



ALTHING!

THE CRESCENT AND THE NORTHERN STAR

FEATURING STORIES BY

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THE CRESCENT AND THE NORTHERN STAR

**Edited by
Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad
& Joshua Gillingham**

ALTHINGI: THE CRESCENT AND THE NORTHERN STAR

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The Saga of Aud the Seeress © 2021 Siobhán Clark

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The Gold of Iskander © 2021 Nicholas Kotar

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Published by Outland Entertainment LLC

3119 Gillham Road

Kansas City, MO 64109

Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler

Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott

ISBN: 978-1-954255-07-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-954255-08-1 (eBook)

Worldwide Rights

Editors: JM Gillingham & Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad

Cover Illustration: Lada Shustova & Pedro Figue

Cover Design: Jeremy D. Mohler

Interior Layout: Mikael Brodu

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— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

<i>Speaking with Giants</i> , by Linnea Hartsuyker	5
<i>The Blasphemy of the Gods</i> , by Sami Shah	26
<i>The Short Tale of Thurid the Exasperated</i> , by Genevieve Gornichec	40
<i>Torunn Unhoused</i> , by Emily Osborne	60
<i>What a Miserable Drink, and What a Terrible Place</i> , by Alex Kreis	77
<i>The Saga of Aud the Seeress</i> , by Siobhán Clark	92
<i>Dragoslava Dreadkeel</i> , by Giti Chandra	122
<i>The Gold of Iskander</i> , by Nicholas Kotar	141
<i>Wave Runners</i> , by Kaitlin Felix	166
<i>Exiles</i> , by Shanon Sinn	187
<i>A Clash in Kaupang</i> , by Eric Schumacher	206
<i>Sif the Fair</i> , by Jordan Stratford	224
<i>Sky of Bronze</i> , by R.F. Dunham	235
<i>So do I write and color the runes</i> , by Bjarne Benjaminsen	254

“I saw the Rusiyyah when they had arrived on their trading expedition and had disembarked at the River Atil. I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs—they are like palm trees, are fair and reddish, and do not wear the qurçtaq or the caftan. The man wears a cloak with which he covers one half of his body, leaving one of his arms uncovered. Every one of them carries an axe, a sword and a dagger and is never without all of that which we have mentioned...”

—From the journal of Ahmad ibn Fadlan,
emissary of the Caliph al-Muqtadir in Baghdad, 921 A.D.
(Adapted from the english translation by J.E. Montgomery)

— SPEAKING WITH GIANTS —
Linnea Hartsuyker



Vidar the Strong

Rashid's fever rises during the day, when the heat of the Baghdad sun bakes the walls of his building. Vidar drapes wet towels over Rashid's forehead, which dry quickly, even as he sweats his sheets sodden. The boy Vidar hired to fan him often grows tired and must rest.

The last time Vidar remembers hating the very air around him was after a week becalmed in the Black Sea, the sky shimmering and misty, the sea's marine scent turned lifeless. Rashid had been full of energy, though, writing in his book when he wasn't watching the water intently, hoping to see a Leviathan.

Now he spends his time groaning softly in pain, or sleeping, and then Vidar dozes too, curled up on the rug next to the bed. Fever has pared the flesh from Rashid's face; planes of cheek and jaw that

Vidar once found beautiful have sunk away. Only his eyes are the same, brown and too large in his narrower face.

During the day Rashid can only speak a word or two at a time, requests for relief that leave him breathless. Sometimes Fatima takes Vidar's place by her father's bed, but even then, Vidar can't make himself retreat very far. He lingers outside the door, listening, waiting, hoping. Hoping this is the day that Rashid's fever breaks and doesn't return.

At night Vidar opens the windows and lets in the cool desert air. Earlier in Rashid's illness, Vidar would carry him to the roof at night. There, they watched sunset glimmer orange on the Tigris River, and then ships' lanterns blinking awake, moving like slow dancers across the water. On those nights, Rashid sipped cool mint tea, propped up on pillows, and told Vidar stories of his youth on Baghdad's docks, begging tales from sailors about the savages to the north.

"That was when I learned about the Land of Darkness," said Rashid. "It made me more determined to travel. I loved the world so much I hated to imagine it ending."

Loved. Vidar's Arabic is good enough to understand the past-tense, to know that Rashid is withdrawing.

"What are you going to do when I am gone?" Rashid asked him.

Vidar stared down at his huge hands, useless for fighting Rashid's illness. He never let himself think of anything beyond shifts in Rashid's breathing, and signs of pain in the tightening of his jaw.

"You are meant for more than to be my servant," said Rashid. "Still, I would ask something else of you."

"Anything," said Vidar.

"We have spoken before of the new land, this Iceland. It may be where the giants live, the ones who will end the world. I will not ask for your promise, but if you wish for another task, go there. Claim a farm, find a wife, sons as tall as yourself."

Vidar shakes his head. "What about Fatima? You asked me to guard her."

"Drink Odin's mead, and ask the giants of Iceland how to prevent the world's ending. Guard Fatima that way."

This long speech made Rashid's breath come in gasps. He closed his eyes and did not wake when Vidar picked him up and carried him back down to his room.

These days Rashid can hardly speak at all and cannot bear to be moved. Vidar sponges his limbs with mint water, hoping to draw down the fever without hurting him too much.

Today Rashid's cousin Umar has come again to check on Rashid, or so he said. He seems more interested in peering into his rooms, and running a finger along the dusty wall-hangings, than sitting by Rashid's bed. When Vidar shows him to Rashid's room, he demands tea and pastry, a footstool, for the boy fanning Rashid to turn and cool him instead.

"Are you his slave?" Umar asks Vidar in sharp Arabic. "Tell me, how many slaves does he have?"

Vidar pretends not to understand. He doesn't know how to answer. Rashid was his master. Once Vidar had been a slave. Perhaps he still was, enslaved by bonds of love and loyalty. But he will not be Umar's slave.

When Umar first visited, Rashid had laughed when he left, and said to Vidar in Norse, "Umar has a coin-hoard for a heart."

Vidar thinks of dragons, dwarves, the glowing of gold under the earth.

Umar reaches out to cuff the child fanning him. "Come here little boy," he says when the child flinches away from his blow.

The anger Vidar feels is an echo of an older rage. Those same words, spoken in a different language on the bank of the Dnieper River, below Kyiv's cliffs, brought Vidar to Rashid, ten years ago.



Sun beat down on Vidar's shoulders as he helped unload the foreigner's ship. His fellow slaves complained, but Vidar enjoyed the power of his arms and back as he lifted the foreign merchant's heavy trunks and carried them down the gangplank. A pulley system at the base of the cliffs would raise them up to the city proper.

"There is still ice in the river," Vidar overheard one of the foreigner's servants say, haltingly, to Agmund, warrior for the Grand Prince of Kyiv, who was supervising the unloading. The servant had dark eyes that widened when an ice-chunk the size of a small boat passed near. Its depths shone blue like a summer sky at midnight. The servant's skin was nut-brown. One of Vidar's fellow slaves had said that it was from the bright sun in their land, burning them dark as logs in a fire.

"Yes," Agmund was saying to the servant. "Spring comes late here."

Vidar's boots crunched in the spidery tracings of ice at the edge of the vast river. Mist clung to its surface even as the sun sparkled above.

He hefted another box and his eyes caught Agmund's. A few years ago, Agmund had said he would free Vidar when he grew to his full size, find him a place among the Prince's warriors. But time had passed, and Vidar tried not to let himself hope. Agmund let him train, sometimes, with his men. He had a special nod for Vidar, and greeted Vidar in the dialect of their shared stretch of Norse coastline. Vidar replied in words that tasted strange now, after so many years away. In Kyiv they spoke a mix of Slavic and an oddly accented Norse that Vidar had barely understood when he first arrived.

"Come here little boy," Vidar heard Mani say from somewhere beyond a stack of boxes. Vidar tightened his grip on the trunk's handle, splintering wood. Mani was another of the Grand Prince's warriors. "I have a sweetmeat for you," Mani added with a laugh.

The last time Vidar had tried to save a slave boy from Mani, Agmund had threatened a beating. Vidar still wished he had tried harder, learned whether Agmund would carry out his threat. Most of Agmund's men feared Vidar's size.

The slave boy had looked haunted for two weeks, especially in the mornings when he came from Mani's bed, though after Mani tired of him, he became a palace servant, so perhaps he judged the price worth it.

Vidar deposited the trunk in the pile of those waiting to ascend the cliff and trotted back to the ship. Mani had cornered the boy against a pile of stacked crates. The boy's shoulders shook, his dark eyes scared and defiant.

This child didn't belong to anyone in Kyiv—not dressed in those scarlet trousers, a color no Kyiv master would waste on a slave. If Mani wanted a night with him, he should at least compensate the boy's owner. The thought sickened Vidar. He could not have seen more than seven summers.

The child glanced up when he saw Vidar approaching, and darted toward him, hoping, it seemed, to duck between Mani and the wall of crates. Mani saw his movement and backhanded him, sending him sprawling onto the frosty ground.

Something in the way the child had fallen made Vidar think this was a little girl, not a boy. Mani might not care, but it made Vidar even more determined to save her.

Mani lunged for Vidar, who ducked so Mani's fist swung over his head. Few expected someone of Vidar's size to move quickly, and Mani looked affronted that his blow had missed. The girl scrambled to her feet, and as Mani glanced at her, Vidar shoved a box toward Mani's feet, hoping it contained nothing breakable. The girl ran around behind Vidar.

"I'll see you gutted for this," said Mani. "They'll flay the flesh off your back and leave you for crows to pick."

"Maybe," said Vidar. He waited to see if Mani would try to attack him, even now that the girl had gotten away. He half wished he would. He wanted to feel how hard Mani's blows might be, if he could resist by tensing his muscles enough to ward off the worst of the pain. Could he break Mani's wrist the way he had the handle of that last crate?

"What's going on?" Vidar heard Agmund say from somewhere behind him.

"Mani wanted to take one of the visitor's...boys," said Vidar. If the child wanted to be thought a boy, he would let her. "I didn't think it would be good for business."

"Perhaps," said Agmund. "Perhaps not."

The child said something in her language, her voice high and harsh. Vidar turned to look where she did, and Mani's blow caught him on the cheek.

He staggered a few steps before regaining his balance and the most beautiful face Vidar had ever seen swam into view. A man's face, floating above crimson and saffron, symmetrical and finely cut. His beard could not disguise the line of his chin, or his lips, shaped like a nomad's bow.

"The child tells me that you helped," the man said in deeply accented Slavic that Vidar could hardly understand at first.

"I did, my lord," Vidar mumbled.

He said something else in his language, which his translator repeated as, "Who is this man?"

"An ugly liar," said Mani. "The boy was lost. I was finding his way."

Vidar clenched his fists, but otherwise kept his eyes cast down.

"This is no boy, but my daughter," the traveler said. "Fatima bin Rashid, Fatima daughter of Rashid."

Vidar's anger ebbed somewhat. He had been right to see a girl child in boys' clothes. He dared a glance up at the foreigner—Rashid—and saw the man's clear, kind eyes resting upon him, as

though they saw through to his heart. Vidar's throat burned and he had to look away.

Rashid continued, through his translator, "She likes to explore. Her nurse should keep better track of her, but I had not thought her in danger as a guest in your land."

Servants and warriors murmured to one another. To abuse a guest was a crime even Mani should understand. The Prince would lose standing with the great merchants of Constantinople and Baghdad if news of this reached them.

"A girl," Mani scoffed. "You cannot believe a girl."

"I believe my daughter over a blustering coward who would harm a child," said Rashid.

Another wash of murmuring. Mani must answer Rashid's words with a sword or be thought no man at all.

"Do guests insult their hosts where you come from?" Mani asked. "You will defend your lies and I will defend my honor."

Rashid looked unperturbed by Mani's anger. He exchanged a few low words with his translator, who then said, "Lord Rashid did not name a particular coward," he said. "There is no insult."

The crowd that had gathered laughed at that. Agmund, standing near Mani, said, "He has you there."

"But who is this man who has aided my daughter?" Rashid asked. "I would reward him."

Agmund raised a hand as if to push away Rashid's offer. "He's only a slave, my lord. He does the Prince's bidding. It is the Prince you should thank."

Vidar looked at Rashid again, and felt an understanding pass between them, though it faded as soon as someone else caught him in conversation.

At the feast that night, Vidar sat in his usual place, on the low benches with the other slaves, eating scraps leftover from those of higher rank. He hunched in his shoulders out of habit. Every time

he reached for the ladle to pour some broth to soak his stale, coarse bread, his elbow hit one of his fellows.

A Slavic man with a tan too deep to have been burnished in Kyiv approached Vidar at his seat. "My lord would like you to join him tomorrow at his ship in the morning," he said. "He also warned you not to find yourself alone with that man." He sniffed fastidiously. "And you should bathe first."

Vidar inhaled a whiff of dog shit hidden among the rushes, mixed with the scent of rotten food, and his own sweaty reek. He nodded.



Vidar used the bathhouse in the depths of the night, when no one else wanted it, and kept himself awake until dawn, wary of an attack from Mani. By the time he joined Rashid on the deck of his ship, sleeplessness made his head spin.

He stared at one of the sailors lowering the yard that held the triangle sail, so different from square-sailed Norse ships. A breeze blew down the Dnieper River, carrying scents of forest and fish, making ripples and eddies on its broad back.

Rashid and his translator appeared at Vidar's elbow. His head came nearly to the top of Vidar's nose. A tall man, by most measures, and as perfectly formed as Vidar remembered.

"Do you have anything binding you here, in Kyiv?" Rashid asked, speaking for himself, in his deeply accented Norse. Vidar had to watch Rashid's lips form the words to understand him and forgot to be embarrassed by Rashid's beauty. A man like Rashid should not be easy to reach.

"No," said Vidar. Nor anywhere else. His kin were dead or scattered in the raid that had brought him here.

"Then why do you stay?" Rashid asked. Vidar hardly noticed when Rashid switched to Arabic and his translator continued, "You are strong. You could run off into the woods. Any village

nearby would be glad to have a man like you to lend your strong back to the work. No one would follow you or make you return. I have spoken with Agmund and I am sure of that.”

Shame burned Vidar’s face. Why had he stayed? Too little imagination to leave? Or had he been grateful for a place to belong, even as a slave?

“Not every man is born to lead,” he said, quoting the Norse proverb.

“Perhaps not,” said Rashid through his translator, “but I think you could learn to lead yourself, at least. How old are you?”

Vidar thought about it. “I had seen twelve summers when I was captured. Now, I have seen six more, I think.” Or was it five? It was easier to count winters, when so little happened that one event defined the season. The first winter: cold and always hungry. The second: still hungry, with hands and feet grown huge, making him trip whenever he moved. His bones ached that winter. The third: he learned to sleep among the cows for warmth, and his fellow slaves mocked him for the dung on his clothes. The fourth winter: his shoulders broadened and a local girl with an aged husband took him to her bed a few times. The fifth: when Agmund had noticed him and began to train him for a place among the Prince’s warriors. And this last winter, when he had fought with Mani for the first time.

Rashid was laughing a little, his eyes shining. “Oh, you are very young. I did not realize. I am bad at judging the ages of you Northmen, and still worse with a giant like you.”

Vidar looked down at his hands, massive, shovel-like, and wanted to fold into himself.

“I could use a man like you on my travels, though you must be expensive to feed.” Vidar winced to be compared to livestock. “But it would be worth it for your kindness. You are wasted here, and that man will find a way to punish you if you stay. If you will not

come with me, take my advice and find a place away from Kyiv. I will give you some silver to ease your way."

"You want me to come with you?" Vidar asked, not believing.

"Yes," Rashid replied in his own voice. "I think you are a man I can trust, and I need more of those. You have shown you will fight for my daughter. You will be her guard."



Vidar joined Rashid's ship, carrying nothing more than his eating dagger and a winter cloak. Rashid offered him an eastern sword, but when Vidar said he didn't know how to wield it, let him choose for himself. He decided upon an ax that he could use for slaughtering a cow or defending Fatima. He wore it on his back and practiced unsheathing it quickly.

Fatima didn't require that kind of guarding though. Instead she slipped away in every port, wending through narrow passages, and down crowded alleys. Vidar learned the narrow streets of Baghdad, of Constantinople, and the forests of every trading town in Rus and Pencheneg territory, following her through them, though he missed many marvels looking for her little sandaled heel as it disappeared around a corner.

He learned that, even among their people, Rashid and his daughter were thought strange. Rashid let her dress as a boy and go unveiled. He said he would not marry her off unless she asked him to, and he did not think that likely.

The first time they returned to Baghdad, Rashid's home, Vidar lost Fatima when she pursued a crying kitten. He had been learning Arabic slowly, and Persian too, enough to ask the street-sellers of Baghdad if they had seen his charge. When he found her, she pointed to a fallen wall until he moved the stones and retrieved the creature, small enough to nestle in the fold of his palm.

In Sarkel, Fatima asked her father to purchase a little slave boy who did nothing but get underfoot on the ship and perform little

tasks that the sailors set for him. Vidar longed to ask if he had been acquired the same way.

"Why?" he asked Fatima, instead, in his few words of Arabic. She would have to answer simply for him to understand. "Why do you always flee?"

"Practice," she said stonily. "Someday I will have to flee for good, and I want to know how."

"Flee your father?" Vidar asked.

She laid a hand on his forearm, her fingers light like a bird's bones. "I would never flee him. But I will flee anyone but him who tries to cage me."

Vidar frowned, and tried to keep a closer eye on her.

At Rashid's request, Vidar taught them Norse, speaking the language of his childhood with pleasure after days when he felt as though his mind and tongue had to traverse a maze more challenging than the streets of Baghdad.

Rashid treated all his men according to their abilities, none as slaves, none as masters. Every season, a young Arab man accompanied him, each the son of a friend who wanted to learn the merchant life. These he taught with patience, and sent them back to their families, wiser, stronger, and quieter men.

He kept a notebook of his travels, bound in calfskin, in which he wrote with a feather. In Norway, only sorcerers knew runes, and used them in rituals rarely glimpsed by common men. Rashid wrote as a matter of course, and often made Vidar fearful. Was the peace and generosity that surrounded him unnatural? Vidar had never known a man who did not cuff his servants, did not laugh to see a fight break out between his men.

Vidar had been traveling with Rashid for three years before he summoned the courage to ask what he wrote each night. They were sailing before a spring gale across the empty vastness of the Caspian Sea. A Norse captain would stay in view of the coastline to keep his bearing, but Rashid and his pilot read the stars and

the weather to cross open sea and thus brought their goods more quickly to market.

“My lord, what sorcery do you make with that feather every night?” Vidar asked in Norse, when they practiced one night.

“Sorcery?” Rashid asked.

“Runes?” Vidar replied. “Norse has no word for ‘writing.’” And here he used the Arabic word, which he thought must mean sorcery.

“It is not sorcery,” Rashid answered in Norse. “It is...I record my thoughts and the things that I have seen so the Caliph can read them. But also, so Fatima can read them when I am gone. Perhaps a man in Baghdad with no legs will read them and be able to see in his mind what I have seen. Perhaps the Ulema—the religious scholars—will read them and add to their vast store of knowledge about...”

He trailed off and regarded Vidar thoughtfully before continuing. “The Ulema say that the end of the world will come when the descendants of the great giants, Gog and Magog, come down out of the North, bringing snow and cold with them.” He spoke in Arabic now, slowly, so Vidar could translate each word in his mind.

“Their snow will smother the fertile lands of the Tigris and Euphrates, and blanket even Kaaba in Mecca. Then God will call all of His people home to heaven. It is not something to be wished. Allah has given us this world as a blessing to care for. The Ulema has asked me to find out what I can about these giants, and whether they will one day destroy us.”

He gave Vidar a fond look. “I have met you, though. You are a giant, but you do not seem to desire destruction. Indeed, you seem more peaceful than most of your fellow Norse, though you are the largest of them. So, what am I to make of this? Is it the truth, or is it a tale that may only be true in the empty desert, like the djinns and ifrits, the Cyclops on their wandering islands? I have traveled

many places and I have not seen those things, though other men may swear to them. What do you say?"

Vidar roused himself from the spell of Rashid's words and replied in Norse, "We too, believe that giants from the north, from the Land of Darkness, will one day destroy us. We call it Ragnarok, the end of Fate. The giants will fight the gods, and their fighting will destroy the earth."

"Is that so?" Rashid asked, fascinated. "I have not known Norse well enough to ask, and the Slavs are mostly Christian with a different idea of the end of the world. Do you know what must be done to avert it?"

"No," Vidar tried to remember the tales. "They say that many wolf-years will come before the end, when men fight men in hungry packs and tear one another apart."

"We are also taught that," Rashid replied. "The Masih al-Dajjal, the false one, will rule the earth during a time of terrible violence. But at the end the dead will be resurrected in body, and then will never die. Will your dead live again?"

"Yes. The brave warriors will fight on the side of the gods, and the cowards and oath-breakers will fight on the side of the giants."

"And then all will live forever?" Rashid asked.

"No, all will perish, and the world be full of darkness." At Rashid's frown he added, "Some say a new world will rise, with new gods."

"Ah, that is different from our tale. I would know more of this. We do not know when it will come, but I fear it will be soon."

"Why?" Vidar asked.

"I have met too many wolf-like men," he said. He shook his head. "Is there anything else you know of it?"

"I heard in Kyiv that the frost giants live in Iceland, a new land that some Norse have settled."

Rashid sat upright. "Is that so? I would like to go there."

"It is a rumor," said Vidar. "It would be easier to ask Odin himself, I think." He yawned.

"Can that be done?" Rashid asked.

"They say the berserks who drink Odin's mead can speak with him," said Vidar. "I do not know how, though."



Vidar gazed up at the dark sky overhead, his huge, heavy body sinking into last year's leaves, and the loam underneath. The full moon raced across the sky, the stars wheeling around it. He closed his eyes and opened them again. The moon had returned to where it started, staring down at him.

They had encountered some of Odin's brethren, berserker warriors, in Staraya Ladoga, near the Baltic Sea. Because Rashid wanted him to, because Vidar would do anything Rashid asked, he had fought on the side of these berserkers when they raided a nearby town.

Never before had he quaffed Odin's mead, strong and sweet, but bitter too, and musty like he lay his tongue on a stone. In that cave, his mouth tasted death, and then he emerged and slaked death's hunger with his ax and then his hands. He followed a Valkyrie into battle. He had a memory of pulling on a man's limb with all his might, hearing bone snap, tendon and flesh tear. No weapon could touch him. They wouldn't dare.

He returned from battle with his face and hands covered with blood until Rashid washed it from him with a rag, gently, and then used a broken stick to pry blood from under his fingernails. Vidar had gone shirtless into this battle on the edge of winter but did not feel cold until Rashid's touch.

"What did Odin say?" Rashid's voice was gentle and insistent. "Tell me."

Vidar flopped his head over, heard a snap as his movement broke a twig. The prickle of splinters pained him distantly. His

arm wouldn't move to brush the pieces away. Rashid leaned up on one elbow, looking at him, his eyes black in the dimness.

"You are beautiful," said Vidar.

Rashid smiled ruefully, pleased and sorrowful at the same time. "You're drunk," he said.

"More than that," Vidar replied, and looked away. Rashid's face was too much for him right now, his eyes growing wide to swallow up his cheeks, his teeth, his close-cropped hair. Odin's brethren had made Vidar drink too much of their drugged mead. He'd been lucky to stagger out of the cave and into battle without falling on his face.

"Are you angry that I asked this of you?" The worry in Rashid's voice made tears spring to Vidar's eyes.

"I am not a berserk," said Vidar. "I have never done this before. I suppose Odin is my god now."

"Did he speak to you?" Rashid asked. "Did he tell you about the end of the world?"

Overhead, the moon was covered with blood. Vidar's eyes had been open when he looked into the mystery, but he had seen nothing that Rashid wanted to know.

"When you're drinking Odin's wine you cannot die, and if you do, Odin and his Valkyrie maidens come for you," Vidar said.

"What was it like?" Rashid asked. His voice was beautiful too, full of patience, but cruelty also, because he sent Vidar to take the mead of the brethren, to learn what it was to fall upward into the bloody sky.

"What *is* it like," Vidar countered. "I have not left."

"The others are sleeping now," said Rashid. "I hear their snores, but you are still awake."

"You won't let me sleep," Vidar grumbled. He'd never spoken to Rashid like this before.

"I'll let you sleep if you tell me," said Rashid. "Did you see him? Did you learn anything about the giants? Where to find the Land of the North?"

Did he see Odin on his eight-legged steed? He saw the limbs of men and horses, moving through the air, wielding hooves like weapons, swords like hooves, limbs severed on the ground, white bone and red blood. He saw the sky clawed by dead fingers. He was speaking now, letting the words spill out of him. "I could not die. I could not live. I could only kill. I am still drunk on the blood."

Vidar wanted to help him understand. But maybe it was like his mother used to talk about the pangs of childbirth. Unless you've gone through them, you can't know, and even on the other side, the memory slips away. Pain and effort like that can't stay in the body. It's too much: body and spirit turning themselves inside out, trying to approach a god.

"Odin makes the killing feel inevitable," said Vidar. "Not easy, but impossible to do otherwise."

"Perhaps this Odin does not fear the end of the world," said Rashid.

"He wants warriors for it," said Vidar. "So, he can win. Does your god want warriors?"

"Warriors of the faith," said Rashid.

"Then we will fight together," said Vidar.

Rashid sighed. "I suppose that's all I can hope."



Vidar holds Rashid's limp hand in his own. His breaths come so slowly now. Vidar thinks each one will be the last, until another rattles his chest. Fatima sits on his other side.

Three years of winter should have come first, the great Fimbul-winter, the wolf-years, the horn of Heimdall announcing the doom of the gods.

This day is cool, a fall breeze stealing around the curtains. Vidar sends the fan-boy away.

Rashid's other servants have left. Vidar does not know how to pay them and there's little enough for them to do.

Then Rashid breathes no more.

Vidar hears city sounds. Fatima sits, shocked and still, then utters a cry and flings her father's hand down. She flees to another room, and still Vidar sits. He has no plans for this. He never needed to plan, not when he followed Rashid.

If Rashid were Norse, he would be burned on his ship, with a crowd of warriors to drink his farewell. He should have a dog killed and burned with him, to guide him to Valhalla, and a wife too, or concubine, to go with him so he would not be lonely. He should have Vidar and Fatima.

But that is not what he asked of Vidar.

Rashid's cousin Umar arrives that afternoon, leading an army of servants he sets to removing everything from Rashid's chambers, including the shutters nailed to the outside of the building. He speaks in simple phrases that Vidar can understand, particularly the one he keeps repeating: "All of this belongs to me."

And later, "Where is the girl? I am allowed one more wife."

"The girl is with a friend," says Vidar loudly, to warn her.

"If you were his slave, you belong to me too," Umar tells him.

"I am not a slave," Vidar says, walking slowly toward Umar. His servants look cowed when Vidar rolls his neck. Umar himself has a bit more heft than Rashid did, broader in the shoulders and waist, but Vidar doesn't think he would be a problem, not if Vidar wraps his hands around Umar's neck and does not let go until he is dead.

"This house is mine, and you'll have to clear off," says Umar, in a more conciliatory tone. As if he saw the thoughts of violence passing through Vidar's mind.

"Tomorrow," says Vidar. "Come back then."

"Tomorrow," he agrees. "Bring the girl back and there's a reward in it for you. I'll hire you, if you like."

"Tomorrow," Vidar repeats.

He stares after Umar and his entourage as they leave, meeting the eyes of any who turn back. As soon as they're gone, he finds Fatima on the roof. She has her knees drawn up to her chest, her arms wrapped around them, her face pale.

"He's come," she says. "I thought he might. Father told me of him. Too much..." Her face crumples.

"What do you want of me?" Vidar asks. Fatima looks so much like Rashid, her beauty angular and androgynous like his. He would serve her, follow her, for Rashid, and for herself.

She rushes toward the roof's edge and he follows her. She holds a finger to her lips and points down. Below, two men stand, swords curving from their waists.

"There will be more tomorrow," Fatima tells him in a whisper.

"What do we do?" Vidar asks.

"I don't know!" Fatima's voice rises and Vidar puts a hand over her mouth.

"I promised your father I would guard you," says Vidar slowly, letting her go.

"He's dead." Now she sounds like a stone given speech.

"What do you want to do next? Do you have relatives I can bring you to?"

"Yes, Umar," says Fatima with a broken laugh. "But I do not want to marry him. I do not want to marry anyone."

"You don't have," Vidar replies. "You don't have to do anything."

This is more than they have ever spoken to one another, even when Vidar guarded her. He saved his words for Rashid, and so did she. He looks out the window again. Two more men have arrived, talking purposefully to the others.

"They're not waiting until tomorrow," he says. "If we're to leave, we have to go tonight."

"To where?" Fatima asks. "Neither of us have anywhere to go."

"Your father wanted me to go to Iceland," says Vidar. "I thought guarding you was more important."

Fatima raises her head. "I can go to Iceland. I would like to see it."

"The giants, and the end of the world?" Vidar asks.

"I don't know if my father ever wanted to find answers," she says. "He just liked searching."

He also advised Vidar to find a place where his strength was needed. A new minted land, with giants in the mountains. He might be needed there.

"I have some jewelry hidden in my mattress to pay our way," says Fatima. "But how can we get out? That's the only exit."

The building backs up against one much higher—they cannot escape on the roof. And two more men have joined the others. Surely, soon they will have enough to confront Vidar and a slender girl.

"I have a packet of Odin's herbs," Vidar tells her. "If I take them, I will be able to fight my way out. But I will not be in my right mind. You will have to guide me to the docks so we can hire a ship."

She looks fearful, but only asks, "What about my father? He should be buried tonight. It is our way."

"My way would be to burn him," says Vidar. "He will still reach the gods. And it will be a good distraction."

Fatima doesn't like it, but she lets herself be convinced. They do not have time to wash him and dress him properly, a task, Fatima says, that his male relatives should undertake. Vidar carries him up to the roof, along with his bed and mattress, and stacks some broken pieces of furniture around him.

Fatima has a bottle of spirits used for some of Rashid's medicines. She pours some on the pyre to help it catch, and Vidar drinks the rest, swallowing down dry bits of Odin's herbs. He prays in Norse, and Fatima prays in Arabic, and when Rashid's skin starts to crackle in the heat, the drugs take hold.

Fatima towers over him. *Follow me*, she says, somehow in Vidar's mind, not his ears, one of Odin's Valkyries, her black eyes gleaming death. He follows her down a narrow set of stairs to a door she opens quickly, before springing back.

A man's head appears in the doorway, and Vidar slices down with an ax he does not remember picking up. Now the man lies on the ground, his head and shoulder half severed from his body.

Two come through together. One trips over his fellow and Vidar kicks him in the chin so his head snaps back. He catches the other in the gut with his ax.

They'll trap us in here, the Valkyrie says, so Vidar pulls the bodies in one-handed, still holding his ax in the other.

Another attacker slices along Vidar's arm with a blade, but Vidar cuts off his hand and then his head. He picks it up and tosses it out the door. He hears it hit the wall on the other side of the street and then hears feet slapping stone, growing quieter.

They've run away. Let's go.

But Odin does not yet have his fill of blood and death, and Vidar longs to give it to him. Bring him more. Let these men be the wood for the pyre on which Rashid burns.

The Valkyrie takes his hand, though, sticky with blood, and leads him out into the night, where black stars shine down from a white sky. Vidar looks back at the bodies in the street, until the Valkyrie tugs on him again. He nods. She is Odin's creature. She will know where he can find more blood.

They hire on a ship that night bound for Cordoba.

The sun rises before Odin's herbs depart from Vidar's senses, and he remembers what he did, and why he is here. His hands are cool where Fatima has scrubbed a wet rag over them. Vidar remembers Rashid doing the same, and he weeps. Fatima weeps with him, for a time, but then she wipes her eyes with the edge of her veil and says, "In Cordoba we can find a ship going north

to Iceland. There, it will be safest if you act as my eunuch guard. Further north, perhaps I should act as your slave instead."

"Perhaps," says Vidar. "But I serve you. Always remember that."

"Perhaps," she echoes back. "Perhaps we both serve him."