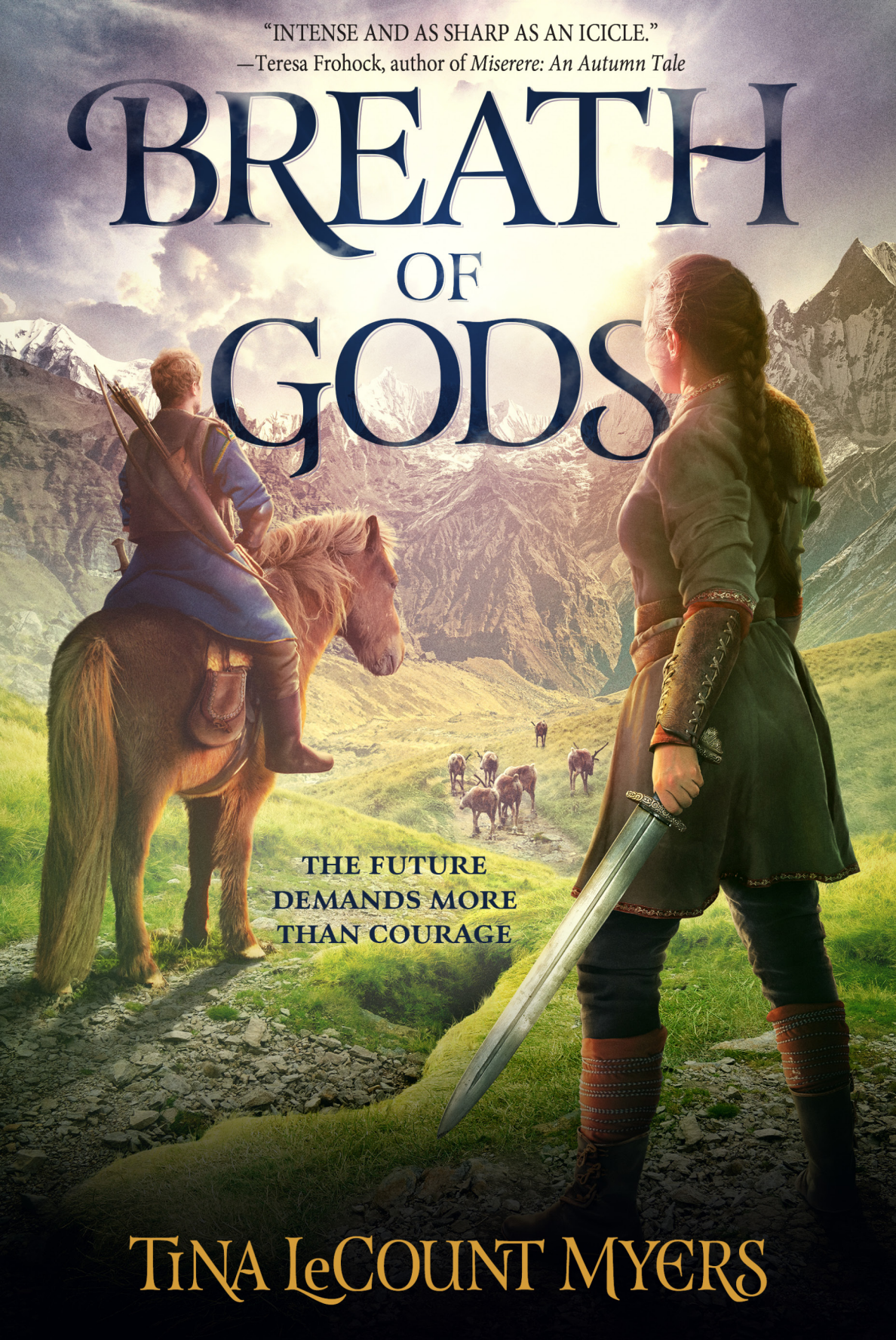


"INTENSE AND AS SHARP AS AN ICICLE."

—Teresa Frohock, author of *Miserere: An Autumn Tale*

BREATH OF GODS

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a man with reddish hair, wearing a blue tunic and brown boots, sits atop a brown horse. He is facing away from the viewer, looking towards a valley. In the background, a herd of animals, possibly ibex or goats, is grazing on a grassy slope. To the right, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a green tunic and dark leggings with red and white patterned bands, stands facing the same direction. She holds a long, straight sword in her right hand. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall lighting suggests a bright, sunny day.

THE FUTURE
DEMANDS MORE
THAN COURAGE

TINA LeCOUNT MYERS

BREATH OF GODS

BOOKS BY TINA LECOUNT MYERS

The Legacy of the Heavens

The Song of All

Dreams of the Dark Sky

THE LEGACY OF THE HEAVENS
BOOK THREE

BREATH OF GODS

TINA LeCOUNT MYERS

Night Shade Books
New York

Copyright © 2020 by Tina LeCount Myers

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without the express written consent of the publisher, except in the case of brief excerpts in critical reviews or articles. All inquiries should be addressed to Night Shade Books, 307 West 36th Street, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10018.

Night Shade books may be purchased in bulk at special discounts for sales promotion, corporate gifts, fund-raising, or educational purposes. Special editions can also be created to specifications. For details, contact the Special Sales Department, Night Shade Books, 307 West 36th Street, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10018 or info@skyhorsepublishing.com.

Night Shade Books® is a registered trademark of Skyhorse Publishing, Inc.®, a Delaware corporation.

Visit our website at www.nightshadebooks.com.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

HC ISBN: 978-1-949102-36-9

PB ISBN: 978-1-949102-35-2

Printed in the United States of America

For my father.

A cast of characters and three glossaries—one for English, one for Jápmemeahttun, and one for Southern Lands terms—and a map can be found in the back of this book.

We return to our Origin.

We return to begin anew.

One life to begin.

One life to change.

One life to end.

—Jápmemeahttun Song of Return

The last battle between humans and Immortals shattered the fragile peace of Davvieana. To the south, the human Olmmoš celebrated their victory. The Jápmemeahttun, called Immortals, defeated and decimated, lived on in the Northlands, veiled by the Song of All. Gifted by the gods with a life lived in two parts—the first as female and the second as male—the Jápmemeahttun had once restored harmony to their world when their numbers overwhelmed the land. After the war with the humans, the Immortals were left with more females than males. With their closed life-cycle, where one soul left the world as another gave birth, the Immortals would never again regain their numbers.

Dárja, the guide child of the legendary immortal hunter Irjan, had pledged to fight and die as an immortal warrior. She survived the last battle only to be taken prisoner by the humans. In the human prison, she encountered Marnej, Irjan's son. Raised by the Brethren of Hunters, Marnej had become an immortal hunter, like his father. But unlike Irjan, Marnej wanted to prove his loyalty to the Brethren. Marnej's curiosity about his father compelled him to seek out Dárja, the one person who could tell him the truth about Irjan. Lives shrouded in secrets and lies made Dárja and Marnej wary and resentful of each other. When the Brethren of Hunters paraded Dárja before the High Priest of the Order of Believers, a contest of wills between Believers and Hunters revealed that Dávgon, the Brethren leader, knew a dark secret: both Irjan and Marnej shared immortal blood with

their human blood. Betrayed by his Brethren leader, Marnej freed Dárja, and together they fought their way out of the Stronghold of Believers to seek refuge within the Song of All.

Bávvál, High Priest of the Order of Believers, sought to consolidate power among the human Olmmoš by eliminating the Brethren of Hunters. Those Hunters not killed by his soldiers were imprisoned, including Dávgon, the leader of the Brethren. However, a small band of Brethren survived the betrayal and swore an oath to avenge themselves against the High Priest. Managing to keep one step ahead of the High Priest's soldiers, the leader of the remaining Hunters, Válde, was forced to contend with the morale of his beleaguered men, while facing a challenge to his power from within.

Tasked with bringing an end to the Brethren of Hunters, Niilán, once a common foot soldier, had been raised, against his will, to the rank of commander in the High Priest's personal regiment. Niilán harbored no ill will against the Brethren, but he followed orders to bolster the ranks of Believers in far-flung garrisons while searching for the elusive Hunters.

Dárja and Marnej remained at loggerheads as they continued their trek north. Fueled by jealousy over Irjan and stymied by injury, the age-old prejudice between humans and Immortals flared. Marnej had been raised to hate his father as a traitor to the Brethren of Hunters, yet he secretly yearned for Irjan's love. Dárja, raised by Irjan among the Immortals, resented his loyalty to his biological son.

Dárja and Marnej arrived in the immortal homeland to learn that Irjan had been killed in the battle. Dárja blamed herself, believing her last argument with Irjan prompted him to take up arms. Marnej, abandoned by Dárja and left to his own devices, struggled to find his place among the Immortals.

Although grateful for Dárja's return and accepting of Marnej's presence, the community of Immortals struggled with their own survival. There were no longer enough males to share the burden of work, nor would there ever be. The females had to balance the pressure to give birth with the fear that the Song of All could no

longer protect them. Dárja, having at last found a friend and ally in Marnej, convinced him that they could protect the life bringers. Unsettled by his feelings for Dárja, Marnej reluctantly supported her plan, which could finally provide a role for them within the community and a path forward for the Immortals. With the cautious blessing of the Elders, Dárja and Marnej left with the life bringers, Okta and Úlla, carrying the last hope for the Immortals to give birth safely.

To the south, Niilán, along with what remained of his regiment of Believers, continued to track the Brethren, who had stolen horses, killed soldiers, and set fire to garrisons and temples. To avoid capture, the Brethren of Hunters split their forces, with the main group hiding above the Great Valley, while Válde rode south, drawing away the soldiers. Backtracking into the Great Valley, Válde came upon a mêlée, involving his men, soldiers, and two souls he never thought he would see again—Dárja and Marnej.

Grateful for Dárja's escort in the disorienting world outside the Song of All, the life bringer Úlla inadvertently revealed that Marnej had shared Dárja's long-held secret that she would never give birth. When reunited with Okta and Marnej at the birthplace, Dárja's rage erupted. However, chastened by Okta, Dárja's tirade ended with the arrival of soldiers in the Great Valley. Dárja left Úlla and Okta to continue the birthing, following Marnej out to confront the riders.

Dárja had little time to wonder why humans were battling each other before Marnej begged her to leave. She fought until a soldier plucked her out of the skirmish. Struggling to free herself, Dárja looked back to see Marnej fall upon the snow. Dárja and her would-be savior rode through the northern divide, where she escaped to hide out until the soldiers had passed. Making her way back to the valley, Dárja heard Úlla's scream, then watched from her hiding place as soldiers swarmed over Úlla and Okta's birthplace. With no weapon, there was nothing she could do. Dárja retreated back into the woods. Marnej had fallen and she had failed to protect Úlla. Dárja could never return to the homeland of the Immortals.

PROLOGUE

THERE IS NOTHING YOU or I can do for them,” Okta said, holding Úlla back. The ancient healer gently guided the nieddaš deeper into the snow-laden trees. “What is important is you prepare for the birth and ready yourself for the changes to come.”

Pointing to a gap in a dense thicket, he said, “Go. Hide now. Cover yourself and remain hidden. No matter what happens.”

The nieddaš shook her head as if lost in a nightmare.

“You must do this, Úlla,” said Okta. “The binna are tethered beyond those trees. When it is safe, ride to the Pohjola. Keep to the forests.”

Úlla hesitated, her eyes pleading.

The ancient healer enveloped her in an embrace. “Go,” he whispered. Releasing her, Okta felt a stab of pain and believed it was his heart breaking until it reached his core and he knew his end had come.

“Go,” he said again, gasping.

Úlla drew her dagger, her teeth chattering as she disappeared into the thicket.

Okta offered a silent prayer to the gods. He unsheathed his blade, turning to face the snow-covered valley. A fresh wave of pain racked his weakened body. He sagged, leaning on his sword.

“Okta,” Úlla called, her voice thin and wavering.

“Stay where you are, Úlla. Remember what I said.”

The healer straightened. He looked out across the expanse. In the fading light of the short day, he could see the advancing soldiers. Before the last battle with the Olmmoš, he had tried to honor the possibility of peace between their two kinds. *At what cost?*

Okta threw off his furs. He would not need them when he was done. He regarded the miehkki in his gnarled hand. The heft of the blade and the familiar feel of its hilt reassured him. As a young warrior, they had been together through many battles and together had slain more Olmmoš than he cared to remember. Today, it seemed a few more lives would be cut short by its honed edge. He took an unsteady step forward, then another.

Standing out in the open, Okta greeted the first of the mounted soldiers with his blade ready. He parried a blow meant to cleave him in half. He staggered back into a soft snowbank, then recovered to slice through the soldier's leg as he made another pass. The satisfying scream of the Olmmoš rider suffused the ancient healer with the thrill of his warrior days so long ago. The first soldier gave way to another and another, until Okta's senses reeled with the sights and sounds of men and horses intent on killing him. His body burned with pain and fury.

From deep inside him, the voice of agony welled up. He fought against it as he swung his blade. He could not stop it, just as he could not stop the Olmmoš soldiers who overran him. Okta begged the gods for more time. The voice within his soul was too powerful to be ignored. It consumed his consciousness.

I return to my Origin to share my life force.

My life ends so that a new life begins and another transforms.

I leave as I entered, and the whole is unchanged.

The chorus exploded from him. The chant rose to meet the sky, to meet the waiting gods. Okta fell to his knees, his arms outstretched. Úlla's screams echoed in his last moment of awareness before he succumbed to the light within him.

Part One

ONE LIFE TO BEGIN

CHAPTER ONE

WHATEVER THOUGHTS OF REWARD Niilán had entertained disappeared the moment he saw the half-naked Jápmea female and her bloody newborn huddled in the snow. He turned from her stricken face toward his beaming soldiers. Disgust welled within him. “I asked you to bring me the heads of the last of the Brethren of Hunters. Instead, you bring me a helpless female and her offspring!”

“Sir, she’s one of them Jápmea—an Immortal,” a soldier said, his accent thick and coarse.

Niilán turned his cold fury on the man. “I can see she is Jápmea. I also see that we are no closer to fulfilling the High Priest’s orders. One Immortal will not save our hides from a painful end. If we do not bring back the heads of the remaining Brethren to the Vijns, our lives will be forfeit.” Before any could protest, Niilán spoke decisively. “We will make camp here for the night and await the return of the others.” The cowed and sullen men moved uneasily. Finally, they shuffled off, their mutterings low and unsettling.

Niilán looked to the fissured rock that marked the northernmost boundary of the Great Valley. Above the snow-topped granite ridge, the waning moon promised to shine upon a clear, cold night. Beyond, the remaining Brethren of Hunters had

likely slipped out of his grasp. Frustration vied with apprehension as Niilán reviewed his actions. The thrill of the chase and the prospect of success had been as heady as a strong cup of juhka or a woman's lust-filled kiss. *I finally had a fresh trail to follow*, he thought bitterly. He had ridden the length of this valley as if chased by demons. His every sense had been intent on the backs of the mounted riders fleeing north. They had been within his reach. He had been sure they were the rogue Piijkij he had been tasked with hunting down. The fact that they dressed like soldiers had not swayed his conviction that these were the last of the Immortal Hunters, the last to challenge the power of the High Priest of the Order of Believers.

Staring northward, Niilán breathed in the cold. The air stung his lungs and cleared away false hopes. In hindsight, his decision to send his riders off to follow the fleeing Brethren had been ill-considered. He was sure those spurious soldiers were the men he sought. He also knew his men were no match for them. The best he could hope for was their safe return and a trail he might follow come daylight. Discouraged by an uncertain future, Niilán turned his attention to the snow-hushed valley. The last time he had been here, it had been a once-green field turned to mire by men and Jápmea, fighting and dying. While the battle seemed a lifetime ago, the moon had ridden across the sky for only six cycles. And yet his life had been changed more in that short time than in the preceding twenty-nine seasons of snow.

Once again, this valley proved to be the backdrop of death. Only this time it was not the Olmmoš fighting the Immortals. It was men cast against each other. Niilán believed he had seen the end of the fighting as an ordinary foot soldier and counted himself grateful to be alive. He had survived the last battle with the Immortals because of the skill of his Brethren commander. *They led us into battle, and then we turned on them*, he observed silently, regret foremost in his thoughts. Had these rogue Brethren simply been content to escape after their fortress had been sacked, they might have gone overlooked. But they had killed their own

people, burned Believers' temples, and infiltrated the ranks of soldiers to further discord. *Their desire for revenge will be their end*, Niilán thought, wishing he had never been tasked with finding the last of the Piijkij. He had only ever had respect for them. But respect mattered little to a soldier following orders.

Niilán railed against the gods who had cursed him and then castigated himself for believing he could be more than a failed farmer and worthless handmate. His wife had not been sorry to see the back of him leave for war. His children had neither heart nor need for him either. How could they, when hunger shadowed them daily? With gratitude, Niilán understood that the battle had freed him from their recriminations. His wife had taken a new man. His children claimed a new father. And Niilán had finally found a trade in which he was skilled. So skilled, that he had come to the notice of the High Priest. He would have preferred to have stayed as another faceless soldier. The gods, it seemed, had other plans for him. They had singled him out for unwelcomed recognition.

A piteous howl called Niilán back from a past he could not change. The Immortal female cowered at the feet of one of his soldiers, shielding her babe from his rough tugging. She screamed something he did not understand, trying to pull away. He had enough burdens to bear without a Jápmea in their midst. An expedient end to this problem would be to kill the female and her infant. Niilán could even reason it would be a mercy. *Better to kill them than let my men use her cruelly*. An argument he knew he would never act upon. Despite his failings as a man, husband, and father, he could not kill a woman or her child. Nor did she deserve the violence of his men. *Too long away from home and too full of their undeserved arrogance*. Most of his soldiers were really just boys. Few had fought in the last battle against the Jápmea. Beneath the sheltering snow lay the bones of countless dead, human and Immortal alike. *What did they know of it?* Still these soldiers felt owed retribution for how the Jápmea had treated their mother's mother's mother.

“Give me the creature,” demanded the bow-legged soldier, pulling on the yowling babe. “I will put an end to the spawn of your unnatural kind.”

“Leave it!” Niilán ordered, stepping forward to yank the determined soldier away from their prisoners.

Under his commander’s crushing grip, the young soldier relinquished his hold on the infant. Niilán pushed him toward the others, who stood watching. “Go make camp!” he growled, eyeing his men for further challenges to his authority.

“Osku,” Niilán called to the one man he could trust to do what was asked of him.

He would have gladly traded half these boys for a couple more experienced ones like Osku—a man who knew what it was like to fight to see another day. The weathered soldier also understood that the true danger did not rest with the Immortals, rather with the High Priest. In the absence of the Jápmea and the Brethren, the Vijns’s power had no limits.

He waved the man over. “Get my furs and cover her. Then dig her a snow-cave and stay with her.”

Osku nodded, then headed to where the horses were tethered to forage.

Niilán regarded the Jápmea. She sat upon the snow, shivering. She held the infant to her chest, trying unsuccessfully to comfort it. Her golden hair lay plastered to her face. Even in the night’s gloom, he felt her eyes watching him.

“You are safe,” he said. He then wondered if the Jápmea understood him. He had never actually spoken to an Immortal. He’d only fought them on the battlefield. Fighting required no words, only a blade, and a fist.

“Can you understand me?” he asked, as much out of curiosity as a need to communicate with her.

She nodded, saying nothing.

At Osku’s approach, Niilán turned away from her fixed stare. The seasoned soldier handed over the furs, keeping for himself the short, crude spade. Only when Osku set about digging a

snow-cave did Niilán step toward the Jápmea. She shrank back. He raised his hand, then held open the furs. "I'm going to cover you."

She said nothing and watched him with shadowed eyes.

Niilán gently laid the furs on her broad, muscled shoulders, then stepped back. She grasped the ends around herself and the infant, her focus on him.

He put out his open hand to her. "I will help you stand."

She stayed hunkered on the snow, trembling. Niilán let his hand drop. His patience with her had reached its limit. "When Osku finishes, he will guard your shelter." He turned toward the snowy sweep of the valley floor and the dead who waited.

"I will ride out into the valley with some men," he said to Osku, adding to himself, "Perhaps fortune granted us a Hunter among those we lost."



Away from the shelter of trees and the heat of smoky fires, not even the reassuring sounds of men and horses could shake Niilán of a growing sense of foreboding. There was something in the air. He swore he could smell death, even though he knew the wind and the cold kept rot at bay. The dark shapes scattered upon the white snow seemed to shift before his eyes as if the dead were about to rise and accuse him for their end. He had not wanted to be a commander. Just as he had not wanted to cut off the heads of their own scouts, men he had once trailed behind as a foot soldier. He had assuaged this guilt by telling himself their scouts were already dead at the hands of the Brethren. It was his commander who had ordered their heads be passed off as those of the escaped Hunters. Niilán could have told the man the deception would end badly. It had. For all those involved. Now Niilán was the commander, promoted against his will. Charged with delivering the heads of the true Brethren, he could not escape the feeling he too had made a fatal error.

CHAPTER TWO

A PIERCING CRY TORE THROUGH the recesses of Marnej's mind. He awoke facedown in the snow. His head throbbed. His body was numb, as if he was made of ice and stone. He heard another scream. This time an image shattered the fog, imprisoning his thoughts. *Dárja*. Marnej coughed, choking on snow. His parched throat tried to sound out her name. Slowly he opened his frost-encrusted eyes. His vision swam, mixing with his memories. He struggled to move. The slow coursing of blood began to burn in his veins as he painstakingly bent his fingers to claw through the snow.

He recalled the soldiers riding down from the hills. There'd been too many of them for him to fight. There'd been others among them as well. Faces he'd recognized but couldn't recall. Marnej rolled onto his side. The effort took all his concentration. He felt something solid behind him, something that prevented him from shifting onto his back. The steam of his breath clouded his hazy view of his surroundings. He tried to concentrate on the pale shimmer of light in the dark sky. *The moon*, he thought, as if naming the parts of the world in which he found himself would help him to make sense of it. Faint voices reached him. *Okta?* Was the ancient healer in this world? Perhaps Úlla had not given birth. *No, no, no. That's not possible.* The sky had been light when he'd last seen them, when he'd ridden

out into the valley to confront the riders—the Olmmoš soldiers.
How long have I been lying here?

Marnej pushed himself up to sit. The pain in his head went from throbbing to pounding. He clutched his temples in his hands, taking in the shadowed shapes around him. Scattered bodies. Horse carcasses. The reindeer he'd been riding. The binna's forked antlers looked like a tiny, desolate tree upon the snowy plain.

Fear gripped Marnej's heart. What if Dárja were among these corpses? He'd been fighting next to her. He twisted to see what lay behind him. It was a dead Olmmoš soldier. Panicked, he scrambled toward the next closest body. Then he remembered that Dárja had been carried off. By a soldier. *No. Not a soldier.* It was Válde, dressed as a soldier. *Why was he dressed as a soldier?* Válde was a Piiikij, one of the Brethren of Hunters, like Marnej had been once.

Only Marnej was no longer a Piiikij. The Brethren had betrayed him. He'd escaped, with Dárja's help. She'd brought him to the Pohjola, where the other Immortals lived. Where his father had lived. But Irjan was gone. He'd died in the battle between the Olmmoš and the Immortals. Dárja was also gone. He'd tried to help her, tried to protect her. In the end, he'd failed her.

The sounds of horses and men shifted Marnej's interest to the dark contours on the eastern border of the valley. In the glow of smoky fires, men milled about where he'd last seen Okta and Úlla. *At their Origin.* This thought ripped the breath from him. *Gods! No!* he prayed, even as he knew what must have happened. He had left Okta and Úlla at their Origin. They were the life bringers. Okta's end time had come and Úlla was about to give birth. He'd promised to keep them safe as Okta ascended and his spirit stream passed into Úlla and the unborn baby. He'd honored the Jápmea ritual like the Immortal Elders demanded. At first, he hadn't understood why they needed to give birth away from the others. Later, he'd convinced himself he didn't need to know. It was enough to help Dárja protect Úlla, so she could return with

her child to the Pohjola, to their kind. "Our kind," he whispered. Then a horrible realization washed over him. *The scream*. It had been Úlla. He was sure of it now, and he feared what it meant.

The pounding in Marnej's head grew louder. Before he could make further sense of what had come to pass, he became aware that the pounding came from somewhere other than his battered self. Mounted riders rode toward him. His anger surged. He longed to fight, to make right the injustices heaped upon him, the Immortals, and Dárja. He wrenched a sword from a dead soldier's frozen grip. He could barely hold the blade in his shaking hand. His strength had deserted him.

If I die here, I'll be of no help to anyone, he thought. Sick with defeat, Marnej used the last of his will to pull the two closest bodies on top of him. Their rigid weight crushed him into the snow's stinging chill. His breath caught, then released in short bursts. He made himself accept the feeling of death upon him. He heard the indistinct voices of men, then felt the snow shift as horses trod past him in a deliberate circle. Tensing, he prayed that men and beasts would lose interest in the dead. Then he heard the snow squeak as boots landed on its yielding surface.

"How are we supposed to know which are ours?" a low voice groused, close enough to where Marnej lay that he held his breath, convinced his beating heart would give him away.

"Sir, they are all wearing the yellow and brown of soldiers."

"Search them all to see if they carry any markers of a Piijkij," said a weary voice of authority. After a pause, the speaker added with the bite of annoyance, "A weapon. A talisman. Anything a Believers soldier would not carry."

Feet shuffled past Marnej's hidden body, then stopped.

"The dead don't need much," said someone so close to him he could smell the onion on the man's breath. A tremor ran through Marnej.

"When you are done searching the bodies, turn them on their stomachs," said the weary voice. "The ravens have already claimed these men's souls. They do not need their eyes."

The corpses on top of Marnej rolled away. He registered an onion-tinged grunt a moment before the stars suddenly came into view. He jumped up, startling the nearby soldier. The man fell back, hurling crude invectives into the night air.

Marnej didn't wait for him to stand for a fair fight. He raised his scavenged blade, intent on adding one more soldier to the dead in the valley. The sword slipped from his numb fingers, leaving him unarmed and facing a trio of soldiers. He briefly registered the shock on their faces, then turned to run, not wanting to know what they intended to do to a risen corpse.

"Run. Run. Run," Marnej hissed to his wobbly legs as they plunged deep into the snow. He ran like a man on the brink of falling forward, barely managing to stay upright. His lungs were near bursting with the effort it took to pump his arms and legs.

For the love of the gods! Why were the western hills so far away? They were like a horizon he would never reach. Only, in this case, he really might not live to see another day. If the soldiers caught him, there would be no mercy, no tomorrow. He would be dead upon the snow in this valley, like his father.

"You'll just have to wait," he shouted at the gods, then regretted his swagger when a wracking cough rose in his lungs. As he ran, he tried to dislodge the thick foulness blocking his throat. There was only a sustained wheeze. He hadn't the breath.

If I die, so be it, he thought, imagining his bones resting with those of his father. Perhaps then he would know the truth of the man.

While Marnej's steadfastness threatened to crumble, his body continued on, propelled by a will of its own. His eyes riveted on the trees ahead of him. *They were getting closer. Weren't they?* His vision blurred and for an instant he felt himself falling. The whole world around him seemed to be vibrating. *No. Humming*, some far-off part of his mind corrected. No sooner had he noticed this than every part of him resonated with the overlapping chorus of countless songs.

“Too many voices,” he protested weakly before the interwoven refrains within him carried away further objections.

From a distant place, Marnej looked down upon himself. He knelt on the snow. A small part of him screamed to get up and keep running. Every other sound around him called for him to listen and add his voice to theirs.

My voice. It was a dreamlike thought that swelled to urgency. His voice cracked as he whispered, “I am the vessel of a father’s soul.”

Then he felt the very center of his being come alive and the words flowed from his heart.

I am the vessel of a father’s soul.

I have journeyed into the realm of the dreams of the dark sky

And have traveled back in a blaze of light.

I enter into the world to meet my destiny,

Knowing that I have been touched by the gods.

When the last of his refrain entered the resplendent chorus around him, Marnej could no longer hold himself up. His forehead touched upon the snow. He waited for what would come next.

The mounted soldiers surged past him, their hooves churning the snow. Then they came to an abrupt halt. Voices cut the air with sharp rolling curses.

“Mother of demons! Where did he go?”

Marnej raised his head to meet the men encircling him.

“Eternal darkness, where he belongs.” A soldier spat upon the ground.

Marnej saw the anger in their shadowed faces. There was also something fearful in their quick, shifting movements.

“He’s here, hiding. A coward like all his kind!” said the rider, who passed by him.

Marnej lay back in the snow and laughed while the soldiers turned their horses in all directions. He had somehow left behind the world of men and entered the realm of the Immortals

through the chorus of the Song of All. He was beyond the reach of these soldiers. They could be on the same terrain and never touch one another. He was like the wind now. Marnej let himself sink into the beauty of the songs, listening to the Immortals who lived far from here and wondering if it had been the will of the gods or some inexplicable aspect of the Song of All that had made it possible.

As a boy, these voices had been a comfort against a harsh life among the Brethren of Hunters. As a young man, Marnej had soon figured out the voices made him different. Wanting to fit in with the other Piijkij, he had shut his mind to their soothing presence. It had been a needless sacrifice because nothing Marnej did mattered. Not when he was the son of Irjan—the most skilled of the Piijkij and a traitor to the Brethren. He, however, was never gladder to have Irjan's Immortal blood flowing in his veins than at this precise moment.

Marnej slowly stood. He rested his hands on his knees. The mounted horses continued to snort and rear. He wondered if they saw him or could hear his song. He couldn't hear theirs. Dárja had said everything had a song. *Except for the Olmmoš*, he reminded himself. The Song of All was a gift from the gods to protect the Jápmeahttun from the humans. Dárja had tried to explain things to him. She'd tried to help him live like an Immortal. And he had begun to make a life for himself among them.

The mounted rider closest to Marnej pulled hard on his reins. "We gain nothing by searching for the Jápmea. Our purpose is to find the Brethren." The soldier looked west once more, then turned to address his men. "Go back to the bodies. See if any are Piijkij."

With that command, they spurred their horses back the way they'd come. Marnej watched them retreat. On the valley's eastern edge, the fires burned. The sound of men, laughing and singing, caught the wind. Marnej stood frozen, chilled by wrongs he would never be able to right. Finally, he turned and reprised his journey west.

CHAPTER THREE

DÁRJA LONGED TO SINK to her knees in the snow. She wanted the cold to drain the life from her. Instead, her feet kept trudging on through the drifts. Her arms continued to push aside the branches in her way. In her way to what? To where? She didn't know. She looked up at the clear night sky, her eyes avoiding the North Star. It provided no guidance. It served only to remind her that she couldn't go home. Not after the promises she'd made to the Elders. To Kalek. Not when Marnej and Úlla lay dead upon the valley floor. The sound of Úlla's screams haunted her.

But it was the stillness, following the screams, that drove Dárja. Each step she took was out of an urgency to atone. She'd been so certain she could protect the nieddaš who traveled to their Origins. Now she wondered if her actions had been motivated by a desire to protect her friends. Or if this foray had been some grand gesture to prove that, though she would never give birth to become almai, she was Jápmemeahttun.

When she'd first learned that Irjan's attempt to save Marnej had robbed her of the life force she needed to mature, she'd been heartbroken. Irjan had been her biebmoeadni—her guide mother. He'd raised her among the Jápmemeahttun. And when she'd asked him, he'd trained her to fight like a Taistelijan. *No, not*

*a warrior. A Piijki—*a Hunter. When she'd finally confronted him, demanding the truth, his remorseful confession had confirmed her greatest fear. He'd always loved his son, Marnej, more than her.

The day she'd run away to fight in the battle against the Olmmoš, she'd resigned herself to her fate. She'd die upon the battlefield like a true warrior, and Irjan would suffer the loss. Dárja hadn't expected the gods would spare her. She'd been taken prisoner by the Olmmoš, then escaped, making it back to the Pohjola and to her kind. Her freedom, however, had not been the work of the gods. That had been Marnej. He was gone now. So was Irjan. And she was the one left to suffer their loss.

With plodding steps, Dárja began to cross the clearing ahead of her. Her feet were numb with cold. Her one boot was sodden from crossing a still-running stream. She heard the accusatory screech of an owl, coming from the trees ahead of her. In the treetops, branches rustled and shadows appeared to come alive for a moment. Then everything was quiet again. With each successive footfall, the silence grew more oppressive. A desperate need to seek out the Song of All arose within Dárja. She longed to hear the voices and feel the solace of being a part of something bigger than herself. But she didn't dare. She couldn't bear to hear the songs of Birtá, Tuá, Ravna, and Kalek. To stave off the tears that threatened to rise, she began to hum.

Step after step, the words came out of her in a halting mutter as if against her will.

Daughter of the gods.

Sister among the Jápmemeahttun.

You start your life at your Origin, with sadness and joy as your companions.

You braved dangers and met enemies and can see the truth of friendship.

Go into the world to meet your destiny, knowing that the stars watch over you.

Dárja was so engrossed in the measure of her song that she hardly noticed she once again wound her way through the trees. The branches buffeted her. She staggered first in one direction and then the other. She obsessed upon the falsehood inherent in her song. She was no longer a sister among her kind. The Elder had said she wasn't truly Jápmeahttun. He'd said it in a way that told her he'd known this all along.

Dárja lurched to one side. Her arm pulled away from her body. Stumbling through sharp branches, she fell forward into the snow. A pressing weight landed upon her. Her first thought was she'd been attacked by a wolf, but she felt no teeth, no tearing of her skin. She struggled, kicking and screaming into the snow. She twisted around to see a body straddling her. A hand shot forward to cover her mouth.

"You are stomping around like a wounded bear," an Olmmoš voice hissed at her. "There are soldiers out there. Do you understand?"

Dárja shook her head, trying to clear her eyes from the snow.

"Be quiet, or you will get us killed." The man's whisper was more a snarl. His hand drew away from her mouth.

Dárja took a gasping breath. The shadowed face, hovering above her, came into focus. "I'm prepared to die," she scowled back at the Olmmoš soldier. He was the one who had pulled her out of the skirmish in the valley. She was about to comment that it seemed all he knew how to do was yank her about, then he brandished a knife. Its edge caught the moonlight, filtering down through the trees.

"I saved you once. Do not make me regret it."

"Why's an Olmmoš soldier hiding from his brothers-in-arms?"

"Why's a Jápmea saving the life of a Piijkij?"

"Marnej's not a Hunter."

The Olmmoš snorted. "No, he's one of you and no more fortunate for it." The man rolled off her. Awash in moonlight now, Dárja could see his large, wide-set Olmmoš eyes studying her.

His lips pressed into a grim line. His patchy beard did not conceal his disgust.

"Why did you pull me out of the fight?" she challenged, failing to find a reason for why an Olmmoš soldier would try to save her.

The man continued to stare at her. "You did not deserve to die out there," he said finally.

Dárja heard the judgment behind his words. Though she might never be a warrior in body, she was one in her soul, and no one could take that from her. "I am a Taistelijan. I fought in the battle. I killed as many of your kind as I could, just as I did today. I deserved to be there." She scrambled to her feet. Pushing against the Olmmoš, she lunged to free herself from the dense underbrush.

Unable to break her captor's grip, he pinned her to him. "Warrior among your kind or not, your bravery will be wasted if you die here because you were too proud to hear the truth."

Dárja's response was muffled by the man's hand clamped to her mouth. "Riders."

The Olmmoš dragged her down into a crouch. Dárja didn't resist. She had no weapon to defend herself if it came to a fight.

In the cold night air, the crack of snapping branches carried.

"He must've come this way," said a disgruntled voice.

"We're going to freeze, wandering around out here," complained another.

Through the gaps in the frozen thicket, the two riders came into view. Dárja's heart skipped a beat. If the soldiers continued on their current path, they would see her footfalls. Those tracks would lead the riders right to them.

"Gods be cursed," the man next to her muttered.

The foremost rider slowed. Leaning to one side of his saddle, he examined the area around him.

"Let's go back to where the tracks ended," suggested the soldier at the rear.

"I want to go just a little farther," said the lead, surveying the ground on the other side.

"I want to go back to the valley," said the soldier at the rear.

"And I want to be in my wife's bed. But I'm stuck here with you," grumbled the first.

The low grouching of his compatriot was cut short by the leader. "There! Footfalls."

He kicked his horse into a trot.

"It could be a trap," his friend warned.

The Olmmoš beside Dárja sprang up. "I am not waiting to see if they find their way here," he hissed, tugging her forward. Dárja dug in her heels.

He dropped her hand. "Stay here if you like. Be discovered by those two." He nodded his head in the direction of the approaching soldiers. "If you are as wise, you will not be so sow-headed that you turn down an opportunity to escape when it is offered."

He turned his back on her and began to wend his way through the opposite side of the snowy copse.

Dárja stood and took a few reluctant steps toward him. "Why are you willing to help me?"

"Because the enemy of my enemy is supposedly my friend," the man said, his whisper strained as he pushed his way forward.

"Who's your enemy?"

"You will have to follow me to find out."

Lacking a weapon to defend herself, Dárja followed, puzzled by this Olmmoš. Branches slapped her face and tore at her furs and breeches. Emerging from the thicket, she saw the Olmmoš had already untied a horse from its lead.

"Hurry," he encouraged. "Get on the horse!" He held his hand out to her.

From beyond the thicket, the voices of the soldiers accosted them.

"The tracks stop here."

"Wait for me."

Dárja took his hand. Using his bent knee, she vaulted onto the shaggy horse. The Olmmoš grabbed the saddle and pulled himself up. Dárja set the animal in motion. The Olmmoš pressed against her in the tight saddle. She couldn't move away without ending up on the horse's withers. She'd had enough of that when riding with Marnej. The thought of him, and what they'd gone through to escape north, made her breath catch. So often, she'd reminded him that without her he never would've escaped the treachery of his people. In truth, were it not for him, she never would've been reunited with those she loved.

"Give me the reins," the Olmmoš said into her ear, breaking through her sorrow.

Dárja felt the momentary pressure of his hands upon hers, then did as he asked. To steady herself, she gripped the front of the saddle. The man leaned in closer, pushing her up against the horse's neck. The beast's muscles rippled as the man urged it to go faster.

They broke through the thinning forest into a gallop. Dárja closed her eyes against the biting wind that brought tears. There were other reasons for those tears as well. She and Marnej had managed to overcome their mutual resentment. She'd finally let herself share her feelings for him, feelings that had made her unbearably weak and vulnerable. Dárja squeezed her eyes tight in a futile attempt to stop the images of Marnej from assailing her. His smile. The obstinate set of his chin. The way he reminded her of Irjan. The anguish in his eyes when she'd accused him of betraying her secret to Úlla.

Úlla had looked so sincere when she'd said she was sorry Dárja would never return to her Origin. Never give birth. Never go through transition. It had been maddening to hear sympathy from someone who had always despised her. In that moment, Dárja's rage had let her imagine Marnej, holding Úlla in his arms, sharing with her Dárja's darkest fear. The memory of her rage filled her with shame—a shame made more excruciating by the recollection of Marnej's last stand and Úlla's last scream.

The horse veered sharply under Dárja, bringing her back to the present. She managed to stay upright by virtue of the Olmmoš's encircling arms. Suddenly, his chest peeled away from her, and though she couldn't see him, she knew his gaze trailed behind them.

"You may have a chance to die today, after all," he said into her ear.

"I'm not afraid," she shouted, the wind tearing her words from her mouth.

An arrow sailed past them. Then another.

"How close are they?" Dárja called, her training winning out over the flutter of alarm.

"Close enough," the man grunted, snapping the reins again.

An arrow grazed Dárja's knee. Its sharpened point cut through fabric and into her skin. She grimaced. The horse veered again, and the man behind her was abruptly gone. Dárja fought against her instinct to look back. She gripped the horse harder with her legs. She leaned forward to grasp the dangling reins. As she sat up, the horse responded with a sharp, arcing turn back the way they'd come. Dárja bit back a curse, wishing she were on a binna, an animal she knew how to control.

Ahead, the Olmmoš who'd been riding with her staggered to his feet. He drew his blade. From the south, two mounted soldiers rode at him, one at full gallop, the other trailing with an arrow nocked to his bow. This was her moment to escape. She owed the man nothing. *I was ready to die fighting*, she told herself, watching the arrow fly wide of her into a snowdrift.

"Gods' curses," she swore, knowing she could not leave the Olmmoš to fight alone. She snapped the reins. Her only weapon was the speed of the beast beneath her. She kicked her mount's sides, urging the horse to run hard at the two mounted soldiers. "Ride with the wind," she said. "Ride with all your courage." The last part had been for her resolve. Dárja kept her eye on the soldier with the bow. He aimed for her Olmmoš. *Darkness take him!* Her fury exploded as a fearsome howl into the night.

Momentarily unsettled, the archer dropped his bow. Dárja rode directly at him. He sat stunned as if he didn't believe what he saw. Dárja launched herself at him. The two of them fell ass-over-head into the snow. The bow shattered as both bodies landed on it. Blind rage brought Dárja to her feet immediately. She kicked the soldier in the gut and then in the ribs. A frisson of icy pain shot through her frozen legs. Still she kept on kicking the downed soldier. The man, tangled in his quiver and bowstring, cried out, covering his head. Dárja saw the bone-handled niibi at his waist. She grabbed the knife and drove the blade through the Olmmoš's back with the surety of vengeance. Again and again.

Dárja jumped to her feet and spun in the direction of *her soldier*—because this was how she thought of him now. Her soldier fought the mounted rider with a practiced skill she recognized. She watched, bewildered why the humans were fighting amongst themselves. Less than a full turn of the heavens had passed since she'd been a prisoner of the Olmmoš. They had appeared united in their victory over the Jápmemeahttun. *The world can't have changed this much in such a short time.*

Dárja shook herself from her stupor in time to see the mounted soldier land a hit. Without thinking, she sprang into a run. The two Olmmoš blades clanged together like a tolling bell. The mounted soldier began to press his advantage. Dárja's anger gave way to strategy. She couldn't enter the fight with only a knife in her hand. Either of the men's swords could cut her in two before she could be effective.

Dárja stopped running. She planted herself and hurled the knife at the largest target—the horse. She despised the idea of hurting the beast who had no will in the matter, but it was the only practical option. Her throw went high, missing its mark and surprising the rider. Distracted, he overswung. Suddenly unbalanced, her Olmmoš easily pulled the soldier to the ground.

The two men grappled in the snow, grunting with the effort it took to move in their furs and leather armor. Dárja ran forward, then heard the crack of bone upon bone, followed by a sharp

snap, and then the quiet of the forest returned. Her Olmmoš stared at her, his shoulders heaving. He slowly crumpled.

A hush as soft as falling snow enveloped Dárja. Her vision closed upon a single point. She swayed, feeling light enough to float away on the wind. Then a pounding in her chest pulled her back from the comforting darkness. Her mind reeled as she relived the last few moments. She looked back to where she'd left the corpse of the Olmmoš archer. She felt nothing. No anger. No regret. Then she turned to where her Olmmoš had fallen. The notion of him being hers seemed laughable, yet something compelled her forward, at first haltingly, then as fast as her spent body would let her go.

Reaching him, she knelt by his side. Blood oozed from more than one wound on his body and his nose was broken. If she left him here, he would die, if not from the wounds, then from the cold. She moved him onto his back, thinking she could pull him to the sheltering trees, then realized that in her exhausted state she might as well try to move a mountain as to move his limp body. She looked up, searching for the horse she'd abandoned, hoping it would be close at hand.

While their horse was nowhere in sight, the soldiers' horses stood together, head to head, as if they sought the reassurance of closeness. Dárja stood up on shaking legs. She slowly walked toward the animals, as much out of her need to preserve her strength as out of a desire to not startle the pair. Nearing, she held out her hand.

"Come. We are one," she murmured soothingly. "I'll give you my song if you give me yours."

One horse snorted and shook its mane. The other stepped back. Dárja cautiously leaned down to take hold of the closest reins.

"I've met your kind before," she said with a fondness for this animal that hadn't existed before her escape north with Marnej. Before that journey, she'd thought of these animals with a disdainful pity. To the Jápmemeahttun, horses had no will of their

own. She knew better now. She'd learned these creatures had a generous and kind spirit.

Slowly she came close enough to the animal to brush its shaggy coat with her hand.

"The Olmmoš do not deserve you," she said, then added with heartfelt understanding, "I know of your longing to be with your herd and to run free."

A weak groan caught Dárja's attention. She glanced back. Her soldier had rolled to his side, his face half hidden in the snow. She hadn't asked for his help, and she hadn't asked for this fight.

Why do they always demand something of us? If not our death, then our aid.