

"MASTERFULLY CRAFTED AND BRUTALLY
COMPELLING." —ANTHONY RYAN

THE SHADOW OF THE GODS

JOHN
GWYNNE

THE SHADOW OF THE GODS

BOOK ONE OF
THE BLOODSWORN TRILOGY

JOHN
GWYNNE



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Orbit

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10104

orbitbooks.net

First Edition: May 2021

Simultaneously published in Great Britain by Orbit

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020947123

ISBNs: 978-0-316-53988-3 (trade paperback), 978-0-316-53987-6 (ebook)

E3-20210325-JV-NF-ORI

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For Caroline,

My love,

My heart,

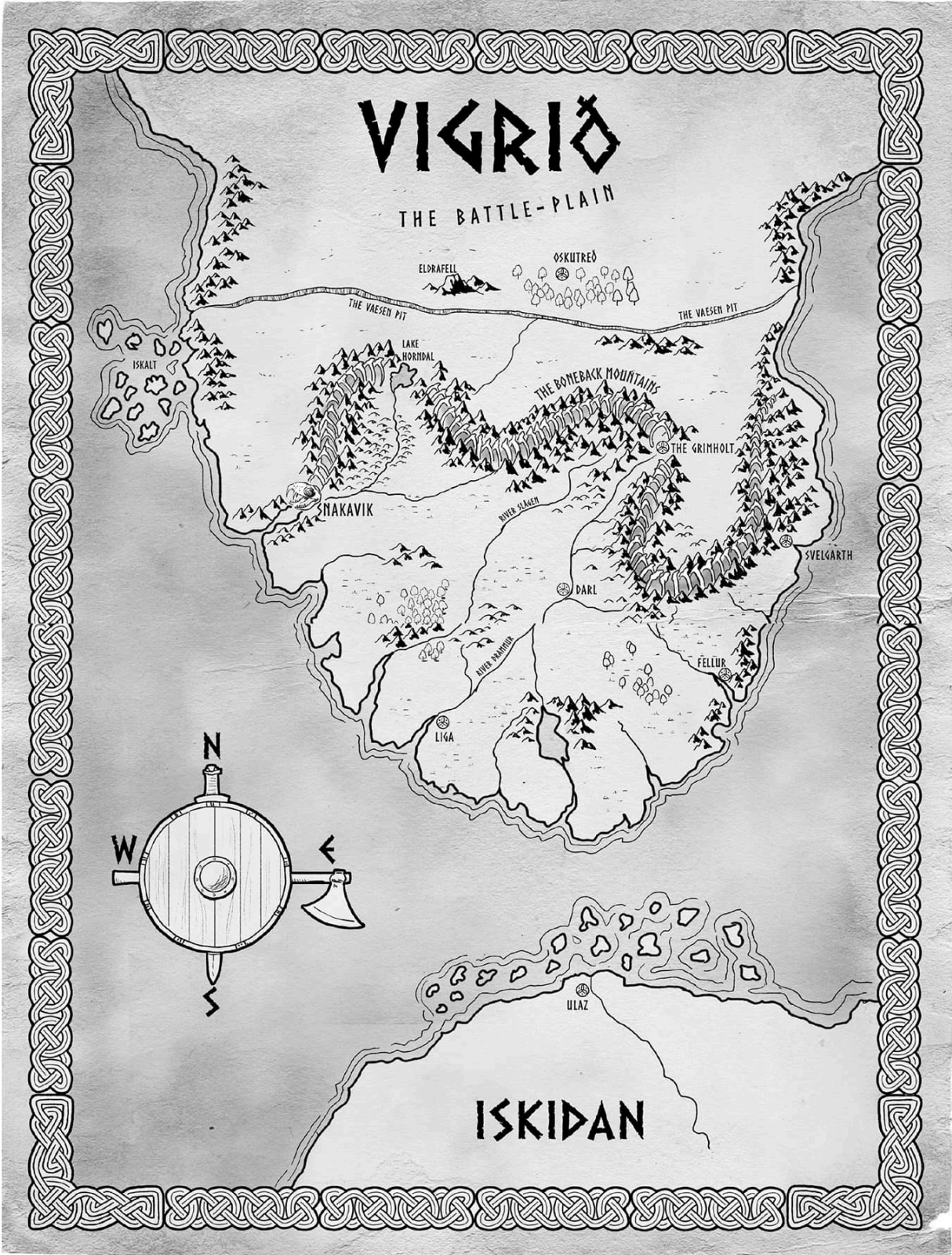
My everything.

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*There comes the shadow-dark dragon flying,
The gleaming serpent, up from Dark-of-Moon Hills;
He flies over the plain, and in his pinions
he carries corpses.*

The Voluspa

CHAPTER ONE

ORKA

The year 297 of Friðaröld, The Age of Peace

“Death is a part of life,” Orka whispered into her son’s ear.

Even though Breca’s arm was drawn back, the ash-spear gripped tight in his small, white-knuckled fist and the spearhead aimed at the reindeer in front of them, she could see the hesitation in his eyes, in the set of his jaw.

He is too gentle for this world of pain, Orka thought. She opened her mouth to scold him, but a hand touched her arm, a huge hand where Breca’s was small, rough-skinned where Breca’s was smooth.

“Wait,” Thorkel breathed through his braided beard, a cold-misting of breath. He stood to her left, solid and huge as a boulder.

Muscles bunched in Orka’s jaw, hard words already in her throat.

Hard words are needed for this hard world.

But she held her tongue.

Spring sunlight dappled the ground through soft-swaying branches, reflecting brightly from patches of rimed snow, winter’s last hoar-frost kiss on this high mountain woodland. A dozen reindeer stood grazing in a glade, a thick-antlered bull watching over the herd of cows and calves as they chewed and scratched moss and lichen from trunks and boulders.

A shift in Breca’s eyes, an indrawn breath that he held, followed by a burst of explosive movement; his hips twisting, his arm moving. The spear left his fist: a hiss as sharp iron sliced through air. A flush of pride in Orka’s

chest. It was well thrown. As soon as the spear had left Breca's grip she knew it would hit its mark.

In the same heartbeat that Breca loosed his spear, the reindeer he had chosen looked up from the trunk it had been scraping lichen from. Its ears twitched and it leaped forwards, the herd around it breaking into motion, bounding and swerving around trees. Breca's spear slammed into the trunk, the shaft quivering. A moment later there was a crashing from the east, the sound of branches cracking, and a form burst from the undergrowth, huge, slate-furred and long-clawed, exploding into the glade. The reindeer fled in all directions as the beast loped among them, oblivious to all around it. Blood pulsed from a swarm of wounds across its body, long teeth slick, its red tongue lolling, and then it was gone, disappearing into the forest gloom.

"What... was that?" Breca hissed, looking up at his mother and father, wide eyes shifting from Orka to Thorkel.

"A fell-wolf," Thorkel grunted as he broke into motion, the stealth of the hunt forgotten. He pushed through undergrowth into the glade, a thick-shafted spear in one fist, branches snapping, Orka and Breca following. Thorkel dropped to one knee, tugged a glove off with his teeth and touched his fingertips to droplets of the wolf's blood, brushing them across the tip of his tongue. He spat, rose and followed the trail of wolf-blood to the edge of the glade, then stood there peering into the murk.

Breca walked up to his spear, the blade half-sunk into a pine tree, and tried to pull it free. His body strained, but the spear didn't move. He looked up at Orka, grey-green eyes in a pale, muddied face, a straight nose and strong jaw framed with crow-black hair, so much like his father, and the opposite of her. Apart from his eyes. He had Orka's eyes.

"I missed," he said, his shoulders slumping.

Orka gripped the shaft in her gloved hand and tugged the spear free.

"Yes," she said as she handed Breca his spear, half-an-arm shorter than hers and Thorkel's.

"It was not your fault," Thorkel said from the glade's edge. He was still staring into the gloom, a thick braid of black, grey-streaked hair poking from

beneath his woollen nálbinding cap, his nose twitching. “The fell-wolf startled them.”

“Why didn’t it kill any of those reindeer?” Breca asked as he took his short spear back from Orka.

Thorkel lifted his hand, showing bloodied fingertips. “It was wounded, not thinking about its supper.”

“What did that to a fell-wolf?” Breca asked.

A silence.

Orka strode to the opposite end of the glade, her spear ready as she regarded the dark hole in the undergrowth from where the wolf had emerged. She paused, cocked her head. A faint sound, drifting through the woodland like mist.

Screams.

Breca joined her. He gripped his spear with both hands and pointed into the darkness.

“Thorkel,” Orka grunted, twisting to look over her shoulder at her husband. He was still staring after the wounded wolf. With a last, lingering look and shake of his fur-draped shoulders he turned and strode towards her.

More screams, faint and distant.

Orka shared a look with Thorkel.

“Asgrim’s steading lies that way,” she said.

“Harek,” Breca said, referring to Asgrim’s son. Breca had played with him on the beach at Fellur, on the occasions when Orka and Thorkel had visited the village to trade for provisions.

Another scream, faint and ethereal through the trees.

“Best we take a look,” Thorkel muttered.

“Heya,” Orka grunted her agreement.

Their breath misted about them in clouds as they worked their way through the pinewoods, the ground thick and soft with needles. It was spring, signs of new life in the world below, but winter still clung to these wooded hills like a hunched old warrior refusing to let go of his past. They

walked in file, Orka leading, her eyes constantly shifting between the wolf-carved path they were following and the deep shadows around them. Old, ice-crusting snow crunched underfoot as trees opened up and they stepped on to a ridge, steep cliffs falling away sharply to the west, ragged strips of cloud drifting across the open sky below them. Orka glanced down and saw reed-thin columns of hearth fire smoke rising from Fellur, far below. The fishing village sat nestled on the eastern edge of a deep, blue-black fjord, the calm waters shimmering in the pale sun. Gulls swirled and called.

“Orka,” Thorkel said and she stopped, turned.

Thorkel was unstoppering a leather water bottle and handing it to Breca, who despite the chill was flushed and sweating.

“His legs aren’t as long as yours,” Thorkel smiled through his beard, the scar from cheek to jaw giving his mouth a twist.

Orka looked back up the trail they were following and listened. She had heard no more screams for a while now, so she nodded to Thorkel and reached for her own water bottle.

They sat on a boulder for a few moments, looking out over the land of green and blue, like gods upon the crest of the world. To the south the fjord beyond Fellur spilled into the sea, a ragged coastline curling west and then south, ribbed and scarred with deep fjords and inlets. Iron-grey clouds bunched over the sea, glowing with the threat of snow. Far to the north a green-sloped, snow-topped mountain range coiled across the land, filling the horizon from east to west. Here and there a towering cliff face gleamed, the old-bone roots of the mountain from this distance just a flash of grey.

“Tell me of the serpent Snaka again,” Breca said as they all stared at the mountains.

Orka said nothing, eyes fixed on the undulating peaks.

“If I were to tell that saga-tale, little one, your nose and fingers would freeze, and when you stood to walk away your toes would snap like ice,” Thorkel said.

Breca looked at him with his grey-green eyes.

“Ach, you know I cannot say no to that look,” Thorkel huffed, breath

misting. “All right, then, the short telling.” He tugged off the nǫlbinding cap on his head and scratched his scalp. “All that you can see before you is Vigrið, the Battle-Plain. The land of shattered realms. Each steppe of land between the sea and those mountains, and a hundred leagues beyond them: that is where the gods fought, and died, and Snaka was the father of them all; some say the greatest of them.”

“Certainly the biggest,” Breca said, voice and eyes round and earnest.

“Am I telling this tale, or you?” Thorkel said, a dark eyebrow rising.

“You, Father,” Breca said, dipping his head.

Thorkel grunted. “Snaka was of course the biggest. He was the oldest, the father of the gods; Eldest, they called him, and he had grown monstrous huge, which you would, too, if you had eaten your fill each day since the world was born. But his children were not to be sniffed at, either. Eagle, Bear, Wolf, Dragon, a host of others. Kin fought kin, and Snaka was slain by his children, and he fell. In his death the world was shattered, whole realms crushed, heaved into the air, the seas rushing in. Those mountains are all that is left of him, his bones now covered with the earth that he ruptured.”

Breca whistled through his teeth and shook his head. “It must have been a sight to see.”

“Heya, lad, it must have been. When gods go to war, it is no small thing. The world was broken in their ruin.”

“Heya,” Orka agreed. “And in Snaka’s fall the vaesen pit was opened, and all those creatures of tooth and claw and power that dwelled in the world below were released into our land of sky and sea.” From their vantage point the world looked pure and unspoiled, a beautiful, untamed tapestry spread across the landscape in gold and green and blue.

But Orka knew the truth was a blood-soaked saga.

She looked to her right and saw on the ground the droplets of blood from the injured wolf. In her mind she saw those droplets spreading, growing into pools, more blood spraying, ghostly bodies falling, hacked and broken, voices screaming...

This is a world of blood. Of tooth and claw and sharp iron. Of short lives