinvigorated, Aslaug turned back to the face of the Wall and placed her palm against one of the stones. At her touch, its mossy covering crumbled to the ground, revealing a strange symbol carved into the smooth grey rock: *færnys*, the rune of far passage. Aslaug closed her eyes, focusing her energy. The engraved rune began to glow beneath her fingers. She clutched Rannveig tight, bracing her for the jump –

In a wisp of smoke, like warm wind over a frozen lake, they were gone.

Aslaug felt the change in the air before she opened her eyes; the sudden warm, sweet smell of her secret place. She found herself in a small clearing in the woods, surrounded on all sides by a thick curtain of brambles. A deep-bellied cauldron, ringed by stones, marked the center of the grotto; silken hangings and bone charms hung from the trees, fluttering and clinking in the warm breeze. Her supplies lay haphazardly where she had left them last: chunks of flint, a wood-handled dirk, sacks of dried herbs, three bronze handbells, a carved bone flute, brightly dyed cushions and lengths of cloth, smooth stones carved with strange runes, the scattered bones of small animals from rituals past. At Aslaug’s feet, a second rune of far passage glowed bright as a star; but even as she watched, its carvings dulled and greyed into an ordinary stone once more.

She smiled. This was her secret place, nested deep into Amrendeth so as to be found by no man.

Rannveig fussed within her swaddling, and Aslaug bounced the baby on her knee, kissing her forehead. They had passed many miles; such a journey was never easy on a child of this age. She managed to calm Rannveig, but to truly cure her, much more work would need to be done. Murmuring gently, Aslaug eased her daughter out of her carrying cloth, lay her upon one of the cushions, and tucked her cloak around her as a blanket. The child gave a little cry, but seemed
too tired to throw a proper tantrum; this set deep lines in Aslaug’s brow. She’d do a burning, perhaps an invocation of Skal if she needed it, and finish with a prayer over the dweogar amulet for luck.

Aslaug got to work quickly. She chose three runestones – *wellness, yellow,* and *Onela* – and laid them above Rannveig’s head, then gave the baby a rat’s femur to hold in her little fist while she waited. With a great heave, Aslaug turned the cauldron on its side and rolled it to the edge of the clearing. She dragged a few branches of kindling into its place, then struck her dirk against the flint and blew its sparks into flame. She burned a few handfuls of bergamot and crushed madder root to perfume the smoke and knelt to meditate, one hand resting gently on Rannveig’s forehead. She closed her eyes, breathing in the fire’s heady smoke. Soon the ground beneath Aslaug’s feet began to rise and sink like a boat on water, and she swayed in the fumes of the fire, vision hazy.

“Lácnung,” she murmured; the holy word came to her lips as if from the forest itself. “Cit árfæstnes... Hjalmar, æswutol...”

In her conscious mind, Aslaug had no inkling of the meaning of these words. Yet she felt each one emerge from her mouth with presence and weight, reverberating like bells in the air. She dove not deeply into the recesses of her own mind, but cast her consciousness out into the forest around, divining not for language, but for tendrils of raw power, unknowable in nature, voiced in sound ... The pines rustled with unnatural wind overhead, scattering snowflakes across the warm clearing, and Aslaug felt a force building in her that was not her own, a power joining and melding with hers – she held tightly to Rannveig’s tiny hand, thinking of healing, appeals against sickness and blight and blood in the stool. The image of Rannveig as an infant, smiling toothlessly at her breast mere weeks after birth, burst to the front of Aslaug’s mind, and
she reached out for words that felt strong as the bond between mother and child, warm and soft as mercy. Following a sudden inspiration, Aslaug reached out to grab her dirk in her other hand, feeling what she must do without knowing what it was – as if the path ahead were illuminating itself one step at a time. She raised the dagger in her right hand, her left palm open to the sky, and gave a wild shout as she drew the blade across her opposite hand.

“Néahlaecung!”

Aslaug’s eyes flew open in pain, and she clutched the hand to her chest as it bled. For several minutes, only Rannveig’s fussy cries and Aslaug’s labored breathing filled the air. Then, just as Aslaug began to think her spell had failed, a pair of yellow, slanted eyes appeared in the darkness at the edge of the clearing. Aslaug breathed a sigh of relief. Teeth gritted, she held out her flowing wound to the thing that looked back.

“Come, little one,” she said, fighting to speak evenly through her pain. “Be not afraid … come, take this gift … take my blood so that my kit will shed none.”

Aslaug closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to the ground, bleeding palm outstretched. After a moment, she heard four legs stepping tentatively nearer with a hunched, limping gait. She felt the touch of a rough, forked tongue as it lapped at her wound, its double rows of curved canine teeth rubbing lightly against her arm. She smelled its putrid breath as it breathed on her skin, hot and sweetish and rotted. Eventually the tongue left her hand and stinging wound, and Aslaug heard the creature’s soft footsteps as it slunk away. She straightened, and caught sight of a matted black tail disappearing into the thorns at the edge of the clearing. As she watched, the beast looked back over its shoulder; its intelligent yellow eyes, glimmering in the darkness, met her own.

“Thank you,” she murmured.
The beast held her gaze for a fraction of a second longer, then turned and was gone.

Aslaug let out a long breath. She looked down at her hand, bleeding less profusely than before, though stinging from the beast’s saliva. She tore a strip of cloth from her skirt and bound it tightly around her palm before turning to Rannveig. The child had fallen into a peaceful sleep, her breathing still belabored, but slower and deeper than it had been before. Aslaug smiled and stroked a lock of her hair.

“The beasts have blessed you, my little wolf pup,” she whispered, lifting her daughter gently and wrapping her once more against her own chest. Aslaug stood, threw aside the dirk and runestones, and doused the fire with a few handfuls of dirt. Then, remembering suddenly, she approached the overturned cauldron and reached inside for the dweogar amulet she’d left there a week before – but her fingers tapped only against cold metal. Frowning, Aslaug looked inside: empty. She checked the ground around, picking up bones and runestones and casting them aside, but her delicate silver amulet was nowhere to be found.

At last, Aslaug stood, hand resting on Rannveig’s head, her brow furrowed. She was certain of where she’d left it; something here didn’t add up.

“Just a little while longer, darling,” Aslaug whispered to Rannveig. She knelt once more on the ground, clutching the runestone for true sight in one hand. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, drawing her mind down, deep down, back into the energies of Amrendeth ….

Time passed, and Aslaug’s conscious thoughts again began to recede into quietness. Brief flashes of movement flickered before her closed eyes – the careful step of a fox, a falling drift of snow, the crack of an icy pond leagues deeper into the wood – and within them, guiding them all, waves of invisible power, sheer energy, permeating everything. She gripped the runestone, willing Amrendeth to show her that which she sought.
“Sien,” she whispered; and an image clearer than all the rest burst before her sight, radiating an energy the likes of which she had never sensed before. She saw the ashen, dirty face of a young girl, barely yet a woman. Tears fell from the girl’s wide brown eyes, betraying a naïveté hidden behind recklessness and bravado. In one hand she clutched Aslaug’s dweogar amulet; in the other, two halves of a broken yew bow; and all around her glowed an aura of raw, untamed power – stronger and wilder than anything Aslaug had ever seen before.

Aslaug’s eyes flew open. She stumbled and fell backwards, catching herself on her elbows. Rannveig stirred within her carrier at the sudden motion, and Aslaug stroked her head, cooing an apology while also trying to calm her own heavy breathing. She looked around the clearing, at the secret things she had so carefully guarded for so long. It was near on four decades, now, since she’d first burned the space for this clearing. She’d journeyed on foot the first time, well over a month’s journey, until she was sure she’d gone far enough to ensure no wandering hunter or beast-slayer would ever stumble upon her secret place. She’d placed the far passage spell to ease her future journeys. She’d grown the thorns herself, imbued with magic, ensuring that only those born with the blood-gift, Amrendeth’s blessing, would be able to penetrate their brambles: Aslaug herself, and her children.

Her defenses had never failed her before. It could mean only one thing.

Another woman graced with the gift of holy blood lived within Braigh Amren’s Wall, one of whom Aslaug had never known. Such innocence in her eyes … could it be that the girl had no inkling of the power she held? It must be so, for Aslaug had never sensed her use her gift before. Rannveig gurgled against Aslaug’s chest, and she bounced the babe gently, thinking. The existence of another blood-born in the village – particularly one who had stolen her amulet – posed certain danger, especially in light of Aslaug’s plans for the coming weeks. And yet … if
the girl could be found, swayed to the cause … Aslaug looked up to the sky, steely grey, just barely visible through the overhanging willows.

“The stars will be right,” Aslaug murmured. “And she will help me make them so.”

7 SACRAMENTS OF THE EIDOLON

The sound of a crackling fire drifted to Eilun from very far away. With a soft groan, she turned onto her side and rubbed her eyes. Something across the room shifted, then stopped.

“No, Adalbert … give her a moment.”

Her mother’s voice echoed as if it sounded from the end of a long corridor. Eilun’s head swam. She lay beneath her familiar yellow quilt, feeling remarkably warm. Realizing where she was, she opened her eyes. Darkness pressed against the windowpane of her family home, and the fire cast meager light onto the timber walls. Several hours must have passed since she’d fainted beside the East Gate. A stone settled in Eilun’s chest as the memory of the day’s events came back to her. Deor’s face across the courtyard, torn with anguish, swam before her eyes …

“There, child, hush now,” Eilun’s mother, Iseult, was at her side, using the hem of her sleeve to wipe away the tear sliding down her daughter’s cheek. Eilun pushed herself up, closing her fingers around her mother’s. Her father sat in the far corner of the room, the fire’s complex shadows flickering in his eyes.

“Many of your aunts and uncles paid visit while you slept,” Adalbert said stiffly. “We turned them away at the door, of course … but they offer their congratulations to you.”

Eilun nodded. She couldn’t speak. The stone in her chest had moved to her throat.

“I know that it is not what we had expected,” her mother stroked her hand, voice as soothing as she could manage. “I know you had great happiness in your heart for your future –
but, my daughter, we must rejoice anyway, for the gods have given us a joy we all thought had
passed. It is tinged with sorrow, yes – but no matter the earthly plans we make for ourselves, our
lords above illuminate even grander designs for us than we can – can ever imagine –”

Why did her mother have to look at her that way? Eilun turned her head away, struggling
to hold back the gasp building in the back of her throat.

“Eilun, we are so proud,” Iseult said, and Eilun could hear tears in her voice. “You know
I have dreamed of this, my daughter of purest and most loving heart. So very proud...”

She bowed her head in Eilun’s lap and said no more. These were words every mother
must utter to her daughter when she is Crowned Eidolon. But why did they feel so hollow now?
Her mother loved her, glowed at the mention of the grandbabies Eilun now would never give
her… her mother wished on her glory and honor, and prayed for her death ... tears slid down
Eilun’s cheeks in earnest now. It was too confusing. Across the room, her father gripped the
arms of his chair as if he wished to throttle them. But he said nothing.

The night passed with agonizing slowness. More kin to Eilun’s family – aunts, uncles,
cousins, second-cousins, distant relatives – knocked at the door throughout the wee hours to offer
their congratulations. Adalbert took their calls outside on the doorstep, in accordance with the
priestess’ request to keep Eilun pure. She could hear their voices on the other side of the Wall,
warbled and strange, as she curled in bed beside her mother, sipping hot drinks and speaking
little. They would be discussing the dashed plans for her engagement, how to negotiate with
Deor’s family for the return of her dowry, meaningless now. Days Eilun would never live to see.
She knew she should try to sleep before the priestesses called, but she couldn’t manage it. Her
parents stayed awake with her, for which she was grateful. Her father played on his lute, like he
had when Eilun was young, but did not sing. They waited together as the darkness outside their
window slowly brightened into the deep blue of dawn.

With an hour left before daybreak, Iseult cooked a sparse meal of grain and water for
breakfast, then let the fire die out. Eilun ate quietly and obediently. In the darkness, she could
feel her mother's weight at the end of her bed, sense her father's solemn presence across the
room. Though nobody spoke much in the chill and dark, a somber, nervous energy crackled
somewhere beneath the surface of their movements. Eilun allowed her mother to bathe her and
brush her hair, a little ritual of theirs that had fallen to the wayside as Eilun grew older. She
dressed in her Temple clothes, a fine russet wool with green trim at the sleeves. Iseult held her
chin high with pride as she fastened the family's pin to Eilun's cloak, but dawdled as she adjusted
the fabric and smoothed Eilun's hair.

“Iseult,” her father said. Her mother swallowed hard and pulled Eilun into a tight hug.

“No love can compare to mine for you,” she whispered.

Eilun felt the burning in her throat threaten to begin again. Iseult released her, pressing a
hand to her mouth, and Eilun felt Adalbert’s arm encircle hers. Holding her mother’s gaze, she
and her father stepped out of the house and shut the door behind them. They walked from their
house at the edge of the village into the city proper. Despite the early hour, several townspeople
had gathered to watch Eilun go, craning their necks as she passed. She felt naked before their
gaze. Her father led her to the heart of the city, across Gehwelene Square, to the foot of the
Temple stairs. For a moment, silence. Then before them, the Temple doors swung open wide.
The priestesses emerged in two straight lines, each holding a lantern aloft.
“Listen to me, Eilun,” her father said suddenly. “I couldn’t say it in front of your mother. But you must do exactly as you are bidden by these women, do you understand? You cannot comprehend the danger we all are in,” he grimaced. “Our family especially.”

Eilun blinked up at him in surprise; he spoke very fast, without turning his head, as the priestesses’ black robes fluttered in the wind.

“Things are changing in Braigh Amren, Eilun. The common people are meeting in the dark corners of taverns, exchanging radical ideas, organizing something sinister. The Queen will be looking to use the power of the Temple and the importance of the Midwinter’s Sacrifice to stamp them down. This year will not be like the ones of the past. Strife and bloodshed mark bad omens over this solstice. You are at the center of something so much larger than yourself.”

“But Papa, what – ?”

“Do not ask me for any more details. Just know: you cannot risk another stunt like the one you pulled at your Crowning. There is too much at stake – for you, and for your mother and me; for all the city. Do you understand?”

Eilun couldn’t speak; her thoughts had stopped cold. The priestesses were swarming down the steps. Behind them, framed by the dark aperture of the open Temple doors, the High Priestess stood waiting, absolutely still, in robes of regal blood red.

“Papa, our family especially?”

She would have expected another stern diatribe, knowing her father. But inexplicably, he looked guilty, as if he had said more than he’d intended. Eilun’s eyes widened. What had he – ?

The first priestess reached the bottom stair and held out her hand. Heart thumping, Eilun took it, but hesitated, and looked back at her father. His eyes said again, do you understand? The
priestess cleared her throat. Eilun swallowed. She fixed her father’s gaze squarely with her own and, though fear coursed through her veins, nodded as confidently as she could.

The priestess led Eilun up the Temple steps and presented her to the High Priestess, who took her hand instead. As they turned to go inside, Eilun risked one last glance down the steps at her father. She thought she saw him open his mouth to speak. But it was too late. The oaken doors of the Temple closed behind Eilun, cutting her father off from view.

Eilun’s whole body shuddered. She could not even begin to process what she had just heard. Calm down. Calm down! She scolded herself. The priestesses were looking at her. Her father had told her to behave. Breathing deeply, she forced her nerves to settle.

The priestesses led Eilun further inside. The grandly carved stone and arcing ceiling of the Temple of the Gods had been decorated as Eilun had never seen it. Silk banners and embroidered tapestries adorned the walls, and sprigs of pine and holly hung from the pillars. All around the altar, an enormous spread of offerings sat piled higher than Eilun’s head: cups of wine, dried fruits and cheeses, soft-baked bread, scaled fish, barley meal with herbs and nuts, plates and goblets of shimmering gold and silver. On the altar itself lay the carcasses of two young deer draped with woven flowers. The High Priestess led Eilun to the front of the room, the priestesses processing behind them.

“Eidolon of the Midwinter Sacrifice, we ladies of the gods bid you welcome,” The High Priestess said. From the pile of offerings, she handed Eilun a golden chalice filled with a mouthful of salt water, meant to purify the insides. She trained her cool, formidable gaze on Eilun. “Kneel, and drink.”

Eyes wide, Eilun did as she was told. Even as the priestesses processed through different rituals, the High Priestess’ intimidating, regal demeanor never changed. Her every motion
seemed calculated and significant, and the expression on her face may well have been carved from the same stone as the Temple. Eilun's heart beat in her chest, conscious of the tiny droplet she had just spilled on her dress. Around her, the priestesses lit candles. When she finished her drink, Eilun dipped two fingers into the chalice, and touched the drops of water to Hjalmar’s stone feet, carved on the altar before her. The priestesses erupted into exultations, and the first rite was done.

The sun rose and fell outside the Temple windows, and Eilun and the priestesses performed dozens more rituals. Though she attended the women’s service weekly with her mother, many of the rites Eilun had never seen before.

“The Eidolon is permitted to know many secrets of our faith ordinary women are not,” the High Priestess explained. “Treasure these mysteries, for they are sacred.”

The priestesses adorned Eilun’s hands, head, and neck with ropes of precious jewels and gold insignias; they took her clothes and robed her instead in brilliant satin, gold and red. She was made to burn incense, recite passages from the Annals, and process at the hand of the High Priestess around the temple perimeter, praying and receiving a blessing at all twelve of the gods’ shrines. Eilun’s clothes were cumbersome and heavy, and every movement she made set her weighty jewelry ringing. She ached to be able to scratch her nose or stretch her back, but the High Priestess’ commanding stare kept her in line.

Long after sunset, the High Priestess finally eased Eilun down into a kneeling position before the altar. Her priestesses brought bowls of bright pigments and salt water, which they mixed together into paint, and patterned Eilun's hands and arms with swirling holy symbols. Then the High Priestess placed her thumb on Eilun's brow and bid her to close her eyes. She felt the ink, cool and wet against her forehead.
"I paint you with the Ácennedes," she declared, and the word shimmered like a prayer upon the air between them. "It is the most hallowed Sigil of Onela, secret to the rest of our people. Only an Eidolon is permitted to bear this mark upon her skin."

The High Priestess offered Eilun her hand, and lifted her up from her knees. When Eilun opened her eyes, she saw that all the other priestesses had circled around her. The High Priestess stepped back to join their ranks. "Hail, she who is accepted to the First Rites of the Eidolon, first and best among women, to whom all shall knees shall bend and offer devotion and honor," she said. And to her surprise, every single priestess, even the High Priestess herself, fell to their knees, heads bowed toward Eilun in utmost reverence.

Even if it had been permitted for her to speak, she did not think she would be able to do anything but stare. There she was, simple, quiet Eilun, robed in outrageous fineries and painted with the holiest symbols of her faith, receiving the bows of two dozen honored priestesses. The heavens and the earth might as well have traded places.

After a moment, the High Priestess rose. She stepped forward to take Eilun’s hand once more, and guided her behind the altar toward a set of tall stone doors. Through this passage, Eilun knew, lay the High Priestess’ private, sacred chambers. Two priestesses rose from their knees to open the doors before them, revealing a set of spiraling stone steps. Eilun and the High Priestess descended into the darkness. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Eilun heard the heavy doors scrape shut behind them. The realization hit her at once: they were alone in the most holy heart of the Temple.

The light of a central fire illuminated a far humbler space than Eilun had been expecting. Red and purple silk hangings hung between palatial column supports, and shelves of thick religious tomes lined the walls. Though Eilun could see no chairs, plenty of soft woven mats lay
comfortably on the floor aside more plates of dried fruits and wines. Around the roaring standalone hearth at room’s center, plush cushions provided spaces to kneel in prayer and burn incense. A stone basin stood on a dais at the end of the hall, inlaid with gold. Something rose up behind it – Eilun took a few steps closer and gasped. A gargantuan stone carving, at least twenty feet high and seventy feet long, was masterfully hewn into the very Temple wall.

"It is Hjalmar's Wall," said the High Priestess behind Eilun, who jumped. "It took seventy-seven craftsmen nineteen years to create, many centuries ago, when Hrúnan and the Temple were first constructed. Go closer, if you like. It tells the story of creation." The High Priestess' voice and manner had softened. Eilun cautiously approached, while the Priestess went to each panel and illuminated it with her candle.

"Yngmorne, bearing the earth from her womb into Hjalmar's dominion," she said, gesturing with her free hand; the pain in the goddess’ face was somehow terrible and beautiful at the same time. "Hjalmar, joining with his sons Hoddas and Lod in the eternal fight across the material plane and through the heavens above,” the light fell on three hulking gods, great spears in their hands, leaping across the sky. “Here, the peace of victory, beheld for seven centuries by our earliest ancestors … the betrayal and corruption of Skal into the Blood-Drinker, Father of Beasts … the decay of Amrendeth, the weeping of Onela and Yngmorne for his shame … and the Blessing of Braigh Amren as sigil against darkness. And ever-present beneath it all, Sanaurach, beast god of the end times, patiently waiting to do his duty and devour creation."

Eilun knew each scene from dutiful study of the Annals, but never had she seen them like this. She reached out tentatively to touch the peaks of Sanaurach's curling horns. In the flickering firelight, his serpentine body almost seemed to move.

"It is ethereal," she whispered.
The High Priestess held out her hand once more to Eilun, who allowed herself to be led back to the fireside. When they were seated on the comfortable prayer cushions, the High Priestess smiled: it was genuinely warm. She squeezed Eilun's hand.

"I scarcely think there is any other way to begin, except to express to you the profound gratitude I feel for what you have set out to do. Eilun, you join a long line of sisters before you who have earned the glory of the gods through their sacrifice. It is my honor and humble privilege as High Priestess to prepare you for this special time."

The declaration was formal, but even so, Eilun was taken aback. This was the most respected woman in the religious order of Braigh Amren, a rival in status to the Queen — speaking as if she were a servant to Eilun. The High Priestess seemed to intuit Eilun's thoughts, and gave a slight smile.

"My manner can seem strange to some who have never known me outside the context of Temple rituals," she said, dropping Eilun's hand to stoke the fire. "But the Eidolon and High Priestess share a special bond during the period before the Midwinter Sacrifice. As I take you through the rites, I hope to be more to you than a spiritual guide, but a teacher and confidant also. You are permitted to call me by my given name. I am Lilija."

Eilun blushed, taken aback. "I am honored, Lilija," she said. The name felt wrong on her tongue: for a layperson to utter the true name of the High Priestess was a great disrespect. Though, Eilun thought, a weight dropping in her chest, I am no longer lay, but Eidolon.

"It will become more comfortable in time," said the High Priestess. "This is a period of preparation, of learning. The Midwinter Sacrifice is the longest, most complicated ceremony of our calendar year. Every word and movement must be precise. The fate of our village through the winter, under the mercy and wrath of our great gods, depends on you, who will play the most
You will learn to speak in the old tongue, and to recite the Annals by heart. You will learn the significance of each part of the ceremony, and rehearse each movement until you can perform it in your sleep. You will also be purified, in both body and soul. You will spend the next few weeks in a deep state of prayer and contemplation. The priestesses and I will prepare you for the solstice, administer last rites, and draw you into a deeper state of spirituality. You will see and learn mysteries of our faith that none but the Eidolon are permitted to understand."

Lilija gripped Eilun's hand, eyes sparkling. "You and your family are feeling happiness and pain in equal measure right now; this is common knowledge to all in the village. Eilun, it is my sworn duty to assuage this pain as best I can. To be Eidolon is to feel great fear – but that is by its nature. Sacrifice gains its worth because it is born of pain. The path you have chosen is a great joy, a glorious celebration."

Eilun swallowed, and tried to return the hopeful look in Lilija's eyes.

"Onela give me strength to suffer, for praise and glory await me in my next life with the gods," she said quietly. A verse from the Annals. It was far too daunting a task to seek out her own words to express how she was feeling.

Lilija smiled. "Our savior: Eilun."

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Lilija led Eilun through another door in the Alcove of the Ancients, leading to a small spiraling staircase. They climbed until they must have been several stories above even the ground floor of the Temple. When they finally reached the top, Lilija produced a key from the folds of her robes and used it to unlock a humble wooden door.
“You will stay here, in the Eidolon’s rooms at the Temple, until the day of the Solstice, to remain pure. You should find them quite comfortable. You’ll have to forgive me, but I must lock the door behind me – precaution, as you surely understand.”

Eilun gave a nod so small she wasn’t sure Lilija could see it. She felt as if she were floating. Lilija swept inside.

“Should you want for anything at all, ring the servants’ bell in the hall, and the lower priestesses will attend to you,” Lilija said. “Ask for a bath to be drawn, company to pass the time, any kind of food you like. As for your preparations for the Solstice, we begin our work tomorrow morning. I shall come for you then.”

Eilun stepped gingerly inside and looked around. The antechamber was hewn from the same fine stone as the rest of the Temple, draped with beautifully embroidered tapestries and rugs in warm colors. She could see more doors along the hall: a bedroom to the right and a well-furnished sitting room on the left. She felt out of place here: they were rooms fit for a princess, not a wheelwright’s daughter.

“Sleep well,” the High Priestess said. Before Eilun could respond, she stepped out of the room and shut the door behind her. Eilun heard the turn of the key in the lock, and Lilija’s footsteps receding back down the staircase. Silence fell, still as dust, in the silent chambers.

Unsure of what else to do with her time, Eilun looked around at the chambers. She traced the swirling leaf pattern carved into the sitting room table, got down on her hands and knees and picked at the threading in the soft green rug – it must have taken ten skilled ladies a year to weave. She opened the wardrobe in the bedroom and found it filled with every kind of beautiful dress she’d always wished she could own when she was a little girl: breathtaking brocades woven with unicorns and vines; brightly dyed wool, softer than she’d ever felt; gossamer silk
that rippled like water when touched. Though the priestesses had clearly swept and dusted before Eilun’s arrival, everything in the chambers still had the cold look of a year’s disuse about it, the smell of death. Yet it was all as luxurious as could be. There was even an indoor lavatory and bathing tub in a small room off the antechamber. All hers.

Eilun ran her fingers over the rich maroon silk of the perfectly made four-poster bed. So this was to be her final home. Well, it was fine enough for it. She flopped onto the bed most ungracefully – *No one here to tell me to act like a lady*, Eilun thought – and stared up at the canopy, feeling the run of the silk beneath her fingers. Everyone who had ever slept here was dead. She rolled over onto her stomach and gazed out of the arched window beside the bed, bathing herself in moonlight. She replayed her father’s urgent words that morning in her head: *You have no idea the danger we all are in ...* She would be sacrificed, but what dangers threatened her parents? *Our family especially* ... Eilun’s insides twisted with fear.

Out the window, the lights of Braigh Amren twinkled hundreds of feet below. Eilun thought about all the people asleep down there in their own homes, their loved ones all around them, and how she was going to give of her blood to save them. Eilun thought about all the other girls, hundreds and thousands before her, who had pressed their hands to the same place on the cold windowpane and thought the same thing about her, back when she herself slept with her mother and father near, back when Deor’s hands could still encircle her and set fire running through every inch of her body. Her throat began to burn again. The thing against which Eilun had been pretending all day she was too honored to feel now threatened to overpower her. She was tired of beating it back.

She pulled the glossy covers all around her, buried her head in the softness of one of the many goose feather pillows, and sobbed through the rest of the night.
From each of the four Great Gates of Braigh Amren – trudging in from the North, South, East, and West with their shoulders bowed, helmets tucked beneath their arms, armor bent and missing and blacked with blood and filth – the warriors of the Thanes’ search parties returned to their city. The welcoming crowds who had gathered to greet the first returning party came to the Gates in large numbers at first, buoyant and optimistic; but their numbers dwindled as the dullness in the eyes of one exhausted Thane after another confirmed they had encountered no sign of King Ceawlin in Amrendeth. The people’s hope against hope, the search for their King, had failed. On the evening of the final search party’s return, as the day’s gathering storm clouds began to give way to flurries of snow, the Queen addressed her people from Gehwelcne Square.

“My husband, our great warrior-King,” she called, “fought valiantly and with pleasure all his life, eager for glory. Glory so shall we give him. We shall process in somber bearing through the city behind his image, and perform for him funerary rites befitting the highest of Kings. As our city’s great craftsmen restore the mead-hall Hrúnan to its former glory, I will instruct them to fashion a marvelous image in his likeness atop its golden door, so that all who enter into the new splendor of this hall shall know how dear its cost. Tomorrow’s sunrise shall mark a day of mourning, to be observed by all. And tonight, as dusk closes on Braigh Amren, I declare a somber feast in fair King Ceawlin’s name, that we may drink to him in reverence and melancholy, alike in grief among friends and kin. Hail to him, great King Ceawlin!”

A chorus of hail! echoed across the twilit square. Atop the city’s highest hill, Hrúnan’s windows glowed feebly, its stone walls framed by wooden scaffolds. Its tallest throne sat empty.

The Queen presided over the night’s funeral feast from the seat to its right, her usual spot at her husband’s hand. As the craftsmen and carpenters of the city were still hard at work
rebuilding the feasting hall proper, the royal servants had hauled several long tables into the back portrait gallery and lit a crackling fire in the hearth. After a toast in the King’s name, the nobles of Braigh Amren and their families sat down to a lavish spread, though few seemed to have much of an appetite. While the wives and children of the Thanes doted on their returning husbands and fathers, or comforted those women who had lost their loved ones to the horrors of Amrendeth, most of the men gathered themselves together, muttering darkly: a far sight from the raucous laughter that usually filled the hall at feast-time.

Svanna yanked at the waist of her dress, trying to stretch a little breathing room into the bodice. It pulled the neckline down somewhat, but she didn’t care. She stood in the corner of the hall, a wine jug in hand, glaring daggers at the back of her father’s head. This was the punishment he had set to her for slaying a beast: women’s clothes and women’s work. Demeaning and infuriating. Svanna’s mother, leaning over the table to plate out roast duck to two commanding soldiers, looked over her shoulder at Svanna. She pursed her lips in dissatisfaction, set the plate of duck down, and stormed over.

“Onela’s mercy, pull your blouse back up this instant. You’ll shame us all,” she said, yanking it further up Svanna’s chest and pulling the bodice tight.

“I can’t breathe with it this way,” Svanna whined.

“You’ve suffered far worse gallivanting about in the forest like a man,” her mother said. “We are lucky that there is still enough of the spindle side left in you to fill out this dress.”

“It makes me feel even less like a lady than leather chaps do,” Svanna scowled. “I can’t take a step without tripping over my own feet. Everyone is staring. I look a fool.”

“It is a woman’s burden to bear the eyes of others and keep a mindful eye herself. Look, didn’t you notice? Your father’s drink needs replenishing.”
Fuming, and with a rebellious yank to the bodice of her dress, Svanna stalked over toward her father’s spot at the table. She was glad, at least, that she’d tucked the silver amulet she’d found in Amrendeth into the pocket of her underskirt. Though she knew not why, its presence made her feel the tiniest bit calmer.

Svanna arrived at her father’s side. He was leaning close to the two noblemen beside him, deep in conversation.

“…line of succession simply isn’t clear. She’d have a strong case as Dowager Queen, but with no heir to show for, I can’t see how –”

Her father glanced up at Svanna, barely noting her presence, and turned away again. Glowering, Svanna leaned in and refilled his cup where it sat on the table.

“I can’t see how,” her father continued, “she can think this is a legitimate claim.”

“Perhaps the time is right for a new ruling family to take up our liege-lord’s mantle, Endarr,” replied the man Svanna recognized as Thane Wulfrig.

“Whom?”

“One of the Thanes, surely,” Wulfrig replied.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Wulfrig,” laughed the third man, a wealthy landowner called Berthram.

“It is only logical!” he insisted. “As seconds to the King, we Thanes are next in rank –”

“Yes, but to elevate only one of the twelve?” Svanna’s father replied. “Shield-brothers of oath, all of equal rank to the man at his side? Let not your ambitions cloud your judgment, Vidar; there would be killings for power, every man’s kin against the other’s.”

“Now, if we were to turn our attention to our lord King’s family tree, and trace back …”
Her attention waning, Svanna leaned in to replenish to the other men’s drinks, looking out the window as she did so. The light snow that had begun as the Queen addressed them earlier had deepened into a proper storm; thickly falling flakes obscured the street outside so that it seemed to fade off into white oblivion.

“…a common ancestor of noble stock, with progeny fit to bear the weight of Kinghood upon his shoulders.”

“But we run the risk of multitudes all the same – every King’s second cousin and bastard son shall lay some claim …”

Nestled in her pocket, Svanna’s silver amulet gave a comforting weight to the movement of her dress. The odd desire to pull it out and clutch it in her hand, just to feel its warmth between her fingers, floated across her mind, but she suppressed it; for some reason, she felt the foreign object might draw judging eyes if revealed in a place such as this. She watched the snow fall thick in the street outside, wishing she could rip off her confining clothes and run, far, far, from this court of her father’s whims, lose herself in the silence of the storm …

As she tipped the mouth of the wine jug ungracefully back from Berthram’s cup, several things happened at once. Incensed by something Svanna’s father had said, Thane Vidar slammed his drinking horn against the table, rattling the silverware and sloshing wine everywhere; the amulet in Svanna’s skirts gave an unnatural shudder, suddenly hot against her thigh; and at the exact point where the street outside faded into the white oblivion of the snowstorm, a strange light flashed, like the lightning of a blizzard, illuminating for the briefest second the dark silhouette of a woman who had not been there before.

Svanna jumped, losing her grip on the wine jug, which smashed against the stone floor. A wave of red liquid splashed over the bottoms of her skirt and the boots of her father’s friends.
“Ho!” Wulfrig cried, as the three men leapt back, dabbing at their chests. “The fault is mine, the fault is mine, Endarr – no, do not chastise the girl, I ought not to have startled her. Forgive me, dear lady, for allowing the passions of our discussion to get the better of me.”

“M-my apologies, father,” Svanna stammered, looking from the window to the men to the wine puddle on the ground. Had she seen what she thought she had? “I’m sorry. I must go.”

Lifting her soaking skirts around her ankles, and ignoring her father’s angry calls, she hurried toward the entrance hall and asked one of the servants to fetch her cloak. Quick footsteps sounded behind Svanna, and her mother appeared, cheeks scarlet as two summer apples.

“Have you no tact?” She hissed. “You represent your family’s honor! Spilling drink all over a Thane of the court – your father must atone for your – your foolish —”

“There is nothing the acid of your tongue can do to change what is done, and so spare me of it,” Svanna spat without thinking, pulling on her outdoor boots. “This isn’t my place and never was. I belong in the forest with my bow and my man’s clothes. You have always known it.”

“Do you think you can storm out of the mead-hall like an ignorant child when you do not get your way?” Her mother seethed. “It was never my dream either as a young girl to stand at the elbows of chewing men and serve them drink, but I bit my lip and bore it. You are bound by duty and by kin, Svanna. Your father’s reputation is already greatly tarnished in the wake of Deor’s dishonor. Do not shame him any further.”

The servant came with her cloak, and Svanna swung it around her neck as quickly as she could. “Svanna!” Her mother called. But she had already flung wide the door and run off.

Bitter wind stung her face as she burst out into the open air, but Svanna barely registered it; every part of her mind willed her to move faster, down the side street where the strange silhouetted woman had stood. Snow fell thick, reducing the deserted street to a white blur. She
could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she turned this way and that, certain that this was where the vision had been – she had to see, for fear she might be going mad –

“Such a precocious girl,” a voice like silk cut through the howl of the wind. “I knew I’d felt a strength of spirit in you, indeed.”

Svanna whipped around, holding back her flying hair from her face. A woman stood in a narrow alleyway, half in shadow. Her ice-blue eyes glinted even in the darkness.

“Hold you any ill will against me,” Svanna shouted, trying to sound intimidating, “I suggest you voice your concern. You have no right to follow me.”

“No more right than you had to take what was not yours,” the woman answered.

There was something in the woman’s knowing gaze that unnerved Svanna.

“You have mistaken me for someone else –”

“Spare me your feeble pretenses, girl. You know that of which I speak.”

Svanna took a step backward, a hand over top of the pocket which held the amulet, which suddenly felt conspicuous indeed beneath the folds of her dress. Mirroring her, the woman took a slow step forward, casting herself into light. Shallow lines crinkled at the corners of her mouth and eyes, and her jet black hair billowed in the wind.

“I know how it makes you feel, when you hold it between your fingers when no one is looking,” the woman said. “The strange warmth it brings. I know the deepness that it awakens inside of you, the darkness and vitality you knew not your soul held.”

The woman advanced as Svanna stepped back again. Fear bubbled in her chest – it was as if she had read the words written on Svanna’s very heart –

“You know so precious little of the matters in which you have meddled, but I know you have sensed it: that the thing you clutch for comfort is the key to a great mystery,” the woman
advanced, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “A precipice. And beyond it lies
knowledge and power of which no man of this village has ever dared dream.”

“Who are you?” Svanna gasped.

“I am Aslaug,” she responded, eyes blazing. “But what I wish to know is who you are,
girl of the wood, who had power enough to steal my amulet.”

Every instinct in Svanna’s brain was screaming at her to run, fast, and escape this
nightmarish encounter, but something rooted her to the spot – how could this woman know such
things, dark secrets she had never before uttered aloud?


“Svanna,” Aslaug repeated. She reached out, as if to touch Svanna’s cheek; Svanna
recoiled, and Aslaug drew her hand back. “I dreamed of you, you know. You are just as I saw
you then. You leapt through the wood as nimbly as a deer, and held in your hand a bow of yew.”

“That’s finished now,” Svanna found herself saying. “The bow is broken. My father has
made sure I will never see the forest again.”

“And the forest is the place where you find yourself most alive,” Aslaug said. “It has
been that way since you were small, has it not? From your earliest days, Amrendeth has called
you … a pure and natural instinct to you, but to the insular minds of this village, the gravest
transgression. I see the anger in your eyes. You curse their narrowness. You yearn for freedom.
But you are not so alone as you think. A fell wind is sweeping over Braigh Amren, Svanna.
Outcasts and dissenters, shunted to the edge of the West Wall, are muttering…”

“How can you speak as if you can see – as if into my very heart –”

“I know you because I know myself,” she said. “We are one and the same, Svanna.
Bound up in the same blood. The same fight. That amulet would not call out to just anyone. The
deepest magics of Amrendeth shield that thicket from unwanted visitors. That sacred place could not have been penetrated by any ordinary girl, no matter her precociousness.”

“Magic,” Svanna breathed, feeling faint.

Aslaug stepped closer again, eyes blazing, dark hair whipping across her face, and this time, Svanna did not retreat.

“Magic,” she said, and the word hung in the air, glittering. “There is so little of yourself that you understand, Svanna. And so much I could teach you.”

Aslaug closed the gap between them, reached out her hand, and closed it over Svanna’s, which clutched the amulet. Immediately, warmth spread from the talisman like a silver sun.

Svanna met Aslaug’s piercing gaze with her own look of shock and confusion. The strange woman spoke in riddles, the ravings of a lunatic – and yet, as she looked, it was as if a missing piece slid into place deep in Svanna’s chest. It was a feeling she couldn’t place, couldn’t possibly describe; she knew only that she had always longed for it, and yet never known that she had until now. A rightness. A belonging. A truth beyond words.

“I want to understand,” Svanna whispered.

As the gale of snow and frost swept their hair and skirts around them, Aslaug ran her fingers over Svanna’s knuckles, clutching them tight, and smiled. To some in Braigh Amren, this tiniest gesture between two members of the weaker sex would command not a moment’s attention. Svanna and Aslaug alone knew that the revolutionary power of the pact formed by that twining of hands, two women standing alone in the darkness of a deserted street, bound together by forces greater than either understood.