

THE RAVEN RINGS



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ODIN'S CHILD

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ARCTIS

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RIME RETURNS

The half-rotten spruce lay across the Alldjup like a bridge. Its bark had cracked into great sheets, its trunk growing increasingly bare as the years passed. It was about twenty paces over to the other side. A shortcut for brave squirrels. No place for people.

Hirka steeled herself and took another step out. The trunk groaned beneath her. She doubted it had ever had to contend with this much weight before, and the suspicious stench of decay didn't do much to allay her fears. She found herself thinking kind thoughts about the tree, as if that would prevent it from snapping in two and sending her tumbling into the gaping wound in the landscape, from breaking her on the rocks in the Stryfe, which babbled indifferently below.

I am not afraid.

She looked up. Vetle was sitting farther along the trunk, whimpering like a dog. He was fifteen winters old, the same age as Hirka, but although his body continued to grow, his mind remained that of a child's. Vetle trusted people too much, even though he was afraid of everything else. So how in Slokna's name had the other boys coaxed him out here?

Miserable worms! May the blind take them all!

The boys responsible were sitting safely at the edge of the forest. Hirka could feel their eyes boring into her back, desperate to see her fall. She didn't intend to give them that pleasure. But she *did* plan to

have bruised knuckles once she'd gotten them both out of this mess. Kolgrim wouldn't be able to eat anything but soup until autumn. She clenched her fists. Her hands were clammy.

Vetle had started to rock dangerously between sobs. Hirka took a couple of determined steps toward him. A knot in the trunk splintered under her foot and she started. Her arms started to windmill as if of their own volition, helping her regain her balance before she'd even quite realized she'd lost it. Her heart was in her mouth. Her knees shook.

"Feeling a bit wobbly, tailless?"

Predictably, Kolgrim's shout was followed by a chorus of guffaws. The echo bounced between the rock walls of the Alldjup. *Tailless! Tailless! Tailless!*

Hirka drew herself up to her full height. She wouldn't let them get to her. Not now.

Vetle was terrified. He sat bawling in a clump of spindly branches that had long since shed their needles. He had buried his face in his arm, as if not seeing the danger would make it go away. He clutched a small wooden horse in his fist.

"Vetle, it's me, Hirka. Can you look at me?"

He stopped crying and peered over his elbow. A smile spread across his ruddy face, and Hirka realized her mistake. Vetle jumped to his feet and charged toward her with his arms flung wide.

"Vetle! Wait!"

But it was too late. He threw himself at her and she lost her footing. She twisted around as she fell and threw her arms around the trunk. Vetle landed heavily on her back, knocking the air out of her lungs.

The wooden horse dug into her cheek. The tree gave a series of ominous cracks.

Crows alighted from the treetops, shrieking as they disappeared into the forest. Scattered shouts revealed that Kolgrim and his cro-

nies were making a run for it. Everything and everyone fled the scene as if Slokna already had them in its grasp.

“You’re a coward, Kolgrim!” Hirka shouted as she clung to the tree. “A dead coward!” she added, hoping for the opportunity to make good on her threat.

The trunk started to sag and Hirka’s stomach dropped. The top had broken away and the branches were scraping down the rock wall on the far side. The angle was becoming increasingly precarious.

So, what’s it gonna be? Live or die?

“Run, Vetle! Now!”

As if by some miracle, Vetle recognized the urgency in her voice and scrambled forward. His knee sank mercilessly between her shoulder blades, but he managed to clamber over her and bound up the trunk.

Hirka clung on. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the inevitable plunge. She heard roots being torn from the earth, snapping like bowstrings. Moss and stones rained down on her.

Then, quite suddenly, everything was still.

She opened her eyes. Only one at first, to check whether there was any point opening the other. The roots had held. She was hanging against the rock face. She heard Vetle cry out from above.

“Jomar!”

The wooden horse sailed past her into the gorge. It ended its days with a hollow splash in the Stryfe. But Vetle was safe. He had made it up over the edge. *Thank the Seer*, Hirka thought in a rare moment of faith.

Carefully, she looked up. The roots hung like a gaping troll’s mouth not far above her. They were impassable. Blood oozed from the palm of her hand down her forearm. She needed to act quickly—before the pain caught up with her.

She pulled out her pocketknife, plunged it into the tree, and pulled herself up until she reached the roots. Dry earth trickled over

her face. She shook her head and tried to blink it away. She huffed out a laugh.

At least things can't get any worse.

She wrapped her thighs around the trunk and sheathed her knife. Then she reached up and fumbled at the roots. She needed to find a handhold. Something she could use to pull herself up and over.

Then a strong hand gripped hers.

“One point to me if I pull you up?”

Hirka almost let go. Was she dreaming? That voice ... she knew that voice! Or had she hit her head?

One point to me? It couldn't be anyone else.

Rime's back!

True, she hadn't heard his voice for three summers, and it was deeper than she remembered, but it was definitely him. No doubt about it. Hirka hesitated before answering. Maybe she was imagining things. It would be just like her, if what people said were true. But people said a lot of things about her.

What in Slokna was he doing here?

Rime's hand was warm and firm around hers. To her disgust, she realized that she'd already transferred a lot of her weight to him.

“Well?” a cool voice prompted from the edge.

“I don't need help!” she said.

“So you still think you can fly? Or do you have some other strategy for getting past these?”

She heard him kick the roots just before more earth dropped down into her face. She turned away and spat. He thought he'd won, the spoiled rat. Here she was, risking her life to save Vetle, only for him to come swaggering in to win points in a desperate situation. It was inconceivably childish. What a nerve! But he remembered ...

Hirka bit her lower lip to conceal a smile, even though no one could see her face. Her shoulders were screaming. She hated to admit it, but there was no way she was getting up without help.

“I’d have been fine if you hadn’t distracted me. You can have half a point.”

He laughed. A deep, husky laugh that triggered an avalanche of memories from a time when everything was simpler. A lump formed unbidden in her throat.

“You always try to change the rules. One whole point or nothing,” Rime said.

“Fine.” She had to force the words out. “One point to you if you pull me up.”

The sentence was barely out of her mouth before she was torn away from the tree trunk. For a moment, she dangled helplessly over the edge of the gorge, and then she was lifted to safety. Rime let go of her and she took a few shaky steps to make sure her legs still worked. It went better than expected.

Vetle was slumped like a sack of potatoes on the ground, plucking absently at a tear in his sleeve. Rime stood before her as if he’d never left.

“Where does it hurt?” he asked.

He was the same as ever. Always seeking out the weak spots. Like a predator asserting its superior strength, its ability to endure what others couldn’t.

“I’m fine,” she said, hiding her hand behind her back. It probably looked like carrion.

Rime helped Vetle to his feet. The boy sniffed, his tail hanging limply. Hirka watched from the corner of her eye as Rime’s hands explored Vetle’s neck and joints, checking for injuries.

His hair was longer than she remembered, but no less blindingly white. It came down to his shoulder blades and was tied with strips of leather. Shorter hairs had come loose to frame his face, which was narrower than before. Markedly so. But there was something else ... something she couldn’t put her finger on. Something about the way he moved now.

And he was armed.

Her eyes fell to two swords in black scabbards. They were narrow and attached to a wide belt around his waist. He was dressed like a warrior, in a light shirt with slits on both sides and a high collar. Wide leather straps crossed his chest. He glowed like a snow cat against the dark backdrop of the forest.

Hirka looked away. Rime was an idiot. Why come here dressed like that? The money those clothes cost probably could have fed half of Elveroa for a whole winter.

When he turned to look at her, she noticed the embroidery on the left-hand side of his chest. The Raven. Its famous wings spread wide. The mark of the Council. The mark of the Seer.

Panic gripped her, cutting deep like claws.

The Seer ... the Rite!

Her blood turned cold as she realized why he'd returned.

No! It's too early! It's still summer!

His pale gray eyes met hers. She lifted her chin and held his gaze. She refused to let him see her panic. He cocked his head and appraised her with amused curiosity, as if she were an animal he hadn't seen before.

"Didn't you used to have red hair?" he asked.

Hirka raised a hand to her hair, dislodging a fair amount of sand. She tried to brush it away, but her fingers just got caught in the tangle of red. Rime's eyes sparkled like ice. She remembered that teasing look of his all too well. It was out of place with the uniform he wore, but it only lasted a moment before he looked away. He had remembered who he was.

Rime meant danger. She could feel it in every nerve in her body. She'd thought she recognized him, but this wasn't the boy she remembered. Not her childhood rival. Not her friend. He was the son of a powerful family. He was Rime An-Elderin. He was bound to the Council by blood.

It just hadn't mattered before.

"I won't be here long. I'm going to Mannfalla with Ilume," he said, as if reminding her of the distance between them.

Hirka crossed her arms. "Normal people call their grandmothers *Grandmother*. I would, if I had one." It wasn't the best gibe, but she couldn't think of anything else. Her brain had turned to mush.

"Not if she were Ilume."

Hirka looked down.

Rime took two steps closer. His clothes smelled of sage oil. Behind him, Vetle craned his neck to peer down into the abyss that had swallowed his wooden horse.

"They've still got a lot to do before the Rite. It's your year too, isn't it?" Rime asked.

Hirka nodded lamely. Time had caught up with her. She felt a stab of nausea. The others in Elveroa who were turning fifteen this year had been counting the days. Making clothes for the occasion. Commissioning tail rings made of gold and silver. Planning the journey everyone had to make at least once in their life. Hirka was no exception. The difference was that she'd have given everything she owned to avoid it.

Rime reached for her hip. She jumped back, fumbling for her knife, but it wasn't there anymore. It flashed in Rime's hand. Hirka swallowed and backed away from it. For a moment she thought he'd seen through her and planned to kill her then and there, just to save the Council the trouble. Instead, he walked over to the tree roots.

"I'll take Vetle home," he said, cutting the few roots that were still holding on. The tree crashed down into the Alldjup. All that remained was the scar in the earth and a cloud of dust that glittered in the spray from the Stryfe. The Alldjup seemed much wider now that the two rock faces were exposed on both sides.

"Get your father to look at your hand," Rime said.

She snorted. "I've been patching people up since I was seven!"

He came closer. She fought the urge to back away. He was almost a head taller than she was. Leather creaked as he leaned toward her and pressed her knife back into its scabbard.

“Jomar,” she heard Vetle whimper. She understood how he felt. He could get a new toy, but it wouldn’t even matter if it were made of pure gold. Jomar was gone.

Hirka turned and started walking. She felt as if she were walking away from something important, but she didn’t look back.