

flame,
silver smith

By
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Chapter 1

I begin this humble account on the 26th day of January, in the Year of our Lord 946. I sit here in the prow of this stinking Viking ship and think of ways to die. It would be better to die, in any one of many painful ways, than to face what awaits me when I reach shore. Certain slavery, more rape, maybe worse. The longer it takes to reach land the more I can hope for my death. Anything could happen. I am already heartsick, and seasick. Something has been broken inside me and the bleeding won't stop. Certainly I'm dehydrated, and I haven't kept any food down since supper three nights ago. I am cold but sweating, then hot by turns. Maybe it is easiest if I refuse to eat, let the fever take me, just let go and pray and have the Norse pigs throw the empty husk of my body to the waves below.

This would be better than the alternative, better than remembering, much better than surviving. I huddle deeper into my wet cloak, flinch away from the spraying waves and freezing wind, my tied hands numb behind my back, and try to forget...

It wasn't even dawn when the screaming began. The first light I saw that day was from the flames engulfing the straw roof of our hut, my whole life burning down around me, and not from the sun. One scream cut short and into a gurgle, "Raiders! Rai—," told me all I needed to know.

Roughly shaking my little sister awake, "Anna, quickly! Stay close," I pulled the woollen cloak from the pallet, wrapped it around our heads, and tried to find the door through smoke suddenly thick and heavy as barley soup. Anna, only six years old, coughed harshly but did as she was told, screaming only once as burning embers from the straw roof fell into her hair. Swatting at them and holding tightly to her hand, we reached the exit, fresh air and freedom, only to find that even screaming once had been too much.

As my eyes adjusted to a different kind of darkness outside, my arms were suddenly empty. “Emily!” my sister wailed, as she was pulled roughly away from me.

“Anna! No!” the words were croaked in horror at my first sight of the raiders. Huge, hulking shapes all around us in the dawning light, a stinking nightmare come to life. The Viking’s sword swung almost lazily through the air. In an instant, silenced forever, my beloved sister’s head bounced on the ground, then stopped, her wide blue eyes still open and facing me as her body crumpled to the ground several feet away.

I did not see what they did to her next, as she did not see what they did to me. I suspect it was the same for us both, on the ground as the sun rose over the burning village, legs shoved roughly apart, the dress my mother had worn thrown up to make room for them. I wish I had died then, with a blade at my neck, as Anna did. To my shame, I did not. I screamed, though, as loud as I could, though no help came but the mercy of a fist and blackness. Later, they laughed, all four of them that I counted, until my breath ran out and I could scream no more, the snot and blood so thick in my throat I could scarcely breathe. The darkness was a mercy then.

Dawn. Later? The Next?

Day.

I awoke to a light rain, the motion of the sea, and a pain so intense I eagerly sank back into oblivion. Surely, death would take me now.

Later that day.

I live, still. Small mercy, that. The ugliest one, a giant of a man with one eye scarred shut, the chief, surely; he wouldn’t let the others touch me again because of the bleeding. They want me alive, then, I guess, as alive as I can be with a wadded up scrap from a cloak between

my legs, as if that will help what is broken inside. A slave for their wives, perhaps, or maybe it's just the other girl's turn. I ignore her cries as best I can, and let the fever take me down to hell again.

Sometime later. The next day?

When next I woke, it was to die drowning. Choking and coughing and puking, I sat up to a fresh version of hell. They were trying to keep me alive, the bastards, or why else force me to drink?

I thought back to the day it all began, to the look of disappointment in my father's eyes. I woke that first morning to a bright blue sky, a belly full of porridge, and good news! My brother was home from London with the lord's men! He had seen the King, I was sure of it! Rushing from the cottage to see what delicious treat or pretty ribbon he had brought me, I had no idea whatsoever of the tragedy this day would bring.

I sit here now in the bow of this stinking Viking ship, gagged and bound around the ankles, and know not what my fate will be. I think my ankle is broken – the pain is excruciating – but nothing compared to the torment in my guts. My brother, my father, my sister, the entire village, dead, and all because of me.

In shame and fear, I vomit once again over the side of the ship; a thin gruel of phlegm tinged with blood dribbling down my chin. As I wipe my face with the edge of my cloak, my weight shifts. Something inside me tears again, pain from my swollen ankle rips through my leg, and blackness awaits me once again...

Later.

If only I could go back and live that day anew...

I knew better than to once again go to the beach. I had, after all, been beaten for it more than once. But something called me there. I did not know why, but it was the only place my heart felt full, my mind at peace. When I sat on the shore, the symmetry of nature all around me, I was complete. To feel the baby smooth beach rocks against my bare feet, warmed just slightly

in the sun and wind; to touch the tender whorls in the limpet's shell; to magnify eternity's waves in sea and shell both held up to my ears; something hummed in me in the presence of such things. Closing my eyes to the sky, letting the sounds of gulls fill me, I saw living sparks of silver fire behind my closed lids and felt I was home in the slippery sand and shale; so different from my real home with its four drab walls and life of mud and endless work. And when I drew what I saw and heard and felt, something inside the sand or charcoal and wood shapes, something came alive for me. It was witchcraft, death if I told, and I feared it as a God-loving lass should. But I was drawn to it, as well, to the shapes and swirls and whirls of life I had made. In those subtle lines, I lost myself and found something free. So I risked it, only seldom, when the need came fierce, and only hidden by an hour of chores away from the village.

When I opened my eyes that day to deepening shadows, I knew much time had passed. I scrambled to my feet from the sheltered driftwood I sat upon, and knew myself found out. No one would believe it had taken half the day to visit widow Tanner. A remedy for Anna's cough was a job done in mere minutes. I was done for. I gathered my basket and cloak and started to run up the beach. Turning my head to the village, I was startled by a darkness on the horizon, eagle black shapes on the water, where none should be. Ships! Great Norse warships, scores of them, pointed south towards London and the King's men.

My stomach sank, panicked blood thumping in my chest as I wondered what to do. I had to tell, had to... The villages south of us needed to be warned.

But the ships were so far away, so vast the water between us, it seemed nigh impossible they would seek land anytime soon. Maybe I could still pretend I had only been on an errand. If I told of the ships I would be caught for sure, beaten, punished, denied such small freedoms as I already had, and then sent to the priest for penance. A harsh enough duty, that, with his gibberish talk and endless kneeling. Not to mention the second beating that would follow. The ships were so very far away, almost out of sight already, I told myself. And so, I ran and said nothing, craven coward that I am.

Would I have done things differently if I only had known? Of course, but the past is always as clear as the crystal gem on a lord's ring. Today, still, forever, I sit on the hard, cold

plank, huddle in my cloak and watch unrelenting winter-cold sea slide soundlessly by the boat. There is a comfort in the faint, rhythmic hush of the waves against the hull and a freshness in the crisp air that belies the darkness of my thoughts. I am mostly undisturbed by the men now. Perhaps it is the smell of me – old blood and new vomit – that they avoid. Or perhaps it is that the other girl fights back still. They like that. As if a mere raven-headed girl, spitting and snarling in some foreign tongue in their faces, is some kind of challenge.

When they grab me now with rough hands, I am merely a scratch for an itch, a balm for the bruise of a long journey at sea. I no longer fight. My ankle, still swollen and discoloured like an over-ripe fruit, prevents it. Even if I could, what is the point? This is my penance.

I imagine my village in flames, mere ash now. Where lie my sister's bones? Where lie the ashes of my father and brother? Do their spirits wander restlessly, or have they found the peace denied me? My life is dust now.

I don't really remember much of my mother. I was in my seventh spring when she died birthing Anna, so I have a few memories of that time when I had a real family, but they are indistinct, hazy, like the images in a dream. Playing in the flowers of spring, my small hands held clasped close to her heart, I vaguely remember her warmth and her smell.

There had been other babes between Anna and I, but only Anna survived in my mother's womb to be born. An easy birth, everyone said. The child healthy and squalling, ale all around. But mere hours later, you could see the grey shadows on my mother's face. No more dark-haired, quiet beauty on her features. The bleeding was too heavy, the fever too fierce, and on the morn Anna was three days old, my mother lay, cold and pale, dead and gone forever. Her name was Margaret.

My father was never really the same after.

He did his daily work, toiled in the fields, fixed the roof when it rained. He left the woman's chores to me, a child of six, and quietly left us to fend for ourselves. Anna only

survived because widow Miller nursed her. Of course, she wasn't 'widow' then, her only babe dead in a cloud of summer flies and heat. When her husband, the miller, died a few years later, many, myself included, thought she would marry my father, but it was never to be. No one but my mother ever really touched his heart.

For a few years our clothes were rags and we ate little but burnt bread, and ale I begged from the cooper's wife, but eventually I learned. My brother William helped when he could, when he was able to leave the fields, but that all ended when he became the horse boy. Then he followed the lord, and I, a maid still, managed the house and the table. I wondered if my father would ever have me marry, so happy was he to have me stock his larder. I guess that doesn't matter now. My whole village is gone – surely everyone I know is dead. And I will never marry.

Who would want me now? Even if I don't already carry a Viking brat, I am spoiled goods to any righteous man. And even if someone did want me, why would I want anyone in return, sorely used as I have been? Again, this is my penance for that day, a life spent alone and heart-sore.

Today I woke to a shining sun, golden and nearly warm on my face, so different from the clouds and freezing mist of the last three sen' nights. The sea seems different today also, the men's rowing more purposeful. Though their breath still steams in the ocean air, it freezes now in their rough, bearded faces. No matter. They are uplifted by the nearness of home, I think.

Their wives and mothers must be close now also, as they haven't touched me or the other girl in the last three or four days. Perhaps their women can sense it, their men's nearness and savagery. Does a Viking hesitate to rape when he thinks of his mother, the woman who wiped his baby soft arse? Is a Viking softened by the thought of his woman cradling his own babe? Apparently so.

They have even removed the cords from my wrists and ankles. I nearly feel myself again after so long tied like an animal, and used worse. With my legs free, I have been able to ease the pain in my ankle somewhat, aided more still by a binding of coarse woven cloth one of the yellow giants tore from his cloak. What kindness this? They must intend us to live.

I have even gotten to know the other girl. 'Pe-tite', her name is, or something like it, though I know not any others of the words from her mouth. I wonder if perhaps she is French. She certainly does not look like an English lass, with her black hair and green eyes and bird-like build. Pe-tite is a gentle soul, until the men touch her, that is.

Then she is a fighter, and I admire her for it, though she has certainly lost the majority of the battles. One of the men was kicked by her so hard he had trouble pissing for a week, but other than that the victories go to the Vikings. One of Pe-tite's eyes is still swollen shut, and her slender face is scarred now, from the back-handed blow delivered by the ring-fingered captain, a man named Olaf the Grimir, or gloomy.

Aside from his violence, he has - in his way - cared for us. At least we have been offered food and drink, water and watered ale, and Pe-tite and I have been allowed to sit together now, to talk, in our way. Hand signals, counted taps, and gestures of all kinds every day for the last sen-night, and I still know next to nothing about her. She is fourteen, and she can scream for hours without losing her voice. This is what I know.

Yesterday, one of the men died. The knife wound on his arm had festered over the past weeks, eventually puffing up his arm like a rotten fish and turning black as ash from the fire. Too bad – I could have borne being his slave. He was one of the kinder ones. Or maybe he was just sicker.

When they threw him over the side of the ship with his shield, there were some fists among the men. Some wanted to keep the body for a proper funeral pyre on land; the captain and a few others said he was already stinking up the boat too much. It was enough that he died of a battle wound, they argued. He was already in Valhalla.

The heavy splash sounded as a bell among the rest of the men. Death, always so close to us, came quietly over night and whispered in our ears. It was very silent on the ship for the rest of the day. The wind sounded hollow and alone. The waves wept.

My first sight of the Viking settlement took me by surprise. It was all so normal, peaceful looking, like any small farming village, anywhere, even home. The inlet ended at a small river mouth, a fjord, Olaf said. Where the sea met the land, I could see long, low wooden houses with smoke puffing up from them in the early morning breeze. More dragon boats like this one lined the beach, some larger, some small. Pe-tite grabbed my hand and held it tight, her compact body tense and rigid on the plank beside me. I realized with surprise that this was the first sign of her fear I had ever seen. Ant-sized people scurried here and there as we approached, and more than one silhouette in skirts rushed to the shore at our shouts of homecoming.

It reminded me of the last time William and the horses came home with the lord. It brought tears to my eyes. I blinked them away in the wind, and looked straight forward to the land, and my new life, ahead.