

BEFORE THE BLADE

A Novelette of Astrid Bjornsdottir
D.R. Quill

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CHAPTER ONE

The Last Good Day



The morning my father died, I was racing Leif through the barley field. One of those autumn mornings that tricks you into thinking summer hasn't truly ended. Warm enough for bare feet, crisp enough that your breath showed in the early shadows between the stalks. The barley came up past my shoulder that year, and I was twelve years old, built like a river reed, all knees and elbows, and faster than any boy in the village.

Leif was thirteen, and he would never let me forget it.

"Cheating!" he hollered behind me, his voice cracking on the word, the way it had been cracking lately, skipping registers like a stone across water. "You started before I said go!"

"I said go," I called back, not slowing.

"You said it to yourself!"

I burst through the far edge of the field laughing, arms thrown wide, the last of the summer's warmth on my face. A moment later Leif came crashing through beside me, red-faced and panting, his dark hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. He was going to be tall. You could already see it in the long bones of his arms and legs, in the way he was growing too fast for his own coordination. Right now he was still more colt than warrior, all sprawling limbs and accidental grace.

He bent double with his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "You always cheat."

"I always win," I corrected. "Those are different things."

He looked up at me from under his hair, and even then, even at twelve years old, there was a look in his eyes I didn't have words for yet. Not annoyance. Warmer than that. He looked at me the way you look at a fire: as if it might burn you, but you'd stand close anyway.

"Bjorn's daughter," he said, the way the older boys said it, half admiration and half complaint. Like being good at things was something I'd done to him personally.

I grinned. "Bjorn's daughter," I agreed.

My father's name in my mouth felt like wearing his cloak. Too big, still, but mine someday. He was the jarl of our clan, broad-shouldered and steady, a man who made every room feel safer just by walking into it. He had my mother's gray eyes, people said, which meant I had them too. Storm-gray, the color of the sea before a squall. He told me once that the color was a warning and a promise together. *I will weather this*, those eyes said. *And so will everything around me.*

My mother had died bringing me into the world. I didn't mourn her, exactly. You can't grieve what you never had. But sometimes I caught my father's face when he thought no one was watching, and I understood that some wounds never fully close. He never spoke of her as a failure or a loss. He spoke of her as a woman who gave everything she had, and he made it clear that was the highest honor a person could earn.

He'd taught me that. He'd taught me most things worth knowing.

Leif and I walked back through the village together, still arguing about the race, as we had argued about every race and every spar and every swimming contest since we were small enough to be unaware that boys and girls weren't supposed to compete with each other. Leif's father, Ulf, was one of my father's best warriors, and they had houses near enough that Leif and I had grown up underfoot of each other. He was my oldest friend and my most

reliable opponent, and I loved him the uncomplicated way children love the things that are simply always there.

I didn't see my father's warriors gathered outside our hall until we were nearly upon them.

They stood in a cluster near the door, and the wrongness of it hit me before I knew why. Too quiet, too still, their eyes moving away from mine when I came near. Gunnar, my father's second, was among them. He was a boulder of a man, gray-bearded and scarred, and I had never seen him look uncertain before. He looked uncertain now.

"Astrid." His voice was soft. He never spoke softly.

Leif's hand found my arm. Not quite gripping, just present. As if he already knew, somehow, what was coming, and wanted to be a solid thing nearby.

"Your father," Gunnar said. And then: "Come inside, girl."



Fever.

Of all the ways for a jarl to go, fever was the one that made the least sense to me. My father was a warrior. He carried scars from three campaigns, had once driven off a raiding party with nothing but a seax and the knowledge that he was right. He should have died on a battlefield with his sword in his hand, the way the sagas said. He should have gone to Valhalla in glory and feasted there until Ragnarok.

Instead he burned from the inside out over four days, and I sat beside him for all of them.

He was lucid at the start. He held my hand and told me things I needed to know. Who to trust among his men, how to read the mood of the longhouse, what the western clans really wanted when they came with smiles and trading offers. He told me about my mother, more than he ever had before, as if he were unpacking

a chest he'd kept locked for twelve years. Her name was Gunhild. She had laughed too loud and argued too freely, and he had loved her without reservation or dignity, and he didn't regret a moment of it.

"You have her eyes," he said. "And her stubbornness, gods help whoever has to deal with you when you're grown."

"I'm already a problem," I told him.

He smiled. Even then, even burning with fever, he had a good smile. "You're a gift," he said. "Don't let anyone tell you different."

By the third day he didn't know me anymore. By the fourth day, he was quiet.

I didn't cry at the funeral. I watched them build the pyre and thought about how he would have hated this. The ceremony, the speeches, the people pressing my hand and telling me he was with the gods now. He was a practical man. He would have said the gods had enough company already and he'd rather be needed here.

Leif stood beside me through the whole of it. He didn't say anything, which was the right choice. He just stood close enough that our arms touched, a small warmth in the cold morning, and that was enough.

Sigrid Thorsdottir found me afterward, behind the longhouse, where I'd gone to finally be alone with it. She was a year older than me, which at that age felt significant. She had already begun the weapons training that girls could take if their fathers permitted it, already carrying herself with the self-consciousness of someone who knew people were watching. She had blonde hair like mine, though lighter, and eyes the color of a summer sky. She had been watching me from across the clan gatherings for as long as I could remember, with an expression I'd never been able to read.

She sat down beside me in the mud without asking and didn't speak.

After a while I said, "Why are you here?"

"Because you shouldn't be alone," Sigrid said simply.

“I want to be alone.”

“I know. But you shouldn’t be.” She pulled her knees up to her chest. “My uncle died two winters past. I was alone when I heard, and I made up stories about how he wasn’t really gone, and I believed them for months, and it made everything worse when I finally stopped. Someone should have sat with me.” She glanced at me sideways. “So I’m sitting with you.”

I looked at her. She looked back. Something settled between us, quiet and permanent.

“He was a good man,” I said.

“Yes,” said Sigrid. “He was.”

We sat there in the mud behind the longhouse until the autumn dark came down, and neither of us spoke much, and it was the beginning of everything.

CHAPTER TWO

How to Build a Shield-Sister



Bjorn's hall passed to his thane, a man named Aldric. Fair enough, if not the leader my father had been. What mattered more to me that winter was that his daughter was now a jarl's child without a jarl, and the world reconfigured itself around that fact in ways both large and small. The large: I was watched more carefully, spoken to more formally, given a kind of distant respect I hadn't earned and didn't want. Aldric was generous and uncomfortable about it in equal measure.

The small: I was suddenly, ferociously free.

My father had trained me, but within the bounds of what he thought I needed. Sword basics. How to read a room. Letters and figures and the histories of the clans. He'd given me a thorough foundation and a clear ceiling, and the ceiling had been his protection as much as his authority. A jarl's daughter had limits, because limits kept her safe.

With those limits gone, I went looking for something to fill the space they left.

I found it in Sigrid.

Her father Thorvald was a different kind of man than mine had been. Harder, blunter, with rough affection that showed up as criticism. But he believed in useful daughters, which meant Sigrid had been in real weapons training since the autumn. She brought me with her that winter as naturally as if it had been planned, appearing at my door one morning with a wooden practice sword and a look that said *come on, then*, and I went.

The training yard was cold and crowded and absolutely where I was supposed to be.

The weapons master, an old warrior named Birna who had herself fought in three campaigns before a knee injury ended her battlefield years, looked me over with the expression of someone evaluating a horse.

“Bjorn’s girl,” she said.

“Yes.”

“He started you on sword work?”

“The past two years. He said I was old enough to learn properly.”

She held out a practice blade. “Show me.”

I showed her. She watched without expression, then held up a hand.

“You’re leading with your shoulder,” she said. “Your father taught you his style. Broad man, wide stance. You’re narrow. You’ll fight differently, or you’ll fight badly.” She took the blade and demonstrated. “Like this. Again.”

I was there every day after that.

Leif had been in training for two years already, and he greeted my arrival with the enthusiasm of someone who had been hoping for exactly this.

“Finally,” he said, handing me a blunted training seax. “Everyone else here is terrible and I’m bored.”

“You’re not that good,” I told him, and he grinned the wide, uncomplicated grin I had known my whole life, and we fell into sparring like we’d been doing it forever. Which, in a sense, we had. Just with sharper consequences now.

Sigrid watched us from the side, her expression thoughtful.

“You two always like that?” she asked, during a water break, nodding toward Leif, who was demonstrating something to one of the younger boys with more confidence than accuracy.

“Since we were small,” I said.

“Like you’re arguing even when you’re not talking?”

I frowned. “We’re not arguing.”

Sigrid smiled the way she had when she’d seen something and was deciding whether to share it. “No,” she agreed. “Not arguing.” And she picked up her sword and went back to practice without explaining further.

Those were good months, that winter. Grief sat in my chest like a stone. Sometimes smooth and bearable, sometimes with an edge I’d catch unexpectedly, reaching for something and finding it gone. But the training gave it somewhere to go. Sweat and soreness and the satisfaction of getting something right that you’d gotten wrong a hundred times before. These things don’t heal grief, but they give you a place to put it while you learn to carry its weight.

Leif and I sparred every day. Sigrid and I ran in the mornings, breath clouding in the dark before dawn, feet finding the frozen paths through the village and out into the fields and back. We talked about everything and nothing. Her family, the other girls in training, what we thought the gods actually wanted from people. We talked about my father, sometimes, which no one else seemed willing to do. The living want to let the dead stay quiet. Sigrid understood that sometimes you need to make them speak.

By spring, the three of us were inseparable. Leif had accepted Sigrid’s presence with the easy adaptability of someone who had never questioned that his world would expand and improve. Sigrid had accepted Leif with the mild wariness of someone who has assessed a risk and decided it’s manageable. They didn’t have what Leif and I had, that old, wordless shorthand, but they had their own thing. A careful mutual respect, and a shared exasperation with me that became, over the years, one of their deepest bonds.

We were a strange little clan of three, but we were ours.

CHAPTER THREE

Yield



Three years passed. I was fifteen when I first understood that something had changed between Leif and me. Or rather, that something had been changing slowly for a long time, and I had only just noticed.

We were sparring in the training yard on a late summer evening, most of the others already gone to supper, just the two of us and the long golden light and the steady rhythm of wooden blades. I was better than him on speed; he was better than me on reach. We had been refining the dance of our specific strengths and weaknesses for three years, and we knew each other's moves the way you know the words to a song. So well that knowing became instinct became something closer to thought.

I went for his left side, which I always did when I was tired, and he swept it down, which he always did in response, and the counter I'd been planning for his response landed perfectly. I had my wooden blade pressed to his ribs and his back against the fence.

He looked down at the blade. Then up at me.

We were very close. I could see the sweat on his temple, the last light catching in his eyes. Dark brown, warm, like river water in autumn. He'd grown into himself that summer, the awkward colt-phase finally done, and the person who'd emerged was someone I would have called handsome without hesitation if he hadn't been Leif, who I'd known since before we had words for things like that.

“Yield,” I said.

He didn’t yield immediately. He looked at me a moment too long, with that expression I’d been seeing more often lately. Not new, exactly, but more visible somehow. Like a river in spring flood showing you how much water had always been moving beneath the ice.

Then he said, “Yield,” and I stepped back, and we both pretended the moment hadn’t happened.

But I thought about it that night. And the night after that. I thought about it the way you think about something that won’t be unthought. Turning it over, examining it, not sure if what I was finding was real or something I’d invented out of loneliness and proximity.

Sigrid had not been pretending the moment hadn’t happened.

She found me by the stream the next morning, during our run, and fell in beside me in silence for a while before she said, “Leif.”

“What about him?”

“Don’t,” she said, mildly. “I saw your face yesterday.”

I ran for a few more paces. “It’s nothing.”

“Mm.” She kept pace easily. “And his face?”

I didn’t answer.

“Astrid,” she said. “I’m your shield-sister. You don’t have to be coy with me.”

Shield-sister. She had started saying it that spring, and the word had taken on weight between us. It wasn’t just a friendship term or a training phrase. It was something else. An oath of a kind, without the formal words. The statement that her life and mine were bound together in a way that transcended whatever else happened. I had a family, technically, in the form of Aldric and his household, but Sigrid was the first person who had ever made me feel that family was something you built, not just inherited.

“I don’t know what it is,” I said honestly. “It might be nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” She didn’t say it unkindly. “He looks at you the way my father looks at the sea before a raid. Like something he wants badly and is afraid of at the same time.”

I thought about that for the rest of the run.

Leif was quieter than usual that week. He sparred with his usual skill but without the commentary he usually kept up — the running critique of his own performance that drove the other trainees mad and that I had always found obscurely comforting. He was thinking, which meant something was happening beneath the surface.

One evening I found him sitting on the fence at the edge of the training yard, looking out over the fields toward the treeline where the sun was setting. I sat beside him.

We were quiet for a while.

“You’ve gotten good, Leif. Better than good. Birna says you’re one of the best she’s trained in years.”

“Birna says that to everyone she thinks needs pushing.”

“She said it to me last spring and meant every word of it. I asked her afterward.”

That surprised him into a real laugh. Short and startled, the kind that escapes before you can decide whether to allow it. He turned to look at me fully, and the last of the sun was in his eyes, and something in my chest did a complicated thing.

“Astrid,” he said, and then stopped.

“What?”

He looked at me for a moment. That expression again, the one I’d been cataloging for weeks, trying to name. And then his jaw set the way it set when he was about to do something that scared him.

“Nothing,” he said, and looked back at the treeline. “Never mind.”

I let it go. But I felt the something between us as clearly as I would have felt an approaching storm. That charge in the air, the way the light changes just before everything else does.

Something was coming. I didn’t know yet whether to call it toward me or brace against it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Words Said and Unsaid



By that autumn, Sigrid and I had been shield-sisters long enough that the word had worn itself smooth between us. Used so often it had stopped being a declaration and become simply a fact, like weather or breath. Leif, upon being told, looked genuinely moved in the way he always did when something mattered to him. He never learned to hide it, which I thought was one of the best things about him.

“Good,” he said. “Good. Then you’ll look after each other even when I’m being an idiot.”

“You’re often an idiot,” Sigrid told him, not unkindly.

“Hence the need for looking after.”

It was the kind of conversation we could have in our sleep, the three of us, and I loved it. I loved them. I wasn’t sure, yet, if what I felt for Leif was the same thing he seemed to feel for me. I was sixteen and I’d spent my whole life focused on training and survival and the long task of growing up, and romantic feeling was still a language I was learning to read in myself. But I knew that the world with Leif in it was categorically better than a world without him, and I knew that when he smiled at me the right way my whole chest responded before my mind could get involved.

That, I was starting to think, was probably information.

We were seventeen when everything shifted for good.

It was mid-winter, dark and bitter cold, the kind that drives you inside for weeks, and we’d been cooped up in the longhouse for days while a storm ground itself out against the coast. The whole

hall was restless. Warriors playing dice and arguing, children underfoot, everyone's tempers fraying. Sigrid had gone to help her mother with something, and Leif and I had claimed a corner near the fire where we'd been sitting for the better part of an afternoon, not saying much, watching the fire and listening to the storm.

"Tell me something you've never told anyone," I said, because I was bored and because it was a game we'd been playing since we were children, variations on it.

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "I think about the future too much."

"That's not a secret. You plan everything."

"Not like that." He turned toward me, and his face in the firelight was serious in a way that made me pay attention. "I mean — I think about where I'll be in ten years. What I'll have. Whether it will have been worth it." He paused. "Whether the people I want to still be there will still be there."

"You're not going anywhere."

"Neither are you," he said, and the way he said it wasn't statement or question but something between. An offering with a request inside it. Something that needed a response.

I looked at him. The fire was warm, the storm was loud, the hall was full of people, and we were somehow entirely alone.

"No," I said. "I'm not going anywhere."

Something in his shoulders relaxed that I hadn't noticed was tense.

After a while he said, quietly, "Do you ever think about it? The future?"

"I think about tomorrow and then the day after that," I said honestly. "My father used to say the present is the only thing you can hold. The future keeps moving."

"But if you could hold it—" He stopped. Started again. Then he set down the thought he'd been circling and said it plainly, the way he did everything when he finally decided to commit. "I'd

like to know if there's a version of the future where you and I are something more than what we are. And I'd like to know if that's something you'd want. Or if I've just been seeing something that isn't there."

The storm pressed against the walls. Somewhere in the hall, someone laughed at a dice game.

I looked at him for a long moment. At the careful stillness he was holding himself in, at the effort it had cost him to say it plainly after all that circling. Leif, who planned everything, who thought too much, who had been working up to this for longer than tonight, and I knew it.

"Give me a week," I said.

"A week."

"To figure out whether I know my own mind about this. I don't want to answer you because the fire's warm and the storm's loud and my good sense is somewhere else." I looked at him steadily. "You deserve a real answer."

He nodded, slowly. "A week." He looked at me a moment longer, that expression, and then he turned back to the fire, and we spent the rest of the evening in a new silence. Charged and strange and not unpleasant. Like the air after lightning, when you're still unhurt and the sky is still bright.

I knew, by the end of that night. I think I'd known before the week began. But I gave myself the week anyway, because I was my father's daughter and I didn't make important decisions without considering them from all angles.

On the seventh day, I found Leif in the training yard.

I walked up to him and I said, "The answer is yes."

He looked at me for one complete beat, making sure he understood what was being answered. Then he smiled. The wide, complete smile I had known all my life, but with something new in it now. Something that was only for me.

"Okay," he said. And then, quieter: "Good."



I told Sigrid that evening.

She looked unsurprised in the way of someone who has been waiting for a thing to happen for a very long time. “Finally,” she said, and went back to sharpening her blade, and said nothing more, and I thought she was probably right.

But the quietness around her stayed. She had come back from her mother’s that afternoon with a stillness she sometimes got and never explained. I asked her, days later, what her mother had needed help with.

She was quiet a moment before she answered.

“She’d found an old ritual. From before.” Sigrid’s voice was even, the way it got when she was deciding how much to say. “She forgot, sometimes, that she couldn’t do those things anymore. She’d start the preparations — the herbs, the arrangement, the words — and then she’d reach for the part that used to come naturally, and it just...” She stopped. “Wasn’t there.”

I didn’t ask. Sigrid didn’t offer. She picked up her whetstone and that was the end of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Language of Touch



What changed between Leif and me was not any one moment but the accumulation of small ones, each sitting on top of the last until they became something you could feel the full weight of.

The first time he held my hand. Deliberately, not incidentally, fingers interlaced and his pulse in his wrist and the full awareness between us of what this meant. We were standing at the shore watching a storm come in off the water. The sky was the color of a bruise, beautiful and violent, and I leaned into him and he leaned back, and the storm came, and we stayed until we were both soaked through and laughing.

“We’re idiots,” I said, through chattering teeth.

“Obviously,” he said, and didn’t let go of my hand.

We learned each other differently in those months. The vocabulary of being close to someone who has chosen to be close to you. Not innocently; we were eighteen by then and the world had been educating us about desire with its usual blunt pedagogy for years. But carefully, the way you learn a skill you want to carry your whole life, with attention and intention and the specific gravity of knowing this is not practice.

The first time I kissed him, I started it. He’d been looking at me too long with that expression, and I’d finally run out of patience waiting for him to close the distance.

“You were going to do that eventually,” he said afterward.

“I was saving us time.”

“You were also nervous.”

“I was not—” I saw his face. He was right. I had been. “Fine. Marginally nervous.”

“Endearing,” he said, and I punched his shoulder, and he caught my hand and pulled me back in, and being right was less important than this.

What followed in the weeks after was its own education. We had six years of knowing each other. Every expression, every habit, every opinion held too strongly. And none of that prepared us for this. Knowing someone’s mind is not the same as knowing their hands. Knowing their courage is not the same as knowing the sound they make when you find the place below their jaw that makes them forget what they were saying.

We were good at most things. We were not, initially, good at this.

The first time we tried to go further than kissing, I knocked his chin with my forehead hard enough that his teeth clacked together, and we both swore at the same moment and then couldn’t stop laughing long enough to try again. He had a bruise on his jaw the next morning. I told Sigrid I’d elbowed him in training, and she looked at me with an expression that said she believed none of it.

“Do you want to—” he started, later that week, when we claimed a quiet corner of the storehouse on some pretense neither of us believed.

“Yes,” I said. “But I don’t entirely know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t either.” He said it simply, without embarrassment. That was Leif. He could admit the thing most people would die before saying, and make it feel like the obvious and sensible position. “We could figure it out.”

“Together,” I said.

“We’re good at that.”

We were. Slowly, haltingly, with wrong turns and whispered questions and the grace of two people who trusted each other enough to be incompetent together, we were.

The first time was not the smooth and certain thing the older warriors made it sound like in their stories. There was an awkward negotiation of limbs, a moment where I laughed at the wrong time and he buried his face in my neck and laughed too, and a long pause where we both held very still and looked at each other and said nothing, and everything. His hands shook slightly. So did mine. I don't know which of us was more frightened or more certain, and I think they were the same feeling worn different.

Afterward we lay tangled together in the dark and he said, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said. Then: "Are you?"

"Yes." A pause. "That was—"

"Not what the songs say it is."

"Not yet," he said, which made me laugh, which made him smile into my hair, and the truth of it was that he was right. It got better. Each time we knew each other a little more thoroughly, learned the language of the other's body with the same patience we'd brought to swords and shields and the long work of becoming warriors. What had been tentative became fluent. What had been uncertain became its own kind of knowledge. The kind that lives in the hands and skin and breath, below the reach of words.

I had always been in my body in the way of a trained fighter. Aware of it, trusting it, demanding of it. But this was different. This was my body learning something training had never taught: that the same thing that makes you strong can make you soft, and both are true at once, and neither one cancels the other out.

The nights we had together in those months belong to us.



Sigrid, for her part, demonstrated the quality that made her a true shield-sister: she saw everything, said only what was useful, and

kept the rest as the private knowledge of someone who loves you and is glad for you.

"You're happy," she said once, simply.

"Insufferably," I agreed.

She smiled. It was the smile of someone whose contentment comes from its own source. Her own kind of strength and her own complicated peace. "Good," she said. "You've earned it. Both of you."

Outside, spring was coming. The snow was retreating. And in Blackmoor, to the north, a young jarl was inheriting his father's hall and his father's ambitions, and the world was already beginning to reshape itself around the consequences. me was not any one moment but the accumulation of small ones, each sitting on top of the last until they became something you could feel the full weight of. The first time he held my hand. Deliberately, not incidentally, fingers interlaced and his pulse in his wrist and the full awareness between us of what this meant. We were standing at the shore watching a storm come in off the water. The sky was the color of a bruise, beautiful and violent, and I leaned into him and he leaned back and the storm came and we stayed until we were both soaked through and laughing.

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The first time was not the smooth and certain thing the older warriors made it sound like in their stories. There was an awkward negotiation of limbs, a moment where I laughed at the wrong time and he buried his face in my neck and laughed too, and a long pause where we both held very still and looked at each other and said nothing, and everything. His hands shook slightly. So did mine. I don't know which of us was more frightened or more certain, and I think they were the same feeling worn different.

Afterward we lay tangled together in the dark and he said, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said. Then: "Are you?"

"Yes." A pause. "That was—"

"Not what the songs say it is."

"Not yet," he said, which made me laugh, which made him smile into my hair, and the truth of it was that he was right. It got better. Each time we knew each other a little more thoroughly, learned the specific language of the other's body with the same patience we'd brought to swords and shields and the long work of becoming warriors. What had been tentative became fluent. What had been uncertain became its own kind of knowledge. The kind that lives in the hands and skin and breath, below the reach of words.

I had always been in my body in the way of a trained fighter. Aware of it, trusting it, demanding of it. But this was different. This was my body learning something training had never taught. That the same thing that makes you strong can make you soft, and both are true at once, and neither one cancels the other out.

The nights we had together in those months belong to us.



Sigrid, for her part, demonstrated the quality that made her a true shield-sister: she saw everything, said only what was useful, and kept the rest as the private knowledge of someone who loves you and is glad for you.

"You're happy," she said once, simply.

"Insufferably," I agreed.

She smiled. It was the smile of someone whose contentment comes from its own source. Her own kind of strength and her own complicated peace. "Good," she said. "You've earned it. Both of you."

Outside, spring was coming. The snow was retreating. And in Blackmoor, to the north, a young jarl was inheriting his father's hall and his father's ambitions, and the world was already beginning to reshape itself around the consequences.

CHAPTER SIX

Iron in the Air



We were nineteen when the trouble started. It began the way trouble usually does. Not with a declaration but with a silence. Trade routes that had been reliable for years went quiet. Messengers came back late, or not at all. The western clans started moving their livestock further from the northern borders, and when you asked why, the answers were careful and indirect.

Blackmoor is restless, they said. The old jarl's son has something to prove.

I knew nothing of him then beyond that. A name not yet spoken aloud in our hall, a shadow at the edge of maps, a young jarl said to be more patient and more dangerous than his father had been. Where the old Bloodraven had raided openly, this one moved like cold water finding cracks: a border dispute here, a trade agreement renegotiated under duress there, a careful expansion that was hard to call war while clearly being war.

Aldric called his warriors together in the autumn.

I went.

I was not yet a warrior in the clan's formal recognition. I was Bjorn's daughter, training-tested and capable, but not blooded in proper battle and not officially sworn. Leif was the same. But Birna, who had trained half the room, made space for us near the back, and Aldric, who knew perfectly well we were there, didn't object.

"Blackmoor has taken three villages on the northern border," Aldric said. His voice was steady. "They haven't crossed into our territory. Yet. But the pressure is increasing." He looked around

the room. "I won't pretend this isn't war. It will be war. The only question is whether we meet it on our terms or theirs."

Leif was very still beside me. I could feel it. Not fear, exactly, but a heightened attention, every sense sharpened, the way he got before a hard spar.

His hand found mine in the dark and held it.

That winter was hard in a different way than the winters before it. The threat changed the texture of everything. Training more urgent, conversations quieter, the way people looked north with their expressions shuttered. Birna pushed us harder. Aldric began drilling formations. The smiths worked late into every night.

And Leif and I found that what we had built was not made to be diminished by any of it.

We lay together on a cold winter night, the fire banked low, and he told me about his father. How Ulf had died in a raid three years before. I had known that. But now he told me the shape of it: how it had restructured everything he thought about bravery and sacrifice and what you owe the people you love.

"He told me once that the only thing worth dying for is what you'd live for," Leif said. "I thought it was just the kind of thing fathers say. Now I think he meant it exactly."

"What do you live for?" I asked.

He was quiet for a moment. "This," he said. "You. Sigrid. This place. The people in it." He turned his head to look at me. "What about you?"

I thought about my father. About the barley field and the races and all the things he'd tried to teach me and whether I'd learned them properly.

"Same," I said. "Exactly the same."

He pulled me closer. "Then we fight for it," he said. "And then we come back. Both of us."

“Shield-oath,” I said. It was what Sigrid and I had used. The weight behind the word, the understanding that this is not a wish but a promise in both directions.

He understood. “Shield-oath,” he agreed.



There was a night, not long before the first battle, when we both understood without saying it that this was the edge of something. That whatever came next would be different from everything before.

He reached for me first. Or I reached for him. It was simultaneous. The way things are when two people have learned each other well enough that the wanting moves in both directions at once and you can't find the seam between them.

This was nothing like those first uncertain nights a year before. We had learned each other thoroughly by then. I knew the exact pressure of his hands when he was trying to be careful and the different pressure when he had stopped trying to be careful. Knew the sound he made low in his throat when I found the place below his collarbone, and the way his breath changed when I took my time about it. Knew that if I pulled back he would follow without thinking, and that he knew the same about me, and that we had long since stopped pretending otherwise.

That night there was an urgency in it that hadn't been there before. Not frantic, but deliberate. Like we were trying to memorize each other. His mouth tracing the line of my jaw, my shoulder, the scar on my ribs from a training accident two years prior that he knew better than I did by now. My hands mapping the breadth of his back, the muscles that shifted under my palms, the warmth of his skin that I had stopped being able to think about without wanting.

“Look at me,” I said at some point, and he did. That expression, fully open, nothing held back. And I held his gaze and didn’t let either of us look away, and I thought: *this. Whatever happens. Remember this.*

Afterward he said my name the way he sometimes did. Not asking anything, just saying it, like it was something he needed to hear aloud in the dark.

“I know,” I said, though he hadn’t finished. I knew anyway.

We lay still for a long time, his arm heavy across me, neither of us sleeping. Outside the wind had come up. Somewhere across the camp a horse shifted and stamped.

“We’re going to be fine,” he said. Talking to himself as much as to me.

“Yes,” I said.

Neither of us entirely believed it. But we said it, and held onto each other in the dark, and for that night it was enough.



Sigrid, in those months, was something I had never quite seen before. She was always steady. That was her gift, the bedrock quality that made her such a good shield-sister. But as the war-season approached, she became something beyond steady. She became certain. Every morning she was in the training yard before light. Every evening she was sharpening her blade and checking her gear and running the forms again. Not from fear but from love. The fierce, protective love of someone who has decided what she is fighting for and accepted the cost.

Once I found her outside at night, looking north.

“Worried?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, simply. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She didn’t look at me, kept her eyes on the dark horizon. “Worried is smart. Scared is honest. It’s the ones who say they feel nothing I don’t trust.” She finally turned. “He’s going to do something stupid in battle. You know that.”

She meant Leif.

“He’s good,” I said.

“He’s good. He’s also loyal. To the point of stupidity. He’ll fight well for himself, but the moment someone he loves is in danger, all that good training goes sideways.”

She wasn’t wrong. I had seen the way his strategy dissolved when he thought I was hurt, the way his attention fractured.

“We’ll stay together,” I said. “The three of us. We watch each other.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “We watch each other.” She looked back north. “And we all come home.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Field Between



The battle came in early autumn, when the leaves were just beginning to turn. Blackmoor had pushed through the western approach, finally crossing what had been an invisible border and making it real. Aldric had called his warriors. We had answered. Leif, Sigrid, and I had been formally sworn and blooded in a border skirmish two months before. A small and ugly thing that I will not pretend was glorious. But we were warriors now, by oath and act, and we took our places in the line.

The morning was cold. The field was wide, and across it I could see the dark lines of Blackmoor's forces gathering like a storm front.

Leif checked my straps without being asked, the habitual competence of someone who has run through this routine a hundred times. I checked his. Sigrid rolled her shoulders, loosening them, checked her shield grip, looked at each of us in turn.

"Together," she said.

"Together," we answered.

The shield-wall formed. I took my place in it. That orderly, terrifying compression of bodies and intent, the smell of fear and cold iron and leather that I would carry in my memory for the rest of my life. Leif was to my right. Sigrid to my left.

The horns sounded.

I will not make the battle into poetry. Battle is not poetry. It is noise and chaos and the sudden violent narrowing of the world to the six feet around you. It is muscle memory taking over while

your mind works at a different level, tracking and calculating and responding faster than thought. It is the sound of steel on steel and the percussion of shields impacting and the way the ground churns under too many feet.

We fought well.

For a long time, we fought well.

The three of us moved together as Birna had taught us, covering each other's flanks, communicating without words in the language of people who have trained together for years. Leif was everything Birna had said. A fighter in his prime, strong and controlled and terrifyingly precise, the patience he'd earned showing up now as the ability to wait for the exact right moment and then move without hesitation.



It was the ambush that broke our formation.

Blackmoor had held back a second line, and when it hit our flank, the shield-wall buckled. The three of us were separated in the crush. Not far, but far enough. The crowd of fighting bodies between us.

I heard Sigrid before I saw her. Her short, fierce war cry, the sound I'd have known anywhere. I fought toward her, clearing space, and found her holding a gap in the line with two of Aldric's men. She was fine. She was good, her blade moving with the clean economy of someone who had made peace with what she was doing.

I looked for Leif.

He was twenty feet away. He'd gone after a man twice his size who had been pushing through the line toward Aldric himself. Leif, who would see a threat to someone he was loyal to and simply move without calculating the odds.

He'd put the man down.

He turned to find me, and I saw him locate me across the field, and I saw the relief on his face.

I also saw the Blackmoor warrior behind him.

I was moving before the thought fully formed. Opening my mouth to shout, already in motion, already knowing I was too far, that the crowd between us was too thick, that no amount of wanting would change the physics of the distance.

I shouted his name.

He turned.

Not fast enough.

The blade caught him in the side, in the gap between armor plates. Every fighter knows that gap is there. Nobody expects to watch it happen to someone they love. I saw him go down. Not immediately, not the way that means quick and clean, but the way that means he registered the wound and then his legs decided they couldn't hold anymore.

I fought through to him. It took me too long. It took me an eternity.

I got to him and went to my knees, and his eyes were open and he was looking at me with that expression. The one I'd been reading for years, the one I knew better than my own face.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said. My voice didn't shake. I don't know how.

"I was trying to be smart about it. You saw."

"You were. You were very smart. You got him."

"I got him," he agreed. He looked satisfied for a moment, and then his face changed, and I recognized the change. The way someone looks when they understand what is happening and are deciding how to meet it.

"Astrid," he said.

"Don't," I said. "Don't you dare do the speech."

Something in his eyes softened. “Okay. No speech.” He found my hand, squeezed it. His grip was weaker than it should have been. “Just — you know. You know.”

“I know,” I said. My eyes were burning. “I know.”

He looked at me for a while longer, and in that looking was everything. All the races through the barley field, and the sparring, and the fire in winter, and the first kiss, and the careful learning of each other, and the future we’d been building with our hands and our entirely stupid optimism.

“Shield-oath,” he said.

“Shield-oath,” I answered.

His hand went still in mine.

I don’t know how long I knelt there. The battle continued around us. I could hear it. The iron and the shouting and the percussion of shields. But it had become remote, like sound heard through deep water. My ears were roaring. My eyes were fixed on his face.

And then I saw something I have never been able to explain to anyone’s satisfaction, including my own.

At the edge of my vision, not quite there, not quite not, a darkness that moved with purpose. Not the darkness of shadow or smoke. Something older. Something that had the shape, if I tilted my perception just slightly sideways from the normal world, of wings. Of a figure that stood where no living person was standing, regarding Leif with an expression I could not read on a face I could not quite see.

It lasted the length of a breath. Then it was gone.

I told myself later it was shock. That grief does strange things to the senses, that the mind under extreme duress manufactures visions to make meaning from meaninglessness. I told myself this for years, and mostly believed it.

But I had never manufactured a vision before. And what I had seen did not feel like something my mind had made. It felt like something my mind had simply been present for. Like a door

opened briefly onto a room that had always been there, that I had never had eyes for until that moment.

I did not know what to do with that. So I set it down and left it.

He was taken well. A warrior's death, witnessed. Carried properly.

It didn't help. But it was something.



Sigrid was there. I don't know when she arrived, I didn't hear her come, but she was there, kneeling on his other side, her hand on his shoulder, her face doing the thing faces do when they are working very hard at holding together.

The battle kept going. Somewhere behind us, Aldric's warriors were pushing Blackmoor back. Somewhere ahead, the retreat was already beginning.

The three of us had always been the three of us. And now there were two.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What We Carry



They gave Leif a warrior's burning. It was right. He had earned it. I helped prepare the pyre. Someone — I think Aldric, or one of his captains — tried to tell me I didn't have to, that others would do it. I looked at them until they stopped talking. There were things you did yourself. This was one of them.

We laid his spear beside him, and his shield, and the small carved horse he'd kept since childhood that he'd never explained and I'd never asked about. I had always meant to ask. I put his knife in his hand, the good one with the antler handle that he'd sharpened every evening with the same methodical patience he brought to everything. His hands were cold. I knew hands went cold. I had held enough of them by then to know. It didn't help to know.

I stood at the edge of the fire when they lit it and thought about my father's pyre, eight years before. The way I had stood at a different edge, younger and less practiced at loss, watching something irreplaceable turn to ash and smoke, and that smell of burning you never forget and never want to remember. I had thought, after my father, that I knew how grief worked. That I had learned its shape and could bear the next one with some dignity.

I was wrong. This was different in kind, not just in degree.

My father had been my foundation. Losing him had left me standing on uncertain ground, but standing. Leif had been what I chose to build on top of that ground. The deliberate thing, the chosen thing, the future I had decided to want. Losing him didn't shake the foundation. It took the whole structure down and left me

in the rubble of my own choosing, which is a different and more terrible thing than simply being knocked off your feet.

The fire was loud. I hadn't remembered that about pyres. The noise of them, the way the wood speaks as it goes. Around me people were saying the things people say. *Good death. Warrior's end. Valhalla feasts tonight.* I understood that they meant it kindly. I could not make myself care.

What I kept thinking about, standing there, was the horse in his hand. That I had never asked. Six years, and I had never asked about the small carved horse, and now I never would, and that one small unanswerable question felt in that moment like the whole of it. The whole weight of all the things we don't ask because we think we have time.

Sigrid stood beside me through all of it and said nothing, which was the only right thing to do. She was carrying her own grief. Leif had been her friend too, her training partner, the third part of the thing that had been the three of us. And she carried it the way she carried everything: steadily, without performance, with the dignity of someone who knows that falling apart is a luxury they cannot afford on someone else's behalf.

I was grateful. I had no words to offer her, and she asked for none. We had said everything that mattered in the field, in the mud, with his hand going still between us. What came after that had no language.

The other mourners came and went. We stayed. We stayed past the point where there was anything to stay for, past the point of warmth, until it was just us and the fading heat and the ash and the sky going gray with the approach of dawn. Until the first birds began, somewhere in the dark trees at the field's edge, doing what birds do regardless.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked. I didn't mean it geographically.

Sigrid was quiet for a long moment.

“Forward,” she said. “Because there isn’t anywhere else.”

She wasn’t wrong. She was never wrong about the fundamental things. Forward is the only direction that exists. You can walk it in grief or in fury or in the gray numbness that settles in after loss like weather, like a season that has no name. But you walk it regardless. Time does not ask.

I thought about what I had seen at the edge of my vision when his hand went still. The wings. The figure that was not quite there. I had not told Sigrid. I was not sure I would ever tell anyone. But standing there at the edge of the ash, I found that it did something for me. Gave me something to stand on that was not just devastation. He had not simply stopped. He had been taken somewhere. By something that moved with the purpose of one who knows exactly where they are going and why.

He was in Valhalla. He had earned it ten times over.

I hoped it was loud there. I hoped there was good food and someone to spar with and that the mead was better than what we’d had at the autumn feast two years ago, which had been genuinely terrible. I hoped he’d found his father.

I hoped he knew.



Then I put all of that away.

I made a decision, standing there at the edge of his ash, in the gray light before dawn with the birds starting and Sigrid’s shoulder warm against mine. I made it the way I made every important decision. Deliberately, from all angles, with full knowledge of what I was choosing and what I was choosing to give up.

I would not love like that again. Not with that openness, that reckless willingness to be entirely undone by another person. The part of me that had run laughing through a barley field at twelve years old, the part that had stood in a winter storm refusing to

let go of someone's hand, the part that had looked at Leif across a sparring yard at fifteen and felt something shift permanently into a new configuration. That part would stay here. In this field. In this ash. Where it could not be reached and therefore could not be lost.

What remained was simpler. Cleaner. A warrior. A shield-sister. Someone who had learned what the world cost and had paid it and would not be caught paying it twice.

It felt, in that moment, like the only sensible thing.

It felt like survival.

Sigrid took my hand. Shield-sister to shield-sister, the old weight of the old oath between our palms. And held it without speaking. She knew. She always knew. She didn't argue, didn't offer comfort I hadn't asked for, didn't tell me I was wrong. She just held on, which was the only thing I needed anyone to do.

The sun came up. We turned toward it.

The war was not finished. Somewhere to the north the pressure that had no name yet continued its patient work, indifferent to what it cost us. There would be more battles. More fields. More mud and iron and the terrible sound of steel finding the place it was always going to find.

We went back to train.

CHAPTER NINE

Iron and Ash



The war did not pause to let me grieve. Three months after Leif's burning, Blackmoor pushed south again. A different approach this time, through the river valley, probing for weakness with the patient certainty of a force that knows it is winning. Aldric called the warriors. We answered.

I answered differently than I had before.

I had spent those three months becoming something I didn't entirely recognize. The training continued. It was the one thing grief could not touch, the one space where the body's requirements overrode everything else. I trained harder than I ever had. Longer. I pushed past the point where it was discipline and into the territory where it was something else. Punishment, maybe. Or obliteration. Exhaustion that silences the parts of your mind you most need silenced.

Sigrid watched me do it and said nothing, which meant she understood and was worried in equal measure.

"You're going to get yourself killed," she said one evening, as I was running forms in the dark after everyone else had gone to supper.

"That's what battle is for," I said.

"That's not what I meant." She stepped into the training yard, arms crossed, her expression the blend of love and exasperation I had known my whole life. "I mean you're going to walk into a fight wanting to die, and that's not the same as being willing to die. One is courage. The other is just slow surrender dressed up as bravery."

I stopped. Looked at her.

“I’m not trying to die,” I said.

“I know you believe that.” She held my gaze. “I’m not sure it’s true.”

I didn’t answer. Partly because I wasn’t certain she was wrong. Partly because the thing I had built in those months – the cold, armored thing I had made of my grief – didn’t have a good answer to someone who loved me enough to say it plainly.

“I’ll be careful,” I said finally.

“You’ll be angry,” she corrected. “There’s a difference.” She paused. “Stay near me. Promise.”

“Shield-oath,” I said.

She held my eyes for a long moment. Then: “Shield-oath.”



The battle began in the gray hour before full dawn.

Autumn. A morning that looked like the world had forgotten color, everything reduced to iron and ash. The valley floor was churned mud, the river running dark and fast to our left, the tree line to our right still thick with shadow. Blackmoor’s forces filled the far end of the field in numbers we hadn’t anticipated. They had brought more than the scouts reported, and I felt the calculation shift in the shield-wall around me, the way a warrior’s body recalibrates when it understands the odds have changed.

Sigrid was to my left. The absence on my right was a thing I felt in my bones every time I looked toward it.

I had fought one battle without Leif. This was the second. I was beginning to understand that this was what the rest of my life would feel like. Learning and relearning the shape of his absence, fitting myself to it the way a scar fits to skin.

The horns sounded.

We met them in the middle of the valley.

The first man I killed that morning came at me with an axe aimed high, and I dropped under it and drove my seax up through the gap between his arm and his side. The second came from the left while I was still pulling free, and I took a slash across the forearm – shallow, nothing – and returned it across his throat. The third was quick, better-trained than the others, and he gave me three hard exchanges before I found the angle and took it.

And then the line broke.

Not our line. Theirs buckled on the right flank, where Aldric's veterans were pushing hard. But the collapse sent bodies surging in every direction, and in the churning reorganization I lost Sigrid. I heard her voice to my left, too far left, further than she should have been. I turned to find her and couldn't. Too many bodies, too much movement, the battle rearranging itself around me faster than I could read it.

And then something happened that I had no name for, in that moment or after.

It wasn't rage. I had felt rage before. The hot, red surge of it, the way it sharpened everything and narrowed your vision to the threat in front of you. This was different. This was cold. This was the armored thing I had spent three months building, the grief that had nowhere left to go, the love that had been locked away and was looking, now, for somewhere to spend itself.

I stopped trying to find Sigrid. I stopped calculating odds. I stopped doing anything except moving forward and removing every obstacle between me and the far end of the field.



The fourth man was the biggest.

He came out of the crush with a sword already swinging, yellow teeth bared in a grin that said he'd seen hundreds like me go down

before him. He was probably right. He twisted his shoulder into the blow the way a practiced killer does, all his weight behind it.

I parried the axe aimed at my skull with my shield and kept moving.

Too busy. Too committed. I didn't see the second blade until I felt it. Cold steel sliding between my ribs on the right side, and white-hot pain blooming through my chest.

I had been stabbed before. Slashed, cut, beaten half to death more times than I could count. But this was different. This was deep. I knew it the way you know weather, the way I had known the morning my father died: this one was going to take me.

My knees buckled. The shield slipped from my fingers and hit the mud with a wet thump. Around me the battle raged on. Screams and the clash of steel, the meaty thunk of axes finding flesh, the war cries of my clan mixing with the howls of our enemies. The autumn sky above was iron-gray, heavy with clouds that promised snow.

A good day to die, the sagas said. A warrior's death, with sword in hand and enemies at your feet.

The sagas were liars.

I grabbed the bastard's wrist as he yanked the blade free. Blood gushed hot down my side, soaking through the leather. My vision swam, but I drove my seax up under his ribs in return. His eyes went wide. We fell together into the mud, a tangle of limbs and gore.

"Astrid!"

Somewhere to my left, Sigrid was screaming my name. My shield-sister. My closest friend. But she sounded far away, like she was calling from across a great chasm. I tried to answer. Blood filled my mouth instead of words.

The world tilted. Sky and earth traded places. The sounds of battle faded to a distant roar, like the ocean heard from underwater.

I had always wondered what it would feel like. Dying, I mean.

It turned out to be cold. Just cold.

My father used to say the Valkyries came for warriors who died bravely in battle. That they would carry you to Valhalla on wings of shadow and steel, where you would feast and fight until Ragnarok. I had half-believed it when I was a girl, training with wooden swords in our hall while he told me stories of the gods.

He died when I was twelve. Fever took him, not battle. No Valkyries came.

Now, lying in the mud with my life bleeding out into the frozen earth, I wondered if he was waiting for me. If my mother was there too, even though she had died giving birth to me. No warrior's death, no glory. Just blood and screaming in the dark.

I wondered if Sigrid would forgive me for dying first.

I wondered if it hurt less if you stopped fighting it.

The cold deepened. My fingers went numb. The sky above started to dim at the edges, like someone drawing a curtain across the world. *This is it, then*, I thought. The final threshold. I had always thought I would rage against it. Go down swinging.

But I was tired.

So tired of the fighting and the blood and all of it.

Maybe it was time to rest.

Maybe it was time to go find Leif.

I let go.

The pain stopped.

The cold stopped.

Everything stopped.



Astrid's story doesn't end here.

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BLADE AND BONE

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