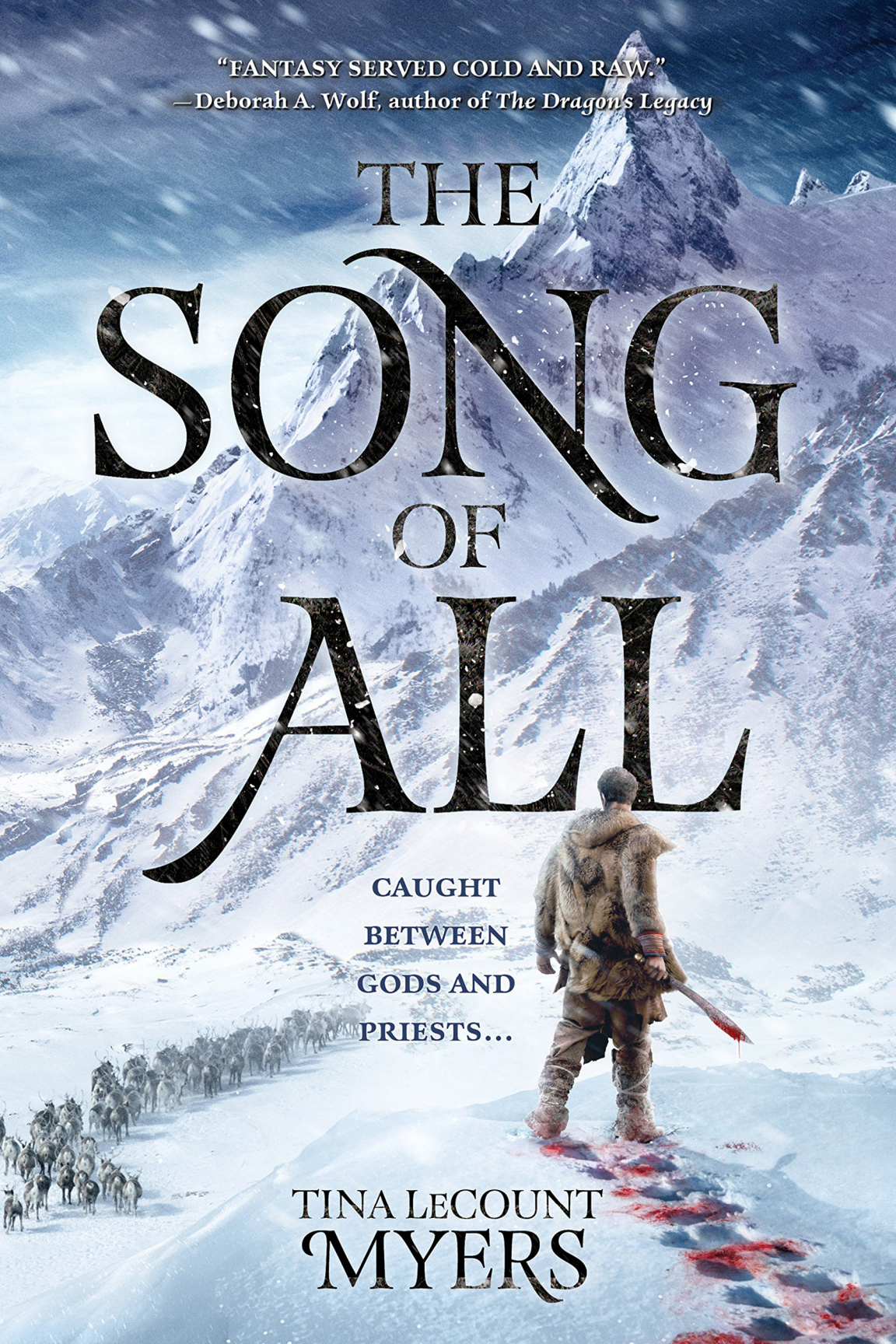


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THE SONG OF ALL

CAUGHT
BETWEEN
GODS AND
PRIESTS...

TINA LECOUNT
MYERS



THE LEGACY OF THE HEAVENS
BOOK ONE

THE
SONG
OF
ALL

TINA LECOUNT
MYERS

Night Shade Books
New York

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Song of All is a work of fiction which draws upon various Saami languages spoken in the northern regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and extreme northwestern Russia. The author incorporates Saami words and concepts in this work with the utmost respect for the Saami languages and cultures and with the hope of their preservation for future generations. The relevance of a language should not only be measured by the number of speakers, but, in the spirit of communication, should also seek to embrace the multiplicity of experience, honor the insight offered, and safeguard what is irreplaceable.

Kiitos, äiti.
You were right.

Part One

THE EIGHTH SEASON
OF SNOW

CHAPTER ONE

IRJAN WALKED WITH SOHJA in silence. Their footfalls made no sound in the powdery snow. The cold air squeezed the breath from him, and the sun, veiled now by the gods, offered him no warmth. By the end of the moon cycle they would be plunged into such darkness that even the weightless snowflakes would become a burden.

But rather than consider the coming shadows, Irjan tried to focus on the sleeping babe snuggled in his wife's arms. Their boy, Marnej, would be their light in the coming darkness. But it scared him to think that so much of their hope rested in such a tiny body. Irjan drew his arm around his small family, pulling them close, as if, by doing so, he could ward off his regrets.

Sohja looked up at him and smiled, her contentment radiating like the brightest of stars. It was too much for Irjan to bear and he looked away, searching the path ahead for an answer to the question that continued to gnaw upon him. *How could he tell his wife that he lived each day with the knowledge that others had died by his hand?*



Sohja's smile faded as Irjan stared ahead. She leaned in closer to him as they walked and he tightened his arm around her. She was

grateful for it, because she suspected his thoughts strayed to the past. They'd spent two full seasons of snow together before the baby had arrived, and she'd often seen him staring into the distance. She worried the call of the tundra and thundering herds would overtake him once again, and he would disappear as suddenly as he had appeared.



In the moon cycle of *Skábmamánnu*, the dark period, Irjan had arrived at the farm seeking shelter and work. Sohja's father could offer him no work, but the old man welcomed the sound of another voice. In the dying firelight the two men had talked nightly, and as days grew into weeks, she'd listened.

He said he'd traveled for six seasons of snow with the *binna*, caring for them as they moved along their ancient routes. The reindeer had given his life its every shape; they'd been his food, his shelter, and his marker of time. He had lived in accordance to moon cycles of molt, rut, and calve, and his life had been measured in their age-old rhythms, in their births and deaths. He had cared for them and they had sustained him.

As the weeks passed through the moon cycles, Irjan told her father stories of the endless nights, much deeper and darker than their own, where the changing lights painted across the black heavens came from the breath of the gods.

"*Badjeolmmoš*, did you not fear this breath of the gods?" her father wondered.

"*Boanda*, I feared not the night sky, but rather the endless sun of the time of *Geassemánnu*. In these days there are no signs in the heavens to know where you are. You must know the trees and the rocks and marshes, but these things change over time." He paused. "The stars in the heavens do not. To be lost on the *Pohjola* is to die on it."

"Well, herder," the old farmer chuckled, "on the farm it is only old age you must fear. For it will surely kill you."

The farmer struggled to his feet from his chair. "Child," he called, "lead me to my bed."

Dutifully, Sohja rose and helped her stooped father cross the room. She glanced backward at Irjan's face, lit by the dying flames. But in her mind, it seemed the breath of the gods lit him also.



On the snowy path they now walked, Sohja looked up at her husband's lined features. The scruff of his beard hid his gauntness. She thought of those long-ago nights and his stories, and wondered if perhaps the gods were darker than their night sky.

He kissed her upturned forehead absentmindedly and seemed to come back to himself, saying, "Wife, I am sorry you have to walk this morning."

"I am content to walk with you. The snow is too light to use the sleigh."

He nodded.

"In a short time we will have all the snow we need. Are you sure you are both warm enough?" He pulled her closer to him.

"It is the first snow, husband. It is hardly cold, and you have us layered so tightly in reindeer *duollji* the wind cannot touch us."

Irjan smiled broadly, which made her laugh. He squeezed her again, and the baby yawned. They could see the village in the distance, and heard the peal of a bell.

"I hope the gods know I do not like sharing you both with them," he said, still smiling.

Her eyes narrowed. "It is not the gods you should worry about. It is the rest of the village. You have been one of us for only two seasons of snow; the others still look upon you as a stranger, a reindeer herder, and not a member of the *girkogilli*."

"And if I worship at their altar with them long enough, this will change?"

“Yes. There are many who are still frightened by you. You came from the Pohjola. Few have been to the Northland. Most have never left their farms.”

“You do not mention that many would have gladly left their farms for yours,” he replied.

“All the more reason to attend worship and make your place in the girkogilli strong,” she said.

“I belong to you, and to no group of men,” Irjan said with more force than he intended.

CHAPTER TWO

“WE HAVE, EACH OF us, a duty to the gods beyond prayer, beyond offerings. From the moment our souls arrive, carried upon the wing of the bird, until the moment they claim them for their own, the gods demand we find the light in the darkness and fight against evil in all its forms. We, the *Olmmoš*, are their chosen. We are their soldiers in this mortal realm of Davvieana.”

The *Apotti's* exhortations echoed in the narrow wooden temple. The burning braziers belched thick smoke, smelling of rich smoldering pine. The Apotti stood in front of the chosen and tried not to see the tired faces of farmers and tradesmen, but rather an army of the gods.

As the last of his words reverberated, he felt his heart beating wildly. The blood of a believer coursed through him. He was a child of the church, a son of a priest, and a man, as his father had impressed upon him, destined for greatness within the Order of Believers.

“And, as soldiers, we must remain ever vigilant.” His voice rose to the rafters. “As we enter the dark time we often become vulnerable. Doubts and fears prey upon us and we can lose our faith, fearing the light will never return. In these moments, I ask all of you, the gods’ chosen ones, to remember the battles of our

forefathers. Remember the blood they shed to fight evil, to fight those who tempted them to look away from the gods, to fight the *Jápmea*. These so-called Immortals, these abominations, strove to bind us to their wickedness and have us believe them to be our true gods. But we saw through their lies, for only the gods are immortal, and we slew these false deities. And in shedding our own blood, we cleansed ourselves of their tainted promises.” The priest sagged after his crescendo to catch his breath.

“Remember, *mánáid*, children of the gods, the battles may have ended, but the war for your souls continues.” The priest closed his eyes and let silence take over the room.



After the sermon, the faithful stood and shuffled toward the door. The priest, however, did not move forward to greet his worshippers. Instead, the priest’s acolyte stood with his outstretched arms, ready to receive the varied offerings.

“The Apotti thanks you as you thank the gods,” the acolyte said softly to each person.

Waiting to leave, Irjan and Sohja spoke to those they knew in the village. The women cooed over the baby, and a few of the men clapped Irjan on the back. He was accepting their congratulations when a voice whispered, “Brother, the Apotti thanks you as you thank the gods.”

Irjan faced the priest’s assistant and replied, “I am thankful to the gods and their messenger the Apotti.” He handed the acolyte the cured and folded reindeer skin.

The acolyte accepted it. The corners of his mouth pulled up into a pained smile, as if someone stood behind him tugging at strings. “Brother,” he said through strained lips, “the Apotti would like you to call upon him in his sanctum. It is a matter of importance to the village.” The acolyte then nodded solemnly.

Irjan continued forward through the open door and into the cold.

Sohja smiled. "You see? I was right!"

"Yes." Irjan smiled back. "You were right."

"Go to him," she urged. "Hurry!"

"The only reason to hurry is to see you and the baby get home and out of the cold. The Apotti can wait," Irjan said, raising his voice.

"Shh. Do not! You have gained the Apotti's notice. Do not court the attention of the rest of the girkogilli for being rude. I will be fine. I will walk with the neighbors, and then it is a short distance home."

Irjan raised his hand to guide Sohja down the steps. "No. I will take care of my family first."

Sohja brushed his hand away. "You are doing so by going to see the Apotti."

Irjan knew by the look in her eyes he could no more change her mind than he could stop the falling snow.

Reluctantly he watched his wife hurry off to catch up with the others. He watched her retreating back until he could no longer distinguish it from the snow. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"This way, Brother," the youthful acolyte said with some command.

Irjan followed, but his thoughts remained with his wife and son.

At a large, rounded door, the acolyte stopped and knocked softly. It seemed impossible anyone could hear such a light touch on such a stout door, but from inside a voice granted entrance.

The young cleric pushed open the door. The iron hinges groaned with strain. A fire blazed on the far side of the room and the priest sat beside the hearth, gazing with interest at his guests.

"Good," he said. "Send the Brother forward, Siggur. Your duty is done. The gods thank you."

The acolyte stopped abruptly, then lowered his head, murmuring, "As I thank the gods." Silently he retreated.

The priest gestured. "Brother, come sit beside the fire. We have important matters to discuss."

Irjan took the proffered chair. Even with the light of the flames, he could only see the Apotti's face. Whatever cloaked the priest's body, its details remained hidden in blackness. In contrast, the priest's face was ageless and luminescent, framed with golden white hair. His eyes were icy pools. Irjan felt as if the Apotti looked through him as if he were mist, with no solid substance to stand in the way. Suddenly, Irjan feared those same eyes were trying to bore into his thoughts, into his soul, where desire and fear intertwined.

"Brother, you have skills we are in need of," the priest said.

"Apotti, I do not understand. I am a boanda, one of many farmers, and certainly not the richest in crops or livestock," Irjan answered cautiously.

The priest blinked.

"Brother, don't think I cannot see your soul, your history," he replied. "You are not a farmer; you are a *Piijkij*, one of the Brethren of Hunters."

The statement hung in the air. One man refused to accept it and the other refused to retract it. The silence grew to fill the room, pushing out what little air the fire had not already consumed.

"Apotti, you are mistaken," the man finally said. "I am not a *Piijkij*. I was a reindeer herder before becoming a part of this village."

The priest's face darkened. "Am I mistaken? Are then the gods mistaken? They are the ones who speak of you. You may deceive others with your tales of traveling with reindeer in the North. The gods are not fooled, nor am I."

Irjan's throat ached to deny, to lie. And yet, he sensed it was useless. The priest's penetrating gaze told him he somehow knew the truth. Had the gods betrayed him? If so, why?

Irjan's mind raced to avoid being engulfed in the past. "Apotti, I was a *Piijkij*," he finally admitted, "but I am *no longer* among the

Brethren of Hunters. I made a vow to the gods I would never again hunt, never again kill."

The priest stared at Irjan, his face taking on the color of the flames. "You remain a Hunter, Brother. It is what the gods want. It is what the gods ask of you now and forever."

"I cannot," Irjan protested. "I am no longer a young man. I have a family, a wife and a child who need my care, and a farm to keep."

The priest rose abruptly from his chair. The rush of his robes fanned the flames and his voice parted the darkness. "Hunter you were born. Hunter you remain. You may not choose your destiny. It has been chosen for you."

"And if I fight my destiny?" Irjan asked.

"Hunter, you will lose," the answer came back, as if from the flames themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

SIGGUR WAITED IN A gloom-filled alcove. The shadows hid his burning humiliation. *Exclusion*. His mind churned on the slight. *Exclusion is my reward for being a faithful acolyte*. The Apotti's door creaked, startling him. He peered out from the shadows and watched the bearded farmer emerge. He glared at the man in disgust.

What can a farmer offer the Apotti or the village? Turnips?

The man walked down the corridor and Siggur stepped out of the gloom. He considered knocking on the priest's door to see if he could be of service, but then he froze.

Service? I have been of service to that man since I was a boy.

Another voice in his mind, smooth and sibilant, answered, *And that is how he still sees you—as a child.*

Siggur spun on his heels and followed the man out of the temple. He watched as the farmer headed. . .not toward his farm, but toward the village.

"Where do you go?" Siggur whispered to the distant figure, curiosity nudging him along.



Out in the cold air, away from the priest's eyes and his fire, Irjan could breathe again. He staggered forward, pushed by his own questions.

How had the Apotti discovered his secret? He'd told no one, not even Sohja's father, who, on his deathbed, had begged to know the secret of Irjan's life before the binna.

"What of life before the reindeer?" the old farmer had asked.

On that night, as on all the others before it, Irjan had answered, "There was no life before the binna."

Irjan had told the old man the truth. No life existed before the reindeer, because there had only been death. The hunt. The capture. Death.

The Apotti had called him by his title, a Piijkij. The Bird of Prey. The Hunter. The Man Who Takes the Souls of the Immortals.

Irjan stumbled over his visions of the past—one body after another, over what seemed a lifetime. With each one, Irjan had stood and watched until the life force dissipated and the ravens came to pluck out the eyes and carry away the soul. And with each one, a little more of his own soul flew off with those same birds, until one day he looked down at the bloodied and distorted face of a Jápmea and saw himself, a twisted shell of a man turned killer. There was no trace of the boy he'd been before the Brethren had turned his fear and heartache into something black and burning. He was dead before he'd ever lived, and now not even the hatred that had fueled him remained. He was empty. On that day, he turned his back on the Jápmea Immortals and ceased to be a Piijkij. He walked into the Pohjola praying to find his soul again.

But here he stood, in the midst of the village, trailed by a past that not even the thunderous tracks of the binna could erase. . . How? Why?

Irjan found himself standing outside the travelers' hut. He opened the door and walked into the smoky room. The men greeted him and the women looked up from their circle, but no one beckoned him to join them for a *jubka*. He got his own ale and found a stool in the corner, away from the chanters, but the room resonated with the chanter's *joik*. The song was strong and vivid,

and Irjan struggled to keep the images from his mind. He had more important things to consider. But the joik could not be ignored.

Irjan heard the hooves of the binna and the wind rushing past them. He heard the ice cracking and thundering as the voice continued to sing of endless expanses. Irjan hung his head and released the breath he had been holding since leaving the priest's chambers.

If I'd stayed with the binna, I would not be in this room. Regret washed over him. The chanter's voice rose, then stopped suddenly. The room pulsed with silence. Irjan buried his face in his hands, trying to wipe away the vision before his eyes, but the truth remained.

Were he not in this room, Irjan would be standing in front of his wife, lying. He could see Sohja's expectant face and the baby asleep in the corner near their bed. A new wave of remorse washed over him. He would have to lie to her. It could not be otherwise. To tell Sohja the truth would be to lose her forever. A woman could not knowingly remain handfast to a killer like himself.

As if to hone the point, the soft chanting of one of the women swelled to fill the murky room. Her clear, sweet voice pierced Irjan's heart as she sang of the wind that spoke the courting promises of her husband, lost to her after a lifetime together.

"I had no idea, Brother, you were interested in the joik of your neighbors," a sly voice cut through the ballad of love and longing. "Perhaps you will sing your own."

Irjan looked up, surprised to see the priest's acolyte hovering before him. The young man quickly sat down beside him.

He smiled, but, to Irjan, the grin seemed to hold more cunning than warmth.

"I am afraid, Brother, that I do not have a voice for chanting," he replied with care.

"Brother, it is not the voice that matters, it is the story it tells."

"Well then, Brother, in that case, no one would be interested in the tales of a farmer."

“But Brother, it is well known you have traveled in the Pohjola. Few of us, here in the South, have gone any distance from our familiar world. Surely, you must have seen a great many things that we can only dream of.”

“Dreams and nightmares are close cousins, *Amanuensa*,” Irjan answered, using the young man’s title in deference, while looking for a way to leave.

The acolyte, his face bright with mischief, drew in close, blocking Irjan’s exit. He called for another drink for them both.

“Brother, tell me some of the things you have seen,” he said with a truthful eagerness.

“What is it you expect to hear, *Amanuensa*?” Irjan pretended to scoff. “Stories of demons and ghosts and—”

“And the Jápmea,” the acolyte finished.

“The Jápmea? Why them?”

“Because they are said to live in the Pohjola. You have traveled in the Pohjola. Surely you must have encountered them.”

The acolyte lowered his voice, though there was no need to hide it in the din of the room. “How are we humans to fight this evil if we do not know its form? Its ways? Please, Brother, I must know something of what I will face in the future.”

The acolyte had guessed well, or he had been sent by the Apotti. Either way, Irjan suspected he could not escape without giving him something, and yet he was determined to try.

“You are speaking of the past, *Amanuensa*—a distant one. Besides, you are more acquainted with the ways of Jápmea Immortals than I. You have been educated. You have learned the history of the ancients. I am a farmer who traveled with the binna.”

The acolyte shook his head forcefully. “Stop,” the young man ordered. “Your attempts at humility only confirm what I suspect. The Apotti has sought your counsel because you have encountered them.”

Would that it were that simple, Irjan silently wished. To the acolyte he said reluctantly, “I have seen them.”

The young man lowered the cup from his mouth. "What do they look like?"

Irjan glanced around the room and lowered his voice. "They look like us."

Appearing slightly crestfallen, the young cleric went on, "The Apotti says that when the Jápmea sought immortality, they offended the gods, and the gods punished them. Surely, those who are blighted cannot look as we do, Brother."

"Would you have them distinguished by some mark of evil?" Irjan demanded, taking another hasty drink. The warmth of the juhka flowed through him and his mind momentarily swam with thoughts and faces and long-forgotten memories. A part of him wanted to tell this young cleric everything, to air out every dark corner of himself. He wanted to confess and wash his hands free of the blood that, though not visible, coated his callused skin, thick and red and sticky as sap. But the part of him trained to survive rose to the surface and took control.

"Do you believe they should have horns like the reindeer or fangs like the wolves?"

The acolyte's face reddened. "How then do you know you have seen the Jápmea?"

"Because they do not move like us," Irjan continued, holding the acolyte's attention. "They move in all measures of space."

"How can that be?" The acolyte pushed back, disbelief flashing across his face.

Irjan leaned forward. "Some say they exist in the shadows, but that is not true. The shadows have substance. Darkness occupies its space. The Jápmea cannot hide where there is no room for them. Instead, they exist in the gaps."

"How can you know this?" the young man pressed.

"Have you ever seen something out of the corner of your eye so fleeting it made you doubt yourself? Or seen something and thought you had seen it before, but could not place when or where? This is where the *Jápmemeahttun* exist. We can share the

same world, the same sun, the same air and water, and yet we need not touch.”

“But if what you say is true”—suspicion crept into the young cleric’s voice—“how is it that you have seen them?”

“Amanuensa, I tell you truly, I do not know. If you say it is a gift, I will tell you it is a curse. They live apart from us for a reason.”

“Because they are evil. We fought them back into the darkness!”

“Not into darkness, Brother. Darkness has no room for them; they still live among us because we give them room.”

“No, Brother! We, all of us, must not give them any room to live. We must follow the faith of the Believers. We must remove this evil creeping around us, threatening our souls.”

“Noble sentiments, Brother.” Irjan snorted, coughing up a bit of rising bile. “How do you propose we do that?”

“We kill them!” the acolyte spat.

“How?”

“If they are as you say they are, like you and me, can they not be killed?”

“To be truthful, Brother, they can be killed, but I wonder if you would be capable of doing the killing.” Irjan leaned back and drained his cup, replacing it on the table with an awkward thump.

Before the acolyte could answer, Irjan stood up and swayed, then walked out of the travelers’ hut.

Outside, he bent over, sickened. When he stood up, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His conversation with the acolyte had left him shaking. The maze of his past was closing in on him.

If he had been wise, he would have gone straight home and told Sohja everything. But he feared losing all he had worked so hard to gain, his freedom, his farm, his family. He thought again of his wife and child waiting at home, safe and warm. He could not allow anything to harm them.

Irjan quickened his pace, reminding himself that only one man knew his true calling: the Apotti. And the priest could not make him do something against his will. As for the acolyte, he only knew a small part of the story. But suddenly the thought occurred to Irjan, *What if the Brethren knew about him?*

And then Irjan ran.

CHAPTER FOUR

DARKNESS SLID DOWN THROUGH the trees, engulfing the small farmhouse. Sohja paced the floor, stopping every few steps to wring her hands. Her husband's audience with the Apotti could not have lasted this long if there were not a serious problem. Marnej stirred in the cradle, his cries becoming increasingly more insistent. Sohja picked him up and held him against her breast. He was rested and fed. She had done everything for his comfort, and yet he still cried.

Sohja rocked in place, chanting her joik, hoping the sound of her voice would soothe her son. Her song brought to life the tale of the everyday, caring for those she loved and knowing that one day she, too, would be loved and cared for by her children. As her last words hung upon the still air, Sohja rested her cheek against Marnej's downy head. He was hot.

She removed the duollji pelts she'd swaddled him in. Out of the furs, he suddenly felt so small in her arms, so unprotected. Her thoughts cracked like spring ice. What could the priest want with her *käällis*? He was a farmer now. They were too far south to have need of a reindeer herder.

Whatever he wanted, she told herself, she should be gratified. The Apotti had said the village needed her husband and that should suffice. But her fears lingered. Irjan never wished to

discuss his life before the binna. And when he did speak of it, his confessions were unsettling. For him, he had said, there had been no life before the binna.

Sohja put her son back in his cradle and paced the room until she felt a cold sweat trickle down her back. She moved closer to the fire. The flames roared, and yet still she felt chilled. All the questions she had feared to ask now rose to the surface. She pushed each one down frantically. But one refused to be suppressed. It screamed in her mind until she could no longer avoid it.

What if my fears are only the start?

Sohja stared at the fire until she could no longer abide her own stillness. She grabbed the broom beside the hearth and began to sweep. When she finished, she began again, seeing dust and grime where there was none. When she started to sweep the room for the third time, she stopped herself and sagged against the rough handled broom.

Sohja looked at Marnej sleeping fitfully. She walked over and sat hesitantly upon the bed, unsure if she could find any rest. She looked at the supper on the table—the stew had a grey skin of congealed fat upon its surface.

The crunch of quick footsteps outside propelled Sohja off the bed. Before she reached the door, it swung open. Irjan rushed in and she fell into his arms, holding on to him as if she would never let him go.



Irjan dropped the knife he gripped in his hand and held on to Sohja even tighter than she held on to him. When she released him, he pulled back and saw her face shadowed and lined with fear.

“What has happened? Have they come?” he demanded, quickly picking up his knife again before rushing to his son’s cradle. Seeing the boy sleeping, he spun to face his wife.

“I am sorry, my love!” she suddenly burst out.

Irjan twitched with surprise. "What have you to be sorry for?"

"I should not have pushed you to make yourself fit where you did not want to."

Sohja hid her face behind her hands.

Irjan stepped forward, placing his knife upon the trestle table before gently pulling aside Sohja's hands. He brushed back the hair that had escaped her pale braid.

"It is all I want, my heart. To be with you here, in this life, and see our son grow. I swear to you I will do anything to make that happen." This time Irjan fell into his wife's arms and held her tightly, wanting to feel her reassuring embrace, wanting to believe that they were all still safe.



The Apotti sat and peered into the fire. He clenched his teeth, thinking of the man's pathetic attempts to deny his past. *How dare he?*

He may have been a Pijikij, but he was obviously a fool when it came to the power of the Order of Believers. There had been no divine intervention; rather, Rikkar had made inquiries accompanied by the correct compensation. True, he wore the robes of a priest, but Rikkar was a man of his world, and in his world, one either wielded power or cringed beneath it, and he'd experienced both.

But while he much preferred being Apotti over acolyte, Rikkar had to admit that he now found little satisfaction knowing the villagers of Hemmela placed their souls in his hands. They were sheep, easily corralled and led, and what power did the shepherd really have? He desired something more befitting his skills, his talent. With a Pijikij in his service, he would not only have access to the Brethren's closely guarded knowledge, but he would also have access to the Immortals themselves.

Rikkar momentarily savored the vision of depositing one of those vile creatures at the foot of the Vijns.

The High Priest would be compelled to offer him a position within the Court of Counselors. Rikkar smiled at the thought, then eased back in his chair, warmed by both the fire beside him and his own smoldering ambitions.

CHAPTER FIVE

RIKKAR AWOKE WELL BEFORE dawn to pray. His prayers, however, had swiftly resolved into a plan. Destiny beckoned him to reach higher and farther, and he would not entrust his future to chance. His own hand needed to guide him forward.

Rikkar crossed the temple's threshold and shivered in the wan morning light. He tightened his cloak about him. From the corner of his eye, he saw something move. He whirled in the direction of the flash, but saw only wispy fog. He moved cautiously into the courtyard and slowly circled. Finally satisfied he was alone, Rikkar walked toward the outskirts of the village.

As he passed the last of the central structures, he looked over his shoulder one more time, and then headed toward the woods lining the path. It would take him longer to travel the uneven and snowy ground, but he could not risk being seen by any who traveled to the last trading market.



“I do not like to leave you,” Irjan said. “Especially when I can see your heart is still heavy from yesterday’s trouble.”

Sohja shook her head, saying, "Yesterday is gone. I am much better. You cannot miss the last market."

"We are stocked for the dark time ahead. We need little else to be well prepared."

"Do not look so dour," she chided him. "There are things we still need. Go and get them." Sohja gently pushed him toward the door.

"I do not like to leave you," Irjan repeated with an insistence that almost sounded like pleading to Sohja's ears.

She shook her head at her own strange thoughts. "Go now, or you will miss the others."

Irjan tried to protest, but she cut him short with a finger to his lips. "I have much to do today, and by the time you are back, I will have finished and we can sit down together before the fire as we did when we first met." She gave him a shy smile and a nudge.

Irjan kissed her and then their son before finally heading toward the door. Just before he stepped through he looked back over his shoulder and smiled. "I will hold you to that," he said, before closing the door with a firm pull.

With Irjan gone, Sohja focused on the day ahead. She put behind all her silly speculation and concentrated on the tasks at hand. Her husband's assurances the night before had calmed her fears. In fact, in the morning's light her worries seemed silly. He loved her.

Marnej began to cry. Sohja went to pick him up, but saw he moved within his dreams. She walked to the hearth and stoked the fire to boil wash water. As she waited, Sohja cut up potatoes and turnips along with the rabbit she would serve her husband when he returned. She sang softly to herself as she peeled and cut the vegetables, then salted the meat and set it aside to rest. The rabbit skin hung on a line, to cure. It would make a fine little cap for the baby.

While waiting for the water to boil, Sohja sat down beside the fire and picked up her mending. As a little girl, working next to her mother, she had imagined a moment such as this.

"One day you will be a mother yourself, with a home and a handmate to honor you and children to love," her mother had said.

As a child, Sohja had nodded, believing her mother.

But as she grew older, and a desirable handmate was not forthcoming, Sohja despaired. Then her mother became ill. Sohja could do nothing but try to offer her peace at her death.

"Do not carry worry in your heart to the other side, Mother," Sohja soothed. "I will choose a good handmate. Our children will grow strong and care for Father in his old age."

But Sohja did not become handfasted after her mother's death. Instead, she cared for her father in his dotage.

And then Irjan arrived, out of the darkness and into their home, and eventually into her heart. At first, Sohja was cautious. The stranger could have been like most of the men in the village, more interested in her father's land than in truly sharing a life with her. Sohja watched and listened, and in the end she knew before he did that his heart belonged to her.

Warmed by the fire, Sohja smiled to herself and drifted along with her thoughts, her needle moving ahead without her attention.

The knock on the door startled her out of her reverie. She stood and went to the door, but paused, her hand hovering above the pull. She opened it warily. The Apotti stood before her. Sohja shrank back.

"Good morning, Sister." The priest bowed slightly.

Sohja gave him a bobbing curtsey. "Good morning, Apotti."

"I hope I have not come too early, or found you in an inconvenient moment," he continued evenly.

She cast her eyes down, smoothing the front of her apron. "No, no," she stammered.

"I have come to see your husband."

Sohja tried to steady her gaze upon the man in front of her. "My käällis has left for the market."

The priest looked disappointed, but then his expression lightened. "Then perhaps I might take a moment to speak with you, Sister."

He stepped forward toward her.

Sohja stood frozen in the doorway. An awkward silence filled the small gap between them.

"Sister," the Apotti leaned in to confide, "it is a matter of great importance." His voice whispered, but it felt far from comforting.

Sohja stirred and haltingly took a step back into the house. "Of course. Please come in and warm yourself by the fire."

The cleric brushed past her and she jumped back.

He strode toward the fire, but spied the cradle and changed his direction. Sohja shot out her hand as if to stop him, but pulled it back again just as quickly. He leaned over the sleeping infant and touched a gloved hand to his face.

"I marvel at the beauty of innocence," he said, facing Sohja once again.

Sohja moved to stand near the fire. "You must forgive me, Apotti, we are not used to entertaining those of your standing."

"Please, Sister, do not concern yourself with matters of conduct. I am a man of humble origins and now find myself with the most humble task of all—serving the gods."

Sohja could not meet his eyes and gestured to the priest to sit. The cleric took her mending chair and she her husband's. The chair felt cool and unfamiliar. She never sat in it. It was her käällis's. Her hands brushed along its smooth edge and then fluttered from her knees to her throat and back again. Finally, she clasped her hands in her lap.

"Would you care for tea, Apotti, to warm you after your walk?" She gave her guest a fleeting glance before fixing her attention upon the fire, feeling the priest looking at her.

"Something warming would be most appreciated." The priest smiled.



Rikkar could see the woman was nervous. In her brief glances he discerned uncertainty and apprehension lurking behind her eyes. She feared him, he realized, and he swelled with satisfaction. His task would be simpler than anticipated. It was always much easier to reap the rewards of fear than to sow them. But he was not averse to using a heavy hand this day to obtain what he wanted.

When it seemed she could delay the moment no longer, the woman handed him a steaming cup.

"I thank you, as the gods thank you."

"It is I who am thankful," she answered. "To have a messenger of the gods in our home is an honor."

Rikkar smiled at the rote compliment, and carefully sipped his scalding tea. "Yesterday, I sought conversation with your husband. Did he speak of it to you?"

"Yes, Apotti. I mean no," she mumbled. "I mean, yes, I know my käällis joined you in your chambers for an audience, but no, he did not speak to me of it when he returned home."

Rikkar digested her words. The man had not told his wife of the conversation. It suggested she did not know the truth of her husband's past.

The priest tested his theory.

"Your husband has unique talents which could well serve, not only the girkogilli, but also the gods."

"What need does the village have for a farmer or a reindeer herder? Or the gods, for that matter?"

The priest sat quietly with his suspicions confirmed. "Sister, your husband is much more than a boanda or badjeolmmoš. He is a Hunter."

"But so is every man in this village, Apotti."

"True. But your husband is not merely one of many. He is a Piijkij."

The woman's face clouded in confusion and doubt. "What do you mean?"

"Sister, your husband was born with a destiny to fulfill. He is the agent of the gods in the struggle against evil."

The woman shook her head. "No," she whispered. "He is my käällis. He is father to his son. He has chosen to become a boanda."

"It is one role, among many, he has played in his life so far. He may pretend otherwise, but your husband is first and foremost a Piiikij, a Bird of Prey. He is a Hunter, a slayer of Immortals."

The woman's eyes widened and seemed to look into the face of every fear she held in her heart. "No. That cannot be true," she whispered.

Rikkar let her denial crumble into silence. He could see she did not believe it herself.

"I know this must be difficult for you," he soothed. "But you must realize it is not I who asks your husband to fulfill his destiny. It is the gods. We each have our calling."

She raised her chin in an attempt at defiance. "And what would the gods have him do?"

"To take up his mantle once again," Rikkar said with passion. "To punish those who enslaved us when we were weak and in need of compassion. To avenge those who died in the wars to free us from the Jápmea."

Her eyes narrowed. "And why are you here today speaking to me?"

"I am here to enlist your voice on behalf of the gods. Speak to your husband. Help him understand that the gods are in need of his service."

"If you need my help, then my käällis must have refused to answer your call. I will not urge him to do what he does not desire to do." Her voice gained strength and clarity, but her hands shook and she spilled her tea.

"Sister, I have clearly upset you, which was not my intention." Rikkar rose to his feet, standing before her. She trembled. Rikkar reached down and took her empty cup from her hands.

“Let me fill this for you,” he said.

The Apotti stood in front of the fire. With his back to the woman he pulled a flask from his pocket. He continued to speak as he emptied a murky liquid into the woman’s cup. “I understand the hardship I am asking you to face. It would be natural for you to think of your child, who needs a father in the dark time, and yourself, in need of a husband and a protector.” He stirred her newly brimming cup and faced her. “I can only ask you to think of those who came before, who had the courage to stand up against cruelty and injustice and offer up their lives. I ask you to remember that those who are willing to make sacrifices are richly rewarded by the gods.”

He handed the woman her tea, but remained standing.

The woman looked down at the cup before looking up.

“I do not think of myself or my child. I think of my husband. If he has turned his back on the rewards of the gods, who am I to seek it for myself? As you said, Apotti, we each have our calling. Mine is to stand by my käällis and honor his decisions.”

Rikkar allowed himself a brief smile. “Sister, it is a noble destiny you have before you. I will not stand in its way. I only hope you can see that in coming here today, I answered the call of my fate to serve the gods in whatever they ask of me.”

Rikkar bowed to the seated woman. “We are both wiser today for knowing the truth that lies in our hearts.”

The woman remained watchful, but kept her own counsel.

“Sister, I thank you, as the gods thank you,” Rikkar said, and strode to the door.



Left alone again by the fire, Sohja drank deeply of her tea and let its warmth push away the cold fear filling her. Her heart pounded, and yet, for the first time since her käällis had appeared as a stranger on their doorstep, she felt sure of who she was.

Thank You For Reading This Excerpt From

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by Tina LeCount Myers.

The full book is currently available in hard cover, paperback, audiobook and e-book.

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