

Daughter of Doom

Jean-Claude van Rijckeghem

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Translator Kristen Gehrman

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It's September. The ship left four months ago, and Yrsa has been engaged for five months. In all that time, she hasn't seen the jeweler from Odin's Hill once. Summer is almost over. It's the season of making cheeses, salting butter and gathering hay for winter. Every morning, Yrsa helps Revna clean the fish nets, which are braided with seal leather. They drip and rustle and smell of the world beneath the waves. Of shells, salt and algae. Yrsa picks out the clumps of seagrass, crabs and fish tangled in the weave. She tosses the carcasses into the sand at her feet. The second she's gone, the herring gulls will come swooping down, hoping for a bite of crab or perch. For now, the greasy birds are watching her with one hungry eye, while their other eye—the watchful eye—remains fixed on the rest of the flock.

"You're getting pretty good at cleaning nets," says Grandma Gudrun, her tone dripping with mockery. Occasionally, Gudrun comes out to help. She sits down beside them, her bones creaking like the planks of a ship in a storm. It's a strange sight—Gudrun with her golden pins, elegant dress and necklace sitting on the beach. It's as if she wants to show the goddess of the sea that she has achieved a life of fame and reputation. Gudrun claims that she enjoys cleaning the nets because it allows her to gaze out at the sea. She can't get enough of it, she says.

"Njall is still waiting for an apology," says Gudrun.

Yrsa says nothing.

"Who knows, maybe she'll become Njall's sister-in-law one day," Revna teases.

Yrsa feels her cheeks burn red. Put a cork in it, Revna! One morning, while they were picking nets, Yrsa told the fisherman's daughter about how she had made out with Nokki in the dunes. Revna swore she wouldn't tell a soul.

"Njall's sister-in-law? What makes you say that?" Gudrun asks.

"Nokki is her sweetheart," chuckles Revna.

"Nokki is her cousin," Gudrun corrects her.

"Haven't you heard, Gudrun? Yrsa is madly in love with Nokki," Revna exclaims. Then she bursts into laughter, her red braid dancing back and forth.

"Is that so, Yrsa?" Gudrun asks. "Then why am I going out of my way to find you a good husband?"

Yrsa doesn't answer.

"As soon as your father returns we will send you to Odin's Hill. You'll be married before the snow falls," Gudrun says and extracts a mussel from its broken shell with her teeth.

“Thanks a lot, Revna,” Yrsa says sharply.

Revna looks mortified. Yrsa jerks the net closer toward her. She focuses on extracting the crabs, slugs and slime from the wet, smelly heap in her lap.

“I already feel sorry for that jeweler of yours,” Grandma Gudrun says, “He’s getting a bride who spends her days thinking about someone else.”

“I’m only fifteen,” Yrsa scowls. “You could’ve waited a year, you know.”

“I wanted to marry you off last year. I knew that sooner or later word would get out that your mother was a slave.”

Revna looks at Yrsa, her eyes wide.

“Your mother was a slave?” Revna asks.

“You just worry about your nets, Revna,” says Gudrun. “It’s none of your concern.”

The old woman strokes the bishop’s ring on her necklace, something she only does when she’s afraid—Yrsa knows that. It has something to do with Cara.

“I can understand that your father fell in love with a slave. It happens,” Revna cackles. “Just look at me. I used to have a crush on Mikel.”

“Why don’t you shut your trap, girl?” Gudrun snarls.

“You have no business insulting me, you old squid,” Revna retorts indignantly.

“Who are you calling an old squid?” Gudrun shouts. “I went to sea with the warriors. I was out hunting whales when I was your age. I fought with spear and shield. I captured slaves and sold them myself.”

“Yeah, a long time ago, back when clams had teeth,” Yrsa says, yawning widely. That really makes Gudrun mad.

“You’ll be married as soon as your father returns,” Gudrun snaps. She pulls a small crab out of the nets and tosses it to the gulls. The birds flap and screech, pecking at each other as they all scramble for the snack.

Yrsa says nothing. She secretly hopes she can convince her father not to let her go to Odin’s Hill. She hopes Nokki will return from his first trip with some gold or silver, a bounty worth more than the wool of twenty-five sheep. But the engagement to Ljufr is already a done deal. Gudrun and the jeweler shook on it.

A gust of wind blows down the beach. Yrsa shivers. Gudrun stands up, walks over to the fire in the sand and stokes it a little.

“Don’t worry,” Revna whispers. “Nokki won’t turn his back on you when he hears that your mother was a slave. He’ll just shrug and say that your mother could’ve been a goat for all he cares.”

That makes Yrsa smile. Revna giggles.

“What’s so funny?” Gudrun demands as she sits back down at her nets.

“Nothing,” Yrsa says, and the two girls burst out laughing. Gudrun groans in exasperation.

If I pick this clam out of the net, Yrsa thinks, and then count to one hundred, then look up at that exact moment, then—and only then—will I see a tiny dot appear on the thin, straight line where the sea meets the sky. I’ll stand up and stretch my neck to get a better look, and yes, that small blip on the horizon will still be there. The mast of the ship that is bringing Nokki back. The sail of the Huginn. But when she counts to a hundred and turns her eyes toward the sea, there’s nothing there. The water is empty. There’s not a speck on the horizon. The men have been at sea for more than four months now. The apples have been harvested. The nuts have been gathered. The summer is almost about over. The days of snow and ice will soon be upon them. Yrsa gazes out at the sea, as if she can raise her father’s ship out of the water by the sheer force of will. The wind cuts through her nostrils. She tastes the snot on her lips. The high, narrow stone of Mimir doesn’t offer much shelter.

Yrsa lets the fishing net slide off her lap and goes to warm her hands over the fire. She pulls up her dress and petticoat and feels the warmth against her legs.

Revna joins Yrsa by the fire, where she, too, warms her legs. Gudrun looks up from her nets annoyed, as if the fire belongs to her and no one else. She takes a handful of herbs from a leather pouch and tosses them into the fire. The fire crackles, releasing a cloud of smoke. Revna jumps back, but Yrsa isn't quick enough. She feels the hot smoke seep into her mouth and nose. It fills her head, her throat and her lungs, burning inside her. Yrsa grows dizzy. Tiny flames appear on her dress, but she doesn't notice. Revna pats them away with her bare hands. Yrsa staggers. For a moment, she thinks Gudrun has poisoned her with herbs. She loses her balance and grabs Revna by the wrists. She falls. No, she sinks. Not into the sand, not into the sea, but into the girl herself. All of a sudden, she sees Revna's cottage, the dune with a door in it. Revna races out of the dunes toward the village—Yrsa can hear the gravel crunching under her feet. She hurries into the stable. Stinkbreath is waiting for her inside. He smiles at her. Yrsa feels his kisses. In her neck and on her cheeks. It all seems so real. Then suddenly, a wave washes it all away, and she sinks deeper. She sees Revna lying in a rowboat, on her stomach, one arm slung over the edge. The hems of her sleeves are scorched. At the front of the boat are nine lobsters. One female lobster with eggs under her tail is trying to climb over the side, but she loses her footing on the slippery wood and tumbles back into the boat. In the distance, the god of thunder rumbles. Yrsa feels the girl's heart grind to a halt. Her blood stops flowing. Her brain stops thinking. Yrsa sinks even deeper. Her heartbeat slows, her blood slows, her brain shrinks like a shrimp in hot soup.

Someone slaps her on the cheeks, and only then is Yrsa jerked back to consciousness. Only then does she let go of Revna's wrists. She gasps for air as if she'd been held underwater. Her heart is galloping in her throat. Her ears are ringing. She just felt Revna die.

Revna rubs her aching wrists. They're streaked with blood where Yrsa's nails punctured her flesh.

"What was that all about?" asks Grandma Gudrun.

Yrsa doesn't answer. She tries to breathe calmly. In and out. In and out.

"You were convulsing," Gudrun says. "I thought you were dying."

"I was inside of you, Revna."

"What?"

"Don't go to your lobster traps. It's going to storm."

Grandma Gudrun and Revna gape at Yrsa as if she'd just sprung a set of gills.

Then Revna gazes up at the deep blue sky. There's not a cloud in sight. "No storm today," she says.

"There will be," Yrsa says. "Don't go out to sea. I saw you dead, struck by lightning in your boat. You were lying on your stomach. You had caught nine lobsters."

"You were dreaming," Gudrun says. "It's because of the herbs I threw into the fire. You inhaled all the smoke."

"No, I really saw it."

Revna isn't sure what to believe. She felt Yrsa's iron grip around her wrists and the terror in her body.

"You're as pale as an oyster, girl," Gudrun says worriedly.

"Go inside before you get sick. We'll finish the nets."

Yrsa staggers past the high stone of Mimir and heads down the oxen path.

"Hey, Yrsa, are you all right?" a woman at the edge of the village calls. She's hanging herrings to dry on a rack, high enough so the cats can't reach them. Yrsa doesn't answer. She feels nauseous. She walks into the dune bushes and vomits. She spews all the milk, fish and nuts she ate this morning

into the sand. Everything inside her comes out. She feels her heart thumping in her throat, as if it's trying to escape her body. Yrsa spits out the last of her saliva. Then she sinks down into the sand. All she wants to do is lie there. Lie down and sleep and forget. She can smell her vomit in the bushes. A bird scurries away. The last thing she sees are the orange berries in the bushes. The same shade of orange as the beads on her necklace, she thinks. Then she falls into a ravine of sleep.

She's awakened by Odin's cold snout on her skin. The dog looks like a cross between a sheep and a wolf. His fur is so full and long and thick that you could hide half of your possessions in it. Odin is a rat hunter. Any rat that's stupid enough to bite him in the throat will find itself lost in that tangle of hair and become easy prey. In his ferocious jaws are more teeth than you can count. Fangs that will clamp down on an animal and refuse to let it go, incisors that can break a bone and molars that can tear skin and flesh to shreds. He's only got one eye, which is why Yrsa calls him Odin, because the Ancestor only has one eye too. Sometimes the fleas will drive him so crazy that he'll bite a person in the calves. Then he gets mud flung at his head, and he hides for the rest of the day. The dog like to follow Yrsa on her walks, especially when she spreads dashes of butter and leftover food for the elves. When she's not looking, he laps it all up. Odin takes what he can get—he's not one to pass up a bite for the elves.

Yrsa's head spins as she tries to stand up. For a second, she thinks she's going to pass out again. She wonders how long she's been lying there in the bushes. Hours it seems. The ground is dry, and the sky is crystal clear. There's no thunderstorm coming, she thinks. But it all seemed so real. She felt everything she saw. It must have been a dream. It was all Gudrun's fault. She threw those nasty herbs into the fire. Yrsa clambers to her feet. Odin walks off ahead of her toward the village. His tail swishes like a broom, as if he's clearing the way for her.

At the end of the afternoon, after the work in the shipyard and the weaving huts has come to an end, after all the fires have been lit, Revna pushes her skiff into the surf. At first, she was hesitant to go out to sea, but Gudrun told her to stop being ridiculous. Revna had seen it for herself: Yrsa had inhaled the smoke, passed out and slipped into some kind of dream. Nothing more than that. Revna paddles through the tide until she reaches the edge of the open sea. There's a wooden float bobbing in the water. She pulls up the chain and slowly lifts a braided basket from the water. The lobster trap. Water sloshes out. The basket is teeming with lobsters. Big ones. What a catch! She sticks her arm through the round opening and extracts the sputtering creatures one by one. She works carefully, patiently, so they can't pinch her fingers with their claws. She drops a couple of dead bass into the basket as bait and tosses it back into the sea, hoping for an equally good catch the next day. Then she starts transferring her catch into her seal leather bag. She counts the lobsters. There are nine of them. Nine! A cold breeze ripples through the air. She looks up. The sea is no longer as friendly as it was before. Whitecaps have formed on the waves. The wind slaps her face, as if it's trying to call her to attention. From the east, grim clouds pass over the hills as if they're being chased by the god of thunder himself. She hears the clouds rumble and remembers Yrsa's warning. Fear shivers down her spine like a ball of ice. "Nonsense," she murmurs. The daughter of a helmsman couldn't have possibly seen her fate. Only old women with white hair could do that. Women with ravens and a tall staff. Seeresses. Witches.

Still, Revna touches the shark's teeth and the tiny hammer around her neck. She grabs the oars. She rows. It's low tide, which means she has to paddle against the current. She lets the lobsters crawl over her feet. The clouds move like a dark blanket across the sky. She rows hard. She thinks of Stinkbreath. Of his kisses on her neck, of his body against hers, of his death at Heath Ridge. She manages to overtake the waves, cutting through the surf. She can smell the wood fires from the five

long houses in the village. Ten more strokes and she'll hear the sound of the sand crunching under her boat. Nine more. Eight.

Then lightning flashes, and for a split second the world goes white as milk. Thunder cracks. One of the oars slides into the water. The tide carries the boat onto the beach.

Sten is first one to spot the skiff. He finds Revna lying on her stomach with her arm slung over the edge. The boy shouts for help. Pretty soon, the entire village is standing around the boat. The lobsters snap their claws at the approaching hands, as if they're trying to protect Revna. No one dares to touch the fisherman's daughter. What if the fire of the thunder god is still in her body? People cling to the hammers, plates, teeth and bones hanging around their necks. Some even spit on the ground to ward off evil.

No one wants the lobsters. They're thrown back into the sea. Everyone on the beach is whispering the same thing: "Yrsa predicted this."

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Two women collecting mussels at low tide heard from a passing longboat that the Huginn was in Ribe, on the west coast of Denmark, and that the men might be home tomorrow. Everyone heads to the beach to welcome the ship. Sixteen women from the farms in the hinterland travel to the village to greet their husbands, for they too had joined the men at sea. Three goats are slaughtered. Fifteen salmon are rolled in salt and dill and buried in the ground to marinate. But that afternoon, a storm rolls in, one so violent that it blackens the sky and blows the women off the beach. Only Signe remains at the lookout, sheltered by the stone of Mimir, but the men don't return that night.

The next morning, after the storm has cleared, the sea is as empty as a shell on the beach. There is no sign of the ship. Not a speck on the horizon. Everyone is worried; no one knows what to do. The women from the hinterland linger in the village. They don't want to go back to their farms without their husbands. When Signe, exhausted from the night watch, comes down for a bite of salmon, it takes a while for anyone to remember where they buried the fish. After a few mouthfuls of the salty, oily fish, Signe regains her strength.

But the ship doesn't come the next day either. Fear is carved into everyone's faces. Some can't help but recall the bad omens: a young man drowned the day they left, and his beloved, the fisherman's daughter, of all people, has been struck dead. They spit in the sand to ward off doom.

Little Sten hangs mackerel over the fire trench in the long room. Gudrun lights the fire to smoke them. Yrsa sits on her cot. She tries not to think about the ship that's supposed to bring her father and Nokki home. Odin the dog has been bitten by a rat. Yrsa cleans the wound and rubs honey over the raw flesh where the skin has been torn away.

"You're wasting good honey on that half-wild beast," says a voice in front of her. Yrsa looks up startled. There, standing before her is Kveldulf the Norwegian. On his chest are two wolf claws hanging from a cord. Yrsa pulls her dress down over her ankles. She slides her crooked foot under her thigh.

"Odin is a good rat catcher. He deserves care," she says.

The dog gnaws at his paw through the impenetrable fur. Clumps of hair go flying.

Kveldulf sits down on the clothes chest in front of Yrsa's bed. Rarely has Yrsa seen the old Norwegian up close. She does her best not to look away from the scars zigzagging across his face. Every winter, when the cold seeps in through the walls and everyone gathers around the fire, Kveldulf tells of his infamous battle in Brittany. The more he drinks, the more enemies he pounded to death that day. Even he didn't leave the battlefield unscathed. His face was in tatters, like a curtain clawed to shreds by a cat. An old Breton granny had sewn the strips of skin back together. Either she did it with a fat knitting needle or she was half-blind because the scars on Kveldulf's face are like ropes of wild flesh. Young children cry at the sight of him, and women avert their eyes so they don't have to look at his ravaged head.

Yrsa doesn't understand why he's here.

"You predicted Revna's death," Kveldulf says.

"It wasn't my fault," Yrsa says. "I didn't wish her dead."

"Of course not," he says. His voice is soft.

Meanwhile, nine women have entered the house. The smoke is slow to escape through the holes in the roof, making them look like ghosts in the mist. They remind Yrsa of the nine daughters of Rán and Aegir whom the waves are named after. It takes her a moment to recognize them as the women from the hinterland.

"What's going on?" asks Signe, who has just come stumbling into her house. Her eyes are red with fatigue. Sand clings to the hem of her dress.

One of the women points to Kveldulf. "He says your daughter is having visions."

"We need Yrsa," Kveldulf says.

"And why is that?" Signe demands.

"Let him speak," says Gudrun.

Signe sighs. Why does her mother-in-law always have to contradict her? Signe looks at Yrsa as if this is all her fault.

"The boys tell me that this isn't the first time you've had a vision," Kveldulf says. "That you've predicted when it was going to snow or when a merchant was coming."

"It's not that hard to guess," Yrsa says.

"At the beginning of summer, your grandmother's scissors were missing," Kveldulf continues. "You knew exactly where she dropped them."

"That was a coincidence," Yrsa whispers.

"She also had a dream about a whale," Little Sten pipes in suddenly. "She dreamed that the bay would turn red with whale blood, and two days later the fishermen caught a whale."

Yrsa is puzzled. She had completely forgotten about that dream.

"So you have had visions before?" asks Kveldulf.

"I was inside her," Yrsa explains. "In Revna."

Astonishment ripples across the scars on Kveldulf's face.

"But that was just this one time."

Yrsa had seen a wise woman at work once. She tossed bones carved with runes on the ground, and based on the order in which they landed, she could predict the future. She was old and wise, that woman.

"Only a *völva* can predict a person's fate," Signe said.

Everyone held their breath. The word had been said: *völva*. A woman with a staff. A seeress. A witch.

"Only an experienced *völva* can know what the Norns have decided," Signe repeats.

Signe had often spoken of the Norns, the three weavers who lived in a lair under the roots of the world tree, Yggdrasil. The Norns decide on life and death. Every decision a Dane makes in life has already been made for them by the Norns. They weave people's destinies

into tapestries just as Yrsa sews patterns into sails. The Norns aren't so different from the old, temperamental women who shuffle through the village arm in arm. Except the weavers are fickle and cruel. Maybe it's because their chilblains itch or because their noses are always running from hay fever, or because one of them has just eaten the last piece of licorice root and the other two are cranky about it, but when the Norns are in a foul mood, they make sure you commit blunder after blunder. You'll find yourself tangled up in woes and wonder why you keep making the wrong decision. The Norns delight in weaving all kinds of misery into people's lives. It helps them forget their chilblains, their hay fever and the lack of licorice. They can't wait to see how fate will strike down their victims, like an oak tree on a drunken lumberjack's head. The Norns have even determined the fate of the gods. Odin, the father of the gods, knows exactly how he will die on the day they call Ragnarok. On the day of the wolf, the monster wolf Fenrir will swallow up the sun and plunge the world into darkness. Then he will pounce on Odin and devour him—skin, hair, beard and all. Not even Odin, the most powerful of them all, can resist his fate. There's nothing he can do to keep his worlds from perishing or protect himself from ending up as finely chewed god meat in the belly of a great wolf. The destiny of every Dane is knotted into their navel at birth. And the only one who can see that destiny is a seeress, a woman with a staff. A Völva.

"If Yrsa is a seeress, I would know," her mother Signe exclaims. "That girl can't predict anything. She doesn't even know when a fish is done. She lets everything burn. Just the other day I asked her to stew some black beans, and..."

"Signe," Kveldulf interrupts, "I didn't come here to hear about how your daughter stews beans. The men of Mimir's Stool should've been home two days ago. Every house on the hill and farm in the hinterland has a father, son or husband on the Huginn. Including you."

Signe nods so violently that her earrings clatter.

She grips the white shark tooth on her necklace.

"All the women with men at sea made offerings to the sacred trees nearby, and also to the goddess of the sea. There's nothing more they can do," Kveldulf says.

Rán, the goddess of the sea, likes blood sacrifices. The women cut open their hands and let the blood drip into the waves. Some even threw gold into the sea. If there's one thing that Rán loves more than blood, it's gold.

"Yrsa, we want to know whether the men are coming back," Kveldulf continues. "And if something has happened to them, we want to know that too."

Yrsa grasps the amulet around her neck, the small plate with the figure of a woman etched into it. It's the figure of Frigg, Odin's wife who spins the clouds each day on a spinning wheel in her lap. She is the goddess who gives advice.

"I can't help you," Yrsa says. "I wouldn't know how."

The women grumble. They don't believe her. Hadn't she predicted the death of that poor fisherman's daughter?

"It was because of the herbs," Grandma Gudrun says.

Everyone looks at Gudrun. The gold sparkles in her white hair.

"It was because of the dried herbs I threw into the fire," she explains. "A mixture of nightshade, wolf cherry, dried fly agaric and some other stuff. I like to toss them into the fire on cold days to ease the pain in my knees and shoulders. They make me feel like I'm floating."

"What do you mean? They make you drunk?" asks one of the visitors.

"Yes, kind of like that. I just sniff a little of it. But Yrsa inhaled all the smoke at once. Her heart started racing, and she couldn't stand straight. She was delirious. She was having delusions."

The room falls silent. Yrsa hears someone coughing in the smoke.

"I still have some of it," Gudrun says almost casually. "If you want, I'll throw some into the fire. Then you can see for yourself."

"But it almost killed me, Grandma," Yrsa says. "I felt my heart stop."

"Oh, you're exaggerating. My heart stops sometimes, too, but it doesn't kill me. You're always complaining, granddaughter. Even your monthly bleeding makes you whine. Think of your forefathers, those great adventurers who explored the high seas, they never complained."

"They didn't get the monthly bleeding either," Yrsa mutters.

"Respect your forefathers," Gudrun hisses, as if they might walk in at any moment and start mingling among the women.

Kveldulf rubs his hand down his ghastly face.

"You want to know what's happened to your father as well, Yrsa," he says.

Deep down, Yrsa knows that her father—that oak of a man—is all right. It's Nokki she's worried about. She dreamed about him last night and heard him screaming. Could something have happened to him? Could Gudrun's smelly herbs help her see that? She can feel the women's eyes burning into her skin. They just want to know if their men are alive.

Yrsa rises from her cot. She steps toward the fire trench, into the ring of light and warmth in the middle of the house. Gudrun staggers toward her. All eyes are on the old woman. She beams—the vain old net picker. If she were to find a golden apple in a tree, she'd eat the whole thing herself. Gudrun tosses a handful of herbs into the fire. They crackle and curl. Sparks fly. Everyone takes a step back. Yrsa bends over the flames. She closes her eyes. Her cheeks glow. The smoke burns in her nose and throat. It smells of dog piss, and all of a sudden her head feels much heavier, as if someone has filled it with water. She staggers dizzily. Her thoughts seem to trip over one another. She tries to think of the sea. The Huginn. Her father at the helm. Nokki at the oar. But everything remains black.

"I can't see anything," she says.

Yrsa feels the milk churning in her stomach. Kveldulf comes closer. His breath smells like a rotten clam.

"Concentrate," he says. "These people are desperate."

Yrsa stumbles. She grabs Kveldulf's arms to keep her balance. Her nails hook into his skin. The mothers murmur in amazement. Some clutch their amulets.

Yrsa doesn't hear them. She is sinking. Not into the sea, not into the sand, but into Kveldulf. Waves wash over her. Suddenly, she sees Kveldulf bashing his saber into the enemy. Around him are six men. He's dripping with blood and mud. This must be the day that made him great, the day he got his scars. Then comes another wave, and Yrsa sinks deeper. A young woman stands before Kveldulf. She has sharp features and black hair. Yrsa feels the woman's fingers on his skin. They are soft and cold. She dabs Kveldulf's scars with ointment. Then another wave washes it all away. Yrsa sinks deeper. She sees a sky full of stars and a trail in the snow. A trail made by skis. Kveldulf follows it. He too is on skis and propels himself forward with a wooden stick to gain speed. He looks back at a man following him. Yrsa can see the breath from Kveldulf's mouth. He stops at the shore of a frozen lake. He looks out in the middle, at a hole in the ice. There are two skis bobbing in the black water. But beyond the hole are footprints. The person Kveldulf is following has fallen through the ice and climbed out again. He must have continued across the ice to the other side of the lake. Kveldulf doesn't dare step out onto the ice. He'll have to go around the lake. He hurries. He skis like a man possessed. Yrsa feels the falling snow sting her face. Across the lake, Kveldulf picks up the trail again. He follows it. Suddenly, he slows. Before him is a naked woman on

her knees, curled into a ball. Her back is blue. Frozen. Her black hair lies stiffly on her neck. It's the woman who tended to Kveldulf's scars. Her clothes are bunched up and wedged between her chest, arms and knees. That's all Yrsa can see. The scene is washed away by another wave, and Yrsa sinks deeper. She feels Kveldulf's pain. A stabbing pain in his chest. She smells fish. Live fish, salty, from the world underwater. Kveldulf is lying on his back surrounded by eels. Hands trembling, he searches for something among the writhing creatures. The eels gnaw at his fingers with their tiny teeth. He writhes with the fear of death in his body. His breath is trapped like a fishbone in his throat. At last, he finds what he's looking for. His sword. He clutches the leather hilt, feels the wood and iron in his hand, and is reassured. Yrsa sees Kveldulf's death, just as she saw Revna's. She feels her heart beat slow with his. Her brain stops thinking.

Yrsa feels a hot slap on her cheek. Signe is standing in front of her. She's completely beside herself, shaking her daughter desperately. She screams, but Yrsa doesn't hear her. Suddenly her ears pop, and she gasps for air. But all she breathes in is smoke.

"Make room, give her some space!" shouts Signe.

Yrsa slumps to the floor. She breathes heavily, like a fish on dry land. Her ears are ringing. Her heart is pounding in her throat, and for a moment she's afraid it will bounce out of her mouth and run away. No one says a word. The women clench their amulets in their fists. Their faces are as white as the inside of an oyster. Yrsa sits up and leans against the side of her cot.

"Have you seen the men?" asks Kveldulf.

Yrsa doesn't answer. She stares at the warrior whose body she has just been inside.

"Is the Huginn coming?" he demands.

"Surely you can see that she's out of breath," Signe protests.

Yrsa hasn't seen the ship, but somehow she's certain that her father is still alive.

"The men are coming back," Yrsa bluffs, though she has no idea if this is true.

Kveldulf stands up and shouts that the ship is coming. Cheers erupt. The boys wriggle between their mothers legs, stepping on toes, crawling between legs, and pushing their way out of the house. Yrsa hears the door slam. The boys want to be the first to reach the fire pits so they can light them. They will spend the whole night on the beach to make sure the fire doesn't go out.

Yrsa's nails have left an imprint on Kveldulf's wrists. He bends over her and asks, "What exactly did you see?"

"I saw your death," she whispers.

The Norwegian stares at her. His face turns as grey as the ashes in the fire. For a second, Yrsa fears that the knots of wild flesh in his face will loosen, that the scars will unravel and his whole head will fall apart.

"My death? When? This winter?"

"I don't know. You were surrounded by fish. Eels. They were still alive."

"Eels," the old warrior repeats. This girl predicted the fisherman's daughter's death a day before it happened. How long did he have left? Days? Weeks? Or longer? Kveldulf springs up from the stool as if he's just scorched his hindquarters on it. He has to go. He has to get out of this cursed house.

"Kveldulf?"

He whips his scarred face back at her. His eyes plead, begging her for more time. One more winter and one more summer and then another winter. But he knows that he cannot

change the fate that the Norns have woven into his navel. Only a fool would think such a thing.

Yrsa wants to ask him about the woman in the snow, but there's so much despair in his eyes that she doesn't dare.

"I'm sorry," she says.

Kveldulf makes his way through the smoky house like a ship cutting through the surf. There's hardly anyone left inside. The entire village has run to the beach. Signe groans at the marks on the floor. She opens the front door to let out the smoke. The fire flares wildly.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

At that, Yrsa vomits on the floor.

Signe and the slave Bulgingcalves carry Yrsa to bed and lay her head on a pillow stuffed with dune grass. Yrsa feels them lay a fur pelt over her body. And again, she falls into a ravine of a sleep.

That night, Yrsa doesn't even hear the men coming home.
