

Tapestries

NED STEPHENSON

Tapestries
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ISBN: 978-1-922757-47-0 (Paperback)
978-1-922757-48-7 (eBook)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

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Design and Typeset: Ocean Reeve Publishing
Printed in Australia by Ocean Reeve Publishing

Published by Ned Stephenson and Ocean Reeve Publishing
www.oceanreevepublishing.com



And they did beat the gold into thin plates, and cut it into wires, to work it in the blue, and in the purple, and in the scarlet, and in the fine linen, with cunning work.

—Exodus 39:3

Dedication

*For Charlotte, who I hope will enjoy travelling
through these tales of fantasy.*

Other Books by the Author

Short Stories
Enhancement

Novels
Sutcliffe's Alchemy: Gold

Contents

Other Books by the Author	vii
Author's Note	xi
1250 BCE	1
865.....	23
1227.....	55
1298.....	73
1429.....	89
1520.....	107
1696.....	135
1944.....	155
1985.....	171
About the Author	177

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

When I was a child, around the age of eight, I enjoyed looking at a tapestry in my parents' dining room. It was a large wall hanging, about six feet tall by five feet wide, showing a rustic scene from the Low Countries in Europe. While it looked old and valuable, I now strongly suspect it was a twentieth-century replica of a seventeenth-century style, though as a child I assumed it to be authentic and, in my mind, ancient. If you look at the back cover of this book, you will see a part of that same tapestry.

At times, I would imagine entering this scene and exploring the world it held. The countryside smells; the thunder of horses galloping across fields; the rattling of carriages as they carried lords and ladies to sprawling country estates. Inside this tapestry was a realm so very different from the 1970s Australian sheep farm where I was growing up, and it was a wonderful, captivating escape.

The same tapestry still hangs in my house today, more than forty years later, two hundred miles from where it sparked my childhood imagination.

A thought came to me when I finished writing *Enhancement* in 2019: I would like to write another collection of short stories that shared a similar chronological sequence. I hit upon the idea to write about tapestries that acted as portals, taking people or objects from one place to the next. All I needed was a setting for each. Then I recalled how old that family tapestry seemed, and it gave me the inspiration to rewrite unexplained historical events and use enchanted weavings to fill in the gaps—to provide magical elements to the otherwise inexplicable. I mean, c'mon. How believable is it that the citizens of Troy would accept the gift of a giant wooden horse from the same people who had been waging war with them for years? And then not take a peek inside before rolling it into their city!

The following are tales of fiction, although some are based loosely on true events or people. I hope you enjoy them.

—Ned Stephenson

NB: One of the stories refers to the male heir to the throne of France as the Dauphin. This title was used by the eldest son of the king of France between 1349 and 1830, comparable to the Prince of Wales being the male heir to the throne of the United Kingdom.

Furthermore, the prayer you will find on page 92 is, unfortunately, not one I wrote. It's from the British Library, Harley MS. 541, a prayer to the Virgin.



1250 BCE

Helenus and Hector discovered the cave when Han injured leopard used the cleft in the rock to escape their hunting party. The boys were cautious about following the wounded animal into the darkness, so they returned later with torches.

The leopard was suffering yet still alive, hissing and lashing out at them until Hector ran it through with his spear. Though the older brother had dealt the final blow, Helenus claimed the leopard's skin for himself. They agreed it was only fair; Helenus's arrow had started the chain of events leading eventually to the animal's death. Besides, Hector had five pelts to his name already.

Hector explored the cave while Helenus pushed his fingers between the leopard's skin and warm muscles. On the sandy floor, he found hare and scattered bird bones. While clinging to the cavern's ceiling, tiny bats stirred. As Hector surveyed the hidden grotto and Helenus skinned his leopard, neither boy could foresee that in twenty

years' time, Helenus would be banished from Troy. And it would be to this cave he would run.

*

Helenus's new home had developed a very lived-in smell, which did not overly bother him, as it was his own stink, but he was aware of it becoming stronger each day.

Entered by a gap well-concealed behind spindly shrubs and leaning pines, the cool and darkness of the cave had shielded Helenus from the summer for the past fortnight. Nearby was a muddy spring, a short walk from the entrance, with salty, undrinkable water. Helenus had no need for the spring. He had many jugs of sweet water. Oddly, the cave contained a lot of his possessions, which was strange considering Helenus had left the city without a horse. He had a thick bedroll with silk cushions, pots of cured food, and an ornate wooden chest filled with gold-braided tunics and scarlet mantles. The sandals he wore were suited to the paved floors of the palace, not the wilds. Sometime, he would have to risk a venture back to collect shoes more suited to sand and stones.

On the floor of the cave lay a thin silk rug, rolled tight and secured with cords. Against the rug rested a spear, and in the centre of his cave sat an oil lamp, which cast shadows over the stone walls whenever a breeze rose up from the valley.

It was only a matter of time before the Greeks learned of Helenus leaving his home city of Troy. They would come looking for him, because Helenus was a potent bargaining chip. *There must be scouts combing the*

*hills by now. An uncomfortable thought rose in his mind:
The Greeks may kill me on sight.*

In the end, it took over a month before a scout got close to his hiding place.

Helenus looked into the eyes of the body folded at his feet. From the man's windpipe, the tiny red mushroom of an arrowhead glistened in the sunlight.

Helenus groaned as he put his bow on the ground.

He'd aimed at the Greek's shoulder, not his neck, but the scout moved at the last moment. He'd hoped only to wound the man enough to slow him down and, perversely, make him easier to reason with.

The Greek scout didn't appear to be carrying anything worth taking. Helenus thought perhaps the man's knife would be useful, or his wineskin. He pulled the arrow through the man's throat and rolled him onto his back. The knife proved to be shorter than the one he already had, and the scout wasn't carrying a skin.

Helenus rose and dashed into the shrubs.

If the man hadn't a skin with him, he must still have a horse nearby. To see it, Helenus needed higher ground. Climbing the rise behind his cave, he froze at the sound of rustling bushes. Away down the slope, a tarnished helmet was moving in his direction. Helenus silently made his way to the west.

Moments later, the second man froze with his hands outstretched. Helenus pressed the spear tip harder against the scout's back.

'Who are you looking for?' Helenus whispered.

'I'm ... searching for a fugitive of Troy.'

Helenus tightened his grip on the spear's shaft.

'By what name?'

The scout considered lying if his captor was indeed the man they were looking for. Helenus sensed the purpose for his delay and lifted the bronze tip to the back of the man's neck.

'Speak the truth, or you will die. The other Greek already has.'

'His name is Helenus!'

Helenus pulled a scroll from his belt and tapped it on the scout's shoulder.

'Give this to your king. Tell him you found what you were looking for.'

The scout reached carefully across his chest to take the scroll.

'Return to your horse.' Helenus lowered his spear. 'If you turn around, I will kill you. It matters little if you die. Agamemnon will send others to find me.'

As the scout moved carefully down the hill, Helenus braced again to throw his spear, but, to his relief, it wasn't necessary.

When he reached the break in slope and his tethered horse, the scout hazarded a glance over his shoulder, but there were only bushes on the rocky hillside. Gripping the bound scroll in hand, he sprang onto his horse and took off down the valley towards the plains that led to the Greek camps.

The scout paused long enough for the outside guards to register him and nod their consent. He had never been inside King Agamemnon's tent, so he hesitated when he

saw the furnishings. Before him, a carpet the size of a house spread out across wooden slats, and from carefully stitched holes on its surface, thick poles jutted out at angles to support the tent's canopy twenty feet above.

As the king's bodyguards straightened, the scout fell to a knee with the scroll thrust above his head.

'Come forward.'

Menelaus, King of Sparta and brother of Agamemnon, motioned for the man to approach. The scout unsheathed his sword and handed it to a bodyguard.

The most senior of the assembled Greek kings, Agamemnon, sat upon a jewelled wooden chair, with Menelaus, Diomedes, Nestor, and the colossal Ajax standing nearby. The scout's entry had interrupted Diomedes' ranting about the poor morale in the army camps.

'You found him?' Diomedes snapped.

The dusty soldier halted five paces from the kings and held out the scroll.

'I did, my lord. He has written to you.'

'Written! Why did you not bring him here?'

Diomedes strode forward and snatched the message. As he read, his irritation eased until, when finished, he offered the parchment to Nestor.

The statesman stroked his white beard while skimming over the lines. It was quick to read. There were only three parts and a seal at the bottom. Nestor eventually turned to the others.

'Would you believe he willingly wants to see us? He claims he has an artefact that will end this war!'

The Greek soldiers knew the importance of their captive and had brought him a horse for the journey. At first, from an involuntary act of royal-blooded confidence, Helenus had refused to be bound. The spear-wielding soldiers had simply looked at each other, unsure what to do, until Helenus realised there was no turning back.

Helenus' hands were bound to his waist with a rope looped back to a mounted soldier behind him. He knew if he tried to flee, he'd be pulled from his mount, and without the use of his arms to brace himself, probably break his back from the fall. Leading Helenus and his captor, the rest of the party walked in single file, carrying his possessions from the cave on their horses. Helenus had no intention or hope of returning there.

As the procession made its way out of the hills and entered the fertile plains, the pines were replaced by ancient olives, their trunks twisted into caricatures of old men. The sun was yet to heat the grassy plains, and the early morning air was cool. A breeze flowed through the valley, carrying with it sweet crocus mixed with hints of almond as the horses wound their way between shrubby, purple-topped heliotropes.

Two hours after being collected, he had still not been offered water, and the sun remained in a cloudless sky. Helenus kept his thoughts to himself, including how different his treatment would be once he had spoken with Agamemnon. Until then, he would bide his time. Thankfully, the sun was against their backs, which told Helenus they were approaching the sea. He knew the Greeks had not ventured far from their ships and the

supply lines back to the islands in the west. When the rough ground was replaced by sand, he knew they must be getting close.

As the troop entered the Greek camps, soldiers stopped their talking and stared. Helenus saw the invaders' dark eyes and drooping shoulders; some lay on sheets, curled up in pain and sweating. Helenus had never smelled camp fever before.

The horses passed a group huddled by a fire, cooking a watery broth reeking of fish and old rope. The soldiers who had collected Helenus from his cave held shiny spears and oiled bows, but the men he now passed carried dull swords and tattered shields. Years ago, it would have pleased Helenus to see the Greeks suffering this way, but now he wanted them strong and well-armed. They would need to be to take Troy; the city was far better provisioned than the assailant's armies and wasn't yet plagued with disease.

A hundred yards from the king's pavilion, Helenus was helped off his horse. He took a moment to look around him before being yanked forward by the guard holding the rope that joined his bound wrists. As they reached the entrance, the flaps were lifted aside, and Helenus went from the stark daylight into the shade of the great tent.

Agamemnon squinted as Helenus's bindings were removed. The tent and its contents didn't impress Helenus the same way it had the scout on the previous day.

'How can we tell you're not deceiving us?' Agamemnon asked as he ran his fingers along the wooden sceptre on his lap.

‘I came freely to you, King Agamemnon.’ Helenus rubbed his thin wrists. ‘I could have just as easily remained hidden.’

‘Maybe you’ve been sent here to kill me.’

Helenus raised his chin. ‘I am Helenus, son of Priam. Descendant of the mighty Dardanus and founder of Troy. I’m not a cutthroat.’

Agamemnon pointed his sceptre at their captive. ‘That’s what you say.’

Helenus eyed each of the kings of the Greek states who had waged war on his home city for a third of his life. He held out a hand bearing a solid gold ring fashioned in the shape of a horse’s head.

‘I am who I say.’

Agamemnon peered down his nose at the ring.

‘If you’re the seer of Troy, why are you out here and not in the city? We kill Ilions this side of the walls.’

‘And we happily kill Mycenaens on that side.’

Nestor chuckled to the right of Agamemnon. ‘Well, he speaks with the confidence of a prince!’

‘I am both prince and seer.’ Helenus examined each king in turn, pausing the longest on Menelaus. Menelaus glared back.

‘Only two nights ago, Apollo came to me in a dream. That is why I am here.’

Ajax snorted as he leaned against a canopy pole. ‘And the gods would speak with *you!*’

Helenus rubbed again at where the bindings had been.

‘When I was young, Apollo gave me the power of prophecy. Since then, I have spoken with Apollo on many occasions during my life.’

Ajax grunted and placed a fist in his other hand.

'You claim you have a way to end this war?' Agamemnon asked. 'I presume you have come here to tell us how?'

'I have, and I can.' Helenus squinted at a cushion. 'May I sit? I am weary. And some water?'

'No, you can stay where you are. If you do not speak quickly, you'll have no need for water.'

Helenus sighed and spread out his arms as though addressing a court.

'Over time, Apollo became pleased with how I used his gift, so he granted me the ability to transfer it to objects. This I did.' He pointed to the floor of the tent. 'Onto weavings made by Athena herself. My brothers Hector and Paris would use these weavings, as would I, to move between Troy and other cities in our father's realm. They permitted us to travel from one place to another, over great distances and instantly.'

Helenus paused a moment, as much in fond memory as for dramatic effect.

'Sadly, most have been destroyed by misuse.'

The Greek kings spared a glance at one another. Except for Nestor. His eyes remained fixed on their captive and his story. Helenus registered a glint in the old man's eyes.

'But ...' Helenus raised a finger in the air. 'Two of these weavings remain in this world.'

Diomedes shook his head at Menelaus. Ajax appeared to have other things on his mind and continued to glare at the son of their enemy while massaging his knuckles.

‘Are you saying these weavings can transport objects from one place to another?’ Nestor asked.

‘They can, King of Pylos. Even *men* can move between them.’

Nestor turned open-mouthed to Agamemnon.

‘When my brother Paris slew the great Achilles,’ Helenus went on, ‘many of your strongest warriors abandoned you. Since then, the timber of your boats rots; the sails and cables disintegrate in your hands. There is no way for you to leave these shores and no means for my father to drive you from his lands. We have reached a stalemate that will go on until we are all dead and the gods find new playthings to toy with.’

‘You think war is a game?’ Ajax growled.

Helenus turned to the man who had interrupted his speech, all seven feet of him, from sandals to crown. Below his malevolent eyes and noble nose, a thick beard jutted proudly.

‘A game to the gods, mighty Ajax.’ Helenus grinned. ‘Though not to we mortals who endure the hardships they bear upon us.’ Helenus returned his attention to Agamemnon.

‘My father knows you don’t have the men left to siege the city fully. Supplies will never stop getting in.’

The Greek king of kings scrutinised the man before him. He didn’t look like a fighter, as had Hector or Paris, but Agamemnon assumed Priam had many wives. A runt was bound to appear eventually in the brood. ‘Why are you telling us this?’ Agamemnon asked.

Helenus looked at the ground.

‘When Paris died, Helen was given to my brother Deiphobus.’ Then his mouth twisted into a snarl. ‘She should have been mine! I was next in line. That is why I was cast out. I was so angry, I laid hands on my father. An act punishable by death.’ Helenus returned his eyes to the assembly. ‘Instead, my father cast me out. Perhaps hoping you ... would do the deed for him.’

Menelaus stepped forward, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword as he did so. ‘Helen is my *wife!* Your bastard brother Paris stole her from me,’ he spat. ‘She’s not your father’s property!’

With surprising speed, Ajax moved between Menelaus and Helenus, his bulk eclipsing all sight of the seer.

‘Calm yourself, Menelaus. She’s been captive in that city these ten years. You know we can’t reach her. Killing this dog won’t change anything.’

Menelaus pointed past Ajax. ‘He is no longer a prince or a seer. He’s an outcast and a beggar. You speak of dogs; I will feed him to my dogs!’

Helenus smirked. ‘What you say is true. I’m now an outcast. But ... if I help you win this war, I may be allowed to be a prince again elsewhere. Perhaps an island state would be a fair reward?’

‘What help is this knowledge to us?’ Agamemnon asked. ‘You haven’t one of these enchanted weavings in your hiding hole, have you?’

‘No, greatest of kings. There’s no weaving in my cave.’

Helenus pointed towards the tent’s entrance.

‘I have instead brought it here with me.’

Helenus untied the cord around the rug and rolled it out until everyone could see the pattern of a galloping black horse on its surface.

‘There is a matching weaving still in the city, only white. It was in my palace chamber, although when I was banished, it was moved to a wall near the stables.’

‘How do you know it’s been moved?’ asked Nestor.

‘Because I’ve used it. How else do you think I’ve been able to hide in a cave all this time and never venture out for food? I use the weaving to enter Troy and collect what I need.’

Diomedes crossed his arms as he squinted at what was turning out to be Troy’s greatest traitor. ‘And you’ve not been seen?’

With hand on chest, Helenus bowed for the first time since their meeting.

‘I have been careful. I use it only on the darkest of nights or when the moon is hidden by cloud.’

Menelaus knelt to run his hand across the material. It was cool like metal but otherwise normal. ‘Priam won’t suspect there is another of these weavings still around?’

‘My father never knew of their power. To him, they were simply pictures of horses. Only Paris and Hector ever knew of the weavings and what they could do. No-one has used them but us. I doubt my father would give a weaving of a horse a second thought; he has many dozens throughout the palace. As you all know, it is the symbol of our kingdom. He certainly wouldn’t know I took this black one with me.’

The assembly went silent as they collectively stared at the rug. Agamemnon imagined the horse's mane shimmering as though it were alive.

'The white weaving is near the stables,' Helenus added, 'and the stables are near the eastern gate to the city.'

Diomedes stood and thrust his own baton at the weaving. 'If men were to go through that, they would come out near a city gate?' he stammered.

'Yes, lord. At a place where your soldiers could easily enter the impregnable city.'

Agamemnon threw his hands in the air. 'Apollo be praised! We will destroy Troy at last.'

'As I have foreseen,' Helenus whispered.

Agamemnon rose from his throne and aimed his wooden sceptre at the treacherous prince of Troy. 'First, I want to see it work. If it's a trick, we'll take you to the walls of the city so your father can watch you pulled apart by living horses.'

*

Ajax offered to test Helenus's claim. Agamemnon was reluctant to sacrifice the powerful war leader, but the immense man was adamant and swore he would fight his way out of the city if it were a trap. Luckily for Helenus, they had only to wait a day for a cloudy night. Otherwise, Agamemnon may have grown suspicious and had Helenus executed for pleasure.

'The weaving must be upright to work. It cannot be on the floor.' Helenus waved at the sides of the tent.

‘We’ll do it outside,’ said Diomedes. ‘I do not wish to have a crowd of armed men in here.’

The outside guards were ordered to find a place where the weaving could be secured and have the area cleared of onlookers. Diomedes thought it wise for the men to not see what was happening. Ajax and two of his most trusted soldiers were helped with their armour, but when offered weapons, Ajax declined.

‘I don’t want any sound. If we carry swords and shields, we may bump into each other.’

‘The passage between is painless,’ said Helenus. ‘It’s like walking through a curtain of water without becoming wet.’

Ajax scowled at him. ‘But we don’t know what waits for us on the other side.’

‘If the weaving is still where I say, when you come out the other side, look to your left. There will be a courtyard and the city gates a hundred yards from you. The area is unguarded on the ground, and there are few torches. It’s near the main stables, so there is no need for lights at night.’

‘Why do you say *if* it’s still there?’

‘They may have moved it.’ Helenus grinned up at the giant. ‘It was there four nights ago. I see no reason it should not be still.’

‘You better hope, for your sake.’ Ajax turned to a soldier. ‘I’ve changed my mind. Hand me my pike spear. I’m going to kill some Ilions while I’m there.’

The soldier holding the twelve-foot spear hesitated.

‘It’s too big, Ajax,’ said Nestor. ‘Take a sword if you must. You want only to go through and come back again. You’re not going in there to fight. If the alarm is raised,

we may never use this artefact again, and our best hope to end this war will be lost.'

Ajax slapped the spear holder away.

'Fine! Get out of the way.' And with that, the enormous man took a few steps back, then ran towards the weaving. All watching, except Helenus, tensed as Ajax reached the fabric, then gasped as the warrior vanished.

Ajax's sandals slapped loudly on the pavement. Where a moment ago his feet were on sand, they now had worn stone beneath them. Wildly, he looked around in his disorientation and stopped running. He turned in time to see the other Greek soldiers materialise from a weaving of a white horse on the wall.

Together, they gawped at the enormous walls of the surrounding city. Level upon level of mud and stone buildings stretched off in all directions. There was little noise, only a distant clattering along another avenue. Ajax was the first to come to his senses, the sweaty scent of horse dung filling his nose.

'There are the gates!' He ran to a wall and pressed himself into the darkness.

The others followed until they were side by side. One started shaking and reached for where his sword would normally hang against his leg, as Ajax began shuffling toward the gates.

'Lord,' hissed the shaking soldier. 'Lord! We must go back.'

Ajax kept going. 'We can open the gates; they're just here.'

The soldier grabbed Ajax by the arm. In a fluid movement, Ajax spun around, gripping the smaller man

by the throat and pinning him against a wall. A clang of breastplate against stone rang down the street.

The other soldier rushed forward and whispered, 'Lord, we are unarmed. We must go back.' As he spoke, voices rose from high on the outer wall. Sentries were alerted to the noise below.

Growling as he released his grip, Ajax turned, and together they sprinted back into the white horse.

As the first soldier returned, he tripped in the sand, and Ajax, caught off guard, crashed over the body. The last man was fast enough to dodge the tangle of bodies and armour.

'Close the weaving!' Helenus shouted.

The others raced forward and rolled the fabric up the side of the tent, holding it above their heads.

'Why?' Diomedes asked as the soldiers rose from the ground, brushing sand off themselves.

'Because if it's closed, it cannot work. While it's rolled up, no-one from the other side can come through. It will feel like normal material to them.'

A beaming Agamemnon placed a hand on Helenus's shoulder. 'Well, treacherous son of Priam, you have proven your story. What reward do you expect?'

Helenus bowed deeply. 'I wish only two things, great Agamemnon. I have already mentioned the first—a city of my own—and to be made a prince again.'

'Granted!' Agamemnon slapped him on the shoulder. 'When we have destroyed Troy, I will give you Buthrotum on the shores of Lake Pelodes. What is your second request? It better not be another city; my generosity has limits.'

Helenus turned towards the glow of Troy in the black distance.

'The second thing I want, Agamemnon, remains behind the walls.'

*

Agamemnon gave Neoptolemus command of the party that would pass through the weaving and open the gates of Troy. He was a natural choice, being Achilles' son and, like his father, a supreme fighter. While Neoptolemus could not avenge his father's murder, as the hated Paris was already dead, he promised Agamemnon nothing would prevent him from opening the gates to the city. Neoptolemus handpicked forty battle-hardened veterans. At the authority of Agamemnon himself, an armed citizen of Troy went with them.

Based on Ajax's description of the area on the other side of the weaving, the men lined up in single file, the purpose being, as soon they were through, to break left or break right depending on their order in the line, so preventing collisions. Diomedes warned the men that slapping their feet on the stones inside the city at night might alert the guards. The soldiers removed their sandals.

When fully armed, and after sacrifices were made to Ares for courage and Apollo for the gift of the way into the city, the men waited for the messenger to arrive.

A quarter before the moon's zenith, a rider galloped into camp. He brought word that Ajax and his band of five hundred men, who were within a quarter-mile of the gate, were ready to storm ahead as soon as they heard

word of the others inside. Once the gates were open, Ajax was to hold them so the army's core could flood into the city. After a decade of fighting and protracted siege, the order across the entire collective Greek armies was that Troy be razed to the ground. Every inhabitant was to be slaughtered, man, woman, and child. There was to be no capturing of slaves, no raping of women, only pillaging of treasures after everyone in sight had been killed. The city was to be torched. Troy was to be wiped from history.

As the men burst through the white horse, they scattered to the shadows of the walls, some crouching behind pots and wagons. Helenus pointed to the passage leading to the gates past the stables. As the men padded quietly forward, the last soldier to pass through the weaving turned around and went back through again.

He reappeared in the Greek camp. 'They are inside, Lord!'

An archer waited by Agamemnon with a huge arrow wrapped in oiled cloth. Agamemnon signalled, and the archer dipped the arrowhead into a brazier. As the oil burst alight, he set it to the bow string, turned in the direction of Ajax's army, and fired it high into the night sky.

As Neoptolemus's men neared the gates, a guard on the wall raised the alarm inside the city at the same time another saw the flaming signal. For his quick sight, he received an arrow to the stomach, his body buckling over and falling to the avenue stones as the Greeks rushed on. There was no resistance at ground level. Troy's soldiers were desperately clambering down ladders to repel the

intruders when another sentry cried out that an army was nearing the outside of the gates. Confused calls rang from every direction as men were told to prepare for battle on the outside while the inside was already under attack. As the largest of the beams holding the gates in place clattered to the ground, Ajax appeared from the desert at the head of a screaming horde.

Seeing the Greeks pouring into the city, Neoptolemus fled into a side alley with Helenus. The path they took wound many times and had countless steps, but with each turn, yet more showed, and the higher they went. The pair were ignored by all they passed as great bronze bells rang throughout the city.

'Is it far?' Neoptolemus called as they reached a cavernous hall.

Helenus wheezed as he led on. At the top of another set of steps, the men found themselves in a paved courtyard. Helenus pointed to their right. 'Through that arch is the temple of Athena. He goes there every evening.'

Neoptolemus gripped his sword and sprang through the stone arch. But the temple was empty. Torches flickered on the walls and a brazier smoked beside the stone alter supporting a ten-foot gold statue of Athena. Helenus and Neoptolemus scanned the room, but they were alone.

'Is this a trap?!" Neoptolemus cried as they heard screaming and the clash of arms in the distance.

A priest appeared from another entrance and disappeared when he saw the invaders. Helenus and Neoptolemus sprinted after him.

‘He must be in the temple of Zeus!’ Helenus panted as the two ran after the priest.

‘Lord!’ the priest cried before them. ‘Lord, they are here!’

Neoptolemus caught up to the priest, and as they entered a further, still larger room, he brought the full force of his sword down on the man’s shoulder, removing his arm from the socket.

Helenus slowed when he saw his father kneeling at the altar, the old man’s hands raised out and above his head. At the sound of the priest’s scream, Priam turned.

‘What—’

Priam recognised his son, panting and dressed for battle. The king of Troy rose unsteadily.

‘Helenus! What are you doing? Why are you dressed that way?’

Priam looked at the black-cloaked man who had struck the priest to the ground, and then he saw what the assailant carried.

‘I know that shield,’ he whispered.

Neoptolemus stood over the screaming man. The priest pawed where his arm had been, trying to staunch the flow. With a swift movement, the son of Achilles brought his sword down on the back of the priest’s neck.

‘This shield,’ Neoptolemus said as he turned to face Priam, ‘was my fathers. The same shield he carried when he slew your Hector.’

Priam’s eyes flicked between his son and the bloody Greek warrior. ‘How did you get here, Helenus? Who let you in?’ Priam glanced at the temple archway as if for the first time hearing the distant battle. ‘What is happening?’

Helenus approached until he was an arm's length from his father. 'Agamemnon is overrunning the city, father. Menelaus has returned for Helen.'

Priam's eyes watered. He reached out knotted hands towards Helenus. 'But why are *you* here with them?'

Helenus slowly unsheathed his sword. Priam fell to his knees, wrapping his arms around his son's legs.

'Helenus! Helenus, no ...'

Helenus raised his arm, then stopped. Beneath him, Priam gurgled and panted at his leg as he would an injured animal. Helenus gradually lowered his weapon and went to rest his free hand on the old king's head. Before he could touch his father, there was a gust and flash of black cloak as Neoptolemus leapt forward and slew king Priam. Thus ended the centuries-old dynasty of Dardanus and its mighty city of Troy.



865

The year was 865, although Ivar did not know it.

From the crest of a beach dune dotted with wispy brown grasses, Ivar Ragnarsson gazed out across the North Sea. He had a notion of the Christian God and the counting of Christian years. He knew of Ansgar, the archbishop of Hamburg travelling through the northern lands spreading missionary words. Corrosive words of weakness and servitude.

Ivar wasn't interested. He held onto the old gods, as did his father before him, the fearsome war chief King Ragnar Lodbrok. Ivar cared more about the changing of seasons than a southern god who favoured the meek.

Below his lookout, herring gulls chased retreating waves in their search for sand crabs. Ivar squinted past them into the distance, searching for whitecaps or signs of changing currents. Soon, the wind would shift, and with it, the opportunity to sail. Ivar needed to sail so his men had strength for plundering when they reached the island

over the waters inhabited by the Angles and Saxons. If he waited much longer, they would have to row.

A year had passed since his father's murder by the Northumbrian ruler, King *Ælla*, and Ivar was being pressured by his brothers to avenge his death. Their harvest was long finished, herring had been dried, and ale was brewed. Throughout their villages, stocks for winter were now stored and animals secured in barns before winter gripped the land. If the Viking raiders stayed longer, there would be little to do but wait for the dark and piercing cold while across the sea lay a soft country of herders, ploughers, and worshippers of the white god. A land Ivar and his warriors had ravaged for years, yet remarkably, a land that remained unprepared for them.

The prince of the Danes knelt to press his fingers into the sand at the beach's limit. He spread his hand inside the ground and prayed to Odin for the strength to sweep through the Christians. In return, Ivar swore to send Odin their souls.

*

Ivar's wife, Astrid, tapped her foot against a leg of the table as she watched Halina, their servant girl, stack plates on one arm and wipe spilt food with the other. Halina was abruptly told to leave.

Bowing to her mistress, Halina left Ivar and Astrid with their dogs, who were now blissfully dozing before a healthy fire.

Astrid toyed with a golden braid that ran all the way to her lap.

'I have something to show you,' she said, 'to take on your raiding.'

Ivar sent a shower of sparks into the flames as he poked the coals with an iron. 'Truth be told, I'm forcing myself to go this time. Many of the men are saying they want to stay there once we land.'

'Let them stay if they want. But make sure you return when you're done.' Astrid rose from her chair. 'Never mind them. Come and see what I got you.'

She took her husband's brawny hand and led him from the hall and along a passage ending in their bedroom.

'So soon after eating?' Ivar grinned.

Astrid slapped his chest as they entered the bedroom.
'I'm not the present. This is!'

On a wall hung a huge woollen weaving. Coloured red, green, and white, showing a scene of people around a central arch shaped like the doorway into a longhouse. Above the arch were stitched two large ravens, their wings outstretched and beaks open.

'It's magnificent!' Ivar breathed as he stepped up to the weaving. 'It will remind me of home.'

Astrid looked to her husband. 'It'll do more than that. I've another here on the floor, just the same.'

'What use are two of them?'

'I'll show you. Take that one to the stable and hang it somewhere. It already has hooks. And make sure the bottom touches the ground!'

'Did you waste time making one for the animals to look at as well?'

‘It’s nice of you to say that, but I didn’t make them.’ Astrid pushed her husband towards the roll on the ground that was the size of a man. ‘Do as I say and wait there!’

Ivar smacked his wife’s bottom. ‘I’d rather give you my present.’

‘Go on!’ Astrid pointed down the hall. ‘I promise it will be worth it.’

Grinning as he slung the heavy weaving onto his shoulder, Ivar carried it from the longhouse.

*

Inside the resin-smelling stable, ponies with cloudy breath and woolly coats shuffled, half-asleep in their pens. As Ivar entered, he sat his lantern on a post and searched for a wall to hang the large weaving. The first spot he chose left it swinging far off the floor. If Astrid asked for it to touch the ground, Ivar would make sure it did.

Rolling aside barrels of ale, Ivar made a space on the pine-log wall to sling up the weaving. He stepped back to view it in the half-light. He would ask Astrid where she had bought it, because the colours were like nothing he’d seen; when viewed from an angle, they shimmered and changed like sunlight on fish scales.

Ivar waited.

What was he supposed to do now? Accept it looked as good in a stable as it did in the house? Maybe Astrid was tricking him, testing to see how long he would wait in the freezing night, like a fool. Well, if it was a game she wanted, he could be as patient as a sleeping bear. Ivar was

not about to return to her, laughing at how gullible he'd been to decorate the stable.

Ivar found a milking stool and made himself comfortable, then considered a heavier coat might have been wise. Cold be damned; Ivar knew cold.

When only five years old, he'd fallen into the Stora River as the ice gave way beneath his feet. His father shouted at him to not go out, but Ivar was determined he was light and fast enough to cross. He would never forget the flash as the water surrounded him, the cold drawing the air from his lungs. The ice crust was too thin for anyone to reach him; Ivar was left to get out on his own. At least the freezing had numbed him to the flogging from his father for his disobedience.

Ivar kept waiting. By Odin, it was a gorgeous scene before him! He checked the candle in the rawhide lantern; there was only a stub of beeswax left, and the light in the room was fading. Until it ran out, he would look at the weaving and wait for his wife to join him.

As Ivar studied the scene of the weaving, it began to blur at the edges and sharpen in the middle, the colours changing as the light of the candle dimmed further. Ivar imagined the arch changing into a woman dressed in dark green with a long golden plait. The longer he watched, the fainter the light in the stable became, until a woman walked right out of the cloth.

In a flash, Ivar drew a knife from his belt.

'Ivar!' the apparition shrieked. 'It's me. It's your Astrid!'

'Astrid?' Ivar whispered with the knife poised above his head.

The spirit before him raised her hands to her husband's cheeks, pushing her fingers through the coarse beard. 'Yes, beloved ... it's me.'

In the nearly extinguished light, his wife's skin looked freshly washed. She felt real enough and had impossibly entered the stable through a wall with no door.

'How is this possible?' Ivar asked.

Astrid pulled his head down to kiss him, then took his hand and turned to re-enter the weaving.

'Here, let me show you,' she said. 'We still have the night before you leave tomorrow.'

*

Eadfrith, the Bishop of Dunwich cathedral in East Anglia, stood on the parapet after being summoned by the sight of ships nearing the cathedral. Through the wind and drizzle, he made out the prows of boats and the bright-coloured shields secured to their sides. They were Danes. The priest, who had called him to the top of the cathedral, asked if they might be traders. Eadfrith shook his grizzled head and squinted. 'It's too late in the year, you fool.'

Eadfrith watched as the first of the ships rode a wave onto the shore. He'd wasted time coming up here and turned to the priest. 'Quick, ring the bell. Gather the men!'

'Yes, lord.' The man kept looking at the boats.

'Hurry! Tell them to bring spears with them. Any weapons they can find.'

*

Eadfrith towered over the men beside and behind him as he stood at the point where the beach reached the land. In one hand, he held a smith's hammer, and in the other, a short sword. For a huge man, he moved faster without a shield in the way.

Eadfrith trusted his leather jerkin to cope with most knife blades, and he knew the raider's archery was unreliable from a distance. It was the axe in the other man's hand he needed to watch. Eadfrith reminded himself to follow his opponent's eyes, not his hands because where the eyes moved, the weapon followed. Nearby, men heard their bishop muttering for God to protect them.

In unison, the hulls pitched like growling wolves onto the stony beach. More boats were coming, but already twenty had offloaded their crews. The raiders were gathering into a mass, drawn by a figure at the lead, an enormous man, taller even than Eadfrith and cloaked in a heavy bearskin.

'What brings you here?' Eadfrith shouted across the expanse between the crowds.

The leader of the Danes ignored his cry. Instead, he looked behind him to see how many of his boats were still to land. There was only a handful left.

Then Ivar Ragnarsson, Prince of the Danes, turned back to the bishop and, reaching both hands under his bearskin, pulled out wicked, curved axes and roared as he sprang up the beach.

*

Dunwich cathedral turned out to be fine pickings. The raiders sacked the Christian treasures, and Ivar was pleased with the number of gold symbols they collected. The raiders gathered the boys and women to send home as slaves while they slaughtered every man older than twelve.

Eadfrith had made it through the brief battle on the beach until an arrow lodged into his thigh. He'd killed a raider with his first hammer swing and stabbed another in the groin, but his brothers were not so effective and fell under the skill and ferocity of the Vikings.

While alive, Ivar had the Bishop of Dunwich nailed to the cathedral door. Next, he ordered the bishop disembowelled, ensuring the man's vitals were tied to prevent him from dying quickly. Let it be known to any who saw the bishop's gutted body—the Vikings were to be feared.

Once again, Ivar and his raiders had returned to pillage the island during the winter months. What the inhabitants of the island did not realise was that this time, the Vikings were staying. This was not a raid; it was a mission of conquest. And for Ivar and his brother, it was also a path to revenge.

The war chiefs of the island were delayed in their response to the Viking attacks, so by midwinter, the Great Heathen Army, as it was now being called, was deep inside the kingdom of East Anglia.

*

Deep in the fog came the thunder of horses approaching, a rhythmic beating with no clear direction. Halfdan said he counted three horses.

‘There is another riding behind the others,’ Ubba corrected.

‘Three, four … either way, it’s an envoy.’

‘They may be scouts,’ said Ubba.

‘We have men in the trees?’ Ivar asked.

‘Twenty.’

‘All archers?’

‘Yes, lord. And there are men hidden on the ground with spears for the horses.’

Ivar grimaced as pain shot along his arm. He hoped none of the men saw him flinch as he pretended to deal with an itch under his tunic.

‘No-one moves unless I say,’ Ivar ordered. ‘They will come to offer tribute, not to fight.’ As Ivar finished, the thundering reached a climax and the horses materialised from the fog.

The four riders, for there were four, as Ubba had said, slowed when they saw the assembled Vikings. Halting a hundred yards from the invaders, the leader of the party dismounted and walked towards them until he felt close enough to be heard. He stopped and bowed to the assembly.

‘Hail Ivar, Prince of the Danes!’ the man called in Danish.

Ubba ran a fingernail over the pommel of his sword. In his mind, he counted the grooves cut into the steel ball, each line a soul he had given to Odin. Its surface was a crisscross of lines. Right now, he wanted to add the man who had only acknowledged his brother and not him.

‘Hail.’ Ivar crossed an arm to his chest.

‘Lord, I am sent by our King of Mercia.’ The man held his arms wide. ‘I am unarmed. May I approach?’

‘Come forward. I will greet you the same.’

The Danish prince left his men to greet the envoy on the ground between the parties. The frosted grass crackled beneath his feet as he strode forward.

Halfway, Ivar and the envoy spoke while Ubba and the others waited. The Vikings stood relaxed; if they had to react, it was best for their limbs to be supple. For the same reason, they blinked freely in the chilly morning. Dry eyeballs would hamper their sight if it came to a fight.

A horse snorted and nodded; otherwise, the envoy remained silent, staring back at the Vikings rather than the men speaking.

Ivar locked his arm with the messenger, signalling an agreement was reached. As Ubba and the others watched Ivar return, the messenger remounted and the envoy returned to the fog.

‘Just as I thought,’ Ivar said as he reached his captains. ‘They want us to pass around Mercia. In tribute for leaving them alone, they will give us horses—not enough for everyone, but two hundred or more. Plenty for us to quickly move north.’

Ivar’s captains sounded their approval, while Ubba closed his hand around the pommel of his sword and tightened his jaw.

*

A lone candle glowed in the bedroom as Ivar stepped from the weaving. His right foot caught on the floor furs,

so strange from the stone room he'd left. He stumbled, then righted himself. In the shadows, he could see the outline of Astrid's body under the blankets.

Ivar quietly made his way forward until, at the bedside, he sat and unwrapped the woollen bindings around his calves, pulled off his shirt and trousers, and slipped into bed beside his wife.

Astrid was warm. Ivar pressed himself against her back and slid his arm between hers as she whispered something beyond his hearing.

Sleep was a long time coming for Ivar. Travelling through the weaving excited his mind as much as it exhausted his body until, close to sunrise, he drifted off to the heavy breathing of his wife against him.

'Why didn't you wake me?' Astrid asked the next day.

'You were under a spell.' Ivar said into his soup.

Astrid grimaced. 'Don't joke about spells!'

'What do you care?' Ivar snorted through a mouthful of cod. 'We're using a spell to see each other.'

'It's not the same. It's the weaving that's enchanted, not us.'

'Is there more?'

The woman brought the iron pot to the table and refilled her husband's bowl.

'Where are the thralls?' Ivar looked around the hall.

'I sent them to town. It would be bad if they saw you appear from nowhere. Halina has items to get; they won't be back until it's near dark.'

'I would gladly flay them if they said a word about seeing me to anyone else.'

'Don't do that! They are obedient servants and can finally speak our words.'

Astrid watched her husband lustily scoop food into his mouth. His usual appetite was even greater than normal. 'Besides, sometimes little Halina is good for you,' she said.

Ivar paused from eating to look at his smirking wife.

'I'm going to be good to you when I've finished this!' he said.

*

There were strict orders for no-one to enter Ivar's room without his permission. The penalty was a torturous death for anyone not on the war council, and to those on the council, it would be combat with Ivar. Such was his reputation; the threat was enough to maintain his privacy.

Torstan had followed Ivar on raids for longer than any of the others. He was Ivar's senior by ten years and, at forty-two, the oldest in the heathen army. He'd never known Ivar to make such a demand for privacy, and it had come abruptly and unwarranted for the first time on this raid. Torstan suspected there was more to Ivar's order than simply a desire for solitude. This evening, he had entered Ivar's room to speak with him and was surprised to not find him there. Risking his lord's wrath, Torstan awaited Ivar's return. It was unusual for Ivar to not tell him where he was going. There were spies everywhere, and it was dangerous to travel without a bodyguard.

Torstan fell asleep waiting.

Long after sunrise, he was woken by a sound in the room. Torstan scanned around, but he was alone. He realised the sound was coming from the hanging weaving Ivar had brought with him, apparently a gift from his wife. Torstan rose and drew his blade to investigate; *it may be rats eating at the fabric.* Suddenly, the weaving shook, and Torstan moved back.

Ivar stepped from the weaving, straight into Torstan.

‘Witchcraft!’ Torstan shouted.

Ivar leapt to grab Torstan by the throat, their bodies falling as Ivar pinned the older man to the ground.

‘What did you see?’ Ivar growled as he tightened his hold and knocked the knife from Torstan’s hand.

‘You came ... from the picture.’ Torstan hissed through the choking grip.

‘For seeing that’—Ivar raised an enormous fist—‘you will die.’

‘Lord, you need me,’ croaked Torstan.

The men lay there, locked together, but neither struggled. To kill the messenger of the gods may not be a good omen for his men. Ivar lessened his grip on the cleric’s throat.

‘You will say nothing of this.’ Ivar released Torstan altogether and helped his advisor to his feet.

‘I have heard of the like before, though I have never seen it.’ Torstan rubbed his throat. The cartilage was bruised, but Ivar’s grip was weaker than usual. ‘I thought it was only a tale made to scare children. Like trolls and pixies.’

Ivar limped to a table that held cups and a pitcher.

‘Beware, little ones’—Torstan wiggled his fingers in the air—‘for the sprite will jump through the wall and take you away if you misbehave!’

Ivar passed Torstan a cup filled with ale. Travelling between the weavings was exhausting him even more each time he used it. Liquid spilled from the shaking cup.

‘I have another such weaving at home. I use it to see Astrid. You will say nothing of it to anyone.’

‘Don’t you trust me?’

Ivar drained his cup with a long, noisy swallow. He stared at the other man through red, wet eyes.

‘Trust is why you’re still alive.’

*

Before they reached the gates of Jorvic, Ubba was wise enough to consult with his brother. Ivar came up with the idea to pick a time when the townsfolk were at a holy ceremony, when all the leaders of the city would be at one location—the cathedral. It would be easier to overcome the greater numbers if the resistance lacked direction. He was right. Jorvic fell quickly under the targeted attack.

Ælla was not in the town, though. He knew of the heathen army’s plan to attack Jorvic and had gone to find Osbert, with whom he’d been fighting over the rule of Northumbria. Now was not the time to squabble; they must combine their forces and drive the raiders from their land.

They never got the chance. As Osbert’s army swung around from the north to meet up with Ælla’s band, the Vikings were a step ahead. Using their network of scouts,

the heathen army had split in two, and Ubba's men had ambushed Osbert as they passed between woods and a marshland.

Ælla's smaller war party was easy to overcome once Osbert was out of the fight.

Such was the way of the Vikings. Fast and ferocious skirmishes were the key. Large, open battlefields where horses could cut them down or sheer numbers overwhelm them were avoided at all costs. Instead, they focused on weak targets, rich to plunder, such as monasteries or small towns with churches or larger towns with cathedrals. The Vikings could not understand the Christians' fascination with turning every second man and woman into a saint of some description, but this meant the land was littered with Christian relics and buildings resplendent with precious metals and gems, all waiting to be taken.

*

'I am Ælla!' the bound man bellowed at his captors.

Ivar pointed towards a young oak tree outside the gates to Yorvik. 'You *were* Ælla. Tie him face-first to that tree.'

Ælla struggled as his shouts for respect were ignored. All esteem for the king of Northumbria was now reduced to the punishment of a brigand.

'We do this together,' Ivar said as he handed a knife to Ubba. His brother's eyes narrowed as he grinned evilly.

Around them, the host of the army was gathered with many Jorvic townsfolk. Ælla had been an immoral and brutal ruler. The townsfolk favoured Osbert as their

king, but he was now gone, killed in the battle with the Vikings. Without an obvious local nobleman left to fill the void, it was time to turn to the Danes for leadership. Anyway, the crowd was here to watch an execution. Whose it was little mattered.

Ivar used his knife to slash the linings of the king's shirt until he could pull the material away and expose his back.

Without warning, *Ælla* screamed as Ivar ran his blade along the side of the man's spine, from the base of his neck to his waist, cutting only so deep as to bump over the places where the ribs joined the spine.

Ivar drove his red knife into the bark beside *Ælla*'s head, signalling it was Ubba's turn.

Ubba did the same on the other side of the man's spine, just as skilfully as Ivar, though he did it slower. When he reached the last rib, Ubba drove his knife through the man's left hand and into the timber.

Ælla's screaming reached a higher pitch, unable to speak or beg for mercy.

A carpenter approached the brothers and handed Ivar a small axe, its bladed head half the width of a hand, a type the Danes used to carve dragons on the prows of their longships. With the axe, Ivar was handed a small, flat-ended hammer.

The axe blade was placed in the sliced flesh and rested against a rib, then Ivar smacked the back of the axe with the hammer, separating the cartilage joining the rib to the spine. *Ælla* screamed without taking a breath.

Ivar worked his way down the man's back with the deft hand of experience, separating each rib from the

spine while taking care to not puncture the lung beneath. At the eighth rib, he stopped, handed the tools to Ubba, and called for wine.

Ubba repeated the process along the left side of Ælla's spine, each time tapping the cartilage softer so it would take longer to sever from the spine. Ivar drank as he watched, smelling when he put the cup to his mouth, Ælla's blood on his hands. The crowd erupted with a cheer when a woman vomited.

The ribs free, the brothers took up their knives again, Ivar's from the bark and Ubba's from Ælla's hand. They worked together to slice the muscles between the ribs, so when they had finished, the ribcage was free of the backbone and free of its neighbouring rib. The executioners now had to move fast before the man died. Ælla had to experience the brilliant pain still to come.

Ivar called for chocks of wood. With these, the brothers wedged open the ribcage until they could see the gasping lungs. Another man brought them a wooden pail filled with coarse crystals. Together, the brothers shoved their bloody hands into the salt, drawing them out white and crusted.

Together, the sons of Radnok Lodbrok reached into the chest of the man who had murdered their father by throwing him in a pit filled with snakes, gripped each of Ælla's lungs, and slowly pulled them out of his back.

*

By the afternoon, the body was so dark with ravens it looked like it had grown wings. Ivar had stayed back after

the others had left to celebrate. A huge raven perched on the dead king's head with an eye fixed on Ivar the executioner.

'Your father would be proud,' said Torstan as he approached.

Ivar's sight remained locked with the bird.

'Can I talk with you, Ivar? I'm worried.'

'Do you think that is one of Odin's ravens?' Ivar asked.

'Which?'

'The huge bastard on Ælla's head. It hasn't eaten; it just watches me. The others stay away from it.'

The cleric examined the bird. It was a normal raven. 'Could be ... who knows.' Torstan didn't believe Odin or any of his ravens existed. He survived by controlling people's imagination, and if that meant people needed to believe in gods and spirits, so be it.

'I really need to speak with you, lord.'

'Let's sit then,' said Ivar, turning away from the spectacle. 'I'm drained.'

The men crossed the marketplace to a small house fronted by a thatched fence, with a bench near the doorway.

'You must have seen by now how frayed your weaving has become?' Torstan began. 'I'd take care in using it, Ivar. We should find a weaver to mend it if the fabric rots. Who knows what it may do to you if you keep using it.'

Ivar leaned against a thatched fence. 'It's too late.'

Torstan noticed Ivar's legs were shaking.

Ivar sighed. 'Something's wrong with me, Torstan. Deep inside ... soaked in my marrow. I don't have the

strength I used to. I can never shake this oppressive tiredness.'

Torstan forced a smile. 'It's only the cold getting in. You've no reason to complain. Wait until you're my age! I have to warm my cock in my hands before it works for me.'

Ivar collapsed onto the bench. 'No ... it's not the chill. I feel as though ... I may snap at any time.'

The cleric watched on as the war leader ran his hands over his knees, massaging the joints through the fabric. The first streaks of grey were appearing in his hair.

'I'm becoming ... brittle. Like lake ice in the thaw. I feel if I push too hard, I'll shatter to pieces.'

Torstan's eyebrows rose as he leaned forward. 'And you think the weaving causes this exhaustion?'

'I'm certain of it.'

The cleric reached down to take hold of Ivar's arm.

'Then stop using it!' Torstan whispered. 'Stay here with me. You've done everything you set out to do. You are the king of Jorvic now, and you've avenged your father's murder. The bards will sing your name for years to come.'

'That's not enough, my friend. You know why I use the weaving.'

'Well, take a new wife.'

Ivar pulled away. 'Don't you dare!'

'Forgive me, Ivar.' Torstan straightened to look down at the new king of Jorvic. 'I fear without you, your brother will lead us into battles we cannot win.'

Ivar clenched his fists against his chest.

'I'm not done yet. I'll be carried into battle before I'm replaced! I'll not shy away as a cripple.'

Torstan considered what the men might think if Ivar were carried in battle—whether they would continue to venerate him. Cripples became mystics if they were born that way, but they left strong men who became frail out in the winter’s night to die, even if they once were noble warriors. Unable to walk or swing an axe was hardly the image of a warrior.

*

Halina was scraping ashes from the fireplace in the bedroom when Ivar appeared from the weaving behind her. She spun around at the sound of his entry, dropping the sack she’d been filling. There her master stood with his legs apart and frame bowed from the hips as though worn out from a long ride. Halina quickly collected up the bag.

‘Where’s your mistress?’

‘She’s in the village, lord.’ Halina knew to remain silent about the weaving, but now being witness to its use terrified her. She’d heard tales of magical rugs from her homeland. Stories around winter fires of witches moving between forests and baby’s blood used to bring the spells alive. She knew her mistress had bought the weaving from a trader who had travelled through her homeland bringing spices and silks from the east, which were paid with gold taken from her husband’s raids.

Ivar looked hard at her; Halina avoided eye contact. Ivar decided he would not wait for Astrid to return. From

the corner of her sight, Halina saw him pull his over-tunic up over his head and drop it to the floor.

‘Bring me a cup, girl.’

Halina bowed and hurried from the room to collect her master a drink from the hall.

‘Wine, if there is any!’ Ivar called out.

Ivar continued to undress. He undid the single button of his inner tunic and pulled it over his head, then released the cord holding his trousers. He bent to undo the laces of his leather shoes and toppled sideways onto the bed as he lost his balance. Using his feet, he scraped off his shoes and lifted his waist to pull his pants off. Lying there naked, he gazed up at the darkened timber ceiling and rested from the travel between the weavings. The room was warm, even without a fire. He could feel his blood beginning to rise.

Halina returned with a cup of wine. Ivar sat up at her sound, and Halina couldn’t help but look at his broad, pale chest with its signs of a violent life.

‘Put it over there.’

Halina did as she was told, her stomach tensing at the sight of her naked master. ‘Would you like me to heat water for a bath, lord?’

Ivar didn’t answer. There was a heavy pause, and Halina turned and ventured to look at her master’s face. She had seen this look in his eyes before; her sight fell to his lap.

‘No, Halina, not yet.’ Ivar stood and approached her. ‘I’ll have one later,’ he said as he gently ran his fingers

through her hair. She gazed up at his bearded face and forced a smile.

Ivar motioned to the skins before the fireplace, to the spot where the wolfhounds slept at night. ‘Lie down on the rug, girl.’

*

The light soaked into Ivar’s face as he sat on a stool outside the longhouse. Astrid was talking, but he wasn’t listening. The heat was easing his aching arms, and it was all he could think about now. It was mid-morning, and for some unknown reason, all Ivar wanted to do was sleep.

He felt a slap on his shoulder.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ Astrid moved to block out the sun. ‘Have you been listening to me?’

Ivar cracked his eyes open. Above him, his wife stood with her hands on her hips. She was wearing a forest green strap dress with a pale smock beneath. The hem was dirty from the thaw.

‘Why don’t you wear the dark blue dress? It looks good on you. It’s tighter.’

‘It’s tighter because I’m getting older,’ Astrid grumbled.

‘I can see your waist better in the other dress.’

‘You haven’t been listening, have you?’

Ivar shut his eyes again. ‘Move, woman. You’re in my sunlight.’

Astrid stayed where she was. Ivar sighed. ‘You said something about a horse. For Baldur.’

‘He needs to learn to ride. On a real horse, not one of the ponies.’

‘Well, get him one. Stop troubling me about it.’

Ivar opened his eyes again to find Astrid now squatting beside him; she took his hand in hers and squeezed it. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘There’s nothing wrong. I’m exhausted. That’s all there is to it.’

Astrid squeezed harder and waited for a better explanation. She had never known her husband to be anything but vigorous.

‘Perhaps I’m also getting old,’ he said as he closed his eyes to enjoy the warmth.

Inside the longhouse, Halina crept into the bedroom and pushed the door closed behind her, leaving it ajar just enough so she could hear someone approach, but not enough that anyone might see her. At the end of her mistress’s bed, she lifted the heavy lid of a box, placed folded clothes on top of others already inside, and carefully closed the lid. She moved around the room in quiet determination, performing a routine repeated hundreds of times since joining the household aged six. Her parents were killed when Ivar’s raiding party sacked their village in Poland, and Halina, along with the other girls spared the fate of the rest of her family were taken back to Denmark to be domestic slaves.

It wasn’t until she was twelve that they allowed her to visit the market on her own. There she met more girls from her land, some older and trying to pay for their freedom, perhaps even marry and have their own household rather than be a thrall all their lives. Others her age would not dream of ever being able to pay for their freedom.

She asked how they were treated in their households. The work was the same: weaving, cleaning, caring for animals, raising their captors' children—from sunrise to sunset. Even being the object of their master's lust, especially when the woman of the house did not want her husband near her or when she was unclean.

Halina knew her master treated her better than most, unless the other thralls were lying. She told them her master cared for her; he spoke kindly and was never forceful. This attracted ridicule and looks that told her she was being a fool. Every Viking viewed his slaves as possessions, less important than cattle. In truth, she hated Ivar to the core and longed for the day he would die.

Since learning of the weavings, Halina had collected clothes moths and kept them in a wooden jar. She fed them pieces of wool until they laid eggs and the larvae hatched. These she gathered up and carefully placed on the back of the weaving in the bedroom, always putting the infant grubs where it was dark, and they would be safe.

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There were two views as to what it meant; one, it was a sign Ivar had lost Odin's favour. Torstan worked hard to suppress that idea. And the other, it was simply a freak fall. Ivar had been unlucky as a man who had dodged death so often, only to then break his collarbone and arm falling from a horse.

Ivar had never been a proficient rider. The ponies at home were for ploughing and carrying, and they were small, and a man his size needed a warhorse for any great

distance. The Mercian horses were a mix, but most were small. The locals saw no point in giving the invaders their best horses.

While crossing a stream swollen with spring waters, Ivar's horse had stumbled, and he'd lost his grip. As he hit the water, his shoulder struck a rock, snapping his collarbone and his arm in four places. Torstan could not see how such an impact would cause such damage, especially to a man who had so many times deflected the force of swords during battle. He remembered Ivar's words about feeling brittle and kept his thoughts to himself.

Naturally, Ubba was now chosen to lead the army as they trampled across ploughed lands and wove their way through forests. The woods were thick with boar, which was much to the men's liking. Ubba made no effort to hide his pleasure at seeing his brother being carried on crossed shields; a sign of respect from the men but to Ubba, it was nothing but weakness.

*

It took five months after Ivar's fall for the breaks to finally heal. During that time, he had sat back and watched two major battles and several raids on monasteries, all the while offering tactics as decisive in determining the outcome as the skilled warriors' ferocity. It was not enough, though, to control the unease spreading through the great heathen army.

'I say we vote.' Ubba addressed the council of war captains.

Ivar glared at his younger brother. He didn't care that the eyes of the others were on him. He wanted them to see his anger at Ubba. 'Vote on what?' Ivar rumbled.

Ubba turned his back on Ivar, paced across the hall, then swung around to the gathering of men.

'That I take sole lead of our men. You are done, Ivar; you haven't taken part in any fighting for months. The men won't keep following you if you need to be carried everywhere.'

Ivar swayed as he rose off his bench. He grabbed hold of Torstan's shoulder. 'I can walk.'

'Not far, brother. I don't know what ails you, but it gets worse. You've been like this for over a year. Long before you fell in the river.'

'The men will stay with you, Ivar,' Torstan said half-heartedly while also bridling at Ubba's challenge. 'You've never failed us. The men worship you.'

Ubba's eyes were reduced to slits. 'You know that isn't true, cleric. The men want me to lead them now.'

Torstan had to be careful not to push Ubba too hard. Very soon, he would be their leader, whether or not Ivar wanted it.

'Say it, Torstan!' Ubba shouted.

'Some ... men do,' Torstan muttered.

'Some! You lie. Stop weaselling your way out of the truth.'

Ivar fell back in his seat as the room went silent. Men looked to the floor, the walls, anywhere but to their leader and his challenger. Eventually, Ubba said calmly, 'Why not vote? If men want me to lead, then it's done. If some

choose to stay with you, so be it. But you won't survive another winter here. Take men with you, if you wish, and move south where the weather will be kinder to you.'

Ubba went on as Ivar's shoulders sagged. 'Many men have taken wives. Remember, this is what we came here to do, to settle. Do you really want to keep raiding the country around where we wish to live? Eventually, they will gather a force against us too great to repel. Or we will start to skin the sheep rather than fleece it.'

*

More than half the men chose to stay with Ubba. Torstan naturally went with Ivar and, together with those loyal to them, or those not wanting to stay in Jorvic, they set sail for Ireland. The three hundred warriors took the northern passage around the top of the land of the Scots. They thought to raid along the way, but the natives were forewarned and prepared. On the west coast, the abbey at Iona would have been perfect, but after so many previous raids over the years, the abbey was abandoned and the relics moved to safer places far inland.

Ivar's fleet continued until they reached the north of Ireland. Raiding the Irish was as easy as the initial forays into East Anglia. The land remained a fracture of internally warring tribes, and Ivar's party moved swiftly and chose soft targets again, like monasteries and abbeys. As the autumn months ended and the warm air stopped blowing across the lush fields from the ocean, Ivar witnessed his men take to settling rather than raiding. Tributes came in from the Christians, preferring to pay

than defend themselves. Ivar decided it was time for him to return home and tell Astrid he was finished.

*

'Why go back at all?' Astrid pleaded. 'Stay with me now!'

'I will return and tell Torstan he should lead now. He will make a wise chieftain. The men need a calm lord now, not a warring one like me.'

'Please don't leave. I beg you! I fear evil will happen. There is something wrong with my weaving.'

Ivar took his wife's hands. He looked down at her with his swollen eyes and smiled warmly. 'My love, this is it. I promise. No more fighting, no more travelling between the lands.'

Astrid pushed him away. 'Be quick, then! Find Torstan and return straight away.'

'I will be no longer than the time it takes to find him. He will understand and agree with my wishes.'

Astrid let a tear run down her face. 'I will wait for you.'

Outside the bedroom, Halina held her breath as she listened. Silently, she rubbed an amber stone in her palm and called upon Jezi Baba, the Slavic forest goddess, to come eat the soul of her master. In so doing, Halina would be free.

*

The men were drunk and enjoying themselves in Ivar's room in the church. The land outside was dusted with snow, and there was nothing to do in the evening but drink ale and play rhyming games.

‘We should not be in here,’ said the only man sober.

‘It’s warmer in this room,’ said another. ‘The fire works better, and I’m freezing.’

‘You know what he will do if he finds us in here?’

‘Who cares. He’s too weak these days to do anything except eat.’

Irritated by the sickly smell of the mead, the sober man wandered to a wall of the church where Ivar’s weaving hung. The colours had all but faded away, though the outline of a scene remained. ‘Why does he still carry this weaving with him everywhere?’ he asked the room.

The others ignored him and continued their game. The weaving reminded the sober man of home: its longhouse with its carvings and the ravens above the door. The material shimmered in the light, subtly changing hues as watched it. Cautiously, he reached out to touch the wool.

‘A draugr!’ he cried as Ivar staggered out from the material. Ivar’s eyes were blood-red, and he was struggling to walk.

‘Witchcraft!’ said another, falling off his stool.

Ivar raised a hand as he paced forward. ‘Calm yourselves. Don’t be alarmed,’ he breathed.

‘A demon amongst us!’ cried a fast-thinking warrior as he took a spear from the wall. Seeing him do so, the others scrambled for their weapons.

Ivar stopped moving and straightened. ‘Stop what you’re doing. Let me explain!'

But the drunken men bustling over their weapons were terrified. In their eyes, a demon had materialised

from the wall, and they had to protect themselves. Ivar went for his sword, but he never travelled through the weaving with a weapon. There had never been a need to. He shot a look to the doors, but before he could move, he was blocked by armed men. His own warriors, the men who he all knew by name.

With supreme effort, Ivar straightened and bellowed, 'I am Ivar Ragnarsson, your leader!'

'The demon tries to deceive us!'

'I'm no draugr!' Ivar turned and pointed to the weaving. 'This is a magical weaving I use to return to my home. I am still your king. Here, touch me and see; I am flesh and blood.'

A warrior raced forward and, with a mighty arc of his sword, slashed the weaving in half. Ivar yelled. The man slashed again, and the remains of the weaving fell to the ground. Ivar lunged at the swordsman and, with his weight behind him, smashed the assailant into the wall. As the two wrestled, Ivar felt a sudden burning sensation in his side. He reached around and gripped wood protruding from his stomach. He tried to hold it, but the spear was yanked from his hand. Before Ivar could turn to defend himself, he felt a further burning in his back. Already exhausted, Ivar lost his footing and fell to the floor.

The Vikings' warriors kept stabbing long after he was dead. Then, taking axes, they hacked until their king's body was in pieces. Thrilled and spattered with gore, the murderers ran from the church, howling like maniacs into the night.

*

Astrid had watched the weaving from the moment Ivar entered it. She took in its every detail, longing for the material to shimmer, any sign of movement, counting the minutes of Ivar's return.

The colours of the weaving were so pale the longhouse shutters were not allowed to be opened for fear of sunlight fading the wool further. Astrid scratched at her palm as she stared at the scene; the skin beneath her eyes was bruised. Her lids were drooping when abruptly the weaving shook.

Startled by the movement, Astrid got up. Something was wrong.

It wasn't the shimmer she was used to. The fabric was shaking violently as though there was something behind, not inside. The trembling grew until a tearing sound came from the material, as before her eyes, a gash rent the entire length of the weaving.

Astrid screamed as the fabric slid from its hooks. She leapt to lift one side to take the weight, but as she did so, it tore again in different directions and lengths. Great pieces slid over her arms to the ground. At the sound of her crying, Halina rushed into the room.

'What is it, mistress?'

'Get me thread, girl! Hurry!'

Halina left the room as Astrid gathered the pieces against her bosom, kicking the firs away from her feet to make a clearing on the floor on which to lay the disintegrating weaving.

Halina returned, clutching a skein of thread and bone needles.

'Lay them out. Help me! We must repair it.'

‘Why now, mistress?’ Halina hid her glee from her mistress. ‘Wouldn’t it be easier to sew in the daylight?’

‘Do it!’ Astrid cried.

Together, the women lay the pieces of the weaving as best they could on the floor. Astrid wailed as fragments tore further.

‘Give me a needle! I will start here; you do that side. Take care to join the lines aright.’

As Astrid slid the needle through the fabric, it crumbled to dust in her fingers. The more they touched, the more the weaving disintegrated.

‘Stop!’ Astrid yelled.

‘What’s happening, mistress? It’s vanishing before us!’

Astrid dropped her face to the weaving with her shoulders shaking as she wailed. She lay her pale hands flat on the material.

Halina watched on with pleasure. ‘Mistress?’

Astrid eventually raised her head. Faint red and green lines from the weaving blended where tears had run down her cheeks.

‘Get out,’ she breathed.

‘Mistress?’

‘Get out!’

When the slave girl had gone, Astrid slowly stripped until she stood bare in the cool of her room. Then the wife of Ivar Ragnarsson, the man known notoriously to the Angles and Saxons as Ivar the Boneless, lay on the shattered remains of her weaving and wept. All the while, Halina grinned through the gap in the door as she held her amber stone and whispered a prayer of gratitude to Jezi Baba for making her wish come true.