

Chapter 1—The Search

In the late-night hours, Terra awoke to splintering wood echoing through the walls. She rubbed her eyes, slid out of bed, and shuffled into the hallway. The sound grew louder. She stumbled to find her brother already on his feet. She grabbed Torin's sleeve and pulled him into the hallway. Still not fully awake, she leaned against the wall and slid to the floor, holding her head between her hands. "What's all that noise?"

Torin sat down next to her, shaking his head to wake up. The commotion from below grew louder. "We have to find out what's happening!" he said between halting breaths. "Get up." He tapped his sister's shoulder as he stood.

Terra dragged herself to her feet. "Let's go," she said wearily. They dropped to their hands and knees and crawled to the landing at the top of the stairs. From there, the great hall below came into view. The sound of splintering wood grew louder as the door gave way. Terra flinched as it crashed to the floor, shattering into pieces, leaving a gaping hole.

Men dressed in dark tunics and trousers cast aside their battering ram. Wood and iron littered the floor. Intruders dashed through the opening—a woman draped in a black cape swept in behind them. As the chaos intensified, Terra trembled. She shook her head as if to wake herself from a nightmare. When nothing changed, she stared wide-eyed in disbelief. Her brother, by her side, clenched his fists as the scene below unfolded.

Startled by thundering footsteps and shouting, they remained hidden at the top of the stairs. The army of men dumped the contents of chests onto the floor. They searched shelves, shattering everything they touched.

Terra moved away from the landing, motioning for Torin to follow. She held her hand to her mouth to stifle her scream. “We should get dressed,” she whispered, “and secure our weapons. We may have to flee.” They both crawled to their sleeping areas.

Terra dressed hastily before cinching her belt around her waist. Her belt held her sheathed seax, a Viking half-sword, and her sling in a leather pouch. She wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and returned to the hallway, waiting for Torin.

He met her outside his room, fully dressed and armed with his seax and staff. As he prepared to rush below, Terra stopped him. “Don’t go down there! No one knows we’re here.”

They returned to the top of the stairs to view the great hall below. The woman commanded, “Search everywhere! Find what he stole from me!”

Terra gasped. “Is she talking about Father?”

“Where is he?” Torin scanned the hallway. “We must find him. We can’t leave without him!” Together, they dashed to their father’s sleeping area, searching every corner—but found no trace of him.

“He must be downstairs,” Terra whispered. “Do they have him?” Her eyes widened in panic.

Below, one of the henchmen brought their housekeeper and her husband into the great hall. They huddled together for protection. They’d been roused from sleep and dragged from their beds, where they slept in a corner of the great hall. They stood against the wall, stifling yawns and rubbing their eyes.

The Woman in Black asked, “Where are they? My mysticals—the shield, the book, the key?”

Their housekeeper, Edith, stepped forward, wringing her hands. “Can you describe them?” she asked in a trembling voice.

The Woman in Black seethed, holding back her anger. “A key like this,” she said, flashing a rusty key. “A shield of gold and silver and a book with a dragon’s eye on the cover.”

Edith replied, shaking her head, “Plenty of old rusty keys lying ‘round ‘ere, but no book with a dragon’s eye.”

Leo, her husband, stepped forward. “We never seen nothin’ like that.”

After more questioning, Edith replied, “Neither of us has seen a shield or a book like you describe. I’ll show you where the keys to the hall are kept.” She motioned for the woman to follow her outside to a stone shed for storing food and cooking implements. “That’s where any keys would be.”

After searching the shed for the key, The Woman in Black returned scowling. She called to her men, “Have you found the book?”

“We’ve emptied the shelves, tossing everything to the floor. Nothing Milady. No book with a dragon’s eye.”

In a whisper, Terra asked, “Have you seen a shield, a key, or a book with a dragon’s eye?”

“Never!” Torin shook his head.

The Woman in Black shouted, “You’re useless!” She signaled to her man in charge. “Take them away and tear this place apart until you find my mysticals.”

Torin and Terra watched as one of her henchmen herded Edith and Leo to the opening where the front door once stood. In their haste to leave, someone knocked over a table holding an oil lamp. Flames spread across the wooden floor. No one appeared to notice. Terra held her hand over her mouth to stifle her sobs.

As Leo and Edith rushed through the opening, the henchman sneered, “Don’t bother to come back.”

“That woman,” Terra said in a hushed voice, “looks exactly like Father described our mother, with blue eyes and silvery white hair.”

“That’s impossible!” Torin replied in a halting voice.

Terra narrowed her eyes. “She died when we were born.”

“Has she returned from the dead?” Torin raised his brow in fear.

Terra winced. “She looks scary enough to be a ghost.”

The woman’s black cape extended to the floor. Her hood partially covered her face. Her long, silvery-white hair cascaded over her shoulders to her waist. Her skin appeared to glow in the candlelight. As she turned her head, her brilliant blue eyes came into view.

Terra flinched. *Those eyes look familiar. Where have I seen them before?* She flinched again as men forced their father into the great room, beaten, bruised, and shackled. The fire continued to spread. When the flames reached the fabric hanging on the wall to conceal an opening, they traveled toward the ceiling. Dark smoke and ash drifted into the air, engulfing the broken debris discarded into a heap.

One of her men approached. “We must leave, Milady! The hall is on fire!”

She gave him a piercing look. “We’ll leave when I say!”

Turning her attention to Ravn. “Where are they?” she demanded. “I know you took them when you left like a coward in the night.”

“Rowena,” Ravn pleaded, “I left with nothing but my clothing and the children. I had to keep them safe, away from you.”

“I would never hurt them,” she smirked. “I told you that.”

“That’s not what I saw.”

“I only took a little bit of their blood.” She mocked him. “You overreacted.” She stifled a snicker.

“You stole their breath. I saw you.”

She arched an eyebrow. “It was alchemy!”

“It was witchcraft!” Ravn shouted.

“You know nothing of witchcraft!” she shook her head. “I know you took the mysticals. They’re a precious gift from my father, and I will get them back.”

“I have nothing of yours,” he insisted. “I fled with our children. I prayed never to see you again.”

“After you left, I searched all over Jorvik. I knew you’d never abandon your ship. After years, I was beginning to think you took the twins to Denmark to raise them as Vikings.”

Ravn shook his head. “I don’t have what you want. Get out and leave us in peace!”

“I won’t leave until I have my mysticals,” she sneered. “The shield, the book, and the key.” She appeared nervous as she scanned the room. Flames continued to spread throughout the wooden structure.

“What happened to you?” Ravn pleaded. “We were happy once. When they were young, you loved them, doted on them.”

“That was a long time ago.” She pursed her lips before looking away. “If I can’t find what I’m after, I’ll take your precious twins and hold them hostage until I get what’s mine!”

Terra and her brother gasped, giving away their position. The Woman in Black turned a sinister stare in their direction. With a flick of her head, she signaled her henchmen to seize them.

“Run!” Their father yelled. “Remember the stories!”

Torin and Terra sprinted away under the cover of smoke to their father's side of the loft. Terra heard the woman threaten her father. "I'll get the truth from you, eventually."

The men charged up the stairs. Terra pressed the lever, a star carving on the bottom of the far wall. The twins escaped as the wall opened to stairs that led down to an underground tunnel. Together, she and her brother pushed the wall back into place. She held her breath as chests crashed to the floor, splintering into shards. Then, off in the distance, they heard the men searching. They broke everything they found, sending echoes through the walls.

In the darkness, Terra heard clicking. She suspected Torin was trying to light a candle with his fire-starting tools. Fearing that a tiny beam of light might shine through a crack in the wooden wall, alerting the intruders to their position, she gripped his hands to stop him. She knew he understood her meaning. She was sure he felt her fear as if she'd whispered into his ear.

They blindly walked down the rickety wooden steps, feeling their way through the darkness until they entered the underground tunnel. When they reached the end, they climbed the ladder to the secret chamber. Together, they pushed open the heavy stone door, leading them outside. They crawled unobserved to a rock formation at the crest of the hill. From their position, they had a full view of the front of their home, now engulfed in red, orange, and yellow flames. Smoke and thick ash filled the night sky. Luckily, they had escaped.

Men stood guard outside, holding torches as others prepared their horses to leave. The Woman in Black rushed outside, pushing their father in front of her. Blood flowed from his forehead.

Her eyes ablaze, The Woman in Black shouted, "Make haste!" She thrust Ravn toward one of her men. "Take him."

Terra recognized the two men sent to seize them. They coughed, sputtered, and bent over, trying to catch their breath.

“Where are they?” the woman screamed.

One of the men stood up, squirmed, and bowed his head. “They disappeared,” he said in a trembling voice. “They’re gone!”

“I’ll deal with you later!” She frowned. “The urchins got the best of you.”

Ravn turned to face her. “Don’t call them that. They’re your children.”

The Woman in Black scowled. “Let this place burn.” As she began to mount her horse, one of her men tried to assist her. “Get away from me,” she hissed, whipping his hand with her reigns. “I don’t need your help!” In one swift motion, she mounted her steed.

Men heaved their father roughly onto the back of his own horse, taken from the barn. He looked to the top of the hill. Terra noticed his slight nod in their direction as if to acknowledge their escape. Then he turned his gaze to the men by his side. One of them smacked his horse from behind. The riders bolted away to the deafening sound of hooves exploding.

Terra and Torin watched their home engulfed in flames. Thick smoke obscured the stars, and the harsh scent stung their lungs with each breath. Their eyes watered. The crackling sound of burning wood echoed into the night sky.

“We have to go after them!” Terra cried. “We must get to the barn and saddle our horses.”

Torin clenched his fists, his face flushed with anger. “Don’t you see? The barn doors are wide open! They took our horses!”

Earlier, the evening unfolded as usual. Terra recalled hearing her father climbing the wooden stairs. She sprinted across her room to the oversized bench to claim the best spot. Before

she reached it, her twelve-year-old brother Torin collided with her. Her snow-white curls flew into her eyes, blinding her for a moment. Almost losing her balance, she braced herself and willed her body to remain upright.

Torin, unprepared for her retaliation, fell to the floor when she pushed him. He bolted and reached the bench first, holding firm. No use trying to dislodge him. She shrugged and sat down next to him, yanking a handful of his hair, the same snow-white curls as hers.

“Ouch! What was that for?” he said, rubbing his head. “I’m hurt,” he pretended to cry.

She giggled at his feigned injury. “Aren’t we getting too old for this?”

“Never too old to out-best you, my dear sister,” he said, laughing and clutching his belly. “I’m your older brother. I was born first.”

“You’re not my older brother. You’re my twin brother, only minutes older than me. Why do you always have to win?” She reached for his hair again.

He brushed her hand aside to escape her grasp. “I don’t always win. But, now that I’m becoming a man, winning is more important than ever.”

“Then be a gentleman instead of a brute,” she said. “If you’re a man, then I’m a lady, and you should let me have my way.”

“You’re no lady.” He chuckled. “You can defend yourself against any man or beast.”

“I’m still a lady.” She pouted. “I can’t help it if Father trained me to fight as well as you.”

“You’re almost as good as me,” he grinned.

She studied her brother. They shared the same likeness except for their eyes. They were still the same height and weight, but not for long. Terra already felt her body changing. She carefully wrapped her chest to hide the beginning signs of her maturity. Torin had yet to develop facial hair, and his voice was still that of a boy.

With long strides, their father, Ravn, reached the loft. He had divided the loft into three sleeping areas with crudely built wooden posts creating separate rooms for privacy. Terra's was in the middle. He marched into her room, carrying a tray with two wooden cups of chamomile tea. He frowned, shaking his head. No doubt, she thought, he doesn't like hearing us argue. But we've been arguing since we were born, she frowned.

She studied her father as he entered, still wearing his Viking leather vest studded with iron, trousers, woolen leg wrappings, and boots. The traditional garb of the Norsemen, his heritage by blood. Tomorrow, he'll wear his Saxon tunic and trousers, the clothing of his adopted countrymen after his marriage to his Saxon wife. He wore his hair like a Viking warrior, shaved on the sides with one long braid cascading down his back. Unlike others of his time, he preferred to be clean-shaven. A head taller than most men, he stood out in a crowd with his light complexion and hair.

The scent of chamomile tea reminded Terra of fresh apples and dried flowers as it filled the air. She sank into the soft sheepskin covering the bench. Taking in a slow breath, she leaned against the wall. She enjoyed their evening routine. A habit she and her brother had long outgrown. But without their mother, who died giving them life, Terra assumed their father could not bring himself to disappoint them. Their nightly ritual began long ago with folktales. Later, he invented the adventures of Viking twins, a sister and a brother. Strong and skilled, the twins knew how to defend themselves against all threats. As Terra and Torin grew up, so did the twins in the story. In their father's absence, often for months when he traveled for trade, they retold the stories to entertain each other.

"I have a surprise to give you." He grinned and handed each of them a gift wrapped in colorful cloth.

Terra opened hers to find a jade scarab dangling from a leather strip. She draped the amulet around her neck, smiling. “Thank you, Father.”

Torin opened his next, surprised when he found a man-size scarab ring made with the same stone.

“You’ll grow into it, son.”

“What does the scarab mean?” Terra asked.

Her father smiled. “The scarab is a beetle. In Egypt, it’s regarded as sacred and represents rebirth. The green jade symbolizes growth. Terra, you’re nearing the age of marriage,” he said.

“Soon, you’ll be thirteen. You’ll marry and start a new life.”

She blanched at the thought. She had no intention of marrying, but this was not the time to take a stand. As her father’s new tale unfolded, the room seemed to fade away, transporting her into his world at sea. After drinking the last drop of her chamomile tea, her eyelids grew heavy. She yawned. “Sorry, Father, I’m falling asleep.” After stifling a new yawn, she stood and kissed him. “Goodnight,” she whispered. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Goodnight,” he said, leading Torin away.

Her last memory before falling to sleep was removing her boots, putting them by the door, and quickly changing into her night clothes. She carefully hung her garments on a peg before climbing into bed and snuggling between blankets with a contented sigh.

Later that night, she awakened to a true nightmare. With their home in ashes, they were alone and on their own. She wondered, will I ever see my father again?