

KIRAN MILLWOOD  
HARGRAVE

THE  
STORM  
AND THE  
SEA HAWK



A GEOMANCER BOOK

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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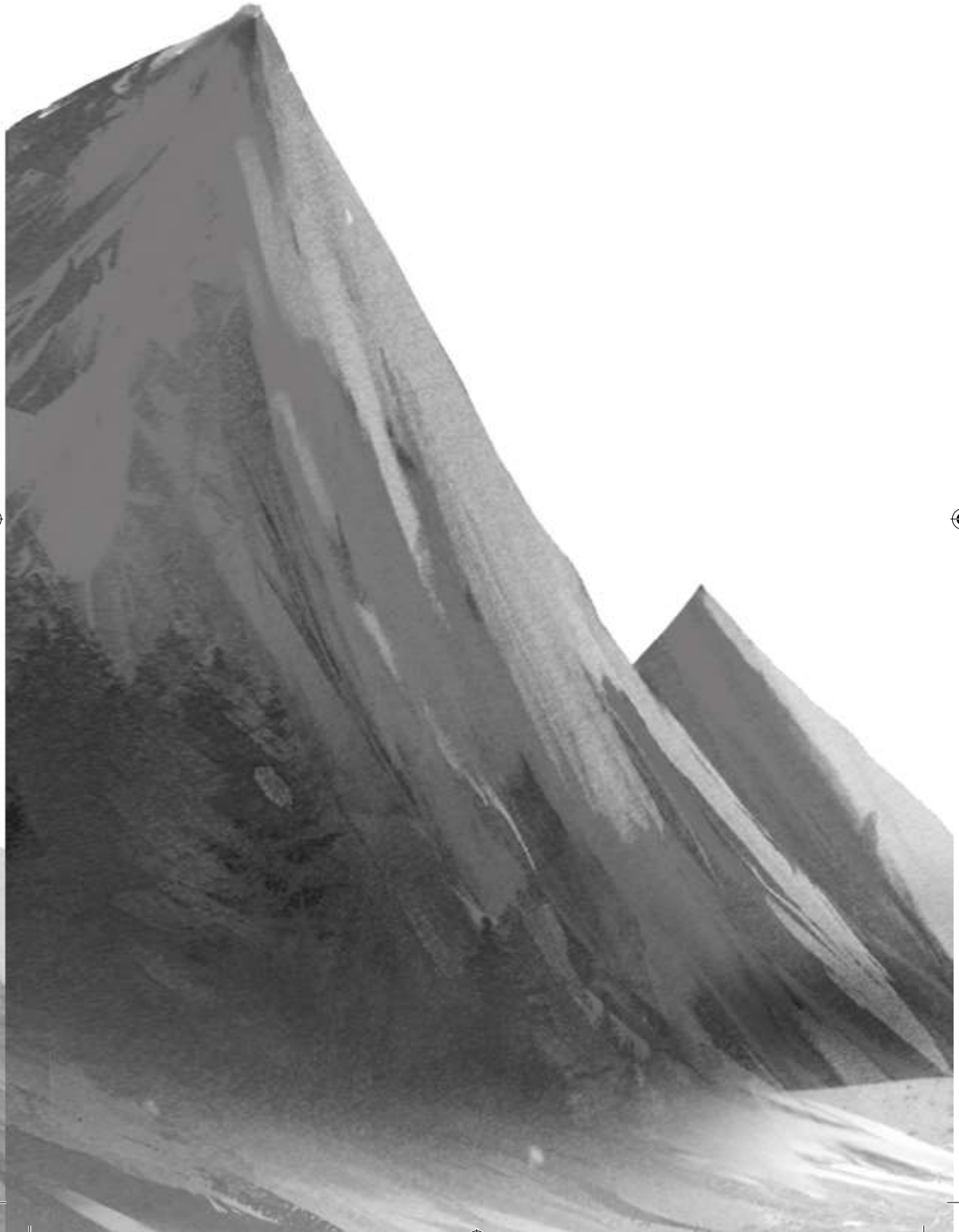
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*for my grandparents,  
who have walked the world*





BOOK TWO:

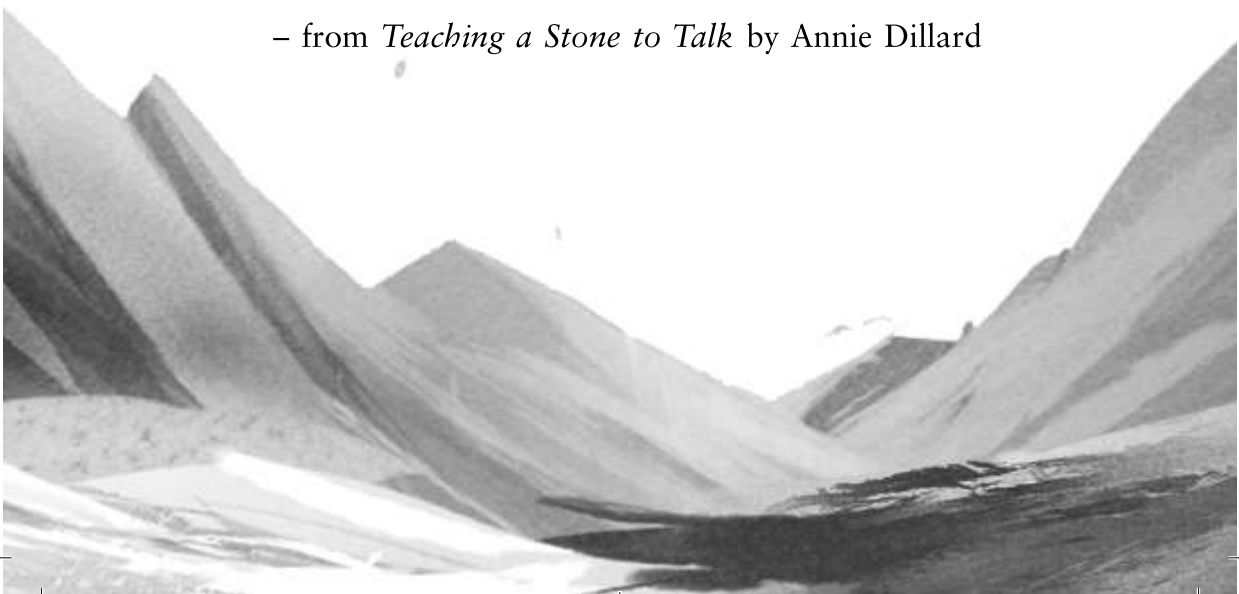
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*'Ice breathes. Rock has tides. Mountains rise  
and fall. We live on a restless Earth.'*


– from *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*  
by Robert Macfarlane

*'you say to the woods, to the sea, to the  
mountains, the world,  
Now I am ready.'*

– from *Teaching a Stone to Talk* by Annie Dillard







## *Walking*

It doesn't take long for a place to pass out of existence. Board up a door, cover over a gate, let ivy stopper up a gap in the wall. People don't remember forever, stop seeing with disturbing ease. Noticing is a talent as rare as magic; attention is a gift as precious as love.

But barely anyone has noticed it is a war already, undeclared but certain. Seeds sown for centuries, star years: bred in the bellies of sharks and the eyes of owls, in the hearts of rulers who had not the stomach nor the vision nor the heart for what they must do.

These, though – the mourning lord and the unflinching queen – these are different. And the world is changing. Already it is changed.

The earth music is loose now, and will not rest until it

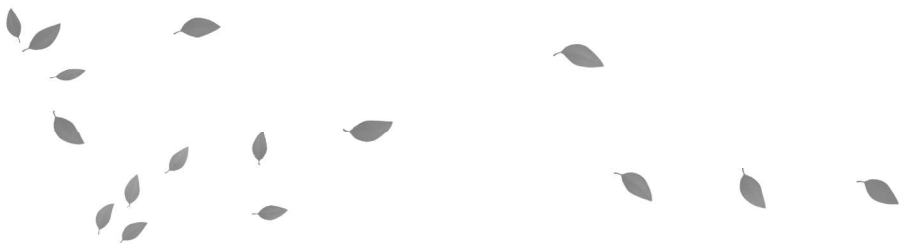


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is done. Every tendril awake and alive to it, to the destruction committed, the destruction to come. A few human ears hear it as song, but it does not sing. It trembles and shakes, passing the instinct across the poles and forces of the world, twists the north from its axis and tilts the planet to new and tempestuous winds.

Birds drop from the sky. Forests burn themselves. Oceans withdraw, unswallowing cities. Oceans rise, making islands of hills. And high in her mountain cage, the ancient girl waits. They're coming, look now – see?

They are nearly here.







CHAPTER ONE

BLACK SHORE



‘Land!’

Stars were out above them by the time Ysolda was jerked awake by Eira’s shout. As they’d left behind the burning End-World Wood and entered the open ocean, darkness fell fast and a huge fear gripped her, of what was below them, what was behind and in front. She’d squeezed her eyes shut for what she thought was a moment, her hawk Nara chirruping lightly on her shoulder, and woke to true night.

Her mind tried to catch up to where she was: on a swimming wolf’s back, in the sea, clutching tight to the wolf queen’s daughter. The wolf queen’s daughter who was pinching her to wake her fully.

‘Ouch!’ She pinched Eira back.



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‘Land!’

‘I heard you the first time,’ she said blearily, squinting ahead. ‘Where?’

‘There, *buddhoo*.’

‘Don’t call me that.’ Then, after a pause, ‘What’s *buddhoo*?’

‘What you are.’

Ysolda pinched Eira’s side again and the girl kicked water at her. Nara gave a grumpy cry, taking off from Ysolda’s shoulder, and a grunt came from the canoe behind as Sami was dashed with freezing seawater.

‘Sorry,’ said Ysolda, twisting to grimace apologetically at the escaped servant. He was pinched and miserable-looking, huddled in the red cloak in the hollowed-out trunk.

‘Forgot you were there,’ said Eira on a yawn, leaning forward to stroke Ravi’s muzzle. The wolf whined happily, clearly in his element despite the long crossing to Norveger. Sami glowered at her back, and though Ysolda mouthed *sorry* again he turned his glare on her too.

She supposed he had every right to be angry. Even before the journey that had seen him injured in a fight between the wolf queen and Thane Boreal’s warriors, captured by Thane Boreal’s Kaltis and nearly burned to death in the End-World Wood, he had been worked to exhaustion in the wolf queen’s court. Of course he’d dislike her daughter too.

Ysolda looked over Eira’s shoulder to where the coast of Norveger should be. She still couldn’t separate sea-dark

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from ground-dark, and instead tipped her head back to the sky.

It was domed and huge overhead, Nara swooping, stars poking through celestial dust in their familiar patterns: crab, bear, sword. She couldn't remember ever seeing a night so huge, so bright. She thought of her sister Hari, stuck in the prison below Seren's castle of broken boats, only the occasional shine of fool's gold set in the cave walls for light, the mineral left there to weaken her listening gift.

She tightened her grasp on the amber amulet around her neck, cared for by her sister and now, by mistake and mischance, in her possession once more. Next to it hung the hag stone, gifted to her by Kore, the Forgive*r*, *to help you see more clearly*. And it had guided her well already, helping her lead the wolf queen across the bog, though Ysolda already regretted that decision.

She had not gone more than a few hours without Hari before, never thought she would be so far away in place and time. What would her sister think if she could see her now, nearing the Norveger coast on wolfback, a Lakes servant in a boat behind and the wolf queen's daughter in front?

She'd probably feel about as happy about it as Ysolda did herself.

She wrapped her arms around her chest, teeth chattering, and wished she hadn't given the red Ryder's cloak to Sami.

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‘Cold?’ asked Eira.

‘N-n-no.’

She could almost feel the girl roll her eyes as she said, ‘Take my cloak. You drooled all over it while you were asleep anyway. We’re nearly there.’

Ysolda unclasped the cloak and pulled the warm wool up under her chin, trying not to breathe in the smell of fabric that had been travelled and slept in by a runaway for weeks.

Now she could start to make out the coast: a jagged line of mountains rising seemingly sheer from the sea. *High Place*. She felt in her pocket for the stick Eira had found in the Anchorite’s nest. It was too dark to make out the Ogham message engraved upon it, but Ysolda traced the grooves with her finger. Had the ancient girl really whittled this? And if she had, it meant she spoke Ogham – the language of the trees and of Ysolda’s own home, Glaw Wood.

She huffed out her breath, made smoke by the cold air. The season was no longer turning, but turned. The position of the stars told her Mabon was passed, probably while she rode across the Kalti Forest with the wolf queen. The festival of Mabon was her favourite in the forest, made to mark this last burst into colour and plenty as herbs were cropped to be dried and apples picked to be stored in barrels for the winter. In Glaw Wood, they would offer cider to the Elder Alder by pouring it on to its ancient



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roots, light fires in the clearing beneath its strong branches and dance as the firelight licked the leaves, tingeing them orange as they would become in the coming weeks.

But would they, this year? Even before the Ryders came and stole Hari, so much was not the same in her beloved wood. The apples were scarcer, smaller, more bitter. There were fewer traders bringing fish to their cove: Ysolda hadn't seen even their favourite merchant, Finn, for months. The rain was constant – no change there – but brought with it frosts even in the warmer weeks that stretched between Beltane and Litha. They had been small changes, but now Ysolda looked back, they amounted to something odd and wrong.

*Happenings*, the wolf queen Seren called them. The quake that swallowed Ysolda and Hari's home, the red storm that chased them into shelter. The murderous trees of the Kalti Forest. And other strange things – the lack of birds, of any animals but the fish in Mirror Lake and the gulls that swarmed the castle of broken boats.

*Happenings*. Warnings. But of what?

Most of what Hari's fellow captor Uncle had told Ysolda was lost to her memory, but she did remember this:

*Most realms have their stories about these lines that cross the earth, the language the world speaks across them like voice lines – but of course it is not a language of words. Some call it music, or song. There are many products of*



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*these lines. The Anchorite is one of its wonders, the Sea Henge a second, the Drakken Peaks a third, the Hell Gate another. There runs the spirit of the earth, and that is a powerful thing. It allows the world to speak, to sing, to hum across its million million miles and, if needed, to restore balance.*

Earth music. Did Ysolda believe such a thing? She was used to Glaw Wood and its certainties, but if she'd learned anything the past days, it was that what she did not know dwarfed what she did.

'Look at that,' said Eira, an unfamiliar note of amazement in her voice. Ysolda peered around her. The peaks were huge and impressive, so large as to feel almost unreal, but most strange was what greeted them on the beach. 'Black sand.'

A long, jagged cove of darkness was enveloping them. Ravi stopped swimming and began wading as the sea floor rose to meet him, whining slightly as his tired legs took their full weight once more. Eira leaped deftly into the shallows, and walked head to shoulder with him, murmuring encouragement as he pulled the canoe on to the shore. Once they were clear of the freezing sea, the wolf slumped on to the black sand and Ysolda slid off his back, numb knees hitting the beach. She felt the grains stick to her hands and wet legs, coarser than she was used to on Glaw Wood's fine golden coast, and black as obsidian.

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‘Why is it like that?’ Sami’s voice was trembling. Ysolda could make out the whites of his eyes as he peered out from his borrowed cloak. ‘Is it burned?’

‘Sand turns to glass when it burns,’ said Eira.

‘There are dragons here though,’ said Sami.

Eira scoffed. ‘Don’t be so foolish. There are fire mountains that ignorant people believe hold dragons, but it’s only the melting of the earth.’

That sounded terrifying enough to Ysolda. ‘Why is it black then?’

‘Because the rock is black, see?’ Eira pointed at the shadowy peaks looming impossibly high above them. ‘The sea grinds them to sand.’

‘Water can’t break rock,’ said Sami.

‘Of course it can,’ said Eira, ‘given time.’

Ysolda was glad it was dark. She wouldn’t want Eira to see her expression: a little scared, a little awed at all the wolf queen’s daughter knew.

‘I still think there might be dragons,’ mumbled Sami, climbing clumsily from the canoe, hitting his cramped legs to bring blood back to them.

‘You’d better hope not,’ said Eira, mischief in her voice glinting as bright as her teeth. ‘I heard their favourite meal is servant-boy.’

‘Stop that,’ snapped Ysolda. She would not let Eira bully Sami. They were not a princess and a servant now, only

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castaways fleeing from the same woman: the wolf queen, Seren.

‘Aren’t you gifted?’ said Eira, ignoring her and eyeing Sami. ‘Can’t you summon us a fire or something?’

‘I’m a weather weaver,’ he mumbled.

‘Even better!’ Eira rubbed her hands together. ‘You can warm us up a bit, get a bit of cloud cover going.’

Sami said something to his feet.

‘What?’ said Eira impatiently.

‘Cold weather,’ repeated Sami, louder. ‘I can summon cold weather.’

Eira snorted. ‘Some gift.’

‘Eira!’ Ysolda turned sternly to her. ‘What now, if you know so much?’

‘Now we light a fire seeing as our gifted boy is about as much use as a wet cloak right now.’

‘Enough!’

Eira huffed. ‘Then we can get Ravi dry and let him rest.’ She threw herself down in the sand next to the panting wolf.

‘We should collect some firewood then,’ said Ysolda, getting aching to her feet.

‘Yes,’ said Eira, flinging an arm across her eyes and waving her away with her other hand, yawning widely. ‘We should.’





## CHAPTER TWO

# SINGING SANDS



Nara flew in and out of view as Ysolda walked carefully over the new and unfamiliar sand, and tried to recall all she knew about Norveger. She'd heard of it, of course, even met traders selling dried fish and pine sap tinctures in Glaw Wood's bay. But knowing about it was something different. From the map she'd seen on the wolf queen's Hull Hall wall, she knew it was far north-east of Glaw Wood. It was cold. It was where the fierce Norse lived. *Three things, she thought. Not much. Not enough.*

'We're lucky the Norse weren't here to meet us,' said Sami behind her, and Ysolda startled. The boy was trailing behind her, dragging his feet across the dark sand. 'I heard they're heartless. That they have lumps of stone where their hearts should be.'



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‘Not literally,’ said Ysolda, bending to pick up a ghostly twist of driftwood. It was damp, but as it was birch it would still burn well. ‘But I heard they don’t take kindly to strangers.’

It was an understatement. The Norse warriors were fabled for their ferocity, and many times had fought with Thane Boreal’s Kalti army, on both sea and land. Neither managed to advance into the other’s territories, but Ysolda knew she stood on a beach that was likely the scene of much bloodshed.

She shivered, pulling the cloak tighter around herself, the damp driftwood leaching warmth from her skin. The black sand grated under her feet, the grains sliding against each other, sharper than the fine sand of the Glaw Wood cove. She collected a few more branches of birch, likely ripped from the same tree and carried on the same currents, until she had an armful. She trudged back to where Eira lay stretched out on the shore, head propped against Ravi’s vast side. Both were snoring loudly.

Ysolda let the wood fall with a clatter, and Eira opened one eye.

‘Do you have a flint?’

Ysolda pulled her striking flint from her pocket. All her things – treasures, as she now thought of them, her only links with home – were as damp as the wood, but she wiped the flint on Eira’s cloak and crouched to stack the

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fire, banking sand around a hollow and angling the birch into a round-bottomed triangle. She pulled some threads from Eira's cloak to use as brush.

Sami returned with his meagre offering of twigs, some so swollen with sea they leaked when he dropped them. Ysolda resisted rolling her eyes – it wasn't his fault he didn't know how to light a fire. He didn't want to be here any more than she did. Only Eira seemed to be enjoying herself, leaning against the wolf and watching Ysolda as she struck the flint once, twice, nursing the spark that fell into the wool threads, cupping it in her hands and blowing until it lit, then dropping it beneath the logs.

They sat in silence as the wood caught and went up in a whoosh that illuminated all their faces: Sami's wary eyes, Eira's constant semi-smirk. Soon the fire's warmth was strong enough to stop Ysolda's hands from trembling. Nara came to land beside her, smoothing her beak against her wings in the way she always did after a meal. Perhaps it had been a fish from the ocean, or a vole from the sandy hillocks that met the rocks behind. Ravi huffed a contented sigh, tongue lolling like a dog's, and Sami stared at the flames.

Eira, though, was staring at her. Ysolda could feel the girl's eyes on her as though she was poking her shoulder. When she could stand it no longer she looked up and glared back.

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‘What?’

‘Nothing,’ said Eira, but there was that cool smile playing on her lips, and the similarity to her mother made Ysolda bunch her fists. ‘You should sleep. Ravi won’t need much longer.’

‘And then?’

‘Then.’ Eira extended her arm, pointing lazily to a patch of deeper darkness. Ysolda waited until her fire blindness receded and saw a slow-moving estuary, a place where the sea was churned lightly by the mouth of a river. ‘We follow that.’

‘The river?’ Again the wolf queen’s map floated into her mind. ‘Slither River?’

‘Slidr,’ said Eira, but she sounded impressed. ‘How did you know that?’

Ysolda bit her tongue. Let Eira think she had knowledge and secrets too. ‘We follow it?’

‘All the way to its source.’ Eira’s eyes shone black in the dancing firelight. ‘At the top of the Drakken Peaks.’

*‘High Place.’*

‘Exactly.’

‘I’m hungry,’ Sami moaned, pulling the cloak that was once a Ryder’s around him. ‘I haven’t eaten in days.’

He still held his arm slightly stiffly, and Ysolda remembered with regret his injury caused by her and Seren’s flight.

‘Didn’t Thane Boreal feed you?’

He shook his head miserably.

‘Come on.’ Ysolda held out her hand and, taking hold of his good arm, hauled him to his feet. ‘There’s seaweed on the tideline, maybe limpets too.’

Sami pulled a face but followed her, Nara alighting once more on her shoulder. They walked the vast expanse, the light and warmth of the fire quickly fading, and combed the shore for suitable seaweed. At first they found only rotting sea lettuce, but then came threads of smoky dulse and salty laver, which they ate as they went, not minding the gritty sand between their teeth.

The search took them around a rocky outcrop, and a blast of wind hit them full in the face. Ysolda bent against it, Sami throwing up a hand to protect his eyes from needle-sharp sand. They drew closer together, borrowed cloaks dragging the ground, and all of a sudden an awful, teeth-scraping screech cut across the wind.

‘Down!’ shouted Ysolda instinctively, yanking Sami hard against the rock. Nara spiralled into the air and was immediately caught by the wind. Ysolda scanned the high outcrop above them for attackers, the dark sea for boats.

‘Is it a dragon?’ hissed Sami, panic clear in his voice. The sound was all around them, grating and endless, an unbroken, unyielding scream –

– and then the wind dropped a moment, and the sound

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mellowed. It became softer, lower in pitch and more musical. A hum, a song. Almost lovely.

‘Is it a mermaid?’ said Sami, and Ysolda would have laughed at him cycling through mythical beings if she didn’t think that maybe it was perfectly possible at that moment. She narrowed her eyes at the ocean, but the sound was closer, rippling over them in time to the wind.

Nara was surfing the current, low to the ground, enjoying the wind through her feathers. Ysolda fixed her eyes on the cove, the black grains dancing as they were lifted by the wind. They glinted beneath the starlight, washing over the beach in a fine dust like enormous graceful wings, their dip and rise matching the pace of the music.

‘It’s the sand,’ said Ysolda wonderingly. ‘It’s singing.’

But there was something else too. A tingling in her gut, as she’d felt when looking down into the pit created by the earthquake after it swallowed her home. A call, telling her to leave the safety of the certain ground and step forward.

Sami obviously felt it too, because a moment later he moved clear of the shelter of the outcrop and stood among the singing sands, fingers splayed. His head was tipped back, and he looked peaceful for the first time since she’d met him. She was about to listen to the pull, to let it carry her after him, when another feeling of wrongness, of danger, flooded Ysolda’s throat.

Then there was a whistle, the zing of air sliced by flint and wood and feathers, and an arrow caught Sami beneath the armpit.

‘No!’

Ysolda dragged him back to her. He was whimpering, but there was no time to check his injury. The arrow had come from above, and they were safe where they stood, pressed under the overhang, but for how long?

Another arrow flew overhead, this time aimed at Nara, who spun away just in time, climbing into the safety of the darkness overhead. Ysolda’s mind worked, jumping to Eira exposed by the fire on the beach. She had no reason to like the girl, but she did not want her to die.

‘This way,’ she hissed. They edged back the way they’d come, and the sound of the singing sands dropped away as the wind was blocked by the outcrop. Ysolda peered ahead, searching for the shapes of Eira and Ravi illuminated by the firelight. But there was nothing but dark.

She pressed against the rock. Had they already been slain, their fire extinguished? Or had they left for the Drakken Peaks, abandoning Ysolda and Sami to the mercy of the black sand beach?

Even now, their attacker could be moving into a better position to aim, and they would be pinned against the outcrop with nowhere to hide.

A smattering of dust and pebbles tumbled on to their

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heads. Ysolda heard a gasp, then a snarl. Sami was trembling so hard it made Ysolda's teeth shake. She could imagine the attacker – Norse as they appeared in stories, blond and as pale as bone, long hair braided and bow held ready, teeth bared and filed to points – leaning over them, readying themselves to strike. She pressed her eyes shut.

'Boo.'

Adrenaline made her shriek, though the word had been spoken in barely more than a whisper. She opened her eyes to see Eira hanging upside down from above them, her white and unfilled teeth shining brightly.

'Got you,' she grinned.





## CHAPTER THREE

# RIVER MOUTH



‘What are you doing?’ gasped Ysolda. ‘There’s someone here, someone shot Sami!’

‘They missed.’ Sami held up his arm to show the torn hole where the arrow had passed through the cloak. ‘But it was close.’

‘They’re above us,’ gabbled Ysolda.

‘They *were*,’ said Eira. ‘Ravi sorted them out.’

Ysolda swallowed queasily.

‘But there may be more,’ said Eira, jumping lightly down into the sand. ‘I reckon he was a lookout. Must have fallen asleep on the job, because the warning fire wasn’t lit. We’ve been lucky. But we should get going while we have the darkness. Ravi’s slept and eaten now’ – Ysolda’s stomach gave another nasty twist – ‘so



we should cover as much ground as we can. Or river, rather.'

They followed her along the beach, all keeping as close as possible to the rocks and each other. Ravi joined them as they reached the river mouth, and Ysolda tried very hard not to think of the lookout's fate. She had grown fond of the animal, thinking of him more as a dog or a horse, and didn't want to consider his more wolfish traits.

Nara reappeared, and Ysolda could read offence in her huffy landing. 'I didn't forget about you,' she murmured, stroking her fine head. 'I saw you'd flown away safely.' Nara snapped her beak but leaned into the caress.

'You're daft about that hawk,' said Eira, who was using her fingers to comb out what Ysolda was sure were mats of blood from Ravi's muzzle.

'Says you.'

Eira bent to rinse her hand in the river. She grimaced. '*Uf*, that's cold. Must be glacial, from the peak.'

Ysolda glanced down at her clothes. Other than the cloak, she was dressed as she had been when she'd left Glaw Wood for the wolf queen's castle. Sami was also dressed in clothes more suited to the Lakes' autumn than a glacial riverbank. But Eira, irritatingly, seemed to have read her mind once more.

'One moment.' She clambered up the bank and returned a few minutes later with a stinking, heavy cloak stitched

from various pelts, a sheepskin tunic, a pair of thick-soled boots and a leather belt loaded with a sword, a quiver of arrows and a broken bow. The latter she threw down on the beach.

‘No use,’ she sighed, and Ysolda realised these clothes had come from Ravi’s victim. *Our attacker*, she corrected herself, but still she felt sick to her stomach as Eira doled out the dead man’s items. She gave the sheepskin and sword to Sami, the boots to Ysolda, and kept the arrows and cloak for herself. She swept the furs about her shoulders and bared her teeth in parody of a Norse man.

‘How can you be so cruel?’ Ysolda snapped, the boots hanging loosely from her fingertips. ‘Someone *died*.’

‘He wasn’t wasted.’ Eira seemed genuinely confused by Ysolda’s disgust. ‘If Ravi hadn’t killed him, he would have killed you. Or raised an alarm that would have brought a dozen more Norse on our heads. It’s a good way for a Norse to die, in battle, especially with a wolf. They worship wolves. He won’t be remembered badly.’

They were so different, Ysolda realised again, though they were a similar age. *He wasn’t wasted*. It made her feel sick.

But Sami had already donned the sheepskin tunic, so she buckled up the boots, looping the straps twice around her ankles to keep them from sliding off. The lining was thick with fleece, and though her feet slipped around inside

they were instantly warmer than they had been in weeks. She whispered a little word of thanks to the man for having such good boots, even if he had tried to kill them.

‘We’ll take the river until the current strengthens,’ said Eira. ‘Then walk under cover in daylight. It’ll throw them off our scent when they come looking.’

‘The Norse?’

‘The Norse, the Kaltis. My mother.’ Eira’s face was in shadow, burrowed into the massive cloak, but she couldn’t hide the tremble in her voice.

‘You think she’ll follow us here?’

‘Eventually she’ll know the Anchorite isn’t on the Isles. Then she’ll come looking. I told you, we need to reach the ancient girl first. It’s the best chance of winning.’

‘Winning?’ said Ysolda sharply. ‘What do you mean, winning?’

‘Did I say that? I meant warning,’ said Eira, flattening her thick black hair to keep her ears warm. ‘Warning the Anchorite.’

Sami and Ysolda exchanged a look of grim knowledge. They had leashed themselves to a liar. But Eira and her control of the wolf were the only reasons either of them were still alive. They might have died in the End-World Wood’s inferno, or at the Norse watchman’s hand. Whatever came next, she had protected them so far.

They assumed their now familiar positions, Ysolda



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behind Eira on Ravi's back, Nara on her shoulder and Sami in the canoe. As she felt him settle into the dugout trunk, Ysolda wondered what he was thinking. A servant, already left for dead once by his mistress, turned betrayer for the Kaltis, and now dragged quite literally in the wake of his mistress's daughter. What did he have to gain from coming with them? Only the fact he had no choice – which made Ysolda worry what he would do when another option was opened to him.

Still, she trusted him more than Eira. Or maybe she just feared him less. She was glad she had Hari's amulet once more around her neck and Nara once more weighting her shoulder. They steadied and strengthened her, a reminder that whatever Eira's quest, Ysolda had her own – to rescue her sister and return to Glaw Wood. Or what remained of it.

They kept a tight silence, eyes locked on their surroundings. Ysolda kept imagining the glint of a flint-tipped arrow, the whisper of a missile fired at her chest. But the only movement was Nara flying overhead; the only sounds Ravi's panting, his paws churning the river. The ice and water had carved a deep gouge into sandy stone, and it was this canyon they swam through for at least an hour before it levelled and slowly gave way to thick woodland that overhung either side of the wide river.



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Ysolda quickly grew jealous of Sami, bundled up in the canoe. She and Eira had to keep their legs drawn up to avoid the icy river water, even colder than the open ocean. Soon her muscles were aching and her stomach grumbling, and she thought longingly of the seaweed abandoned on the singing beach. Hari would cook strands of dulse over a pinewood fire to infuse it with smoke, drying it from the rafters until it was as crisp and salty as bacon.

Her stomach rumbled louder, and then twisted as she remembered their home was gone, swallowed by the quake that arrived with the Ryders who took Hari away. How her life changed utterly in a matter of minutes. Nara seemed to sense, as she always did, that Ysolda's heart felt heavy and landed on her shoulder, nuzzling sharply into her neck. It was still dark, but the blue was starting to swallow the fainter stars, and Ysolda estimated they had only a couple more hours of night.

'Any chance of that hawk earning its keep?' murmured Eira, and Ysolda realised it was not only her stomach she could hear.

'No point her hunting at night,' replied Ysolda. 'She can't see very well.'

'Could she try?' said Sami plaintively from behind them. 'I can barely think straight.'

'What a loss,' said Eira, and Ysolda jabbed her in the ribs.

'Well, he's hardly the mastermind here,' muttered Eira,

and Ysolda felt a tiny thrill that maybe this meant Eira thought she was a little bit the mastermind too.

She nudged Nara awake and the hawk shifted grudgingly, regarding her with a black and yellow eye.

‘Fish?’ said Ysolda hopefully, and Nara gave a huffy snip of her beak but took off anyway. She circled them, searching the dark water, and then seemed to give up, settling instead in one of the trees lining the river. Ysolda quickly lost sight of her shape, but she wasn’t worried.

‘What’s she doing?’ asked Eira.

‘Waiting for the water to settle so she can see the fish. She’ll catch us up.’

‘How did you train her?’

Ysolda thought of the tiny, fierce bundle of feathers she’d found cast from its nest all those years ago in Glaw Wood’s cove. She remembered the black and yellow eye, furious. Fearful.

‘We needed each other,’ she replied. ‘We didn’t have a choice but to stay together.’

‘Like us,’ said Eira, and though it was with her usual slyness, Ysolda felt herself soften, just a little.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEAL



Daylight came but they didn't leave the water. There was no need, as they saw no signs of civilisation along the wide, slow river. The trees were of the same kind as the Kalti Forest, pine growing in shadowed straps of blackish green over gently ascending foothills, and it was incredible to Ysolda how fast the landscape was changing from sea to forest to mountain. It was nothing like her journey across the Isles, where the land blended from forest to rolling hills to forest like the slow dyeing of wool.

The watchman's unlit fire at the beach implied there must be another warning torch nearby, one that would be lit to start a chain to the next until it reached a Norse stronghold, but Ysolda supposed it could be up the mountainside, further off than could trouble them for the



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next day or more. Ravi stopped when he needed to, mounting the banks, and she, Sami and Eira guided the canoe into the mud so it would not get dragged away by the river's current. The three of them would scramble into the dense forest to rest, using roots to climb the steep sides.

Every so often Nara would loop back to them, bringing a branch of berries or an eyeless fish, which Sami would flinch at. He must have dealt with dead animals in the kitchens at the castle of broken boats, but he seemed unable to cope with the damage inflicted by the hawk: talon gouges and pecked-out eyes.

'It's natural. More natural than a knife,' Ysolda would say, but he'd only shudder. He was too hungry to refuse the fish, which they ate raw to avoid lighting a telltale fire, curling up beside the wolf for warmth. Ysolda's feet were snug in their stolen boots but her fingers were perpetually cold, until on the dusk of the second day Nara brought a rabbit.

'Finally, some meat!' cheered Eira, but Ysolda left the rabbit where it was, limp on the ground. 'What?'

'Its eye,' said Ysolda, pointing. Sami leaned further in and grimaced.

'What's wrong with it?'

'Sickness,' said Ysolda. The pink of the eye was familiar to her from the diseases that sometimes struck in Glaw Wood. 'But the fur will be fine.'

She used the General's knife to make the shapes of gloves, and turned the skin inside out to dry in the weak winter sun.

'How do you know to do all this?' asked Eira, as they watched Nara swooping the river. Ravi snored behind them, Sami curled against his stomach, asleep.

'Had to,' said Ysolda, shrugging. 'In Glaw Wood, rabbits were everywhere.'

'And you can light your own fire, with damp wood too.'

'That's basic survival,' said Ysolda. 'We aren't all princesses.'

'No,' said Eira seriously. 'And Ogham – is that what it's called? Does everyone read it?'

'They could,' said Ysolda, 'but hardly anyone learns it. There's not much need for writing most days.'

'But you read it well.'

'Yes,' said Ysolda, a little suspicious that the girl was being nice to her.

'And write it?'

'Yes.'

'So you could teach me. I'm a quick learner.'

Ysolda threw a twig into the darkening water, watching the gentle current carry it back the way they had come. 'Why?'

'Seems useful. The Anchorite uses it.'

Ysolda snorted. She should have known there was a plan. 'So once you know it, you won't need me.'

Eira turned to her, surprised. 'I didn't have to bring you