

The Nesslands 3 – The Victims of Winter War

Prologue



The many birds struggled against the wind, and the coasts of the Western Wing emerged before them. The riders urged their birds towards a lonely hut on the outermost part of the peninsula, flanked by the frothing Western Sea. Lucili Bistorta turned in the saddle, gave the warriors behind her a grating order and let her bird dive towards the ground.

The sun was well on its way past the horizon and lit her beautiful face with a glowing light. They approached the hut around which stunted trees cast long shadows. There was nothing to be seen in the meadow around the hut. The sheep which used to keep the Day Dreamer company were gone.

The sorceress squinted against the wind and frowned. There was a different scent on the wind. One which did not belong out here ... The stench of People of Light. Countless times she had visited the Western Wing to make sure her son stayed put. Up until now it had not been possible to take his life, but she had also considered how he might become useful one day ... but now. What a mistake. What a fatal mistake it had been to let him live ...

It had turned out that it was he who had told the Chosen One the whereabouts of the Shield. Him! Of all the creatures in the Nesslands it was her own son who was the medium.

She did not understand. How could it be him? How could it be that he became the creature that would commit the greatest treachery against his own kind? His own ancestry?

She lashed her whip against the bird which screeched and picked up speed. Ensomnio had been a disappointment, yes. Both she and Conian had realised that their son was a failed experiment. The hope that they would be able to create a powerful, merciless and cruel warrior together had come to nought.

Instead he had become like those People of Light, whom he had preferred to spend his time with down in the dungeons since he was very young. He had sneaked down there as often as he could and helped them with food and clothes. He had not understood what the many prisoners were for. That the existence of the Radix depended on these prisoners; on their flesh, blood and labour. Or maybe he had ...

The ground came closer, and Lucili clenched her teeth. Deep down, her son wanted his own people to become extinct, she realised. And for that he had to die. As soon as possible. As they all dismounted, she looked around. The foreign scent was very patent and very fresh, and Ensomnio's sheep were still nowhere to be seen. Instead the meadow was littered with bloody sheepskins.

'People of Light,' she hissed between her teeth. 'They've only just left! Right under our noses!' One of the nearest warriors led his bird closer to Lucili.

'Should we split up?' he asked.

She shook her head. She had to stay focused on what was about to happen. They did not have time to look for People of Light right now. They would have to do so later, if they had the time.



Inside the hut, Ensomnio pushed away the book. He sighed and muttered an incantation. The contours of the book flickered, dissolved and became one with the uneven tabletop. It looked as if he gave the feather pen in his hand a quick glance. Then he threw it in the fire. The flames flared up around the worn feather, and it turned black. Seconds later it was burnt beyond recognition.

The door opened with a creak and Lucili stepped inside. Ensomnio Semper sat at the table with his disfigured hands resting on the wooden surface. His head was bowed, and his face hidden in the deep darkness of his hood. He looked like he was sleeping.

'My dear mother. What brings you here ... again?' He lifted his face and stared up at her. His blind eyes were pale and dry like parchment. He showed his teeth in a smile.

Lucili did not answer, but stopped in front of the table. Her warriors stood in a semicircle behind her.

'Did you see my sheep out there? They've been a bit restless this evening,' he continued, unperturbed by her furious expression.

'Where are they?' she spat. 'Their skins are lying on the meadow, so what are they hunting?' She grimaced. 'You've had visitors: People of Light!'

Ensomnio shrugged.

'I am merely a mediocre seer,' he said meekly. 'An old soothsayer whose powers are waning by the day. I can't keep track of what all those sheep get up to. And People of Light? There may have been a few visitors who wanted some good advice ... But it's been a while.' He clicked his tongue. 'They never learn ... Coming here in the twilight to ask advice. They know the rumour. No one ever leaves here alive.' He gave a hoarse grunt and smiled.

'You're lying!' snarled Lucili. 'But it doesn't matter. You're not a mediocre seer, and you never have been. You are the best the Nesslands have ever had, but you abuse your powers.' She hesitated.

'Where is the Shield?'

Ensomnio lowered his head again. 'I don't know what you're talking about.' He looked up at her.

'You know I won't say anything. And I know that you're here to kill me. Isn't that right, mother? Let's just get to the point. At long last, I'm going to die ...'

Lucili squinted her eyes into narrow slits. 'You were the medium, Esar. You have betrayed us one too many times, and clearly I can no longer limit your powers to this place.' She lowered her voice. 'Your powers are not waning. In fact, they're growing.'

Ensomnio expelled a hoarse laugh. 'You really never knew, did you? And the prophecy ... Have you and Asaph still not found out who delivered it?'

Lucili opened her mouth, but then pressed her lips together again. They were quiet for a while. Then she said slowly:

'The Carpenter created the Shield of Querqus. He bound its existence to a specially selected person from the People of Light, who would therefore become able to overthrow our race. The witch, Archa, began the tradition of handing down the secret from Queen to Queen through the ages. He – The Carpenter – created the foundation for the prophecy, just like he created that damned shield!'

Ensomnio nodded.

'But who delivered the prophecy?' he said. 'Who made the image for the People of Light and the magicians? Come on ... Who do you think?'

'You're lying.' Lucili stared at him with a wild look. Ensomnio studied her silently.

'But ... but you were just a child ...' snarled Lucili.

'You're not a mediocre seer ... and you never have been,' he repeated her words. 'There's more truth in those words than you know, dear mother.'

He held up his ruined fingers in front of her face, and she studied them impassively.

'Did you never wonder how I got these? Like the caring mother, you ... Oh, yes.' He lowered his hands. 'Silly me. That you were never able to be ...'

Lucili's lips trembled with rage. She fingered the pommel of her sword, but did not draw the weapon.

'I scratched the prophecy into the walls of the dungeon with my bare hands,' said Ensomnio. 'When you let me sit down there, waiting for you to send me out here. I took the completed relief from the wall, brought it here, transferred it to parchment and made sure the People of Light got it. At first, not many took the prophecy seriously. Most were sceptical. But they aren't anymore. Not even the witches from the Northern Crown.'

'Where is the stone tablet now?' Lucili took a step towards him.

'Oona has it. I gave it to her ... When she was here last ...'

Lucili drew her sword and rested it slowly and carefully against his throat. Her eyes were black with rage.

'So, it was Oona who was here just recently?'

The blade cut into his skin, and his blood ran down the sword and dripped onto the table. Ensomnio breathed steadily and did not answer.

'Tell me where the Shield is, and I'll make it quick and painless!'

Ensomnio laughed hoarsely. 'Oh, but I now you that you're completely unable to! I'm a seer, remember? And I know you. I admit that neither of those things are an advantage in this case ...' He hesitated. 'I'll tell you what I want you to know. The things that you can't use for anything anyway.'

He smiled. 'I have knowledge that you would die to know, but all that ... I'll take with me to the grave.'

Lucili closed her eyes. For a while, she stood in deep concentration with the sword at his throat. Darkness suddenly spread in the hut behind her and draped every corner in shadows. Black spiderlike creatures scuttled out of the shadows and across the floor towards Ensomnio.

Her lips moved in a silent chant, while the Mind-spinners spread their black webs in the air between them. They encroached on Ensomnio, who did not bat an eyelid. He stared blindly up at her.

Then the many Mind spinners suddenly shrieked, pulled away from him and curled up as if in pain. Quickly, they retreated to the shadows, where they disappeared.

Lucili's eyes snapped open and she hissed. There were beads of sweat on her brow, and her face was white.

'Yes,' said Ensomnio quietly. 'My mind is still closed to you. Your Mind spinners cannot enter. They never could, and they never will ...'

She opened her mouth to say something, but stopped when her eyes met his blind gaze.

'You also want to know whether I helped Vidarr escape from Aisgard. Whether I helped him follow his heart. You want to know whether I had a hand in his love for Oona's mother. Whether I might even have caused it ... manipulated him?'

Lucili lowered her sword with trembling hands.

Ensomnio clicked his tongue and gave a small shake of his head.

'It's that letter that you can't get out of your head. The letter from Kierstin and Vidarr to Tonam Carcha in Twinton. It's almost unbelievable. True love between a high-ranking Radix warrior like Vidarr ... your own brother ... and a completely ordinary woman from the People of Light. A consummated

love, no less.' He laughed hoarsely. 'What a threat to our people – our future. But no, dear mother. Vidarr's love was his own. No one forced him.' He lowered his voice. 'That love lay deep within him, and yes, I helped him get the one he loved. I helped all I could.'

'But Vidarr is dead,' hissed Lucili. 'Long ago! He cannot do any further damage!'

A smile grew on Ensomnio's lips. 'No? Are you sure?' He tilted back his head and laughed. A hoarse, rasping noise filled the small hut. His disfigured hands clutched the edge of the table, as he pushed himself back in the chair. Then he fell silent and once more rested his blind eyes on Lucili.

'Is it Oona and her brothers you mean? We'll soon get them out of the way,' snarled Lucili. 'They're nothing but weaklings! Half-breeds! Raised wretched and poor far out in the country! They won't be a threat for much longer.'

Ensomnio burst into laughter again. This time louder and more cacophonous than before, but the sound was permeated with frenzy, like a wounded animal in desperate pain.

He fell silent and leaned across the table. 'You know nothing!' he hissed triumphantly. 'Nothing!' Behind Lucili, the warriors stirred. They looked at Ensomnio with a mixture of repulsion and rage.

The nearest one muttered something in Lucili's ear.

'No,' said Ensomnio.

The warrior fell silent and stared at him.

Ensomnio sighed. 'Torture does not work on me anymore. I am ready to die.'

Chapter 1

The Funeral



Varsgar bowed her head reverently. Her mate, Mainer, studied the newcomers uneasily from a distance.

'My lady. Would you like anymore to drink, or ...' The bog woman hesitated and nervously scratched one of her boils which immediately burst and let yellow pus run down her breast. 'I mean, you can have whatever you wish ... you ...'

Lucili sat with her eyes closed in a wide chair of woven branches close to the fireplace. Her nostrils flared and the muscles in her jaw were taut. Opposite her, Conian sat staring into the fire. His eyes were dark with rage.

'Be quiet!' she spat and opened her eyes. She threw the empty goblet into the fire and met Conian's gaze over the flames. The fire crackled and sent more smoke into the bog den. Then she raised her eyes. The smoke drifted up through the trunk of a dead, hollow tree which came through the shadowy ceiling. The thick roots of the tree supported the slimy arches of the roof. Lucili contemplated the dark hole which let the thick smoke out of the den to drift over the water of the marsh above.

'We knew it might be significant ... her origin. Now we see the result,' growled Conian. 'She has inherited Vidarr's wits and powers as a moon master, and Ensomnio has helped her. It's a disaster.'

He rose and the warriors near him pulled away. A warrior, who had a bog girl on his lap, quickly got up and stepped aside. Lucili followed Conian with her eyes, as he paced back and forth.

'She has become stronger,' she stated and stared into the fire. 'But we can't just sit here... humiliated ... beaten. We must fight back. I'm just not entirely sure how yet. I need to think. But we are too few here. Most of our warriors are still out in the Currents and in the tunnels under Aisgard.'

She fell silent. The sound of the crackling flames was punctuated by heavy drips from the ceiling of the bog den. Then she loosened a small waterskin from her belt. Conian stopped and stared at it.

'Yes,' she said. 'The rest of Oona's blood. I didn't drink it all.' She lifted it up and lowered it again.

'The Shield would let me enter ... If I had it.' Her eyes shot lightning. 'Our spy will pay for this! Oona is probably already using it! If she enters the Library of Fate, we're done for!' she spat.

Abruptly, she stood up and fastened the waterskin to her belt again. Her long, fair hair shone glossily in the glow of the fire, and she turned her beautiful face to her brother, gripping her cloak.

'Conian. We must go. We won't be let past the boundary of Hearth Forest any time soon. We must return to the cellars of Aisgard using the root tunnels, take a ship from there and...' She stopped suddenly and stared at the ceiling.

The shadows enveloped the smoke, and a shining contour of a long, sharp beak appeared in the hole. Seconds later, Nuntius was on the back of the chair, his long claws gripping the wickerwork.

The people in the bog den gasped and drew further away from the ruler of the Radix. One red eye of the shadow creature fixed itself on Lucili's face.

'Nuntius!' She let go of her cloak and let it fall to the ground.

'My master has the Shield, my Lady,' sounded his voice. 'He is on his way to the Eastern Sea. Ethlar Perduelli and the rest of the clan are waiting for him in Solhaim. He has secured a ship for my master and his mate, but there are warriors at their heels, although they had a head start. It is Prince Sigmon's warriors and the wizard, Dolomedes,' he continued. 'They also brought a witch. My master and his clan will meet you in the Currents.'

A smile grew on Lucili's lips. She looked at Conian. 'All is not yet lost, Conian. We have the Shield!' She stopped and turned to Nuntius. 'It won't do with that ship. Not when they've got a witch,' she said quickly. 'Her ice leaf is a threat. The clan is too easy prey aboard an ordinary ship. Also, we can't make it to the Currents. We must meet at the Perduelli clan's place of sacrifice – in the Misty Marshes. Tell that to your master. But first, you must fly to Aisgard and bid my warriors send three ships to Solhaim. Two as diversions and one to bring your master and his people to the Misty Marshes. The ships are fast, when they stay underwater. Tell my high-ranking warriors that as many as possible should meet us in the root tunnels, and make sure the Laniidae are ready.'

Nuntius took flight and disappeared at once up through the hollow trunk.



That midsummer night, the rain streamed down, soaking the cloaks of the many people in attendance.

Oona turned her face to the sky, and the rain diluted the salt taste of her tears running down her cheeks and into her open mouth. Her head felt empty, but also so full that it was fit to burst. They did not have time for this. They needed to get going, but first they had to say goodbye to Ingaea.

The woods around them were quiet, and the pink-tinged apple-blossoms glowed like small pearls on the branches with their promise of sweet scent and fruit. Oona lowered her face again. Radulfir's hurriedly chanting voice and faint drips on the leaves of the trees were the only sounds. The tall wizard stood beside the coffin, and his eyes wavered between the many people around him. His movements were jerky.

She clutched Bjorn's hand. Eiric had thrown his arms around her midriff and was staring vacantly into space as she stroked his hair. She was in a tumult and felt the tension from everyone else. The funeral ritual had to be done quickly – a ritual which should have been held with solemn reverence. Instead it was rushed through less than half an hour after they found out that the Shield was missing – so that they could get going as fast as possible. The grief over the death of the Queen and the anger over having to part with her this way was mixed with the impatience and anxiety from having to leave in a minute, and Oona shifted her feet.

Sigmon's Bear Warriors together with Beti and Dolomedes had been sent immediately, and the witch had just left once more after having told them that they had found Racnar's tracks on the Moor. Now she had flown to Hogbight to make them send ships.

Oona looked to the sky again. Beside her was her mother in a wooden wheelchair. She was wrapped in thick blankets and a heavy cloak. Stigandir stood behind them, resting his hand on Oona's shoulder.

'You mustn't blame yourself,' he whispered in her ear. 'You hear?' She did not answer.

'Oona ...' Stigandir gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

But she could not speak. The words were stuck in her throat like a hard, dry lump. She met her mother's eyes which expressed the exact same sentiment as Stigandir's words.

They were both right, but she could not accept what had happened. She would not.

Queen Ingaea was dead. Racnar ... her Racnar had poisoned the Queen. It had been her – Oona – whom he had wished to put in that coffin. Not Ingaea.

‘You must promise me to go to Herluf with the Shield as soon as possible. These recent events have shown us that we aren’t safe.’

The words of the Queen ate their way through her brain, like a worm looking for a way out. Ingaea had been terribly right in her intuition. Just as everything seemed to be going the right way, it turned and went in the opposite direction. She could not keep her promise to the Queen ...

She bit her lip to suppress a groan.

How could she have been so wrong about Racnar? His love for her had only been about the Shield. He had only saved Bjorn in Muldness to gain her trust ... even his participation in the war against the Radix and saving Marck from Aisgard had all been part of his plan.

Her head spun.

Racnar had just been waiting for her to let something slip or confide in him, so that he could find out where the Shield was, and as soon as he knew, he would kill her.

The shadow creature which Racnar had brought with him had overheard the conversation with the Queen, and when Racnar found out that she and Sigmon would leave that same night, he became desperate. Bjorn had criticised her for not taking Racnar, because Racnar had been completely out of it all night – but for an entirely different reason than anyone could have guessed. Oona was not dying as planned, and in addition to that she was on her way to fetch the Shield – and Sigmon had gotten in the way. To think what might have happened if they had brought Racnar along. He had been so eager to ‘help’ her. His

frustrated rage over being turned down suddenly made eerie sense.

She heard his voice in her head among the many thoughts, skittering this way and that; heard his last bitter words to her in the park, before he left town with the Shield.

She had wanted to embrace him, but he pushed her away.

'I can't ... Not now. But I love you. You know I do,' he had said.

With a finger she traced the small scratch that Racnar's pendant had left on her throat.

The thought of the falsehood of his words made her sick. He had just wanted to keep her from finding out that he had the Shield with him – hidden in the bundle he carried beside his bag. She had never been the least bit suspicious. She had been filled with desperation over Sigmon's anger. But that was no excuse. She had been far too naïve.

Although by then she had realised that her feelings for Racnar were not even close to what she felt for Sigmon, it had still hurt that he left her like that.

She felt that she had let him down and hurt him. And although she had not loved him as she loved Sigmon, she still cared about him and was thankful for everything he had done for her. But it had all been lies. Evil lies.

Almost everything had gone according to his plan. He had snatched the Shield without anyone being the wiser, just after she and Sigmon had acquired it from right under Lucili's nose. She shivered at the thought of what might have happened if he had not been exposed. In the final battle with Lucili – where she would have to use the power of love as a shield – she would have to visualise her loved ones so as not to be destroyed together with the Shield of Querqus ... when it had fulfilled its purpose. She had thought about using Racnar for that ...

She shivered again.

'You must only include people whom you are certain reciprocate your feelings ... unconditionally. If even one among them does not, although you might think they do, the spell will fail. It's better to include fewer people than one too many.'

Radulfir's voice echoed in her head.

When would they have time for him to teach her? she thought. That is, if it ever became relevant ... if they got the Shield back.

She watched as Ingaea's coffin was carried into the ancient mausoleum on the fringe of the orchard. The Queen would not be cremated as was otherwise customary in the Nesslands. Only warriors and common folk were burnt – never royal people – except King Aeolas, she thought, and she remembered the pyre they had built for the dead king on the shore of Baegfior. It had been the only way they could give his soul peace at the time, and the King had also had a special connection with the Sea Gliders. It all felt like ages ago.

She heard Stigandir sigh impatiently behind her and let her eyes drift to Sigmon, who stood some distance from her. His face was dark with grief. He stood with a hand on Marck's shoulder, as if it required all his strength to stay on his feet. Beside the two brothers stood Cael with Ceinwen, and the little girl cried inconsolably.

It hurt to see them like that. Especially Sigmon. She was screaming inside. She wanted to run to him, hold him close and console him – make him forgive her. But how could he ever do that? All this was her fault. She had defended Racnar. Brought him into the inner circle. Not even twenty years old, Sigmon had to be king of the Nesslands, and the kingdom was on the verge of another clash with the Radix.

Once again, she, Oona, had to prove her worth. But this time she had to fulfil the prophecy. She would write Lucili and her entire lineage out of the history of the Nesslands and

thus save her own people. The Shield of Querqus gave access to the place where it could be done. The Library of Fate.

The thought filled her that her father's lifebook was in the Library and with it the answer to why he had disappeared – and whether he was alive. The thought had not left her since Ingaea told her what the Shield really was.

But the Shield? Racnar had it, and she sincerely hoped that the Bear Warriors would catch up with him.

Ensomnio's words echoed in her head again and again.

'I believe I saw you in the Tower at Herluf's. Then you must know that the Shield betrays the one who stands behind it ... behind it ... behind it ...' She groaned.

Behind it, she thought. Yes, because it is a portal. I have to be in front of it to open it and step through ...

'I see a closed gate. Nothing else. That is what I can tell you about the nature of the Shield. Nothing!'

Ensomnio's voice faded. She groaned again.

Ensomnio had, without knowing, been infinitely close to understanding what the Shield really was. But now it might never become possible to set it up in the opening of the Tower, open it like a door and step into the Library of Fate.

So many would have died in vain. She thought of Frieda, Manja, Mother Melia ... Meya ... None of them were alive any longer. Neither were many other people who used to live in Muldness.

She met Marck's gaze as he turned his head to look at her. His beautiful face was marred by the gash a root chain had given him over one eye. His eyesight had been spared, but the scar was red against his skin and would never fade. There was no blame in his eyes, only grief. Infinitely deep and desperate grief. But despite that, he gave her a little smile which only made more tears stream down her cheeks.

She looked away.

The heavy stone-door to the mausoleum was pushed shut, and Radulfir sealed it with a quick, muttered spell.

'This is it, Oona,' said Stigandir behind her. 'We have to go.'

She turned to him and nodded, and he gripped the wheelchair and began pushing Kierstin towards the castle.

'We have to say goodbye,' he said and set into a run.

Kierstin looked up at him over her shoulder. 'Who was sent ahead?' Stigandir leaned towards her slightly.

'The wizard Dolomedes went with the rest of Prince Sigmon's Bear Warriors and the witch Beti Bubo. Unfortunately, we lost a lot of Bear Warriors in the war, so they are not as many as we could have wished.' He hesitated. 'They left as soon as we realised that the Shield was gone,' he continued. 'Beti returned just before we met for the funeral, but left shortly afterwards. She was in her owl form and said that they had found Racnar's tracks and those of another horseman on the Moor. However, they found one of the horses on its way back to the Groves – without its rider. For some reason, Racnar and his companion are riding the same horse. Beti thinks that they might be on their way to the Eastern Sea.'

He pulled back his head.

'Now, she has gone to Highbight to make them send ships to meet us further down the coast in case there's a ship waiting for Racnar,' he shouted. 'She will continue to the Northern Crown afterwards. If we're lucky, more witches will come to our aid, but it's not certain.'

'Will Radulfir stay here?' Kierstin clutched one of the wheelchair's armrests, as Stigandir picked up the pace.

'Yes,' he answered, slightly out of breath. 'Radulfir will stay to secure the town's magical wards – where the rivers run through the wall. After the trouble with Racnar and his shadow creature, it's important that the town has a strong

magician. But Dolomedes is just as strong a wizard as Radulfir, and with him, with the Bear Warriors and the many warriors joining us from the north, we'll be a force to be reckoned with,' he assured her. 'The witches Saarlur and Saachinu are also coming.'

Kierstin nodded and cast a glance at her tight-lipped daughter, running at her side. Oona caught a scent of men's perfume and felt Cael's hand at her elbow.

'Alright?' he asked.

They picked up the pace further and quickly made their way through the park. Cael looked worried when she did not answer.

Bjorn carried Eiric, since Eiric could not keep up on his own. He gave Cael a dark look and shook his head.

Oona stared at the lit windows of the Column Hall, which faced towards the park, and gasped. She heard Cael catch his breath, and they slowed down, as they saw Ingaea's face appear on the glass, drawn with water. The raindrops trickled down the smooth surface and gathered in vertical puddles which outlined the face.

Oona held her breath. 'Do you see what I see?'

Stigandir, Cael and Bjorn answered quietly. They saw it too.

'Mother?'

Kierstin looked up at her and nodded. 'Ingaea's face.'

They reached the castle, and behind them Radulfir came running with Sigmon and Marck. Oona heard them mutter to each other about the phenomenon on the windows of the Column Hall. The light from the hall made the pools of Ingaea's spirit face gleam and shimmer, but the sea creatures in the Column swam around calmly as if nothing had happened.

'It's beautiful,' exclaimed Kierstin hoarsely and pointed at the castle. 'And look at all the leaves.' She wiped away tears

with the end of her shawl. Oona gave a sad smile and gripped her mother's hand as she walked. The façade of the castle was covered with a thick layer of leaves of green-glazed tiles, which bounced up and down each time a raindrop hit them.

They stopped, and Oona looked over her shoulder. 'What about Saarlar and Saachinu?' Stigandir nodded, waiting for Cael to open the gate to the atrium.

'They're coming,' he said and quickly pushed the wheel-chair through the opening. The two witches stayed just behind Radulfir, and suddenly Eiric tore free from Bjorn's arms and ran into the atrium. His cloak shone with water.

'Eiric!' Oona let go of her mother's hand and followed him. He stopped in the middle of the atrium, and she crouched down in front of him.

'We're leaving now, Eiric,' she said and put a hand on his cheek. 'Promise to take good care of mom with Potentilla.' She stroked his wet, golden hair.

Eiric nodded and stared up at the glimmering water-face of Ingaea.

'You need the Shield back, right, Oona? The one Racnar took?' He turned his face and looked down at her.

'Yes,' she said and tried to restrain the anger in her voice. 'The one Racnar took.'

'Why did he do it, Oona?' Eiric thrust out his lower lip. 'He was so nice. He took care of me and mom on the ship.'

Oona clenched her teeth.

'Yes, he took care of you and mom, and ... and he did many other nice things, but Eiric ... it was just to make us think he was good. It wasn't real. He's really on the side of our enemies. But I have to go now.' She stood up.

Eiric wrinkled his brow and looked back at the glass façade. He jerked his head from side to side. Oona looked at him. 'What are you doing?'

Eiric kept staring in front of him, still nodding his head.

‘But why did he do it Oona?’ he repeated.

Oona sighed and tried to meet his gaze, but Eiric was apparently completely absorbed in the image that the rain made on the window.

‘I don’t know, Eiric. I really don’t know.’

‘Oona!’ Cael was at the door to the south wing. ‘I’m sorry, but we have to get going!’

She saw that everyone except Saarlal and Saachinu had gone into the castle. The two witches had stopped in the atrium. They preferred, as always, to stay outside. They were just inside the wall dividing the atrium and the park.

She gripped Eiric’s shoulders. ‘I have to go now, Eiric,’ she repeated. ‘Don’t you want to come inside?’

Eiric shook his head and looked at her. ‘I’d like to be out here, even though it’s night. It’s summer after all.’

Oona pulled him into an embrace. ‘I love you. Take good care of yourself. And mom.’

Saarlal followed Oona with her eyes, as she disappeared through the door. Then she stared back at the small boy, who was again studying the large windows of the Column Hall. She exchanged a look with Saachinu – the small, hunch-backed witch who always followed her. Saachinu stared out from under the cloak’s hood, and a low, melodious warble came from her lips.

Saarlal nodded. Silently, she studied the spirit face on the window with her flat eyes. Then she rested her gaze on Eiric.

His body was still with his hands at his sides, while his head made small jerks from side to side, and the small glittering pools on the window followed ...

Ingaea’s face changed expression, and moved across the window, as if it were dancing, smiling and laughing. The two witches looked at each other, turned slowly and left the atrium.

Oona caught up with the others in the corridor. Bjorn had taken over from Stigandir, and was pushing their mother's wheelchair towards the kitchen.

'The witches will have their ice leaves ready in ten minutes!' shouted Stigandir and quickly followed the other men into the kitchen. 'Do you have all your weapons ready?'

Oona trotted to keep up. 'They're already down there,' she answered. 'With my bag.'

They hurried down the few steps to the kitchen. Mimi and her husband sat at the long table with their daughters, and Linn and her brother were also there together with Kerr and his girlfriend Enid. They all stood up as Oona ran into the kitchen.

'It was a beautiful ceremony,' said Mimi tearfully and clutched Radulfir's hands. Aestrid and Linn silently hugged Oona in turn. Neither of her two friends knew what to say.

'Stigandir?' Oona grabbed his sleeve. 'I have to talk to my mother about my father, before we leave, in case ... In case we don't make it,' she mumbled.

She had to know, before she left. And her mother was well enough to talk now, although she could not walk yet. There was a clattering of weapons, and bags were being stuffed with food. Mumbling and restlessness filled the large kitchen.

Stigandir frowned. 'You have to make it quick, Oona.'

She nodded, ran to her mother and knelt beside her. If they failed to get the Shield back, she would never unravel the mystery of her father. Especially not if the fight for the Shield ended up costing her her life.

'Mom.' She gripped her mother's hand. 'There's something I need to know before we leave.' She saw Marck, Sigmon and Cael leave the kitchen.

Her mother squeezed her hand. 'I'm sure you'll come back alive ... with the Shield,' her mother whispered. 'I'm sure ...' Her voice broke and tears ran down her cheeks.

'Mom, I need to know the truth about dad. Who was he?'

Her mother looked confused. 'Your father? He ... I don't remember. I don't think that ... no, I don't remember him.' She pulled away her hand and rested it on the stump that was left of her other arm. The missing arm gave her form a strangely lopsided look.

Oona swallowed a lump in her throat. It was as if her head was suddenly empty. Bjorn and Aril both stared at her mother with open mouths, and Bjorn, who had been frantically closing a bag, froze. He exchanged a brief glance with Aril. Then he hurried over and knelt beside Oona.

'What are you saying, mom?' he whispered. 'Dad ... You must remember dad?' Their mother stared from one to the other despairingly, slowly shaking her head.

'His name was Vidarr ... Dad was called Vidarr, mom.' Oona stared at her, but their mother kept shaking her head. Her chin trembled, and tears ran down her cheeks.

'I don't know who you're talking about, children,' she sobbed. 'I can see that the man you're talking about meant a lot to you. But I have no idea ...' She covered her face with her hand. 'I don't know who your father was. I don't know anyone called Vidarr.'

Oona gripped her mother's hand. Panic spread through her.

'But what about grandmother ... and grandfather? Do you remember them? They lived in Lower Norbluff. They died the year before Bjorn was born.' Her voice had become shrill. 'You said they really liked dad.'

Kierstin looked at her, confused. 'My parents ... Yes, I remember them, but they didn't live in Lower Norbluff ... They ...' She fell silent and her eyes wavered as if she were looking for something.

'Yes, they did!' Oona's voice was shrill. 'They lived in Lower Norbluff. Your father was a saddler, don't you remember?'

And you mother was a seamstress like you.' She hesitated. 'You always told us that they lived up there.'

Her mother shook her head. First slowly, then faster.

'No,' she whispered. 'No, they didn't live there. I ...' She rubbed her brow and her hand shook. Then she suddenly stared vacantly into space.

Oona and Bjorn looked at each other. Something was completely wrong. Why did their mother claim that her parents did not live in Lower Norbluff? Was she losing her mind? And how could she have forgotten their father? But something told Oona that her mother was speaking the truth. Their grandparents must have lived somewhere else. But why had she and dad told them differently? And where had they really lived?

Oona stood up abruptly. 'Radulfir!'

The wizard turned and looked at her, surprised. He let go of Mimi's hands and hurried over to them.

'She doesn't remember dad! Not at all! She doesn't even know who he was!' Oona trembled. Everyone in the kitchen stared at them. Radulfir's eyes darkened. 'I'll be right back,' he said and left the kitchen. Shortly after he was back with Saachinu and Saarlal. The two witches showed an intense displeasure at being brought inside. However, despite their reservations they followed Radulfir through the kitchen without hesitation.

'The ice leaves are ready,' hissed Saarlal, annoyed.

Stigandir had come up to Kierstin, and Oona saw a look in his eyes which she had never seen before, an expression of deep despair. And when he looked at her mother, it was as if he was searching for something in her, but it was in vain. She just stared back at him with a dazed expression and drew further despair into his face.

Saarlal stopped and let Saachinu step close to the woman in the wheelchair. Oona's mother bowed her head. Stigandir's

gaze was clearly unbearable to her. She did not know what he wanted, what it was he sought from her. She only felt that she could not give it to him, and that it hurt him.

‘What’s happening?’ Cael had entered the kitchen. ‘We’re waiting for you. We ...’ He fell silent. Saachinu stared at Oona’s mother. Then she quickly pushed the shawl aside. The scar above Kierstin’s breast shone red against the pale skin. A melodious warble came from the witch’s throat, and Saarlar answered it. Saachinu traced the scar with a curved claw. It glowed faintly, and Kierstin writhed uneasily in the chair. Oona and Bjorn’s eyes flickered back and forth between the small witch and Radulfir, but no one said anything. Radulfir’s brow was pulled into deep furrows between his eyes, and the people in the kitchen held their breath.

Then Saachinu pulled her claw away and stared up at the tall wizard from under the hood of her cloak. She was so hunched that she had to lean back to look at him. She released another warble and Radulfir nodded. Then the witch turned her eyes directly to Oona.

‘The other spell,’ said Radulfir. ‘Do you remember the other spell?’ He lowered his eyes to Oona’s mother. ‘Saachinu found that you had become the victim of two spells on your way home on the ship, remember?’

Oona’s mother nodded slowly.

‘Saachinu says that Lucili has erased all memories of your children’s father. And they’ll only return if you meet him again,’ said Radulfir. ‘I’m sorry.’

Bjorn stared at Oona dumbfounded. ‘But dad is dead,’ he burst out. ‘He ...’ She stared back at him. She did not know what to say.

‘Radulfir!’ A shrill woman’s voice sounded from the corridor. Quick steps approached, clacking against the stone floor. ‘Radulfir!’

Everyone looked to the stairs, as the tall, skinny form of Mrs Fuchtel appeared in the doorway. The stable mistress marched down the stairs. 'It's gone! Disappeared! Someone stole it!'

She stopped in front of Radulfir, and Oona saw that tufts of grey hair had escaped from the tight bun in her neck, and the otherwise always immaculately dressed woman had mud on her boots.

Radulfir put a hand on her arm. 'What's been stolen?' he asked, confused.

'The stallion! The stallion Prince Sigmon and Miss Kinsgood rode just a few hours ago! The one they cast a haste spell on! It's not in its stall! Somebody stole it!'

Stigandir growled and gave Radulfir a dark look. 'Now we know why Racnar and his companion got rid of one of their horses. Come on! Time's running short!'