

Ebba

Ch.9

What do they see when I step forward? An outlander, a half-breed? A girl? Or am I somethin else now, changed by the white shift, by the prester's hand on my shoulder, by his words?

The Blessed Walpurgis was a woman, Berengar said, who loved the White God so much she died for him. Maybe that is what the prester would make me.

But how can you love somethin you've never known?

The prester is right. I'm a liar.

I let him press me forward again, to the heart of the crowd, an now I see where the sparks come from.

A long walk of red fire lies between the watchin men an women. The heat strokes my cheeks as the prester leads me to its edge. The sparks fly up an up, an at the far end a waterfall plunges into a pool.

"The true believer must be forged, like the sword on the anvil," says the prester in my ear, "and all that is impure must be burnt out."

I look into the fire, an I see Uncle Ulf pullin back his arm for the blow, an Ma huggin Stig an laughin. I see Spraki grinnin with his bloody gums, an I feel the hot wet tongue of the hound on my palm, on the tender spot where the prester held my hand steady for the candle's kiss.

This is a lesson I've bin learnin all my life.

I'm ready.

Eyes up!

I look into the unfamiliar faces, an they stare back at me,

wide-eyed, like they en't never seen the like of me before.

You en't, I think, clutchin the pin in my hand. You think you can buy me, can hammer me, but I've got spears an swords inside of me. I din't break before, an I en't goin to now.

Under the sky where night an dawn do battle, I step onto the burnin path.

My flesh shivers like it wants to crawl off me. I take a step, an my bare soles feel the warmth, but inside my blood has turned to steam. Another step, an my eyes are blinded by red mist. The heat lifts my hair, spreads it out, makes a dark cloud in the sparks.

Heat ripples over me like its own spirit, an I think death might be like this, a body meltin away like a cloud in summer.

Is this it?

With each step I'm waitin. If a god's goin to crawl inside of me, it'll be now.

But all I feel is the ash stingin my eyes, the smoke catchin in my lungs...an a strange peace, like a ghostly embrace. It's so strong I almost stop. Just for a moment I feel like if I stop, I might feel those arms, cradlin my whole body against everythin that's ever hurt me.

But my palm throbs, my head comes up, an I step on, quicker now, out of the peace of the shimmerin air an onto the hard cold ground of the grey dawn. My feet an calves are black with ash.

I turn an look back across the fire.

The silent villagers are frozen, their faces laid open for me. Now that I'm lookin properly I see the soldiers too. Erland's face is as bloodless as it was in Lord Frithrun's hall. Berengar's lookin

at me strangely, half-fearful. I wonder if even the prester has fallen into this wonder - but no. The look he gives me is like a master whose dog has learnt a new trick.

For a moment, wi the fire between us, I think, *I could say anythin. He couldn't stop me, not right away.*

But what could I say? There's only one endin they'll believe.

So I open my mouth, an although my voice is choked from the ash, it grows stronger, an the White God's oath rolls from my mouth, his tongue on my tongue, flowerin like flames.

They listen.

Part of me thinks, *They don't even know what I'm sayin!*

An I see it don't matter. The wonder is stronger *because* they don't know. The oath en't dead. It's livin, burnin. I made it so.

Ch. 14

The wave starts at the shore an gallops inland. White horses become gold, the hot, liquid kind, an their manes fly up red. A black tide follows. The east is already dark, the sun's gone down behind the mountains, an below us the soft fields are bein overrun. It must be late summer, cos the crops are ripe, an the black tide laps up around the foothills an starts to climb to where we're tryin to pen the frightened sheep.

I have my arm over my mouth an nose, but the wind pushes the hot ash before it, stingin my eyes. The sheep are panicked, breakin like water from an overfull cup, an the dogs are hard pressed to pen em. Rafe an Stig are there. Stig's holdin my hand. Ulf's first born son, just a year short of manhood, is watchin the fire an cryin. Least there are tears on his face. They might just

be from the ash.

Someone takes my other hand. I screw up my eyes an see my Follower. She's wearin the face of a field thrall. I can see her wrinkled skin an the collar at her throat, but I know it's my Follower from the way her face don't quite fit.

"It's the raiders," I tell her. "They set fire to the dune grass. Everythin from the shore to the mountains burned."

"An why d'you remember that?" she asks.

"Cos it was the year my Da died."

As I say it, I see him.

The glow from the burnin fields lights up his face, streaked black an pocked wi scars. Sweat scours fresh tracks in the ash, an he comes towards me an picks me up. I sit balanced on his hip, an I feel him holdin me, strong an certain. His tawny hair has a reddish tint, like mine, an his eyes...to tell the truth, I can't see his eyes. He's blurred, just like my memories of him, an the scars, the sweat-trails, the glint on his hair, are only fragments. What I have instead is my feelin of him.

I en't scared of the fires no more. In his grasp I stop frettin, even as the red horses throw themselves at the slopes. I lean my head against his shoulder, out of harm's reach, an watch our home go up in smoke.

Torny

Ch.5

I was cold to my bones. All around me the mist rose in a pale haze, and water slapped against wood. I swayed with the swell and drop of the small boat, but all I could see was the hooded shape of the oarsman in the stern, labouring over the long-handled oar. Splinters from the rough seat needled my thighs. About my neck a thick rope scratched the soft skin of my throat, and the weight of its tail trailed down my spine. I wore a shift of undyed wool against the cold, and nothing else.

The swell lessened, and the mist grew opaque. The oarsman sculled us gently into quiet waters, until I felt the bump of the bows on rock. A murmur rose behind me, through the slap and suck of the waves, over the creaking of the boat. Cold strong hands, many of them, caught me under my arms and hauled me up. Under my bare feet was black rock, set in pillars like steps. Around me cloaked figures held out their hands for me to grasp for balance as I climbed. I couldn't tell if this was a guard of honour, or whether I was a captive. Maybe both.

At the top of the rocks, a figure taller than the others held out its hands to me, almost as if it would embrace me, though the face remained hidden. I walked towards it, the mist so thick it hid everything else, though the murmur still ran through the unseen crowd at my back. It sounded almost like hissing.

I slipped on the wet, uneven stones beneath my feet, but the figure stretched out both arms to me - women's arms, tattooed and strong, the hands scarred. I grasped the sinewy wrists, found my balance, and the figure led me, walking backwards into the

white mist.

We walked between lines of small white stones. The figure did not let go of my hands but drew me onwards, and around her hooded head bloomed red tongues of colour, like frozen flames. When I realised what it was I cried out and pulled back, but the figure wouldn't let go; her fingers tightened on my wrists. Above her rose the tree, its bark and branches black as stone, its leaves red, orange and yellow. Over her shoulder I saw first the legs, then the body, then the whole of the dead man. His head was shorn, and his arms dangled uselessly. His ragged eye sockets looked right at me.

Tell me your name.

I yanked my arms away from the figure, but she held me like iron.

Your name.

The branches of the tree were outlined against a growing light, slowly staining the mist red. I felt someone grasp the heavy rope that trailed down my back and jerk it, yanking the rope at my throat tight.

They'll hang you up next to me. Tell me your name, and I will save you.

I gritted my teeth and tried grimly to pull myself out of the figure's grip. The more violently I pulled, the tighter her grasp was. Black spots whirled before my eyes as the rope shut off my breath.

Once you've invited one thing in, it's hard to keep the others out, said the voice, and as I collapsed, the hole in my back, where the Luck-worm crawled in, opened like a rotting fruit.

Ch. 19

Something is climbing out of the sea onto the rocks, just out of sight. I can't see it, but I can feel it: waterlogged, dead, black as bog oak.

I scream. The sky is getting lighter, but the sun won't come in time. All I need is to feel the sun, and I know its gold will fill me, will make me what I'm meant to be, and send this crawling thing back down the long road to its grave forever.

But the sun is swaddled in clouds, and as the bullroarer thrums through the rock, the thing pulls itself over the ledge.

It's like a hole in the world. Everything bends around it, and it keeps coming, limping towards me. I scream and try to rip myself away from the pole. Vigdis is moving her lips, but I can't hear anything over the buzz in my bones, and then, horribly, I feel the flesh at the base of my spine opening.

Tell me your name.

"Stop it!" I scream. "Stop!"

But Drifa spins the bullroarer, and Ranvig opens her arms in glory, as if she can't see the horror moving towards me.

"Vigdis!" I scream, as the thing limps between the boulders that mark the entrance. "It's wrong! Stop!"

But Vigdis ignores me, her lips moving, her gaze far away, nursing some past hope like a future promise. Ranvig pushes the stones back into place, closing off the straight path to the heart of the maze.

I feel the walls of power blaze around me as the labyrinth

closes. I could no more cross the boulders than I could run through stone. The thing halts and sways. It knows it's trapped now, but it doesn't care. I'm trapped with it, and all it wants is me.

"Fenn!" I scream, as it takes another step towards me. It's only a few feet away. I close my eyes and remember Fenn leading me across the lines of white pebbles in the burial chamber. The way he pulled me over them. He's the only one who can help me.

"Fenn!"

The thing is right in front of me. I can feel its cold breath, if such a thing can breathe. Mist wraps around me like a shroud.

The bullroarer dies. I look at Drifa in time to see her snatch her hand away from Fenn, bright beads of blood in toothmarks on the skin. The cloak lies crumpled at her feet. Fenn dodges Vigdis and runs to me, his dark eyes determined.

Ranvig steps in front of him, her fist out, and he shudders.

The light goes out of his eyes, and he slides off her knife.

I scream as he falls, scream as the thing reaches round and finds the hole in my back. Mist curls up my spine like an eel.

I'm here, it says. Everything that was mine is yours. Tell me your name.

So I tell it, and as I do the sun rises. But the mist is with me now, I move through it and breathe it, and the sun seems sickly and far off to me. At my heart where I once felt that hungry red joy there's nothing, just a chasm.

I step outside myself.

My body hangs spent from its bonds, like a rag on the wind and

the waves. I watch as Ranvig treads the labyrinth, circling towards the pole with impatient steps. Her eyes and lips are wide, and her hands shake. Her knife is still bloody. She cuts through my body's bonds, and leads it by the hand along the circling path, like a groom might lead his bride. I watch from outside, wrapped in mist.

As Ranvig steps across the threshold she turns, and holds out her arms in welcome.

My hand slides her own blade into her breast like the prow cuts the wave. The mist around me muffles me, dampens any shock, any horror.

The knife drops.

I am the butcher. I am the Harrower.

Vigdis and the others stumble back, their mouths slack.

Behind them, on the rocks, stands a man.

Laugi, one eye freshly plucked, holds the golden helm in his hands.

"Mistress," he says, bowing to me.

My body stoops and gathers Fenn into its arms, and the mist wraps around us both. I can see where the hard metal of his collar digs into his thin neck, imagine the chill of his cold body against my own, but I can't feel it. He lolls in my arms like a sleepy child.

I am the gates of the land of the dead, and you are all prey to me.