

# RAVEN BOY

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**ISBN: 978-1535101813**

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*To Breandán, the best teacher I ever knew, who taught  
me one of the most precious lessons in my life*

*To Tania, who was the first to like my story*



## **Prologue: Fern Flower**

Long ago, the earth was inhabited by happy, joyful and never-dying people. They could easily change the shape of their bodies, turning from humans into animals or plants. If someone wanted to become an eagle, he could grow wings and fly; if someone wanted to change into a rose, he had only to ask mother-Earth for such a gift. And he could grow and blossom, giving joy to himself and others.

But the Black God who had sown so many evil grains in the world envied these good beings. So he divided each of them into man and woman. At that very moment, hate and vice appeared in nature; predators roared in the forests and plains; clouds of stinging insects rose into the air, craving blood.

Yet people learned how to find their sundered halves to become a whole being again. It happened like this:

When the Black God divided the inhabitants of our world into men and women, each had an open spot on the chest. Through this spot the heart was seen; the heart that did not sleep even at night. When it met its other half, it would blaze with rainbow fire and longed to become a whole being again.

The king of darkness ordered the closure of the open heart spot from childhood, so that people would not even hear the sound in their chest. Little by little, love went extinct in the world and everyone forgot the time when the never-dying people lived on the earth...

*From an ancient legend*



## Preface

His father's sword at the ready, he walked to the place of duel.

To say he was scared was an understatement. A part of him was regretting his foolish bargain, but it was too late to turn back. The agreement was sealed. [...]

Knowing what was about to come, the raven bird uttered a heartbreaking, sorrowful croak from high above. But Hrafn didn't look up. The raven had a special task – to inform him when everyone was ready – and Hrafn had his own. His death stood by his side, and he had to make it linger. Only for a short while, then his task would be over and he would be out of the fight forever. He was named konungr to win the war, and he had to do so by any possible means. Well, it wouldn't be exactly himself who would win, but then it wouldn't really matter.

The end was so close that he could no longer tell whether he wanted it over faster, or whether he wanted it to last – just to live a bit longer, to steal a couple of heartbeats from death itself.

He had never been so much aware of everything around him – the heat, the air, the burning sun, the dry land, and yellow grass, people's stares fixed upon him, his raven flying somewhere above it all... Hrafn was about to leave it forever and it was now so frighteningly real.

Forcing his heavy feet to move, he focused on Ulfrich. It was crucial for the success of their foolish plan.

He stopped before Ulfrich who adjusted his long shield, mockingly smiling down. Hrafn barely reached his chest!

“Did you hug everyone good-bye?” said Ulfrich. Amused, he added, “Listen everyone! We are not cowards. We will honor our oath even though the foolish Viking baby-king made it so easy for us. So be it, let him play before he dies!”

“Aye!” replied the chorus of voices.

Hrafn swallowed and added in a gruff voice, “If I kill you, it will be my pleasure to ride your horse. A fair beast for a king.”

Ulfrich lifted his sword, indicating the beginning of the battle.



## The War Ships Return

“They are back! Konungr\* Torgeir is back! They won! ...”

Turid abandoned her weaving and ran out of the longhouse.

Outside, attracted by the shouting, people hurried toward the sea. Everyone wanted to greet the konungr.

Two beautiful ships with striped yellow and red sails slowly, like gracious swans, glided on the sparkling water toward the land.

The crowd murmured excitedly, warmed by hope, curiosity, and impatience.

Just like the others, Turid spotted the ships from afar and frowned as a slight twist of worry tugged at her insides. It was just a presentiment, the usual woman’s intuition – too small to talk about, yet perceptible enough to make her run faster.

From the first sight her suspicions were confirmed – Konungr Torgeir was not at the bow. His close friend Ari stood on his place, arm lifted to greet the crowd.

Her heart heavy with dark expectations, Turid made her way to the very edge of the pier.

Most of the people around her froze in apprehensive silence, every now and then interrupted by a whispered prayer or a sigh of relief when someone spotted their man alive among the crew.

Finally, the sails were lowered and the oarsmen maneuvered the ships to the wooden pier.

Ari spotted Turid and their eyes met. He said nothing; he didn’t even move a single muscle of his face,

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\* Konungr – king (Old Norse)

but she understood it all as clearly, as if he had just shouted it: something bad had happened. The konungr would not return.

A couple of sailors jumped to the pier with ropes and started to tie the ship to it.

Without delay, Ari spoke.

“Peace and prosperity to you, my people,” he started, and his strong low voice sounded official in the apprehensive silence around him. “We are happy to be finally home.”

Several voices replied with a loud “Welcome!” while others just nodded silently, impatient to hear it all.

Ari was an excellent warrior, but a poor storyteller. Not that it had been a handicap for him – he sincerely believed a good punch to be more effective than long speech. So, feeling the impatience of the crowd, he stepped to the pier and went straight for it.

“We took their fortress. But our konungr is dead.”

For the time of one breath everyone was silent, assimilating what they just heard, then shouts and sighs of pain, anger, and frustration erupted from the crowd. A woman started weeping loudly. Worry and foreboding filled all their hearts – the konungr was loved and respected by his people, and his death meant changes for everyone. It was all the more dangerous because they were in a war that was forced upon them by the Foreigners who had cruelly conquered some of their lands.

Then women pressed forward, all talking at the same time and pushing each other. They wanted to know what happened to their husbands, brothers and sons. But Turid was no longer aware of the mayhem around her. She felt as if she had been hit hard in the chest. She couldn’t breathe anymore, and the world went dark. Her beloved

husband was dead. And she didn't even see him go, she didn't even kiss him farewell! In her mind's eye she saw Torgeir as he laughed, as he galloped on his favorite horse, she saw him bringing her wild flowers at the dawn, playing with his sons, lying by her side on the grass and telling her about his love, his golden hair shining in the firelight... He was so alive in her mind that it was all the harder to realize that from now on this man was gone. Gone forever! Dead! From now on, she was alone. From now on, she was a widow. Never again will he mischievously wink at her in the middle of an important assembly, never again will he kiss her and lift her in his strong, tender arms, never again will he hug her in his sleep...

A piercing, painful emptiness swept over her, tearing every inch of her body. She would have collapsed, but a strong, caring hand seized her shoulder and stopped her. The warmth and firmness of this touch was somewhat consoling, and she slowly returned back to reality.

Her youngest son, Hrafn, stood by her side, his hand on her shoulder. Turid met his gaze and they remained motionless for a moment, silently sharing the pain and comforting each other. Somehow, the boy's presence and silent support made it easier to bear.

Then Turid's eldest son, Olaf, joined them as well. Tears shone in his darkened gray eyes. Yet none of them cried – not in front of everybody. Together, they made their way through the crowd and back to the longhouse.

As they passed, people bowed or muttered words of compassion. But the widow and her sons were beyond noticing. Her rank separated her from other women; Turid was denied the time to cry her pain out. As queen, she was in charge of everything when her husband wasn't there, and the return of the warriors meant additional

work that needed to be done. On the dreadful walk from the docks to the village, she struggled to pull herself together, to push all the hurting thoughts to some far corner of her mind and to lock them there for a while.

Her sons held her hands. Her brave little men stoically fought off their own tears and pain. She had to be strong too. For them and for her people.

For the good memory of her beloved husband.

This fresh thought of Torgeir provoked another huge wave of pain inside her. Before it would swallow her completely, Turid screwed her eyes shut and took several deep breaths. Her mother had always told her that breathing was the best remedy, the fastest way to regain the self-control.

When she looked at her sons again, both regarded her with apprehension.

“Olaf, Hrafn, I am sorry. There is no time to mourn now. I must take care of the warriors and organize the feast...”

She wanted to say “in Torgeir’s memory,” but the words just wouldn’t come out.

She couldn’t decide what was better – to let the children go home or to keep them busy with something, but they solved it for her.

“Can we stay and help you?” asked Hrafn and Olaf nodded, looking hopeful.

A sudden surge of tenderness toward her twins brought tears to her eyes and she hugged both of them, unable to utter a word.

Staying busy was sufficient to keep painful thoughts and grief at bay. Too many things had to be done and thought through, and even people’s condolences and words of compassion seemed somehow much easier to

bear. Probably it was so because Turid just didn't have time to think. She was able to sit down only at the feast, but could not force herself to eat or drink, knowing that soon the details of her husband's death would be revealed. Turid wanted to know it all, and at the same time dreaded it.

But Olaf and Hrafn dreaded something else even more.

Two winters ago they saw the funeral of jarl\* Yngve from the neighboring fjord. Yngve had a wife and two mistresses and by the tradition after his death they were asked whether one of them would like to join him. One of his mistresses said yes. At the end of the ceremony, she was burned in the ship, next to her dead lover.

Their father had no mistresses, only his wife, their mother. The boys feared that she would choose to die and thus they would lose both their parents at once. Olaf and Hrafn sat through the feast quiet and tense, studying their mother's face and behavior and trying to guess what was about to come.

When the time came, the storyteller stepped forward with his harp. His name was Orm. He was a warrior just as tall and muscled as the other Vikings, but his hair and beard were completely gray and his sun-browned face was even more lined.

He cleared his voice and began. "As all of you surely know, a month ago our brave Konungr Torgeir led three of our ships to war with the evil Foreigners.

"We have never sailed to their lands before, but knew the way from merchants and travelers.

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\* Jarl – earl (Old Norse). The word « jarl » meant a chieftain set to rule a territory in a king's stead.

“We traveled for seven days. The sky was clear and blue and the wind was fair, as if Gods were on our side, propelling us forward and helping us. Hope filled our hearts as we readied for the battle.

“But then a storm broke out...”

He took a deep breath. Hypnotized, the crowd did just the same, catching his every word.

“Dark, heavy clouds covered the sky very fast and came down so low, that the tops of our masts scratched them. We lowered our sails and masts as blasts of cold wind fell upon us. Waves towered over the ships, trying to swallow us completely. The planks shivered and moaned under our feet and cold salty water filled our ship faster than we were able to bucket it.

“Separated by the storm, each ship fought on her own against the sea gods. They played with us for quite a while, throwing the ships like pieces of straw. Then, all of a sudden, rocks appeared in front of us, emerging from the foaming, angry waves. More and more of them appeared, higher and higher they grew. They looked like terrible fanged monsters waiting for new prey. We all thought that the ship would break on them, for the sea gods carried us toward those rocks. But an excellent sailor as he always was, Torgeir spotted an opening between the rocky teeth. He must have felt there was a bay there. He skillfully rode a big wave and made it carry the ship into the bay.

“We stopped rowing and looked around. The sea was much calmer there, and tall, black rocks disappeared in the darkness far above us and seemed to form a huge cavern. At least we thought so, judging by the sound, for it was too dark to see well. As we were on the enemy’s territory, we didn’t light torches and spent the night in the dark, just floating there, while the storm raged outside.

“The night was over, yet we were still unable to see. The morning light reached us at last, but instead of black darkness, we were now in the middle of a deep, white fog. White like milk, it was so dense, that one could not see his own feet. No one knew how long it lasted; we could only tell that it was still day when it started to dissipate. Then we saw that the cavern had a quite large opening at the top and was wide enough to contain two dozens of ships. It led to the dry land where beautiful trees and flowers grew. And we saw that six large enemy boats were floating there around us, ready to attack...”

His audience held their breath, eagerly catching his every word.

“We knew we were doomed, but none of us gave thought to surrendering. As for the enemy, they attacked, rushing toward us like wolves charging on a deer...”

“It was a fierce fight. We were surrounded. Torgeir and a group of warriors were positioned alongside the boards, protecting the ship as best as they could. Others received the order to row. First, they fired arrows at us, wounding some and killing Bjarte and Calder, valiant men and good friends who remain in our memory while they feast in Valhalla.

“When the Foreigners were close enough, they threw boarding hooks, trying to get on our ship.

“We fought like never before. Torgeir was everywhere: cutting their ropes, covering for the oarsmen, shouting orders and throwing spears – a weapon that he mastered better than anyone alive. He wanted us out of the bay so badly, that he finally did something mad, brave and unexpected: together with Halvdan and Gudmund, he jumped on the enemy ship that was between us and the entrance to the bay. Taking advantage of the Foreigners’ surprise, they killed several warriors at once and managed

to shift their sail. The Foreigners didn't notice it right away, and these seconds saved our lives. Torgeir, Halvdan and Gudmund kept fighting as if it had been their only aim, while the shifted sail caught the wind coming from the bay entrance, and the ship moved out of our way.

“We were ready. Those who had been fighting instantly dropped their weapons and we pushed hard on our oars. Our sail was down, and the wind couldn't keep us from rushing forward. Those who were up front didn't have time to pull their oars out. They broke with a loud cracking against the stern of the enemy ship. But we managed to keep our ship straight, heading toward the opening in the rocks.

“Meanwhile, Halvdan and Gudmund were slain. They fought bravely, taking at least a dozen of Foreigners with them each. Torgeir was wounded but still fought. He shouted us to keep going. But Ari didn't want to leave his friend in the hands of the Foreigners. He tied a long rope to the mast, and as our ship passed by the foreign boat where Torgeir was still fighting, he jumped on it. In this one jump, he killed three people and caught Torgeir, bringing him back to our ship. We madly rowed under the hail of arrows, and Torgeir and Ari joined us.

“It must have been quick, but it seemed to us too long, the time before we reached the opening and passed through it toward the setting sun, reflected in the open sea. The Foreign boats were close behind, determined not to let us go. One by one, they appeared out of the opening, still firing arrows that hardly reached us, thanks to the wind.

“And finally the gods turned toward us – our two other ships were there, at the ready, hurrying into the battle.



“The Foreigners obviously did not expect it, for they stopped firing arrows and seemed hesitant. But we didn’t give them the time to think: Torgeir gave his order, and our two ships hurried on attack, propelled by the fair wind in their sails. We hoisted the sail and adjusted the number of oars on each side before joining them. The Foreigners still outnumbered us and the fight was hard, however this time we were sure to win...”

Orm made a pause, emptied a cup of mead and wiped his gray mustache with the back of his hand.

“And so it happened. We sank two of their boats and captured three; the last one ran for its life, and as the night fell, we didn’t bother following it. That was when we found that Torgeir lay unconscious.

“Torgeir was covered in his own blood and the wound in his left side was so deep and bad, that none of us could understand how he had managed to fight with us during those last hours, giving orders with his usual energy and determination...” the old man averted his glance and sighed heavily. As he went on, his voice became dull.

“We knew he had no chance, but he came back to his senses and spoke. He gave us orders, precise and wise, and we followed every one of them.

“First, he wanted us to keep going until we conquered an important strategic point, and we were to find one at the morning. Meanwhile, he ordered the ships to gather for the night. He stayed where he was, on the deck, his wounds covered with a tight bandage. Torgeir knew death stood by his side and spared himself unnecessary movements and suffering, but willed himself to stay alive for as long as possible. That very night he announced that he wanted us to return and name a new konungr, once our mission completed. He also wanted us

to ask his beloved wife, Turid, not to sacrifice herself, but to live and help in choosing the new konungr, as well as to look after his sons.”

Orm fell silent for several heartbeats and absently ran his hand up and down his face. His audience didn't move. They just sat there frozen, eyes fixed expectantly on the old storyteller.

“With the first rays of the dawn, we headed toward the Foreigners' land. We hoped to get to their main city, but instead, several miles short of it, we fell upon their fortress. It stood hidden between the rocks, and could only be seen once passed. At that time, Torgeir could barely speak. He looked at the fortress, and then gave us orders with his eyes closed.

“We attacked quickly and by surprise. The fight was fierce but short. The fortress fell. We lost nine people, while their dead tripled ours. Those who remained alive were kept as prisoners.

“Torgeir must have felt that moment. He fell unconscious since giving his last orders, living his last moments. But when Ari appeared on the top of the fortress wall, brandishing our flag, Torgeir opened his eyes and looked around with a long, wise glance; he looked for the last time, his eyes dark with pain. He looked at the clear blue sky, at the bright and warm rising sun, at the long golden pathway that its reflection formed on the moving surface of the sea; he looked at Ari, and as he looked, a smile lit his pale, exhausted face. That beautiful, happy and serene smile that does not belong to the world of the living...”

Orm took a deep breath and went on louder, trying to hide the deep emotions his voice betrayed.

“Torgeir was dead, but he died like a konungr, like a true hero, a man of exceptional courage and of rare

strength... the man we will always remember and admire!”

The crowd roared unanimously, honoring the konungr.

“Before leaving the fortress, we made a worthy funeral for our konungr in the biggest and finest foreign ship. We filled the ship with gold and jewels from the fortress, we brought there the best weapons and food and animals, so that Torgeir was ready to travel to Valhalla. We sang for Torgeir’s glory as we pushed the ship away from the shore and lit it with our torches. As the fire burned higher and stronger, a blast of strong wind caught the ship, propelling her toward the setting sun.

“Our konungr was gone as a true hero, brave, strong and generous. He was a good man and a fair ruler and Odin welcomed him in Valhalla where he now feasts with Gods and with those of his crew who died in this battle.”

While Orm spoke, Turid sat motionless. She saw every scene he was describing as if she was there; she felt the salty wind on her skin and experienced all Torgeir’s pain as her own. It felt like sharp blades slowly cutting into her flesh. There was nothing she could have done for him. He died on a foreign land, far from home, and she was denied even a final farewell. Through Orm’s words, Turid watched her husband draw his final breath. Watching his exhausted beautiful face and his last smile, Turid felt something die inside her. One tear ran down her cheek and fell down on her skirt, but she could not allow herself to cry. She was a queen and she had to act with dignity. Crying was considered a weakness. Turid fought her pain and despair with all her might. She bit the inside of her cheek and clenched her fists as tight as she could.

People started singing to honor the konungr and all the dead. Turid took a rasping breath and joined them. Her voice was weak and quivering at first, but as the song went on it became easier, as if some of her pain was getting out with the sound. By the end of the song she was in control of her emotions enough to be able to finish the ceremony with dignity. And even though she saw everything from afar, through the curtain of pain, her voice was even and her posture straight and proud, as needed.

Olaf and Hrafn felt just as bad: for boys to weep was even more shameful than for the most high-ranked women. Having to suppress it was a real torture. In addition, even though they were positive now that their mother wouldn't sacrifice herself, they worried about her. They watched her every movement anxiously and prayed to all the gods to help her. They stayed until the very end of the ceremony with her and felt relieved when they were finally able to go home.

But even at home they remained silent, too exhausted and shocked to exchange words. Neither knew what to say.

Just as they got home, Ari arrived. He brought with him Torgeir's sword and carefully deposited it on the bench.

"Torgeir ordered me to give his sword to the next konungr. He chose to go to Valhalla with his spears," he explained quietly.

His words met no particular reaction, so he remained silent for a while, absently scratching his head. Then he swallowed and muttered, "His last words were that he loves all of you more than anything... and wants all of you to live happily, taking care of each other and our

people...” Ari's voice betrayed him and he had to clench hard both his fists to fight the coming tears.

In front of him, the queen and her sons sat close together on the straw mats. They were quiet and distant. None of them touched the konungr's sword, as if they were scared to do so.

Ari was Torgeir's closest friend, they grew up, played, and then fought together, and Torgeir's death was very painful for him. Ari felt helpless in front of Turid's silent despair. He could think of nothing else to tell them, so he went away, leaving them alone with their pain.

With the first roosters' crowing the dead konungr's uncle Folke knocked on their door. He found the queen sitting by the nearly extinguished fire. Her sons were curled up by her side, fast asleep.

The man greeted her with a bow. Turid nodded in response and pressed a finger to her lips. Folke understood and noiselessly stepped out of the longhouse.

Turid joined him and silently closed the door behind her, trying to not wake the boys.

Just as the door closed, Hrafn opened his eyes and sat up. His twin woke as well, but, feeling very sleepy, just gave Hrafn a brief glance and closed his eyes again.

Fast and silent like a wild cat, Hrafn got to the door and pressed his ear against it.

“Forgive me, queen, for bothering you when your grief is so great...” the man said hesitantly, “... but the council needs to talk to you.”

Turid didn't answer, but apparently she nodded or somehow encouraged the man, for he went on.

“Important decisions are to be made and time is short. Our people need a new konungr, and we believe that you are the one to guide us in our choice...”

Turid's voice was calm and serious when she answered, "I understand. Take me to the assembly. As for the boys, let them sleep. They need it after what have happened."

Footsteps told Hrafn that both were gone. He went back to his place by the fire. Olaf opened one eye.

"They are going to name the konungr," Hrafn informed him.

"What are we going to do?"

Hrafn sat down, closed his eyes and answered, "For now we can sleep. We will know if anything interesting happens soon enough."

This time, his twin didn't even open an eye. "Mmm... wake me up..."

"I will," whispered Hrafn and lay down. Comfortably stretching his body, he adjusted his sheep-fur blanket and closed his eyes.

## The Choice

The council was held in the great hall in the center of the town. It was not yet the voting assembly. Only jarls were there, sitting in a circle.

Torgeir's uncle opened the door and stepped aside to let Turid pass. The elders of the council stood to greet her.

The woman greeted them back and took a seat among them in the circle.

Harald, the eldest presiding over the assembly, spoke first.

“Thank you, queen, for acting so soon. We do sincerely admire your strength and devotion to our people.”

Turid just nodded. She knew they meant it, but she felt nothing special about her deed.

Harald went on. “Konungr Torgeir was our love and pride. He ruled wisely and died heroically. He will live forever in our hearts and songs... but now, a new chieftain must be named, for a lot of important decisions must be made. The war is not over.”

Turid nodded again. She wanted to hear it all before saying anything.

Harald seemed to understand her strategy. His eyes sparkled and a light smile touched his lips, making his long mustache move up.

“As both of your sons are only ten-winters-old, we have a difficult choice. We believe your advice is necessary here, for you have been a wise and devoted queen.

“There are only two possible solutions: someone rules until your eldest son Olaf is twelve-winters-old, or

we name Olaf our konungr, even though he is still too young. We believe only two people entitled to take the rule instead of your son – you or Örjan, Torgeir’s brother.

“We ask for your choice and will then vote,” he concluded, looking at the young woman.

Turid stared at the ground, thinking. She knew something like this was coming, yet he didn’t enlighten her about the answer she should give. Of one thing she was sure – she was a poor war leader. In everyday life, she had always followed her husband, counterbalancing his energy and strength with her tenderness and sense of harmony. She feared battles and blood too much. As for Örjan, he looked much more like a peaceful farmer than a chieftain. Yet it seemed wise discussing it with him before deciding.

Then she pictured her son Olaf who was now peacefully sleeping at home. Tall, good-looking and fair-haired, he was quick and smart, and rather good in fighting, just like his brother. They looked absolutely identical; the only thing allowing their mother to tell Olaf from Hrafn was the color of their eyes. Olaf’s were gray, turning nearly black when he was upset or very excited, while Hrafn’s were of that rare deep emerald green that fascinated anyone who looked into them. The twins were best friends and both promised to become great warriors.

On the other hand, they were only boys, her boys, and taking from one of them two winters of quiet childhood seemed cruel.

At the same time, the future of her people was at stake.

Turid tried to imagine her son as a konungr, looking for some sort of hint, for some indication that would give her the right answer. She knew she had to be very careful, for many destinies were in her hands.



But the more she thought, the more baffled she felt. Sighing heavily, she looked up at the council participants and said what seemed the most appropriate, given the situation.

“Honored council, I do understand the urgency of the matter. However, I would like to remind you that the issue is very important, for I am deciding not only the destiny of my children, but of all our people. I do not refuse this responsibility, but I would like to think it over and to talk about it to the others concerned.”

People around her listened, their expressions guarded, and Turid felt that they were reluctant to postpone the decision. All right then, she would give them a concession, because it seemed the only way to get what she wanted.

She added, “You’ll have my answer by sunset.”

Several faces around her visibly relaxed, while Harald and a couple of others remained expressionless. Turid felt that this time, she had it her way.

The confirmation came immediately.

“So be it,” said Harald, and the rest of the council openly agreed with him.

First, Turid went to see Örjan. She knew him to be an honest, simple and extremely shy person, and she decided that his opinion might be useful anyway.

Örjan and his family lived in the neighboring village, and Turid rode there.

When she arrived, it was already midday. She found Örjan leaving his field for his meal. Obviously, he did not expect to see her.

“Sorry for interrupting, but I must speak with you,” she announced, jumping off her horse.

Strong, tall and muscled, just like her dead husband, Örjan had bright red hair, and his nearly colorless eyes made his face look unexpressive. He scratched his head, not really knowing what to say.

Turid addressed him an encouraging smile and stopped outside the fence, giving him some space and a chance to overcome his shyness.

Örjan took a deep breath and finally said, “I didn’t expect to see you so soon after... well...what happened. But I’m glad you came. Please come and be my guest.”

His sincerity made her feel better.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” she answered. “But my time is very short. If you don’t mind, I’ll just talk here and go.”

The man nodded, and Turid quickly told him about the request of the council.

Örjan’s clear eyes rolled in amazement. “That’s impossible! ... Me? A konungr?” he chuckled bitterly. “Can you see me ruling?”

Turid did not reply. She wanted to hear his mind and she knew that even a slightest intervention would doom the intent.

Looking away, he stepped toward her and laid his huge, calloused hand on the fence between them. He remained like that, staring at the ground, before finally meeting Turid’s gaze. He shook his head and said, “I am flattered, but you know it: I’m not like my brother. I’m a farmer, and I’m happy with that.”

There was so much pain and sorrow in his eyes that they turned gray. Stunned, Turid discovered for the first time the deep and sincere love and admiration Örjan felt for his brother. It was so unexpected and touching, that tears filled her eyes.

Örjan looked away, leaning against the wooden fence.

“I just... don’t think I will be a good chieftain for our people,” he confessed, and seized his head with both hands. “I’ve always been too bad at planning, and then...” Turid could see how uncomfortable and ashamed he felt making such a confession, “...with my illness, I don’t think I’ll be able to bear such a responsibility,” he finished in a whisper.

Turid felt very bad for having made him talk of it – ever since his early childhood, Örjan had uncontrollable fits when facing a stressful situation. Few people knew it, for his family and close friends protected him as much as they could, and it was difficult to suspect given Örjan’s colossal size and muscles.

Leaning against the fence next to him, Turid put her hand on his shoulder. “It wasn’t my intention to force you into anything,” she gently reassured him. “I just needed your opinion.”

The man slowly nodded and lowered his hands.

“I miss him terribly,” he confessed, still looking down.

Turid swallowed, trying to chase away the upcoming tears, and gently stroke his red hair. “We all miss him...”

Örjan suppressed a sob before regaining the control of his emotions. Giving Turid a guilty smile, he said, “Sorry, I’m the one who should be consoling you.”

The woman chuckled bitterly and looked away. “In grief we are all the same.”

They remained silent for a while, both thinking of Torgeir, of what a wonderful man he was and of all those moments they were lucky to have shared with him.

Turid broke the silence first. “If I may ask you only one more thing, just between us... Who do you think is now the most suitable for succession?”

For several long moments, Örjan remained silent, watching a raven soar over the edge of the forest. Finally, he turned to look at Turid.

“I think, Hrafn,” he said quietly, to the woman’s utmost surprise.

She rolled her eyes at him. “But he is the youngest!”

Örjan shrugged and looked down, confused. “Well, it’s just my opinion...” he muttered.

On her way back, Turid kept hurrying her horse. Her discussion with Örjan left her even more confused. Before there were three potential candidates: Olaf, Örjan and herself, but now her youngest son Hrafn was brought into it. She was irritated and disappointed. She expected a good piece of advice from Örjan, because he knew her twins rather well, and both boys loved him. But Örjan picked none of the three possible. Was he trying to escape the need to make a decision not to offend anyone? Or did he really think that Hrafn was the best to rule? Well, there was no way for Hrafn to become the next konungr – the tradition demanded the eldest to take the father’s place. And Hrafn was born right after Olaf.

But no matter what, she had to choose. The day was inexorably fading. She felt panic growing inside of her.

There still was one more way to avoid any possible mistake. The surest and the most objective. Turid did not want to do it, but she had no other solution. Praying to all the gods, she turned her horse toward the forest.

Olaf and Hrafn were cutting wood with a couple of other boys. Hrafn stopped and pulled his brother by the hand.

“Olaf,” he whispered. “Mother went to see the rune caster!”

Olaf didn’t bother to put a shirt. “We’ll be right back!” he threw to the other boys who exchanged surprised looks, and the twins ran away as fast as they could.

## The Rune Caster

The rune caster lived at the edge of the forest, behind the closest trees. He was the best healer in the town, for he knew herbs. Descendant of famous rune casters, he was very good in predicting the future and many people came to see him to get advice.

Just like her dead husband, Turid believed that the future was not meant to be known in advance. She lived day by day, facing whatever was to come and listening to her intuition. However, this time she was lost and confused, and her intuition fell silent at the thought that she was to determine the future of several towns.

The decision to see the rune caster was not an easy one. She felt guilty, she felt like she was cheating, and several times she nearly turned back.

When she finally knocked at the door of the rune caster's hut, her heart was heavy.

The rune caster greeted her warmly, and politely offered her a cup of rich-smelling herbal tea.

He was a tall, bony man with long, white hair and beard. His face was long and thin, and so were his delicate white fingers. Despite his isolated way of living, he was known for his constant good mood and his love of a good jest. He always wore beautifully colored clothes, and many bright, colorful cushions decorated his simple hut.

With sincere and touching care, the old man gathered a pile of cushions on the floor by the fireplace for Turid and made sure she was comfortable. Then he sat on the floor in front of her and drank his tea in silence, smiling comfortingly and not asking her anything.

Inhaling the aroma of her herbal tea, Turid did not speak either. She was surprised but grateful for his hospitality, and relaxed a bit.

She slowly finished her tea and finally spoke. “Forgive me, ellri\*, for bothering you. I have an important decision to make and I feel I am lost...”

The rune caster slightly nodded, encouraging her. His amber eyes shone with attention.

Turid drew a deep breath, and went on. “As you probably know, my husband is dead, but the war is not over. The Foreign king is already gathering his army to invade more of our lands. We need a konungr to lead our people in this war and to grant us unity and prosperity after. The council is waiting for my opinion, but I’m not sure any of us is good enough.”

The old man took a sip of tea and put his cup away. “It will be my pleasure to help you, even though I see you don’t feel good about what you are asking.”

Turid blushed under his kind but penetrating gaze.

“I will cast the runes for you and will tell you what the gods advise you to do...”

He stood and retrieved his small leather bag with runes from a wooden trunk.

Back to his seat in front of the young woman, he opened it and carefully checked every rune stone. Then he put them back into the bag, closed his eyes, and fell silent. He concentrated his thoughts on Turid’s problem.

To Turid, it all seemed incredible. With a mixture of dull worry and childish curiosity, she observed the old man, not suspecting that her sons held their breath, pressing their ears to the door from outside.

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\* Ellri – elder (Old Norse)

The rune caster shook the bag, making the runes click and jump inside, and muttering to himself. Then he turned it upside down and emptied it on the floor in front of him. He thoughtfully studied the rectangular stones, then spoke. “Your eldest son and a regent received the same number of votes. That’s why the council left the final decision for you.”

Turid nodded.

“You can’t resolve yourself to rule because you are afraid of the war. You have lost family in battle and you fear that you will not be able to send someone else to death.”

The young woman’s face turned bright red. She was suddenly frightened of this strange old man who revealed so easily her deepest and most shameful secrets.

But the rune caster smiled kindly. “I’m not here to judge you, nor do I believe that weaknesses are shameful...”

“Your brother-in-law refused to reign as well... He is honest and his decision is wise...”

“Your sons remain...”

He sighed. Then, without looking at Turid, he reached for his cup and took a long sip of tea.

Outside, the boys exchanged excited looks, pressing their ears even harder against the wooden door.

“Your eldest boy is named ‘ancestors’ descendant’. A good name for a good konungr. He will be a strong and wise leader. People will remember him as Olaf the Fair. He will bring to life the projects of his brother. He will have eight sons and live a long, happy life, until death takes him, and his eldest son will take his place as a konungr...”



A broad grin lit Olaf's face. His brother's face returned his happy grin as Hrafn noiselessly patted his shoulder, congratulating him.

A weak smile touched Turid's lips. She had pride for her son, yet she couldn't help feeling this ordeal was not over.

"As for battles, Olaf will win only one. He will avenge his brother..."

With a dull thud, Turid's cup fell on the floor. The noise made the twins jump, but they instantly regained their position.

The rune caster stopped, gathered the fallen cup and stood. Moving deliberately slowly, he rinsed it, poured more tea for Turid, and patiently waited for her to drink. Only then did he sit back and continue.

"With the help of a woman, Olaf will conquer a large, rich foreign country and our people will rule over it forever, until their race disappears completely."

He stopped and seemed to ponder his next question for a while.

"Why did you call the second boy 'raven'? There was no man called so before..."

Turid's voice was weak and unsure when she answered.

"After he was born, a raven flew into the room and sat next to him. I got scared and wanted to chase the bird, but my son held his hand toward it and the bird bowed as if blessing him. My husband said it was a sign. Since then, the raven has always been around, keeping a close eye on my son."

"Oh... I see," muttered the old man. "Now I understand."

The twins exchanged worried looks: did the old man see that Hrafn and his raven were really one, that they

shared thoughts and feelings? But the old man did not explain and instead heaved a sigh and went on with his prophecy.

“The Raven boy has wisdom and a rare inner strength. He is smart and creative. He will be a very good Viking. He will taste the utmost happiness, for he will find his true love. She is a foreign princess. But they will soon lose each other. Their union is doomed... I see Raven failing... A choice is to be made: one will die, while the other will stay in this world, neither dead nor alive. They will be separated forever. Centuries of unbearable pain and suffering lay in front of him...”

Turid’s face went bloodless. A loving mother’s heart is seldom mistaken – she felt something was to go wrong. Legends said that true love was the greatest happiness a living person could experience. But once found, it should not be lost, or both would suffer. No remedy would help them, for after they have known what it felt like to share a soul, they can no longer stay apart.

Turid, who had just lost her beloved husband, knew how painful it was. But if the legends were true, her son’s pain would be even worse. Her heart bled at the thought of her boy having such a terrible fate.

Behind the door, the twins exchanged stunned looks.

Not letting her dwell on sad thoughts, the rune caster concluded, “Both of your sons are made to be great konungrs. They have their father’s temper. You should be proud of them.

“Now that I told you what you needed to know, you’d better go and get ready for the ceremony. People await your decision.”

The young woman gave him a puzzled look.

But the rune caster nodded and waved her to approach. Bending so close that his beard tickled her cheek, he whispered something in her ear.

## The Ceremony

At sunset, the members of the council and all those who were able to come gathered in the vast clearing in front of the great hall.

Washed and dressed in a hurry, Olaf and Hrafn stood there as well. They had to run back from the rune caster's hut and didn't have time to exchange their thoughts, which made their waiting nearly unbearable. Both had a hard time staying in place, for both itched to talk it over privately. At the same time, the ceremony was too important to miss, especially given the real possibility of Olaf being proclaimed the new chieftain. So they burned with impatience.

Örjan, his wife, and his daughters stood next to them. Örjan was probably even more nervous than his nephews: he honestly feared what was about to happen. All the more, he had never liked being the center of attention. He slouched, shifting from one foot to the other, his gaze fixed upon the ground. He felt that his desire to flee was too obvious, and it made him burn with shame.

Jarls, warriors, farmers, free workers, and slaves from their town and from the neighboring villages gathered around, curious to know the name of the new konungr. Excited whispers came from all sides; all the attention was focused on their small group, making them feel oddly and unpleasantly apart.

Finally, Turid appeared, and the crowd almost instantly fell silent. The tension in the air became almost perceptible as the young woman made her way to the center of the circle. She looked tired and older, her long fair hair tied into a knot, and the corners of her lips bent

downward. A few steps behind her walked the old rune caster. He wore his best embroidered blue shirt, and a belt decorated with silver and precious stones over his leather trousers.

At his sight, the twins couldn't help exchanging alarmed looks.

The old man took a place among the crowd, as if he was merely part of the curious audience and not an active participant. He greeted everybody with a nod, then glanced at the twins and suddenly winked. The boys stiffened, staring at the old man, but then Turid spoke, and they instantly forgot about the rune caster.

Turid greeted the crowd and fell silent, obviously gathering her thoughts. There was something alarming about her tense and pained expression.

Their feelings sharpened by curiosity, people around her froze suddenly aware of the fact that their destiny was being decided.

The young queen drew a deep, silent breath and people around her did the same.

"Honorable assembly," she finally began. "This very morning, I was asked to suggest the successor to my husband, Konungr Torgeir, who died defeating the enemy in a fierce battle, yet not finishing the war."

Her posture was proud and her voice was calm and clear, but the twins felt that it demanded a lot of effort from her.

"I know my suggestion will affect the future of our people and the outcome of the war. This is why I decided not to stop at my own opinion, but to talk to several people, including the rune caster."

The crowd muttered in approval – the rune caster was highly respected. No one doubted his prophecies, for all of them had come true.

Turid continued.

“The glory and prosperity of our people have always been and are my primary concern. With that, I suggest to name as our next konungr my son...”

Olaf’s eyes sparkled with pride and excitement and Hrafn turned to look at him, drawing a deep breath to shout his congratulations first.

“...Hrafn,” finished Turid, and though her voice remained even, it sounded rather like a groan of hidden pain.

Hrafn froze, his mouth open and his lungs so full with air that they threatened to explode. It couldn’t be! He must have misheard!

But the bewildered look on his brother’s face told him that he was not the only one.

Then the moment of silent shock was over and uproar broke from the crowd around them.

“That’s impossible! ...”

“He’s the youngest!”

“That’s wrong!”

“The eldest boy must rule!”

Turid stood motionless, praying it would end soon.

The rune caster was silent, observing the scene.

Örjan was relieved. He happily patted Hrafn’s shoulder in sign of sincere congratulation and beamed.

Hrafn blinked and remembered to breathe. He glanced at Olaf, whose shock quickly turned into vivid anger. Hrafn shook his head in an instinctive attempt to get rid of such a misunderstanding. But Olaf seemed to take it seriously. A frown twisting his face, he pointed his finger at his brother and shouted, “That’s not fair! I was born first, everyone knows it!”

This undeserved anger felt like a painful slap, like a treachery. Hrafn wanted to retort, but the pain of this sudden outburst left him speechless.

“Silence!” Harald’s powerful voice boomed over the uproar.

As if by magic, everyone fell silent and looked at him.

“All of you know that the assembly must vote on every proposal before it becomes a law,” he announced angrily. “According to the tradition, the person who made the proposal has the right to defend it. So now, I suggest everyone to close their mouth and open their ears. We will listen to what our queen has to tell us.”

All the eyes turned to Turid again. She threw a quick glance at the rune caster, as if looking for help, and swallowed hard.

“I do honestly think, and Örjan here agreed with me, that my sons are better suited to rule than me or him. As for the last choice, the rune caster suggested it to me.”

Everyone, including Turid, looked at the rune caster. The latter calmly stepped forward and spoke for the first time.

“Honorable assembly, I have been living among you for more than fifty winters now, and nearly everyone here has come at least once to seek my advice. You know better than I whether my prophecies have been wrong.” The people muttered in agreement.

“So today, at our queen’s request, I cast the runes for the boys. Both are destined to be good konungrs. I am not to reveal what fates the gods have for them, but one thing made me suggest the youngest as the successor: the Raven boy is the only one who will win the present war.”

The crowd gasped.

“I will say no more,” finished the rune caster. “Now vote, and may Odin guide you.”

With that he stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest.

People were obviously confused. They argued until night fall but finally gave their votes.

The rune caster’s arguments had their effect: the vast majority voted for Hrafn because they wanted victory in the war. The opposition clung to the traditions, but took their defeat quiet peacefully, without furious yells and menaces.

Harald walked toward Hrafn, who still wore a flabbergasted expression, and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“By the honest vote of the assembly I declare Hrafn, son of Torgeir, our new konungr!”

Most of the people yelled in approval.

Harald waited for them to calm down and went on. “Let us celebrate now. And tomorrow, after the sun rises...” there he looked down at Hrafn and went on with a challenging spark in his eyes, “...we will start the preparations for war.”

Hrafn swallowed and nodded. A sudden fear started growing inside him.

Harald’s brow wrinkled slightly, betraying his skepticism, but he said nothing.

In the next moment, Hrafn was separated from him as the crowd hurried toward the long row of wooden tables, already groaning with food and drinks. The feast began.

Hrafn sat alone at the head of the table. His raven was back with him – after having informed Hrafn that his mother went to see the rune caster, the bird joined him there and then flew back to the village with him. Now the



raven was perched on the back of his tall, wooden chair. From his place, Hrafn could see nearly everyone and, most importantly, was seen by everyone, which made him feel rather awkward.

Obviously still angry with him, Olaf had Ari sit between them. As for Turid, she sat at Hrafn's left, next to Örjan and his family. Örjan's wife, Aud, an opposite of her shy husband, was already overwhelming Turid with gossip, managing to eat and talk at the same time.

Hrafn felt isolated and avoided, as if he had become different from everybody. He found it unpleasant and had to struggle to keep smiling and answering politely to questions and congratulations. His heart heavy, he didn't feel like eating or drinking at all, and fortunately people kept talking to him, preventing him from doing so.

As for his brother, Olaf ate and drank enough for both. Rare were the occasions when ten-winter-olds were allowed to drink, so Olaf took advantage of the situation, emptying his second cup of mead.

The feast went on as usual: after eating, people began singing and dancing in the fire light.

Normally keen on dancing, Hrafn danced only one dance with one of his cousin and left. He could no longer stand this misunderstanding and the resulting feeling of loneliness, and decided to talk to the closest people he had: his mother and his brother.

The latter obviously had had his dose of mead – drunk asleep, he had fallen backwards off the bench. He lay on the grass, his mouth open and his arms spread wide on his sides, as if waiting for a hug.

Hrafn couldn't suppress a chuckle. If only they were friends like before, he would have made a joke out of it, but now it just seemed out of place. With a sigh, the new king bent down and seizing his brother by the armpits,

heaved him on the bench, so that no one would walk or fall over him.

“I see, the new konungr is the only one sober,” he heard Ari’s loud voice behind him and turned.

The warrior smiled down at him. In the light of recent events, Ari seemed more strong and mighty, and next to him Hrafn felt small and childish. Not knowing what to say to not appear ridiculous, the boy just shrugged.

“Good for you,” commented Ari, eyeing Olaf’s body. “You don’t need a dull head tomorrow.”

Hrafn stiffened. Why were all of them talking about tomorrow? He had a vague idea of what was about to happen then and the expectant allusions everyone kept making about it made the boy dread it.

Ari had drunk a lot, but he was used to it, for his brain was quite clear.

“Can we talk at the morning?” Hrafn asked, hoping it would ease his growing anxiety.

“Of course.” replied the warrior. “Come to the ship at the dawn.” He stopped, realizing that he was speaking to the king now, and it was not appropriate for him to command like that.

Hrafn understood and hurried to accept. “I’ll be there. It’s the best place.”

Both remained silent for a while, not knowing what to say. Ari moved first. Pointing at Olaf, he muttered, “I’ll take him home. It’s cold outside in the morning.”

Hrafn nodded. “Yes, please...” He watched Ari lift his brother’s limp body from the bench and carry him away with such ease as if Olaf weighed no more than a cat.

Then, Hrafn looked for his mother, but she was nowhere to be seen. The little voice inside his head told

him that there was something wrong with it, but he rejected that idea, too willing to think that she was busy.

Instead, he spotted the rune caster who was leaving. He hurried after him.

“Ellri! Ellri! Please, wait! ”

The old man heard and stopped, patiently waiting for the boy to approach.

Suddenly Hrafn felt lost. He wanted to ask so many things, yet didn't know what to say or where to start.

“Why?” he managed to mumble finally. He wanted to say that he had not heard anything about the present war in the prophecy, but stopped just in time, ashamed of their spying.

The old man seemed to know his thoughts, for his amber eyes sparkled with amusement.

“I understand your curiosity, young man,” he said, smiling. “That’s why I revealed some details that your mother doesn’t necessarily need to know yet...”

“Oh.” Hrafn felt from the beginning that the rune caster knew of their spying, but hearing it from him was strange.

“...but now I think you’ve heard enough.”

Hrafn opened his mouth to contradict, but the rune caster interrupted him by lifting his hand.

“You know the main path of your destiny now, but it’s still up to you to craft it. You don’t want to live like a dog following its master's whims, do you?”

Hrafn shook his head. Not that he felt sure of it, but that was what the old man expected him to do.

“A man of wisdom faces it all and makes choices that can change many things. Don’t you agree?”

Puzzled, the boy opened his mouth and closed it, defeated. Unable to hide his disappointment, he nodded. He could not disagree with the old man, but he had hoped

so much to hear something reassuring. Instead, he felt lonely and helpless.

Even if the rune caster read his thoughts, this time he did not react. He only patted the boy's shoulder and said, "Use *your* strength, but always remember that any strength may become a weakness."

Hrafn raised his brows in surprise, just like his father used to do, but the old man smiled and added, "Good luck to you, Konungr Raven, and may Thor help you!"

With that he was gone.

Hrafn remained motionless for a moment, his heart heavy. With a deep sigh, he slowly headed home.

As he reached the door, the big black raven flew toward him and landed on his shoulder. The boy thoughtfully stared at the bird, and after some hesitation, turned on his heels and headed toward the dark forest.

## Author's Note

I guess, for every writer, names have a very special value. I believe that the name is a part of the personality: it determines people's character, behavior and sometimes even destiny.

So, to make it clear to everyone and to avoid any possible pronunciation confusion, I decided to enclose a name index.

### Name index

Torgeir – [TOR-geyr] – “Thor's spear” (Old Norse).

Ari – [AH-ree] – “eagle” (Old Norse).

Orm – “snake” (Old Norse).

Advar – [ahd-VAHR] – “reach guard” (Old English).

Helgi – [HEH-lgee] – “blessed, holy” (Old Norse).

Halvdan – [HALF-dahn] – “half Dane” (Old Norse).

Gudmund – [GOOD-moond] – “god's protection” (Old Norse).

Turid – [TOO-ruhd] – “beautiful” (Old Norse).

Olaf – [OH-lahf] – “ancestor's descendant” (Old Norse).

Hrafn – “raven” (Old Norse). According to different sources, it can be pronounced as [rapn] or [rafn]. Personally, I prefer the second.

Harald – [HAH-rahlt] – “leader of the army” (Old Norse and Old English).

Örjan – [OE-rjan] – “farmer, earth worker” (Ancient Greek).

Ottar – [OH-tar] – “wealthy” (Old Germanic).

Kirk – “church” (Ancient Greek).

Sveinn – [sven] – “boy” (Old Norse).

Siv – “bride” (Old Norse). Siv was the wife of Thor in Norse mythology.

Eydis – [EY-dees] – “goddess of good fortune” (Old Norse).

Asta – [AH-stah] – “goddess of beauty” (Old Norse).

Knut – [knoot] – “knot” (Old Norse).

Idunn – [ee-DOON] – “love again” (Old Norse).

Idunn was the goddess of immortality and spring. She was responsible for guarding of the gods' apples of youth.

Ulfrich – [OOLF-reek] – “wolf’s rule” (Old Germanic).

Trygve [TRIG-vee] – “truth worthy” (Old Norse).

Eric – “ever ruler” (Old Norse).