

# LEGIONNAIRE

**Author: Jan Ove Ekeberg**

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### **About the author:**

Jan Ove Ekeberg (b. 1954) lives in Fredrikstad, journalist and till recently; head of TV 2 Financial News. Today he is a fulltime author. He has written several non-fiction books, children's literature and several historical suspense novel series. His first series, IN TIMES OF SWORDS (three volumes), is set in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. His second series, THE LAST VIKING KING (five volumes) tells the story of Harald Hardrada and is set in 11<sup>th</sup> century. In his new series, LEGIONNAIRE, the story is set in Scandinavian Roman era, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Jan Ove Ekeberg has recently published a first volume of a graphic novel-series called HARDRADA together with illustrator Nils Axle Kanten.

### **About the book:**

Early in the fourth century, the Roman Empire was struck by a fresh outbreak of unrest. The vast global empire, with its thousands of towns and fifty million inhabitants, was coming apart at the seams. Civil war loomed. There was strife further north, too, in the region close to the outer edges of the world known to the Romans as *Scandinavia*. People there made a decent living out of iron sales to the Romans. But the relentless work of burning charcoal and smelting iron from bog ore yields poor returns when ships' cargoes are stolen and menfolk killed. Now, the people of *Scandinavia* are forging the iron into weapons of their own. The charcoal burners and iron smelters are preparing for war.

Four fascinating characters stand in the centre of this dramatic historical novel – three of them fictional, the last one historical. Nithijo – a young man from the kingdom of Rygir in South-West of Norway. Urd – a young woman, raised by the old shaman, from the kingdom of Öland in the Baltic Sea. And Gaois – an ex-legionnaire, living with his family in the kingdom of the Jutes in Denmark. The fourth and last character we meet, is the young Constantin, son of the emperor. Soon their tracks cross and new unexpected connections are made. Prepare yourself for a riveting story.

**Extract**

**LEGIONNAIRE**

**The Barbarians from the North**

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I. *The Holy Sea*

Early in the fourth century, the Roman Empire was struck by a fresh outbreak of unrest. The vast global empire, with its thousands of towns and fifty million inhabitants, was coming apart at the seams. Civil war loomed.

There was strife further north, too, in the region close to the outer edges of the world known to the Romans as *Scandinavia*. People there made a decent living out of iron sales to the Romans. But the relentless work of burning charcoal and smelting iron from bog ore yields poor returns when ships' cargoes are stolen and menfolk killed.

Now, the people of *Scandinavia* are forging the iron into weapons of their own. The charcoal burners and iron smelters are preparing for war.

*1. Springtime in the year 305. Two brothers and a burly thrall are heading for the ore-rich bogs in the kingdom of the Rygir.*

The red deer stood on a hill surveying the terrain. After standing thus for a long time, it shook its great antlers, raised its muzzle and scented the wind.

A ten-tined stag.

Close behind him, a hind emerged from the birch forest, and on her heels came a fawn, a delicate creature with a white-dappled back. On skinny legs, it dashed playfully around its still large-bellied mother. Then all three stood together.

Would the animals scent him and flee? If he could get close enough, this could be his first red deer.

Nithijo wormed his way backward down the hillock where he lay. What was it Wagnijo said? Red deer can smell your breath from a greater distance than any arrow of yours can travel. They're sharp-sighted too. And in spring, in the company of a hind and new-born fawn, the stags are especially vigilant.

In the forest down towards the fjord, with the river where the salmon went upstream to spawn, there were bears. They had emerged from their winter dens now. Stomachs shrunken by hibernation, they were in need of meat and might become careless. That made spring a good time for bear-hunting too.

He trotted around the deer in a swift arc, making as little noise as possible. He could hear Wagnijo somewhere, which meant that Halt couldn't be far behind, moving as quickly as his club foot allowed. Nithijo didn't have time to listen. The animals would make for the lake – he was sure of it. And to get there, they would have to pass along the foot of a hill.

He hurried across a glen that had been cleared of timber, its birches felled for iron-smelting. Birch made the best charcoal. That was why they'd come: to burn charcoal for iron-smelting.

Closer to the hill, he lay down and squirmed forward. The terrain rose abruptly and he had to be quiet. He stopped and lowered his nose towards the ground. It gave off such a lovely smell of grass and plants now that the trees had turned green again. He inhaled deeply.

Ahead, he could see the lake. He'd been right: the little flock – the stag, hind and playful fawn – were going to drink. He'd have shoot from a kneeling position, with one knee on the ground and the other in front of him, foot flat on the ground. But they'd practised this: Wagnijo thought it was just as good as shooting on your feet.

The arrow was the best he had. His father, the Old Blacksmith, had forged small barbs on the tip and his brother had helped him attach the stiff fletches. He drew the bow, noting the pressure of the string against his fingers, looked at the stag. He aimed at the flank of the great body. An arrow would not kill it, but the animal would stay down long enough for Nithijo to reach it and slit its throat.

The bowstring stretched as far as it would go and again he looked at the target. The stag still hadn't bent down to drink. Only the hind and fawn had lowered their heads. The stag seemed to be standing guard over them.

He felt a prick of guilt. Should he kill this noble beast?

He waited a few more heartbeats. Just as he was about to release the arrow, the stag turned and looked up at the hill. Had it seen him? Nithijo barely had time to see the stag set off, swimming across the lake with the hind and the fawn in close pursuit, before he heard something crash through the forest.

By the time Nithijo saw the enormous head with its gaping jaws, it was too late. As the animal roared and ran the few remaining steps towards him, he dropped his bow and shut his eyes. Then he fell over backwards.

The bear roared again, even more ferociously this time. Nithijo waited for the agony of teeth slicing through flesh and crushing bones, of claws eagerly ripping him to shreds. Then came a flash of pain. He screamed. Loudly.

When he opened his eyes, he realised he had fallen against a tree. A twig had struck the side of his belly, tearing his thin jacket to tatters and boring into his skin.

The predator lay lifeless in front of him, its vast carcass steaming.

He fought for breath, then tried and failed to struggle to his feet. Suddenly nauseous, he slid away from the sickening stench of the beast. A thin stream of vomit spewed from his mouth and left his stomach empty. He tried to stand up, but couldn't take his eyes off the bear. It seemed to be roaring at him still with its pale white teeth.

Suddenly, his brother was standing over him. After taking the proffered hand that helped him up, Nithijo looked across the lake. On the other side, the stag was going ashore. The hind and the fawn were close behind. Then they vanished among the birches.

Wagnijo laughed. 'Thanks for your help, little brother.'

He took Nithijo by the shoulders, as if to check that he was steady on his feet, then continued. 'That's the year's first. A he-bear. It's a good thing he didn't eat you. You're so skinny he'd have slunk away as hungry as before.'

Nithijo was still shaking but his breathing was calmer. He could see Halt standing behind his brother. The thrall was proudly holding Wagnijo's bear-hunting spear, which now dripped with fresh blood. He grinned broadly. 'Good thing he didn't eat, yes. Skinny Nithijo,' he repeated, looking up at Wagnijo.

‘Halt will stay here to guard the carcass. I don’t want the birds to peck its eyes out or the fox to gobble a chunk of his enemy,’ Wagnijo said.

‘Halt stay here and guard,’ Halt shouted after them as Nithijo hurried off behind Wagnijo, who bounded up the steep hill in long strides, heading for the camp beside the bog where they were smelting iron.

The sun had passed its zenith by the time the bear was carried up to a little clearing beside the camp. The men who’d helped carry it wanted to help them skin the animal too, but Wagnijo wanted to do that himself. Only Nithijo and Halt could help. The three of them had killed the animal so they should also be the ones to skin it and take its teeth out, Wagnijo said. The men stood around indecisively for a while, as if they thought Wagnijo might change his mind and give them the honour of helping skin and butcher the great beast.

‘You’ll get some meat when the sun goes down. But only my brother and Halt will drink the blood with me,’ Wagnijo said.

Nithijo wanted to protest – he’d earned no honour from the bear hunt – but before he could say a word, his brother gave a barely perceptible shake of the head and Nithijo realised he should keep quiet.

When Wagnijo gave the oldest man a hard stare, they all returned to the camp and their labours.

Once they were alone, the butchering began. First, his brother slit the throat while Halt held a wooden bowl beneath it to collect the blood. Halt held it out to Wagnijo, who drank first and longest. Then he passed it to his little brother.

‘Drink!’

Nithijo looked at him, then down at the bowl. The blood was almost black, like the sea at night. It had a strong, animal smell. This was a great honour, but he didn’t deserve it.



‘Drink! Bear’s blood will give you the bear’s strength.’

Nithijo met his brother’s steady gaze. ‘But it was you who...’ he said.

‘I wouldn’t have got close to the man-killer so easily without you as bait,’ answered Wagnijo. He smiled broadly, his lips black with blood.

Halt grinned and repeated. ‘Without Nithijo as bait...’

Nithijo smiled: ‘Yes, but...’

‘There’s no “but” about it... the three of us killed the bear.’

Wagnijo turned to Halt. ‘You say it too, Halt! Us three. Together. Not just me – and not a word to the others about Nithijo-bait.’

Halt nodded seriously. ‘Us three. Halt himself ...’

There he stopped short, swelling with pride. And it took him a while to continue. ‘Nithijo and Wagnijo, too – great bear-killers.’

Nitijho tasted the blood. It smelt strong but tasted sweet.

‘More!’

Wagnijo smiled: ‘Take a proper gulp and think: today it’s you drinking the bear’s blood and not the beast savouring yours.’

Nithijo drank. Some of it trickled out of the corners of his mouth, but he got a lot of it down, too. His brother smiled contentedly. ‘Halt, the rest is yours. You’ll need your strength because you’ll have to hold the bear as I skin and butcher it.’

Halt drank greedily and licked the bowl until his whole face was blackened with blood. He chuckled and stamped the ground. ‘Halt strong as bear. Strong as bear!’

Wagnijo laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. Halt grinned. The thrall looked at Nithijo, who smiled back at his brother’s sworn servant. Halt was Wagnijo’s shadow, never more than a few steps away.

After the animal was skinned, Nithijo helped his brother stretch the hide between two trees. They made small holes in the edges and threaded leather thongs through them, which allowed them to stretch the thick brown bear pelt out properly. Then Wagnijo and Halt butchered the animal. Nithijo placed the chunks of meat into a wooden chest with handles. Once everything was done, Wagnijo took a little axe and tapped the teeth carefully to loosen them before prising them out with the butcher's knife. There were forty-two of them. A fine treasure.

Wagnijo gave Halt four, one long incisor and three smaller ones, a gesture that made the thrall glow with pride. Nithijo thought he must already have some – this wasn't the first time Halt had been bear-hunting with Wagnijo. But he was a thrall and not permitted to use them as adornment. Perhaps he kept them hidden where he slept.

“Here are yours, little brother.”

Nithijo stared down at his brother's hand. It was full to the brim with bear teeth, even a few incisors. ‘But...’ he said.

‘There've been a lot of “buts” today, even for you, Nithijo. Don't make yourself less than you are,’ Wagnijo said. Again, he laid a hand on Nithijo's shoulder. ‘There are twelve teeth here, enough for a necklace anyone would be proud of.’

Nithijo hesitated, though he managed to repress another ‘but’. ‘You honour me, big brother. Thank you for this...’

Wagnijo interrupted him. ‘Take them, then! Stop hesitating. You'll need them if you want any girls to look your way. You're old enough for a girl now.’

Nithijo felt his cheeks grow warm and his brother laughed again. ‘Halt will help you bore some holes in the teeth and then we can string them on a strip of hide,’ Wagnijo continued.

‘Halt bore little holes. Halt good,’ said the thrall.

Nithijo smiled at them both. ‘All right, I’ll take the teeth. It’s better for me to wear them around my neck than for the bear to sink them into my throat.’

Wagnijo laughed. ‘That’s the way! You’ll make a great hunter and warrior. After all, you’re from the same bloodline as me and the family of our father, the Old Smith,’ he said.

Nithijo’s burden was heavy. The birch wood, stacked the previous summer, was dry and light. But he’d filled his arms so full that the pile reached his chin, so he was staggering along the path to the charcoal pit. When he was almost there, he stumbled. The wood scattered across the ground.

Wagnijo came up out of the charcoal pit where he was busy stacking the logs. He was blackened with ash from the previous year’s burning. Nithijo laughed at himself: what a clown he was... or was he laughing at his brother’s coal-black face? He just couldn’t stop laughing.

‘What’s so funny?’ his brother asked. Nithijo just laughed and laughed.

‘You’re tired. Have a drink. There’s still plenty of water in the pail,’ his brother continued.

Nithijo managed to stifle a fresh wave of laughter and met his brother’s gaze. ‘But father said that...’

‘It takes from one moon to the next to burn charcoal. Then we must burn the bog ore and make iron. Hard work, brother.’

Nithijo went over to the water pail, suddenly aware how thirsty he was. He sat there until his brother shouted that it was still a long time to nightfall. Next time, he carried fewer logs and it went better.

When he arrived with the last batch, Halt was also standing by the pit. The rectangular hole was roughly the length and breadth of a man, dug to a depth that was half a man’s

height. Now it was full to the brim with wood and he was the one who had carried it here. Well, nearly all of it: right at the bottom lay newly cut birch poles. A small channel had been dug down to them so that air would enter the pit from below. ‘Nothing burns without air,’ Wagnijo had said.

Nithijo’s brother straightened his back and stretched his long body. He looked exhausted but the charcoal pit was almost ready. Soon it could be lit.

‘You’ve done a proper man’s work, Nithijo! You can go to the victuals tent now,’ he said.

‘Nithijo go,’ Halt repeated. He had cut the turf for this charcoal pit. The wood must not catch light like a campfire but smoulder for a good long time. If the charcoal pit started to burn, all would be lost. The only thing to do then was start again the next day.

Nithijo felt a growl of hunger. But he wanted to watch and learn everything. Wagnijo had shown him how to stack the logs. Densely packed and upright, not laid flat like in a campfire. Now he also wanted to see how to make the roof of the pit. His brother and Halt had chopped fresh spruce branches. He’d helped them lay the branches across the wood. Then they had placed the damp turf on top: thinly cut, but thick enough to keep out any air. The air must only come from below.

Wagnijo looked at him and smiled. ‘Watch carefully as we light it now. Sit closer so you’ll see better.’

Nithijo sat by the edge of the pit and watched his brother light the dry grass with a fire steel, then hold a long stick of resinous pine above it. He twirled it around until it caught properly, then held it up and waved it at Nithijo.

‘Nothing burns as well as pine kindling...’

‘Nothing like pine,’ Halt repeated.

Nithijo nodded. He knew that. Then his brother poked the burning stick down into a hole he’d made in the centre of the wood pile.

‘It has to smoulder from the bottom up,’ Wagnijo said, and added. ‘If you light the wood on top, it’ll burn upwards and we’ll get nothing but ashes. It has to burn from the base, and not too fiercely – it just has to smoulder and settle for a good long time. That makes for the best charcoal.

‘...and iron pure and malleable enough for the Old Smith to make good weapons out of it,’ Nithijo added.

His brother smiled. ‘You’re learning, little brother. You’re learning.’

‘Nithijo’s learning,’ said Halt with a broad grin.

‘And as a reward, you and I shall go and eat. By the time you come back, the charcoal pile will be smouldering just like it should. Halt will make sure of that. Your job will be to watch over it while Halt and I get some sleep,’ Wagnijo said.

He walked up onto the turf roof they had laid over the pit and added. ‘If the fire burns holes in the turf, they must be filled. At once. Go carefully on the turf roof.’

Wagnijo looked at him and added ‘Then again, you weigh no more than a rooster...’

‘Rooster... Rooster watch charcoal pile,’ said Halt.

Several other people had arrived at the camp in the past few days. Even some women and bigger children had joined in with the work. The tents stood on the dry land by the edge of a vast bog. Like the houses in the village, they were arranged in a circle around an open space, with a campfire in the middle.

Some of the charcoal pits, like their own, were already lit. And there too men were sitting, to make sure that just enough air got in, no more. And that the pit didn’t catch fire. Other men were busy building the kilns where they would smelt iron from the bog ore. Nithijo saw that some were already finished: half the height of a man, round and built of hard-packed clay. Inside, dried bog ore would be placed on top of red-hot charcoal. When everything was burnt,

they would smash up the kiln and look for the chunks of iron in the bottom. Wagnijo had promised to teach him that too.

Plenty of kilns were needed to deal with the big piles of dried bog ore that lay all around. Some horses in a nearby enclosure had a strenuous job ahead of them: they must carry the iron down the steep hillsides to the fjord, where ships would come to fetch the priceless metal. In other places, Nithijo had heard, transporting the iron was just as big a job as smelting it, but the ore bogs lay near the fjord here, close enough to walk down and back up again in a single day.

Beyond the fjord, towards the open sea, lay a great island. Between the island and the mainland was a narrow sound, through which anyone heading north or south along the coast must row. Their village lay there, at Avaldsnes. And this meant that their king, the Coast Watcher, had an overview of all travellers. And all of them had to pay to pass through their sound.

When Nithijo reached the stream, where many people were now washing off ash and clay, he saw an older fellow whose only job was to go hunting to ensure there was meat enough in the camp. His arms were bloody from butchering. Should he ask the man how hunters brought down stags? He tried to catch the man's attention with a smile, but received only a sour look in return. The hunter's son was there too, but he was a grumpy lad who Nithijo dared not talk to.

He approached the table where the food was laid out. His mother should have been among the older women standing there handing out small loaves and filling bowls with meat soup, but only Wagnijo had ever seen her. Nithijo often thought of his mother and what his father said about her, but he would never be able to see her and ask whether his father's words were true.

‘Are you asleep, lad? If you want any food, you’d best pay attention,’ the woman said with a friendly smile, and he held out his bowl.

When she’d filled it and given him some bread, he went over to the table where Wagnijo was sitting. Some of the most respected men in the camp were also there, and Nithijo thought how they all looked up to his brother and wanted to be his friend.

Wagnijo looked at him. ‘You look tired, little brother. Do you have the strength to take the first watch? After all, I’ve shown you how: if you see flames coming through the turf, cover them up before the whole charcoal pit turns into a bonfire. And if that happens, you’ll have to cover the airhole for a while and then...

He’d already said it several times.

‘I know... I know, Wagnijo,’ Nithijo said, as his brother continued.

‘And you have to stay awake. You hear? Awake until I come to relieve you. Then Halt will take the morning watch.’

Wagnijo held out a chunk of roast meat. The bear’s carcass had been shared among the men in the camp, so all of them had been given a piece of the bravest and strongest beast. Nithijo chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed. Then he took the half-eaten bowl of meat soup and went down to the charcoal pit, where Halt was sitting. Nithijo gave him the bowl and Halt slurped down the leftovers.

‘Halt go,’ he said.

Nithijo nodded and Halt set off for the victuals tent at once carrying his own bowl.

Nithijo sat down by the charcoal pit and sensed that it was growing hot. It wasn’t dark yet but the sun hung low over the bogs that stretched off into the mountain plateaus. Nithijo thought that beyond the mountains, on the horizon, lay places he might see when they headed south towards the land of the Jutes. They would be going there later this summer to punish

the Jutes who'd stolen their iron. Their father had said so, but he hadn't answered when Nithijo said he wanted to go along, to join the war for iron that everyone was talking about.

The darkness deepened steadily. And it was easier to see whether any flames were coming out of the turf roof when it grew dark, but he couldn't see anything. He lay on his back and shut his eyes. He drifted off briefly. His eyelids were heavy. The day had been long. Then he heard his brother's voice in his head. 'You hear? Awake!' He sat up again for a while. But his body was sluggish from the food. In one long yawn, he leaned backwards and lay down.

Nithijo awoke to a crashing sound. The flames pouring out through the turf roof lit up the whole area around the charcoal pit and the heat surged towards him. But only when he heard the scream did he realise what had happened. The scream of pain was like the roar of the bear when his brother had speared it – only worse, because Wagnijo was the one crying out. He stood in the centre of the charcoal pit with flames licking his body.

Nithijo screamed too. He crawled to his feet and made to run forward, but before he could do so, Halt charged out of the darkness. Hurling himself into the burning charcoal pit he dragged Wagnijo out with him. Flames and smoke engulfed the pair of them as they landed at Nithijo's feet.

'Nithijo get water. Get water!' yelled Halt.

Thoughts tumbled around in Nithijo's head like boulders crashing down the steepest of scree slopes. He was paralysed. His heart had stopped and his body was rigid as cast iron.

Halt threw the few drops in the water pail over his brother, whose clothes were still ablaze. The thrall rolled him around to put out the flames, then scraped up some soil and threw it over the last few flames that licked at Wagnijo's legs.

'Nithijo get water!' Halt repeated. Even louder this time.



Nithijo heard him but the rockslide in his head drowned out the words. What had he done? Would Wagnijo die? The best of all men!

Halt hauled him to his feet in one swift motion. Then at last Nithijo tore himself away from the ghastly sight of his brother's ruined legs and feet. The steam rose off him as if from boiled meat. As Nithijo ran to the stream, he met other people who had heard the screams of pain and realised what had happened.

By the time Nithijo got back to his brother with the pail, most of the water had splashed out, but other people had already doused the flames and placed his brother on a litter. They carried him to the stream and lowered him into it until the water covered much of his chest. Wagnijo had stopped screaming but groaned whenever they moved him.

Halt was soaking his burnt club foot in the water. He sat close to Wagnijo, rocking his torso from side to side.

Nithijo walked over to his brother and kneeled down in the water. Wagnijo's hair was singed and his face red. His skin had curled into small clumps. His legs were probably more badly burned but Nithijo could barely glimpse them beneath the water. The sour-faced hunter cut away the charred remains of Wagnijo's leather breeches as if he were skinning an animal.

The landslide in his head had stilled now and lay like a vast pile of rocks in his belly. He couldn't speak. His brother took his hand and whispered something Nithijo couldn't hear above his own heavy breathing. But Wagnijo repeated it and then Nithijo heard it: 'Home. Home.'

It was still night when they bore Wagnijo down to the fjord on the litter. Two older women had smeared him with fat before spreading sheepskins over him. Nithijo followed the litter down the hills. His head felt empty. He fumbled his way forward. Twice, he stumbled and

when they got to the boat, he sat in the stern. Nithijo stared at his brother. He was alive. His lips moved soundlessly.

Nithijo was glad no one said anything, no one asked questions. The only sounds were the splash of the oars and the water streaming around the bow. Halt rowed with long strokes. Four other rowers tried to match his rhythm. A few boats that were following them soon fell behind, vanishing into the darkness.

He felt as if he had been speared. The thoughts bored their way into his head.

He had fallen asleep. He was the one who'd been supposed to keep watch, block off the air, lay fresh turf. Instead of waking him, his brother had done the job that was Nithijo's responsibility. But, being much heavier, Wagnijo had gone through the burning turf roof and fallen into the flames.

Nithijo looked at his brother. His face was closed, his mouth like a line. Wagnijo was no longer making any noise but he shuddered periodically, in violent spasms. Then he fell still again, quiet as a corpse.

Nithijo was the one who should have been lying there; should have been feeling the pain race through his body.

*2. The kingdom of Öland in the Baltic Sea. Urd is on her way to see her foster mother, the old shaman.*

A heavy raindrop struck her just above the eye. She shut it instinctively and the drop became a thin stripe running down her cheek. Then she looked up again at the overcast sky. An osprey glided across it with a fish in her beak – a catch she was taking back home to her chicks. Could it be the osprey that nested in the weather-beaten pine? She would never have seen the nest if she hadn't heard the squawking of the newly hatched chicks.

More rain fell and the osprey vanished into a low cloud. Urd hurried on along the familiar path. The ground was still dry but it wouldn't be for much longer, as the heavy rain was gliding in from the sea. She walked through the small stand of windswept elms, whose green shoots stood in sharp contrast to the grey weather. Then she emerged onto a long plain where a dead oak dominated the flat landscape. Its black, spreading branches stretched towards the heavens as if cursing the theft of its hardy leaves, little round acorns and sap – of its very vital force. Once it had been a sacred tree. People had worshipped it, animals had been sacrificed beneath its branches. Enemies had bled out there and fed its roots. But that was long ago. The oak had stood here stolidly for as long as she could remember, naked and unprotected.

Her path would take her past the oak and out towards the long, white beach. There lay the little house where she had grown up and from which she could watch the sun rise far out at sea. She had lived here until she moved to the village further inland on the long narrow island where she had spent her whole life.

Just before she got there, she looked out to sea again. The ocean and sky soon merged into one. She thought she saw a dark shadow on the horizon, maybe two? But then they vanished. All was grey and the rain fell more heavily. She walked the last few steps to the small, barely visible house.

It was quite unlike the houses in the village by the oak forest where the fortress stood. They were long and high, with room aplenty for man and beast when the storms drove in from the sea in autumn and the snow fell in winter. They were cosy places with thick thatched roofs and walls made of logs packed tightly together, the cracks between them stuffed with clay, moss and grass.

This looked more like a shack, but inside the little house was a snug cave. This was where she had learned about the gods that ruled over them, over everyone; about which herbs and plants could cure diseases, which made people sick, and the few that could make them die.

She bent down and pushed her way through the narrow entrance. Once inside, she waited for her eyes to grow accustomed to the dark. The old one sat on an ox hide beside the fire. A woven blanket lay over her shoulders. A thin column of smoke rose from the fire. Two bowl lamps glowed faintly. Jugs and glasses stood around. Urd knew the contents of each and every one. The drawings on the wall were also familiar to her. The long lines in yellow and red, the animal heads and the serpents, ships and oxen, a plough and a spear. But mostly human figures: warriors and people out in the fields, sowing and harvesting. One of the oldest drawings depicted a small child, herself.

She squatted down and waited. The old one still hadn't looked up or said anything. Urd must wait for her to say something. The old one must always speak first. It had always been this way as far back as her memory stretched, to the time when they were alone here – before the old one chose to reveal her to the others; back to the time when she was the secret child who could only be where no one else went.

Back then it had just been them: the old one who was not, and yet *was*, her mother; and she, the child unlike any other – a monstrosity, a troll created by creatures beneath the earth. The people in the village had believed that long after she first revealed herself to them. The old one had undressed her before the people of the village, showing them she was created a

woman: tall as a man, with a broader nose and thicker lips than the people of the village, yet created a woman, with breasts and a sex that could birth children. The only thing different about her was her skin colour. The old one told the people of the village that the gods had given her this child.

Now the old one moved, made herself comfortable, raised her head and looked at her.

‘Urd... come closer. Let me behold your beauty.’

The old one regarded her. Could she still see clearly in the dim light, or did she simply know who had come? Few ever came to the shaman’s cave.

‘Mother,’ she said, moving closer. ‘You can continue. I’m ready.’

Urd bowed her head and stood up. Then she bared her torso, removing a leather jacket lined with the winter fur of a hare, a thin linen shirt and an ox-hide belt. At last, she lifted a chain over her head and set it carefully aside. There was amber in the chain, and a red stone that the old one said was from a country far, far away.

The old one stroked her with a finger, carefully ensuring that her long nails didn’t scratch the brown skin.

‘Your mother loved you, Urd,’ she said.

‘You are my mother,’ Urd replied.

‘You have skin like a summer night just after sunset, hair like ravens’ feathers and eyes like bottomless pools. No one gives up such a miracle without great sorrow.’

Urd smiled. The old one had said this many times. At first she’d believed it was to console her, to make her forget her brown skin, which was night-black in some places. But as she had grown to adulthood, she realised that others also found her beautiful. For her part, she considered herself mostly different. That attracted some and scared others, and made it easy for her to sort people one from another.

The old one warmed the needle and dipped it into a little bowl of plant-green ink. Then Urd felt a prick as her skin was gently scratched. The old one had a glass that reflected the tattoo, and Urd herself had seen the serpent's tail on her own neck. The serpent's body continued over her shoulder and coiled beneath her breast before rising back up to her shoulder and then winding down her right arm.

There wasn't much left now. Just the thinner part of the serpent up towards the head where the teeth in its open jaws would end on the nail of Urd's middle finger. The old one had drawn the serpent in the sand and explained it. She had spoken of the serpent's secret and shown Urd how to unleash it on enemies.

The old one dipped the needle once more, this time into yellow dye for the yellow stripes on the serpent's back. There were also darker colours: the deepest greens of spring and the black of night. And shining silver. Urd had never seen anything like it. It didn't resemble the small snakes that sunned themselves along the paths on the island.

A raindrop from her hair ran down her arm. The old one saw the water. 'Wet you were the night I found you, bathed by the heavens. The spirits showed me the path through the storm. At first, I thought you had floated in from the ocean, so round and smooth; glinting like a fish you floundered, but then I found the chain – the beautiful chain with the red stone that your mother had from your father, and I realised that you had been placed there so that I would find you,' said the old one.

Urd placed a finger on the chain, her most precious possession. It barely spanned her neck and she almost never took it off.

The old one continued, adding that she couldn't have received a greater gift from the gods than the daughter they bestowed upon her. 'The gods wanted me to teach you everything, so that you can sit by the fire in my cave the day I go to my forefathers. That is why I called you Urd. You are our destiny. Your own and mine,' she said.

The old one withdrew the needle, held it over the fire again, then continued her work. Urd looked down at her own long arm. The serpent was as lifelike as only the old one could make the animals in her drawings, whether carved into the wall of the cave or tattooed onto human skin. The serpent seemed to writhe beneath her skin.

‘Perhaps I’m not the one who will sit by your fire, Mother,’ she said. In her mind’s eye, she saw the man she loved, whom she would live with in the village, have children with; the only person she thought about more than her mother, the old shaman.

The old one looked at her for a long time before answering: ‘Your path is not like mine, Urd. Your path is long, but it will lead you back here to your people on Öland. And you will sit again by the fire in my cave, which will then be yours.’

A sound reached them – three long blasts on a lur. A warning signal. The shadows she had seen out on the ocean – had it been ships? Urd went to get up, but the old one restrained her with a motion of her hand. ‘There is still time,’ she said.

The serpent’s body narrowed towards the head and the gaping jaws. The old one had scratched the long fang that pointed towards Urd’s middle finger. Urd had let the nail grow and coloured it green.

Again they heard the three blasts. Again Urd wanted to go out to look, but the old one still held her back with a small hand movement. ‘Then they come in strife and the time is ripe.’

Urd didn’t know what she meant but remained sitting.

Only the serpent’s head was left now. The old one had made the dye for the two long fangs: a bone-white hue made from white flowers and pale soil, carefully blended together. She sat stroking Urd’s arm as if to see whether the tattoo had taken.

The old one looked at her mildly. ‘Go to your destiny, Urd. The destiny you must meet alone,’ she said.

Urd got up. ‘Hide here. They won’t find you here. Promise me that... Mother,’ she said.

She had reached the end of the beach and was starting to walk up through elm wood when she turned to see how far from land the ships were. The rain had eased off and she saw that it would still be a while before the enemy arrived. More blasts on the lur. Her people were gathering in the fortress. Many had taken animals and food with them. There was a well in there, so they could survive a long siege.

When she was about to continue, she saw a figure walk across the beach. Leaning on the long staff, the old one walked towards a hill where she would be visible to the approaching ships. Urd ran back. By the time she reached the hill, the old one had raised her staff towards the ships. She was calling on the gods.

‘Mother!’

Urd called out to her before she had quite reached her. ‘Mother!’ she took the last long strides. ‘Mother! Come with me to the village. We must leave now.’

The old one didn’t answer. Silently, she cursed the enemy that was drawing near. Her eyes were wide, her mouth formed into a shriek, but the words were spoken quietly: “Sun! You who are never vanquished. You, mother of us all, who rule over all that lives. You who give the oxen strength. You who allow our forefathers to live in the oak. Sun! Let us conquer the Jutes. Let us give you the greatest sacrifice.’

‘Mother!’

Urd seized the old one’s arm but it did no good. She continued her ritual. Should she carry her mother to safety? Urd wondered.

She looked out to sea again. The ships were closer now. The rain grew heavier. The old one turned, rain streaming down her face.

‘Go, Urd! You shall set off on your life’s path today,’ she said. Water rippled over her lips. ‘On mine, only a few steps remain.’



Urd laid a hand upon her mother's shoulder. The old one lifted it and kissed it. 'Go now, Urd. Obey me, as you always have done. Run to the village and tell them about what you see, about the enemy that approaches.'

'Mother...'

Urd stood there still. The first ship was clearly visible now. She could almost count the planks on its hull. The old one stroked her cheek and looked at her with those smiling eyes that had comforted her so many times.

Urd thought of the man she loved and who would be hers forever. Then she made her decision and ran in long strides towards the village.

*3. the Jutes attack Öland with a fleet. Gaois is second-in-command during the attack.*

They had been rowing since daybreak. Gaois ordered the oarsmen to slow their strokes. There were forty-two men on board including himself and the captain, who stood by the rudder. The others, in two teams, took turns to sit at the oars. They had now rowed for a while up the long eastern coast of the island that faced the open sea, and he could see the long white beach.

When they came even closer, he commanded them to draw in the oars. Soon they would glide onto the beach and he didn't want the ship to be moving so fast that it would be damaged by skerries or sharp rocks.

An instant later, it scraped against sand and gravel. Men leapt over the gunwales, four on either side, as the rest of the crew walked towards the stern so that the bow would be easier to pull ashore.

A beacon had been lit inland on the island. Fairly close to the old fort by the oaks, he thought. The beacon burned poorly in this rain, its flame barely visible. A lur was blown, several long blasts. The islanders were alerted. It had been like this throughout their expedition. It was impossible to conceal a fleet as large as theirs. The islanders would gather in the fortress but it would do them no good.

Gaios stepped over the ship's gunwale and down into the wet sand. It was quite windy and he wanted to make sure that the men left the ships securely moored, ready to be shoved off again. They couldn't afford to lose a single one. Even with all seven big ships, space would be short when it was time to take all the slaves back to Jutland.

Soon, another ship scraped up onto the shore and another. The largest one came last. The ensign, red with a black ox, flapped wetly in the wind. Shortly afterwards, the commander arrived, his square figure waddling towards Gaios. His helmet, with its large cheek guards descending all the way to his chin and its silver decorations, made the older warrior instantly

recognisable. Centurion, as he was known, also had a short sword that he called a gladius. He'd acquired both helmet and sword during his service in the Roman legions.

Gaios inclined his head. 'Centurion. We should anchor the ships offshore. I'm afraid the wind...'

'You can have them launched again as soon as everything is ashore. Four men must remain behind with each of the ships. They'll stay here together,' he said.

Gaios was about to pass the order on to his captains so that they could organise their crews, but before he could, Centurion seized him by the shoulder: 'Who is that?' he asked. Gaios followed his gaze up towards a hilltop. He had seen the figure too. A woman in fluttering robes leaned into the wind, supporting herself on a long staff.

He smiled and said: 'A shaman... she's cursing us. If this is all the islanders have to offer, we've idle days ahead of us.'

Centurion gave a little nod. 'We'll advance inland slowly all the same. You can lead the vanguard and I'll follow with the main body,' he said. He patted the hilt of his gladius, bronze with silver stripes, as if to emphasise who was in command. It was quite unnecessary, Gaios thought, because wherever Centurion found himself, there could never be any doubt whatsoever who was in command.

It took them the rest of the day to get everything ashore: weapons, tents and blankets, three packhorses for the train, along with food that they might not even need. They usually found plenty of animals left grazing or game they could hunt. In the houses abandoned by fleeing folk, they would find grain, onions and sometimes wine made from wild apples.

They had lived well during the weeks spent rowing along the coast and taking prisoners. Many of their captives had already been rowed back to Jutland, where they'd be taken to work in the coalmines and iron furnaces out on the ore-rich bogs ruled over by his people.

Gaios looked up at the hill again, intrigued by the woman who stood there. Half a day had passed since they'd landed on the beach. Now and then, she raised her staff to the heavens, but otherwise she simply stood, statue-still. She looked to him like an old woman, but her back was ramrod straight. Her figure looked strong.

The wind eased off and the rain stopped towards evening. When everything was ashore, they pushed the ships back out to sea. Now the men busied themselves putting up tents and gathering firewood, and before long several campfires were burning and the air was filled with the smell of roasting meat. They had some fish too and Gaios spent a long time over his meal. Then he wandered round and talked to the men, making sure they all knew what awaited them the next day. At one place, he stayed sitting a while by the fire. The men there wanted to know when they could go home. He answered that as soon as they'd picked up enough islanders to do the iron-smelting through the summer, they would row back to Jutland.

'When will you become our king?' asked one of the older warriors. He had also been one of Centurion's men in the legions too. The commander called him and another of the older men 'triari,' which Gaios knew to be the name of the best warriors in the legions, the veterans.

'The Ox-herder is our king and his son will reign after him,' Gaios answered. He stared hard at the warrior to put a stop to such talk.

'The Ox-herder is old, and was never any good even as a youth. Nothing like his father, the Old Ox-Herder, who was a strong, wise king. He was a true Jute, a man like yourself,' the veteran said. Many around him nodded and several assented aloud.

Gaios raised his arm. 'You must talk no more of this,' he said.

Everyone obeyed. No one said anything else. But Gaios knew that many spoke in secret of how he ought to be the king of the Jutes. Rumours of this had probably reached the ears of

the Ox-Herder too. And that didn't just place Gaios in danger, but those closest to him as well.

The evening was cool. The storm had calmed and the heavens were clear and starry. A crescent moon shone palely. Gaios sat drinking apple wine with his warriors before returning to his tent. He looked towards the hill. The old woman stood there still. He himself had little faith in shamans. He knew better. Men with weapons decide people's destinies, not gods that live in lakes and rocks and oaks.

But the old one's tenacity was worthy of a warrior, and shamans had knowledge of plants and herbs. He had seen shamans heal wounds on more than one occasion.

He decided to speak to her the next day, if she was still standing there.