

# The Raven

By Carrie Cotten

I sat with my anger long enough until she told me her real name was grief.  
C.S. Lewis

For the seekers and searchers. There is nothing earth can offer that will satisfy. It is only found in Jesus Christ. What He offers is complete. Total. Sufficient for every need.

# Prologue

817 AD

Revna

She stole away to the sea to watch the waves, hoping the other half of her heart would appear on their crests and ride ashore to make hers whole again. It was the flash of moonlight on the water that drew her in as a momentary break in thick cloud cover released a brilliant sword of white light from the heavens.

But when she reached the shores, that light was gone. There was nothing but a blanket of dull gray fog covering the water.

Up, up, up the sandy dunes she climbed, fingers clawing at the coarse earth. At just eleven winters, she was skilled at moving silently. Flickering lights in a stone building beckoned her. She knew the chapel would be empty, the holy man long bedded for the night. Mayhap, it was he that left the way lit for lost souls. Mayhap, someone or something else.

*Come.* Candles winked, teasing her with promises of answers to riddles that kept her awake at night. *Come inside and rest.*

She reached the entrance of the small chapel that sat at the foot of the tower. As she pushed open the oak doors, a gust of wind hit her back. It lifted her midnight hair and swept through the aisles, extinguishing candles in quick succession. All color was vanquished, only darkness remained.

Her foot lingered over the threshold, aching to enter but fearing what lay inside as much as she craved it.

An owl screeched, drawing her gaze to the side. Another beacon of moonlight sliced through the clouds, demanding she follow its path.

It led her to a graveyard. To the home of six headstones.

A delicate limestone marker glowed in the single beam that pierced the colorless clouds. She lowered herself to the ground before it, seeking rest. Her bed was lined with needled blades of dead grass atop the mound of a murdered queen's grave. A mother the girl would never know. But that queen never spoke. Not even her ghost was present to whisper comforting words or motherly instruction.

There was nothing carved on the twin markers next to the queen's. The stones were empty, as were the tiny boxes buried beneath. One for her. One for her sister.

Nameless.

As if they never were.

As if she was nothing.

Presumed dead, yet she lived.

"I do not belong there." The girl looked to the tower with its glowing windows. She spoke to the shadows, but she was not afraid. She thought of the enchanted dark forest where another queen waited. "I do not belong there either."

She blinked. The moon was shielded again, leaving nothing illuminated.

*I will welcome you.* The darkness whispered honey sweet words. *Here is where you belong. Safe—in the dark—where nothing is seen. Do what you came to do. I will shield you.*

She glared at the silent tower. At the barely flickering light in the window of the king's quarters. The girl felt a tug at her lips. The fool. He slept so high above his subjects, hidden and guarded. As if stone walls and armed men were enough to stop a shadow.

*He is to blame, said the night. He needs to pay.*

So she became as the night, donning her cloak of shadows.

Dark.

Silent.

Deadly.

Then she slipped into the tower, easily uncovering a narrow, hidden tunnel. The entrance was exactly as the storyteller described that morning three winters past when she took the girl to the edge of the wood and pointed to the cold stone structure, sharing a tale of the girl's true lineage. How she lived when it was meant for her to die. The day the shadows began to pursue her.

A purpose, the storyteller had said. There was a purpose for her pain and for her life. But the storyteller didn't live long enough to explain. She was taken, as so many others had been taken. The girl was ready to do some taking of her own.

The tunnel—located in a far corner of the church—opened when she pressed a hand flat against loose stone in the back of a hearth. Just as it had in the late. As if the storyteller meant her to seek it out, to enter the tunnel.

She watched her softened leather boots, their touch on the stone whispers as she wove through cold, hollow halls. The eyes of sentries skimmed over her lithe, unmoving form, mistaking her for a shadow.

She tossed stones along a forgotten stair, and the guard's eyes wandered, investigating the noise. The flicker of candlelight escaping the bottom edge of a large oak door gave her pause.

Only for the length of a breath. Then she was through and pasted against the backside before the hinges could groan and the sound of returning footsteps could join the soft hush of a sleeping man's breaths.

His long form stretched over ruffled blankets, one arm lazily draped over his bare chest and the other hooked over his head. The king. Her father. The man who had taken everything from her.

He was vulnerable. Exposed.

In a blink, the girl was a hair's width away, a knife clutched in her trembling hand. With a flick of her wrist, the weapon spun, its tip positioned to plunge through flesh and bone—into the organ that certainly must exist to keep him alive but she doubted had any feeling.

She ticked her head to the side, measuring the rise and fall of his chest as air moved in and out of his lungs. Air he had no right to breathe. Not when he'd stolen it from others.

The shine of her blade caught a flicker of flame from the candle on his bedside table, and in a blink, her hand whipped to snuff out the light.

What she needed to do must happen in the dark. It was justice she held in her palm. Righteousness she came to deliver.

She would have to be swift. Rage gave her strength, but she was no fool. She was slight—not yet a woman—and though she'd been trained since she was a bairn, she was not a warrior like the Pictish queen of the woods where she lived. If he woke, he could overpower her in an instant. Stifling a growl, she lowered her dagger.

No. A quick death would not do. His crimes were brutal and lengthy; so should be his end. She would be patient.

He would look into her eyes before he took his final breath. Her face would be the last thing he would see. He would answer for his cruelty and heartlessness. He would dwell in the same darkness he forced upon her.

She was nameless, but he would know her even still. As much as her mouth watered for vengeance and her blood sang for justice, she would wait for that day.

A hearth on the far wall housed the few surviving embers of a dying fire. She snatched the bucket of water from the hearth's side and slowly poured it over the coals, jerking her sharp eyes back to the sleeping king to make sure the hissing didn't wake him.

He slept. Unmoving. Unknowing.

She pressed her hand into cooled ashes mixed with water. Rubbing her fingers together, she created a thick, dark paint.

She raised her hands and sketched a message on the cold stone walls of his chamber.

The girl stepped back, taking in the entirety of her art. It was crisp and black against the gray stones. A perfect warning to haunt his dreams and disturb his slumber for many nights hence.

He shuddered in his sleep, as if he'd received a vision in his dreams. But he did not wake. For this one night, she would allow him rest. The morning sun would usher in the beginning of his torment.

She crept to his bedside again, careful even of the sounds of her breath. A heap of empty mugs, still reeking of staunch ale, littered the floor next to his bed. The girl knew he'd not wake if she were gentle—if her touch was light. With wet ashy paint that still coated her fingers, she traced a matching shape across his forehead. He remained as the dead while she worked.

Her lips pulled back into a wicked grin as she imagined his guards rushing in the next morning, stirred by the sound of his startled cry. She swallowed a bubble of laughter, almost hearing their gasps at the discovery of her masterpiece. First on the chamber wall and then painted across his brow. A great bird with onyx wings spread wide. The symbol of coming death. They would show him a mirror, and he would know how close death had been. That it was waiting.

And she—the nameless one, the raven—with it.

# Chapter 1—Revna

821 AD: four years later

*“Ye are the one, Revna.” Emerald eyes, silvered with tears, grew wide with a terrible, churning mix of sadness and fear as she pleaded. “It has to be ye.”*

*Revna shook her head. She wasn’t a leader, she stayed in the shadows. That was her place. What the queen was asking...what she was trusting her with, she could not accept.*

*“Take them over the mountain,” Cyrene instructed, as if she knew of Revna’s birth, of who her parents truly were. But she couldn’t have known. No one knew then. No one living. “‘Tis ye who must act in my stead should we fail on the battlefield. ‘Tis ye who must love and care for them.”*

*Revna didn’t take them over the mountain. Because she would not let the queen fail. But when she dove into the mob of enemy warriors and came up bloody yet victorious, she met the queen’s eye across the battlefield.*

*What have ye done? The queen’s lips moved with no sound, yet there was deafening anguish. Revna knew what Cyrene’s expression meant. ‘Twas ye. Ye who I gave a name. Ye who I loved. ‘Twas ye who is the keeper of the storyteller’s final tale.*

*What have ye done?*

*Those same green eyes fell on something in the distance. Something that drained the color from Cyrene’s already pale face. Wake up. The queen begged, backing away, fading into the shadows.*

*Wake up. Cyrene’s voice was all around, pounding against the shield the darkness had formed.*

*“Revna. Wake up!”*

Revna jerked awake at the sound of heavy footsteps nearing a hatch covering the small cargo space where she was hidden.

Her joints screamed from being cramped in such a small space. But she bit back a groan as she pitched herself forward and sprinkled a pinch of herbs over the last bits of dried fish in the nearest storage crate. There was no time to get into the barrel of bread or cask of mead. Dagger gripped tightly in her fist, she flattened herself against the shadowed hull as hinges creaked when the cut planks were lifted.

She couldn’t risk leaning closer to see who stood at the opening, but she spied rounded toes of leather boots and leather clad legs. An arm dusted with light colored hair and decorated with bluish tattooed designs reached into the space, grasping the ropes that secured the wooden crate containing the fish.

The crate vanished and Revna nearly released a sigh of relief, expecting the hatch to close again, but it remained open. She squeezed her eyes closed for a second before tilting her head a fraction, just enough to view the opening better but still remain in the shadows. A pair of golden eyes settled on her face and Revna’s blood turned to ice. Crouched at the opening, a Viking sailor stared at her.

Neither moved. She forced herself to breathe. He was young, mayhap even as young as she, his beard just beginning to thicken around his chin but trimmed close at his jaws. His head was also shaved close at the sides and the brown hair not pulled back in braids fell in tangled strings around his shoulders, darkened and damp from the sea. He tilted his head as she had, just enough to see her better without giving her presence away.

Someone spoke behind him, and he looked over his shoulder. Throat instantly dry, Revna tightened her grip on her dagger with one hand and let the fingers of her other hand roam for the hilt of her sword, ready to stand and draw despite the close quarters.

She should pounce, now, while she had the chance and attempt some kind of escape. But something told her to wait. To be patient.

Her feet tingled from the cramped position she'd maintained since nearly the second hour of their voyage and she doubted her ability to stand should he announce her appearance. Once on deck, her options were few. There was little chance she could best the entire crew, but if she could make it to the edge of the longboat, the sea would offer a swifter death than facing them. That ending would be far less violent at least.

She shifted as much as the space would allow and flexed her aching toes, willing them to give her the strength she needed to flee. The young warrior turned his head sharply back toward her, saw the determination she knew was gleaming in her eyes, and gave her the slightest shake of his head.

A warning? A threat? Revna didn't know. She heard the approach of a second set of footsteps and the ice in her veins returned. He looked up at whoever had neared, then flicked his eyes once more to hers before lowering the hatch door, hiding her away.

She froze, unsure of what to do. Would he tell the others and rip open that hatch again, drag her to the deck and mercilessly toss her at their feet? She'd been slowly adding her herbs to their food and drink since they departed. They'd be weakened, but not incapacitated. The only other weapon she had besides her dagger and sword was the bucket she'd been using to tend to her needs for the week she'd been curled into the small space. It might slow a man down should she chuck the putrid contents, but only for a few seconds.

She waited, dagger at the ready, legs alternating stretches to attempt to get her blood flowing again. But he didn't return.

After what seemed like hours, the surge of energy that had jerked her awake and held her rigid during the encounter with the young Viking fled her veins with haste and she sagged against the hull of the boat, feeling boneless. Like that strange rush of power and strength that had overtaken her body during the battle against the army that had attacked Traigh. The battle that ended with these Norsemen fleeing and her secretly chasing them. That energizing urgency had vanished completely in the hours after the Viking longboat sailed from the shores.

Revna inhaled deeply, wishing it had released her before she boarded the longboat, giving her back the use of her mind instead of obeying the intense need for vengeance that tricked her into thinking she was invincible. Then again, she couldn't truly blame that mysterious force, most of her decisions had been powered by fury since she was a lass. Now she was facing the very real consequences of her impulsive actions.

While crafty and skilled with a blade, she was also a girl of fifteen winters. And this longboat was brimming with dozens of grown men. Warriors who'd just been shamed into retreat by the Pictish queen—her queen—and Revna's brother, the king of Traigh.

Staring at the thin layer of wood separating her from those very warriors, she suddenly felt very, very foolish. She didn't take her eyes off the hatch, listening for approaching steps.

Night came. Then the dawn. The hatch didn't open. Revna ground her teeth against the slow torture and the stinging in her eyes from her attempt to remain awake and alert. Despite the twisting in her insides, she ate from the stash of bread she'd pulled out before dosing the rest with her herbs.

At least she'd had the foresight to bring several water skins in addition to her gut-twisting leaves. She drained the skins too quickly though. Now she was exhausted and thirsty. Her traitorous eyes had just dipped closed when she felt the boat slide ashore.

It was night again and the grunts from rowing and barked orders had quieted, overtaken by the sounds of the crew emptying their stomachs over the side. Revna's dry lips pulled back into a cruel grin. Bless Gertrud and her insistence on continuing the lessons on herbs that her mother had begun. Brigid. The storytelling healer.

Revna shook the sleep and haunting memories from her mind, swallowing against the thickness in her dry throat. She could not allow regret to overpower her readiness. The sound of footsteps pounded and then quieted, as if they'd all disembarked. She let out a long breath. She was safe for the moment, but they would return. The tip of her sword dug into the wood between her feet and Revna rested her forehead against the flat side of the blade, chastising herself for her youthful brashness.

Fool. She was such a fool. In the middle of her self-loathing, the hatch door slowly opened again and she forced herself back into the shadows.

"Girl." A whispered voice beckoned her, curiosity winning over caution because she understood—he was speaking her language. The language of the Vestlands.

Dipping her head, she met those same golden eyes from before, still bright in the moonlight. His skin was a little more green than it had been before, darker shadows scooped divots under his eyes. His lips and brows lifted, encouraging her forward enough to reach the bulging water skin he offered.

"Take it." His whisper was raspy and he shook the offering, glancing over his shoulder as if to make sure no one was approaching. "Fresh. From the rain."

His words carried the heavy accent of his people, but they were clear enough. She snatched the gift and scurried to her hiding place before he could turn his head back. Sniffing the liquid and deciding it was worth the risk, she gulped back a mouthful.

"I dunna ken why you are here, but if you want to live, stay hidden. No matter what." He tipped his head, a pointed gaze delivering the seriousness of his warning. "This vessel is cursed."

She lowered the skin, droplets working their way down her chin while she stared at him. He only stared back until she nodded in agreement. Before he closed the hatch, she found herself doing something completely against her better judgment.

She lifted a hand. He stilled, only moving to cast another glance over his shoulder.

"'Tisn't a curse." Her always hoarse voice was even raspier from the dryness in her throat. She swallowed hard. This was not a good idea. At all. And yet, her mouth moved, tongue over teeth, forming words. "Dunna eat the food or drink the mead."

He tilted his head to the side a fraction, his odd colored eyes softening to understanding as she gave a small nod.

"If anyone else but me opens this hatch, hide." A voice from behind had him lowering the hatch and he was gone.

Whatever he said, stopped the approaching footsteps. When they turned and moved away, Revna released the breath trapped in her lungs. She was in the dark again. Still cramped and nearly suffocated by the smell of urine and unwashed bodies, but a bit of the tension that had threatened to rip through her chest and steal her courage eased.

She was not completely alone. For the first time since she boarded the boat, she slept deep and dreamless.

The next night when the boat ran ashore in a different place and the crew disembarked, the hatch opened again and the young Viking appeared to extract another poisoned crate of rations.

"Dunna eat it." She reminded him, wondering why he hadn't informed his crew mates of her confession.



He only nodded. Still, he looked weaker, his cheeks sunken. The herb would not kill, but it would steal all strength and inflict enough misery in a man's guts, he would wish for death.

He offered her another skin of fresh water.

"Thank ye," she whispered.

He nodded and moved to close the hatch, but in another irrational moment of impulsivity, Revna raised her hand, just as she had the night before. "Wait."

He paused.

"How do ye ken my language?"

He glanced around, his movements sharp and tense. He was taking a risk in keeping her secret and she was risking her own safety by keeping him longer, but she had to know something—anything about this Viking who was nothing like the pure savage plunderers she'd always imagined. He positioned himself so his back was to the shore and he let one long leg dangle in the cargo space.

"My father led many voyages across the sea; he said if I learned the language of the Vestmen, I would be a valuable asset to any crew."

He unsheathed a dagger strapped to his waist and Revna tensed, then relaxed when he held it by the blade, showing her the elaborately engraved hilt.

"He gave this to me on my first voyage." He flipped the blade, catching it by the grip. "The carvings tell of the great warriors from Trondheim."

"Trondheim?"

"A settlement in the north. My home."

The blade was sharp, she could tell just by looking at it. Its leather-wrapped grip looked sturdy and worn, as if it had been handled enough to fit perfectly into its bearer's palm. The open mouth of a dragon was engraved into the metal hilt, intricately decorated with scales, loops, and swirls.

"'Tis a good blade. Strong and beautiful," he said.

"Lovely." She meant it too. "Is that where this vessel will land? Yer settlement?"

"Nay," he sighed, brushing his hair out of his face as he looked up at the sky. "Nay, we will land far from there."

He kept his face aimed at the distant stars but let his gaze slide to her. "Do ye mean to allow this boat ashore?"

When she didn't answer, he rolled his head to the side, fully facing her. "I dunna think yer hiding down there because ye aim to be a part of the crew. Especially if yer slowly poisoning us, which is quite clever, by the way."

"I had...plans." she finally answered, slightly breathless.

"Had?" He raised a brow.

She lifted a shoulder. "Now I just want the same as ye. To reach the Northlands alive."

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the propped up hatch covering.

"Will ye ever return?" She tilted her head, observing him. Measuring his reactions to her questions. "To yer settlement, I mean?"

"I havena been there in many winters. I dunna even ken if my father still lives. I'd like to think he does though. That he's heard of his son's many voyages and is proud." A gentle smile tugged at one side of his mouth, revealing a deep dimple in his cheek as he turned the dagger in his fingers.

What would it feel like to have a father who loved her enough to give her such a beautiful gift? Her father had certainly been wealthy enough, but he'd never given her anything. Not even the satisfaction of

being the one to take his life after all the evils he'd committed. No, that right was stolen by some short-lived plague. He left her nothing. Not even a name.

"What are ye called?" The young Viking asked, his head cocked to the side, as if reading her thoughts.

She considered lying, unsure if she should reveal her identity, but in truth—she was no one. She was a ghost. Unnamed. Unseen. But Cyrene had called her, "Revna."

It felt strange to speak the name Cyrene gave her to this Viking, knowing he'd been in the crowd of warriors that had come with the intention of killing her beloved queen. What had changed for him? She opened her mouth to ask but he spoke first.

"Revna," he repeated, his brows knotting together. They relaxed as he slid his golden eyes to hers in interest. "Like the bird?"

"Aye." Her dry lips burned as they pulled back into a half-grin.

"I am called Rune."

They were silent again and he shifted backwards, making room for the hatch to close.

"Rune."

He stopped. She took a portion of her unpoisoned bread and fish and offered it to him. He stared at her for too long. She started to lower her hand when he reached in and accepted her gift, his fingers warm as they brushed hers.

Tucking the rations against his chest, his own lips lifted just a bit at the corners. He was what she imagined other lasses would call braw and for the first time in her life, she wanted to be seen.

As he lowered the hatch door, Revna pushed herself out from her hiding place and fully into his view. The hatch was only opened a crack but his golden eyes surveyed her face, taking in every detail. She wondered what he saw. She was not still a lass, yet not a woman either. But like Rune, there would be the evidence of years in her expression. A weight he also carried in young eyes that had seen too much.

Her heart beat wildly. What was she doing? Even in her crazed, unreasonable movements, she kept one hand behind her back, fingers tightly curled around her own dagger. Every second he lingered was a second the crew had to discover her. A second he had to change his mind about helping her. It was also a second she had to breathe cool, salty air instead of the stifling, musty stench of the hull. It was a moment to speak to another human being. Something she never knew she would miss until she'd spent seven long days in silence.

"What does it mean? Yer name?" she whispered, fighting the urge to close her eyes and bathe in the wisp of fresh air that slipped in from above.

The corner of his mouth lifted again, and as he lowered the hatch the rest of the way, he whispered back, "'Tis a secret."

Revna crouched in her lightless cell, stunned by his answer. What did that mean?

When he returned the next night, he moved hastily. Only lingering long enough to trade her water for more portions of the food she'd stowed away. A strange bite of disappointment pinched her heart when he disappeared without a word. She slept peacefully though, nothing but a flutter of sadness wafting through her dreams.

The next day the sun was in full display and Revna wilted in the breezeless space below deck. The stench of sick sailors, salty air and rotten fish had her gagging more than once and she pressed her hands hard over her mouth to keep from giving away her presence with a fit of coughing.

One soft sound slipped through her fingers and she squeezed her stinging eyes closed, willing her throat to swallow any more outbursts. Surely the rush of waves would have covered the noise. Her body

rebelled and when she felt the constriction of her throat, a lonely sea shanty erupted from above, masking her cough.

Other voices joined in and soon the stifling air was filled with a haunting chorus of song. The deep melody was eerie and slow, but it calmed the panic that had taken hold of her nerves and she nestled into the sacks of grain that had become her makeshift bed. Sweat poured down her forehead and spine, and the heat stole her energy. She just had to hold on a little longer. They had to reach the Northlands soon.

Her people were waiting for rescue. For her.

She listened to the crew's singing, making up her own words to the tune.

*Captured and caged. Too long have ye stayed, o'or in the lands of woe. No more shall ye wait, the raven has come, to set ye asail for home.*

Revna nearly laughed aloud at her version. The long days and cramped quarters were certainly going to drive her mad. If only she'd brought herbs that calmed the mind in addition to those that caused cramping and churning stomachs.

A flashing memory of the yellow-haired healer stole two of Revna's heartbeats. Brigid. The soft-spoken storyteller that held knowledge of herbs and history.

It was Brigid that bade her keep her lineage quiet, even from the queen. When Revna was eight winters, the same age Cyrene had been when she became queen to the few Picts who escaped the king's wrath, the storyteller had come to collect her. Just her, to help in locating a rare herb for her healing poultices. But they'd not gone to the usual haunts where rich beds of lichen produced colorful and pungent plants. Instead, Brigid had taken her to the edge of The Dorcha, to where they could see the top of the tower of Traigh peeking above distant hills. She could still see Brigid's strong form, silhouetted with the trees against a brightening sky.

*I'm going to tell ye a story, Revna. A story which is only yers to hear. A story that will make ye hate me and hate the world, but it's one ye must hear and one ye must learn to overcome. All our lives depend on it.*

The story Brigid told was of a raven haired lass who had the blood of a murderous king flowing in her veins. A lass whose father had brutally slain her mother. He blamed the Picts for her death, and in retribution, sold the ones he didn't slaughter to the Norsemen as slaves. The storyteller said if the queen's Pictish handmaiden hadn't secreted the lass away as a bairn, she would have suffered the same fate as her mother. But Brigid's tale had a twist Revna never expected.

The raven haired bairn wasn't the only one the handmaiden swept up in her arms. There had been another princess. A twin sister.

One thought dead but that truly disappeared with the Picts who were chained and shipped off to the Northlands. That was the day Revna's fury took flight and she swore a secret oath to herself that she would make it right.

It seemed that oath would remain unfulfilled. Until her half brother, Duncan, the new king, granted mercy instead of justice to a war-band of Vikings. They'd negotiated with the king's cousin, William, for a share of the spoils if they helped him sack Traigh. William was of no blood relation to her, being the nephew of the first queen's, Duncan's mother. Revna's gut still twisted at the thought of his betrayal. Of the sick alliance he'd formed with the Norsemen, a trade of flesh and blood. Still, Duncan let them live.

William might have anticipated Traigh's alliance with the neighboring kingdom of Nabaidh, but he hadn't bargained on another union. A secret one between the king of Traigh and the Pictish queen who was nothing more than a legend of the dark woods. William hadn't expected the skilled Pictish warriors, with their bows and blades, to hold off the enemy armies until Nabaidh arrived.

He couldn't have ever guessed those warriors would be filled with some otherworldly strength and speed that kept them alive and fighting long after they should have been felled by simple exhaustion.

And those Norsemen William had bargained with? When their longboat returned to the Northlands, their lives a gift of mercy from the king of Traigh, they would not expect the plague, in the form of a fifteen year old Pictish lass, they'd unknowingly brought back with them either.

That raven haired lass from Brigid's story would deliver the vengeance the Norsemen were owed. She would fulfill her oath and bring home Cyrene's people, her murdered mother's people. Wrath flowed in her veins, that was true. But whatever made her father murder and enslave, Revna swore to use it for life and freedom. She would make the wrong things right.

Revna's hand drifted to the small pouch sewn into her vest. Her fingers traced the outline of a folded parchment tucked inside. Brigid's list. The storyteller did her best to record the names of every villager stolen and sold from the fallen Pictish kingdom when Revna was just a bairn. As Revna explored the shape hidden under the softened leather, resting just over her heart, she could picture the tear dropped shaped stains marking the parchment and how Brigid must have wept over their lost people as she scratched their names in indigo ink. How she ached for the ones who had already been forgotten, for the names that no one knew. Including Revna's twin sister.

"Revna?" Rune's voice carried a bit of worry and she jolted upright. They were ashore again and she'd been so lost in her thoughts, so exhausted from the heat, she hadn't heard the scraping of the hatch door.

"Aye?"

A small sigh reached her in the dark and she dragged herself forward until she could see him. He looked less green, more pink, his eyes the warm honey color she'd first seen.

"You did not answer, I thought..." He shoved another water skin toward her. "We are close now. We should reach the Northlands tomorrow."

She handed him the last of her rations. The ones she would have eaten herself, but kept aside for him.

"Thank ye." Her reply was weak, but thoughts of how she would manage to escape the boat undetected filled her empty belly. Something in her eyes must have betrayed her hunger because he halved the rations, handing her back a portion.

"Did ye like my song?"

Revna's eyes flicked to Rune's face as she tore off a bite of the crusty bread, finding him with one brow arched and a half grin displaying that deep dimple.

"That was ye?"

He lifted a shoulder. "There was a little bird making quite a bit of noise below deck."

"Ye did that for me?"

Rune lifted a shoulder again, then his expression grew serious. "When we come ashore, stay hidden. I will make sure I am the one to unload the supplies."

Revna nodded, relief flooding her veins.

"It shouldn't be too hard considering I'm one of the few who can still stand."

She flicked her eyes back to his, chewing her bottom lip. Was he angry that she'd poisoned the rest of the crew? Relief turned to suspicion and she felt her mouth form a hard line.

"Why are ye helping me?"

Rune didn't answer for three breaths and Revna held hers for the entirety of the wait.

“I have seen enough of death and darkness.” Something passed across his expression that told Revna he was speaking the truth. “And I was given a second chance at life by the mercy of yer king, feels only right to return the favor.”

She knew what happened to the army of William’s men Duncan had trapped in the keep of his tower. When Rune and his crew flooded the keep, the sight of those trapped men was meant to send a message that the battle was already over. But she’d heard their screams and then the silence. The men the Norsemen slaughtered were supposed to be their own allies.

Rune stared at his hands, rubbing them together as if trying to wipe them clean. Were his palms stained by the blood of those men? Was helping her his attempt to return from that dark place?

“I...” Rune shook his head as if he couldn’t find the words he wanted to say.

Revna nodded. The same darkness still swelled around her, threatening to overtake and drag her into its endless depths. It was only the despairing emptiness in Rune’s eyes that encouraged her to resist a little longer.

“My father was right. Though I am but seventeen winters, my gift for languages led me to join many voyages to different lands.” He turned his amber eyes on her, his gaze tracing the lines of her face as he offered his arms, showing her the inked designs covering his skin. “To all who see these marks, I am a mighty warrior. We tell stories of powerful gods and we try to please them. We worship ruthlessness, celebrate a glorious death, and for what? To earn a place in Valhalla only to fight another battle for another god who cares nothing for us?”

“Is that what ye believe?” Revna drew closer to him, nearly touching the leg he let dangle over the edge of the opening in the hull. He gazed down at her with so many questions in his eyes, she wished she had the answers to give him.

“In my many voyages, there is one story that I have heard over and over, from different peoples and tribes. ‘Tis the story of a God above all other gods. One that left His kingdom in the stars and came to our lands, walked our soil as one of us, to grant an eternity of peace instead of war.”

Was he speaking of *An-taon*? Surely, he hadn’t heard of Cyrene’s God.

“Can I tell ye a secret?” His lips twitched, as if he were fighting a smile.

“Like yer name?”

“Aye.” The deep chuckle that resonated from his chest sent a chill skating across her skin.

Rune leaned in, bracing his hands on either side of the hatch opening and lowering his torso until her face was bathed with his warm breath.

“I believe in that God.” His eyes danced back and forth between hers. “I want that eternity.”

Revna found herself wanting it too.

“Is that why yer helping me?” She asked, genuinely desperate for the answer. “Do ye hope to earn that God’s favor?”

“I dunna think it’s something that can be earned. The stories say ’tis a gift.” He held her captive with his searching gaze for what would have been two long breaths had she been able to take them. Then his lips pulled back into a full grin, displaying two dimples in his cheeks. He playfully brushed the back of his hand under her chin as he sat up straight and pushed himself to his feet.

“Also, I quite like the clever little bird who snuck aboard our boat, I want her to live.” His dimples appeared again, but he was gone before she could respond.

Revna settled back into her hiding place, slowly eating the meager rations and humming the tune of Rune’s song in her mind, thinking of the secret he’d shared until she fell asleep again.

Her dreams were filled with booming thunder, shouts of dying men and the coppery smell of blood. Revna awoke with a start to something dripping on her brow from a crevice in the deck above.

It must have stormed in the night, that would explain her terrible dreams and the drops splattering on her forehead. Though she must have been more exhausted than she realized to sleep through such a tempest. She wiped at the wetness, but as her hands brushed over her skin, it didn't feel like water. It was thick and when she drew her hand away, a dark streak painted her palm. It wasn't water. There had been no storm.

Panic seized her insides, muscles tensing at the sounds that reached her from above. Shouts. Cries of pain. The thud of something man-sized dropping on the deck just above her. And the smell.

Fear. Blood. Death.

She closed her eyes and listened. Some kind of battle was raging above. She could hear the clang of metal, shuffle of feet and grunts of men colliding against each other. The boat was unusually steady though, as if they'd slowed. That must have meant they were close to a shore.

Rune told her to stay hidden, that he would help her escape. But what if that was his blood dripping through the cracks? What if the one helping her, her friend, was dead?

A plan. She needed a plan. In the chaos, she could slip on deck, grab Rune and they could launch themselves overboard. She was a strong enough swimmer that she could reach the shore if they weren't too far. Surely, Rune could swim too. If not, she would drag him with her.

She moved toward the hatch, stretching her legs one at a time and bouncing on the balls of her feet to make sure her body would not fail her when she needed to move with swiftness. The crew was still weakened from her trick with the herbs. There was a chance she and Rune could survive. She had to take it.

The sounds from above grew quieter, as if the battle had moved to the other end of the boat. Blade in hand, Revna pushed against the hatch door, easing it open. Something blocked the way and she was forced to use her shoulder and leverage her weight to urge it upward.

She managed to crack the door enough to fit her head and shoulders through, a heavy obstruction still pushed the wood down against her. Sliding through the opening, she kept low on her belly, learning the thing that had been blocking the way was the lifeless body of a Viking sailor.

He wasn't the only one. There were bodies everywhere. Revna's stomach lurched and she slapped her hand over her mouth to keep silent. At the front of the boat, a tangle of men wrestled and grappled with one another. It was a furious mass and she couldn't tell if there were two sides battling or if it was every man for himself. What had happened?

Keeping her body flat on the deck, Revna pushed herself backward, slithering like a snake over the bloody bodies. She just had to reach the edge of the boat.

She scanned the faces of the dead as she crawled over them searching for Rune. Mayhap he'd already escaped. Mayhap he was in the brawl of men, fighting for his life. She paused, her mind and heart waging their own war. The smart thing to do was to escape while no one would notice, but what if her friend was in trouble?

One man shouted words she didn't understand, but she recognized his gruff voice as the one who barked orders on the ship and the one that had stood beside the leader that Cyrene had taken down with her arrow outside the tower.

He must be the new leader. And he was slaughtering his crew.

As Revna watched, it became clear. Some fought each other, but most of the men fought against him. Revna caught a glimpse of Rune in the fray and let out a relieved breath. He was still alive. For now.

It looked like he was trying to break up two sailors and turn their attention to the leader. To the enemy they could defeat if they'd all work together. She was not the only clever one aboard.

With her help, they would have a better chance. Just when she was pushing herself up, aiming for Rune, his amber eyes landed on hers.

"No," he mouthed, shaking his head before his eyes darted to the edge of the boat giving her silent instruction.

Still, she hesitated. When he narrowed his eyes, she huffed a breath and pursed her lips as she silently acquiesced. He would rally the men. They'd defeat the leader. Rune would be fine. They'd meet on the shore and he'd tell her what drove the leader to this madness. She would have a friend in this strange land.

Revna silently rooted for him as she continued her journey across the deck. She tried to keep her eyes on the battle and not look down at the twisted faces of the fallen men so close to hers as she crawled over them.

*Breathe in. Breathe out. Keep moving.*

Her hand pressed on the chest of one of the sailors and a gasping breath pushed through his lips. Revna stared with terror as his eyes flew open and his face distorted with pain. She looked up at the battle again, no one noticed her yet. But the sailor began to groan and Revna slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shh." She hissed, her hand trembling.

His breath rattled in his lungs and hitched in his throat. Revna lay over him, her face just inches from his. Without lifting her body, she shifted herself until she was beside him. With her free hand, she felt along his body, until her hand sank into something warm and wet.

His injury was deep and grave. A slicing wound through his middle that exposed his insides. Revna's stomach revolted and she closed her eyes, forcing her body to remain calm before she met his wild, agonized gaze.

"Shhh..." she said again, bringing her blade up without taking her eyes off of his. "'Twill be over soon."

She knew he couldn't understand her, and another groan passed through his lips along with a cough and spray of blood that coated her cheeks.

"Shhh." She begged, but he couldn't hear. She could tell from the darting of his eyes that he could no longer see either. His end was near, and he was suffering.

Lowering her head, Revna guided her blade upward, direct and sure into his chest where she knew it would pierce his heart, and in seconds, his body stilled. Even though it was an act of mercy, it didn't ease the guilt.

"'Tis over." She whispered, eyes burning with salty tears. Running her hand over the man's face to close his eyes for the final time, she said again, "'Tis over now."

Her chest was so tight she thought her own heart had gone still, the dark blood on her blade a disgusting sight in her eyes. She'd boarded this boat with a craving for that darkness, that blood, but now she only wanted to get as far from it as she could. Fool. What a fool she was.

Limbs shaking, she continued her path to the edge when the traitorous leader, struck hard with the dull end of a battle ax, spun, his head whipping in her direction. Revna froze. Without hesitation, he came back around with a swing of his own weapon, burying the end in the skull of the crew member who'd been fighting to live.

Then he turned again. Dark, hate-filled eyes came to rest on her. A spark of recognition turned his barred teeth into a lustful grin and Revna's blood to ice. He was going to kill her...or worse.

She'd stood next to Cyrene on the battlefield when the queen fired that single arrow that pierced his leader, and he clearly remembered her. He was going to make her pay for their disgrace. Her heart kicked into a sprinting pace that pushed a pulsing beat against her ears and a streak of pain up the muscles in her throat. She was on her feet, blade in hand.

But when he took the first step, Revna matched his movement with her own retreat. In a sheer battle of strength, she would be ended in a second. When she met the dark eyes of the murderer hungering for her blood, she determined it wasn't fear he would see in that split second.

Revna reached inside, seeking out the darkness she'd been ready to abandon seconds before. It hummed from the buried pool deep in her gut. A haunting melody. She searched for that simple string she could tug to unleash its song. There, at the corner of her heart, it waited. When the leader curled his lip, arrogance filling his greedy smile, she yanked that string and let free the rhapsody that constantly thrummed under her skin.

She felt the corner of her mouth peel back into a confident sneer. Before they reached the shore, this murderer would bear her mark and feel the hard side of her blade.

She took two steps toward him, seamlessly unsheathing her sword. A soft song vibrated in her throat. Flipping the blades in her hands, she let loose a cry and rushed the enemy. Before she even reached him, she flicked her dagger through the air. It found purchase in his bicep, drawing a roar of anger and pain. All the while she sang along with the choir of darkness and rage. She snatched a shield from a felled sailor and before the leader's shout faded, she brought her sword down, aiming for his neck.

He blocked her strike with his uninjured arm, but she spun and sliced the sword's sharp edge across his thigh, bringing him to his knees. She tried to dodge his ax, but he was still too strong, too quick. From his knees, he didn't have the height to put much force behind his blow. It was the only advantage that kept her from being brought to the ground. Her raised shield took the brunt of the hit, but it still vibrated through her bones, nearly shattering them.

The other sailors finally rallied under Rune's direction and the leader fought a battle on two sides. Revna jabbed, ducked, and parried. Sailors dropped under the force of his ax until it was only Rune, one other sailor, and Revna.

"Look out!" Rune shouted.

She jumped back, barely missing a blow that sent her tripping over fallen men. The leader turned and aimed for Rune, his blade just missing Rune's chest. The blow would have split him in two.

They were tiring but the leader looked as if he were just reaching his stride. He must have had his own stash of food and mead. He wasn't the least bit winded or green as he brought down the final crew member.

She and Rune were all that were left. They were going to lose. As Revna surveyed the deck, littered with bodies, she saw the faces of her own people instead. She felt the pain of their deaths, the ache of loss for those who had been taken, and she drank it all in. She let it fuel the darkness that begged to be embraced, the want that demanded to be eased.

A coat of red hazed her vision. Revna launched herself at the crew leader. She spun and ducked, swinging her sword with merciless rage. She saw nothing but her prey and she was the ruthless hunter. In a blind fury, she moved like the wind, untouchable and everywhere. She was one with her blade as it sliced through the air. The leader met her with force, and she was lost to the battle between them, never letting him land a blow. She saw nothing else, heard nothing else.



The second she saw her opening, she drove her blade forward, her full weight behind it. But at the last moment, the leader spun and she flew past him, her blade driving into the chest of the man she didn't see behind him.

Into Rune. His golden eyes went wide as her sword sunk in before she could stop herself.

"Nay!" She screamed, grabbing him as he fell. His weight pulled her down with him. "Rune."

*What have ye done?* She thought he'd said it, but the voice came from inside of her.

He lifted his arm, pointing to something behind her as a shadow fell over the both of them. Fury, grief, and vengeance still swirling in her, she grabbed the closest weapon she could find and turned, burying a short blade in the crew leader's thigh nearly in the same spot as her first slice.

He bellowed in pain, dropped his hatchet, and stumbled backwards. Revna rose and raced toward him, snatching the weapon he'd abandoned. The crew leader's eyes widened a fraction and Revna relished the fear that consumed him. He reached the edge of the boat, scanning the deck as he realized he was unarmed. He could still block her blow if she tried to outmatch him, so instead she lifted the hatchet over her head with both hands and sent it flying. It met the hard wood of the ship's side in the exact place where his chest had been. But he was gone. He'd launched himself over the side into the water.

"Nay!"

She slammed into the side just in time to see the waves swallow him whole. She screamed in rage and jerked the ax free from the edge of the boat, hurling it into the water. He shouldn't get to flee. He shouldn't get to steal her revenge. Just as the plague took the life of her father. Not again.

"Revna." Rune's rasped words seeped through her fury.

She raced back to where he lay. He'd pulled out her blade and she pressed her hands to the gushing wound in his chest.

"Rune," she croaked, her throat near to closing out words altogether. "Ye dunna get to die. Ye hear me!"

"I hear ye, my raven," he said, covering her hands with his.

"Why? Why did he do it?" Revna frantically searched the area close to them for anything that could help Rune, and for some answer as to why the crew leader would have attacked his own crew. *Please dunna let it be the herbs that drove him mad, please dunna let it be my fault.*

"Dishonor." Rune let go of her hand, his arm falling limp at his side. "He would be outlawed for returning in defeat."

"So he killed his crew?" Salty tears burned her eyes and she blinked them away, spotting the torn tunic of a nearby sailor. She ripped the fabric from the man's body and balled it up over Rune's wound.

"If he was the only one left, his would be the only story." Rune gasped in pain and his body tensed.

"He's not the only one left." She turned hard eyes on Rune, willing her words to keep him breathing.

When his eyes fluttered closed, she shook him until he opened them again. "Ye are left, Rune. Ye can tell the story. Ye tell them what a coward he was. 'Tis yer duty."

"Yes." Rune's breath rattled in his lungs, blood trickling from his colorless lips.

"Ye tell them!" Revna's chest was too tight, she couldn't breathe.

"Clever little bird." Rune's golden eyes found hers, a soft smile on his lips, that blasted dimple denting his cheek. He lifted a shaking, cold hand to her cheek. "Find the light. Meet me in eternity."

"Rune."

He was still looking at her, but he no longer saw her.

"Rune."

He didn't see anything. He was gone.

And she'd killed him. The one who had tried to help her. Her friend.

When he'd spoken of eternity the day before, for a brief bright moment, Revna had believed there could be a future for her that was something other than dark and lonely. She should have never dared to hope.

She felt something hard against her skin and looked down at her blood covered hands. Rune's dagger. The beautifully crafted gift from his father. He'd pressed it into her palm.

Revna shook him, but he did not breathe. She slammed her fists on his chest, but he did not wake. She screamed for him to live. But he did not listen. She knelt at his side and pleaded with him to speak again. But he did not answer.

"I'm sorry." Her words were nothing more than a strangled whisper as she curled her hands into this torn tunic. "I'm so sorry."

Revna looked down at the red stains spreading across her clothes. *What have I done?*

She balled the fist of the hand that had taken Rune's life and pressed it to her breast. There, just over her heart, beneath the bloodied fabric of her tunic was a mark on her skin. It had appeared the day Brigid had shared her final story, the day Revna began to plan this very mission.

She thought it was a sign that mayhap the God Brigid worshiped truly was real. But then, hours later, Cyrene stumbled into the village bleeding from a wound to her ribs with a story of how Brigid was taken by the sea. Revna saw through the lie. Brigid hadn't been to the sea. Brigid had never left the place where she'd told Revna the story. The place that was exposed to the tower where the murderous king lived and where his murderous soldiers patrolled. The king had taken from her yet again. After that day, Revna turned her back on hope from anyone but herself.

Still the mark remained.

"Why?" She croaked, clawing at the symbol that burned as if it were branded on her very heart. She stared at the cloudless sky. "Why am I marked?"

The sea and sky were silent.

"Why," she screamed. For the first time since she was a bairn, hot tears seared down her cheeks and dripped from her chin. She collapsed on Rune's unmoving chest, pressing her forehead to his. "There is no light, Rune. Not for me."

When the screech of seagulls pierced the quiet, she pushed herself to her feet. The shore was in sight and the longboat coursed toward it despite having no crew. The rippling of the sail drew her eyes upward. She didn't know much about sailing, but she knew that boats lowered their sails when coming ashore.

Her body moved as if powered by sheer muscle memory. She picked up a short blade and moved to the ropes that were still pulled taut by the massive sail. She hacked until they snapped, diving out of the way when the mass of fabric fell into a heavy heap where she'd been standing.

Flipping the sword in her hands again, she cut a section of the sail free, carrying it to where Rune lay. She didn't know their language or how to write their symbols but she could send a message.

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Soaked with sea water, Revna watched from a rocky outcropping as the people gathered on the shore saw her message. Mothers gathered children in their arms and raced inland as the flaming ghost ship plowed ashore, a torn strip of white canvas bearing her mark flying on the mast where the sail had been.

A raven. Wings spread wide. Painted in blood.