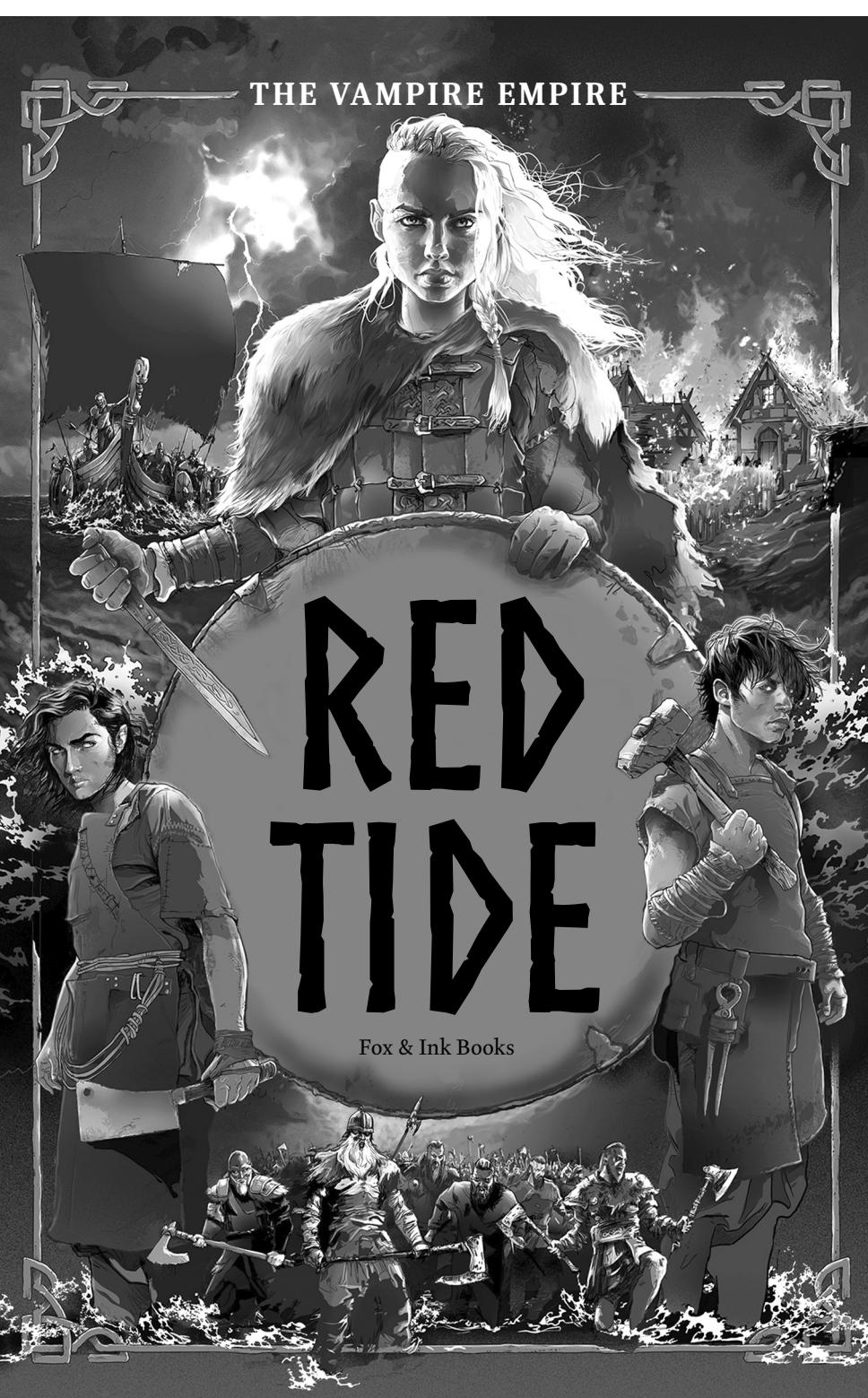
THE VAMPIRE EMPIRE



Fox & Ink Books

For Scarlett,
Daughter. Sister. Warrior.
X

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CHAPTER ONE
HILDE

The horse tossed its head, eyes rolling as the breeze whipped its mane. Hilde had to wonder whether it was aware of its imminent fate. A dozen Norse men and women were gathered on the clifftop, including Hilde's mother, Jarl Frida. The fur of the chieftain's wolfskin cloak rippled as the wind raced across it, the raised hood shrouding her face in shadow. She might have been carved from granite, so motionless was she beside her daughter. Mikko the Silent, Jarl Frida's huscarl, stood to one side of the stallion, reins clenched tight in the bodyguard's fist, while the mysterious *gothi* waited on the horse's other flank. The peculiar holy man held his sacrificial sword in one hand, a wooden bowl in the other, his chalk-daubed face grim and emotionless. Gripping the cliff edge behind them loomed the God Tree, a rowan over twenty feet tall, defying gravity and the elements. The collective gaze of the Norsemen was fixed upon the eastern horizon, the first sliver of dawn's autumn light threatening to rise from the sea.

Hilde's eyes returned to the ceremonial blade in the gothi's bone-white hand, flitting from the weapon to the horse's throat. Torch flames were reflected across the surface of the polished metal, their dance mesmeric to Hilde. She knew what was coming, was prepared for the horse's final moment. There was no greater *blót* offering to the gods than the life

of such a powerful beast. Well, not these days, anyway. It wasn't so long ago that men and women would give their lives – often willingly – for the blessing of their village. That tradition had all but died out, certainly on Unst, as the Norsemen and the islanders found a way to live in harmony (or something approaching it). Not all those who called the Hjaltland Isles home enjoyed such kinship. Like the Orkneyar archipelago to the south, the Hjaltlands formed part of the Kingdom of Norðvegr, right on the edge of King Harald Fairhair's realm. The Hjaltlands, once home to the dwindling race of Picts, had been colonised; these islands belonged to the Vikings now. On Unst, however, Jarl Frida had proved a more benign chieftain, allowing her remaining Pictish subjects to worship the deity of their own choosing, and there was none so popular as the Christian god.

With that thought in mind, Hilde glanced back to the village far below. Torches lined the shore and jetties, burning away the chill touch of sea mist that had encircled the island. Unst, of all the Hjaltland Isles, was embracing its shared festivities as Norsemen and Christians jointly prepared for the equinox. Visitors had arrived in the last few days, traders come to market, neighbouring islanders seeking a moment of Jarl Frida's time. Those Norse men and women who had once been Vikings had turned their backs on their warring past, swapping sword and shield for fishing net and plough. And so, the island of Unst enjoyed a relative peace.

Hilde felt a pair of small, taloned feet grip her shoulder, firm but gentle.

"Eyes front," croaked Siv into her ear, the old raven urging

her charge to pay attention.

Hilde turned in time to witness the sun break the waves and the gothi's silver seax pass across the horse's throat. Mikko's muscles bunched as he held the struggling stallion, blood erupting from the fatal wound, to be gathered in the bowl by the holy man. Hilde watched on as the horse's struggles slowed, its legs buckling as Mikko eased the beast to the stony ground of the clifftop. Then the gothi proceeded around the small group of Norsemen, bowl in the crook of his arm. He dipped a spindly twig into the bloody soup, flicking the steaming contents into the faces of the participants, prayers accompanying each blessing.

In truth, Hilde barely listened to the gothi. Her attention kept wandering to the village below, where other young'uns had gathered on the beach. A monk from the mainland had arrived on Unst the previous day and was delivering dawn blessings of his own to the locals. She could see him now, his robes hitched up to his knees as he stood in the sluicing tide, anointing child and adult alike with sea water. He couldn't have been much older than Hilde, but that hadn't stopped him from becoming an elder in the eyes of his Christian god. *Baptism*, the Picts were calling it, and to Hilde it was fascinating. And decidedly less bloody.

Another squeeze upon her shoulder from Siv, and Hilde's head swivelled back to the front. Warm blood spattered her face as the gothi administered his blessing upon her with a flick of the wrist. The holy man looked her up and down, gaze lingering on her tummy, the chalk mask cracking along his brow. Feeling suddenly vulnerable, Hilde drew her cloak

about herself, obscuring her torso from the gothi. She looked to her mother, only to find Jarl Frida staring back with a vacant expression. Blood streaked down the chieftain's spattered face, gathering around her mouth. Her lips parted, tongue flicking out to taste the coppery ichor.

Hilde shivered.

Jarl Frida strode up to the God Tree. With the wolfskin hood still shielding her face from the elements, she dipped her forehead and rested it against the rough surface. The fingertips of her right hand traced over the various likenesses of the gods that were carved into the rowan's surface. Her palm eventually settled upon the chest of Odin, the All-father's mouth fixed in a perpetual roar from within his gnarled beard of bark. This was the most holy of sites to the Norsemen on Unst, where they could be closest to the gods.

Hilde saw her mother's lips move, her voice a whisper.

"Forgive me."

A stiff wind raced over the clifftop and through the rowan's groaning branches, the God Tree appearing to respond to Jarl Frida's prayer.

"She is no longer a child," said the gothi ruefully.

It wasn't a question: more like a statement, and a weird one at that. *Not a child?* Hilde had seen fifteen winters. She hadn't felt like a child in a long time.

"She became a woman twelve moons ago," replied Siv, the black bird answering on Jarl Frida's behalf as if Hilde weren't even there.

What on earth are they talking about? wondered Hilde. Once more, she felt the reassuring touch of the raven's feet, as the

bird beat her wings in the breeze.

"I wonder how much of her mother is in her," said the gothi.

Only now did Jarl Frida briefly look Hilde's way, daughter catching mother's fleeting glance within her wolfskin cowl.

"That's yet to be seen," boomed Mikko, loud as ever, as he beckoned other participants in the *blót* ceremony to join him. "Have the horse brought down to the village. Erskine will butcher it. The entire village should enjoy the meat at tonight's feast." A considered pause. "Even the Christians."

"*Especially* the Christians," added the gothi, glowering disapprovingly at the beach below and the monk in the water. "Every year, more of our people turn to this foreign god."

"It's not so simple as that," said Mikko. "Our people are Pictish, as well as Norse. And the handful of souls you see gathered on this cliff are all that remains of those who accompanied Jarl Frida and me to Unst. We are outnumbered."

The gothi sucked his teeth and shook his head. "Whatever happened to that fierce shieldmaiden?"

Mikko the Silent looked at Hilde and gave her a friendly wink. Of all the Norsemen who had helped her mother settle on the island, he was Hilde's favourite. A hammer blow to his helm as a young man had apparently left his hearing in ruins and earnt him the ironic nickname, but there were none so loyal to Jarl Frida as Mikko.

"She had a child," said the old warrior, his voice that rare thing: quiet.

The gothi watched the chieftain as she remained transfixed by the rowan tree.

"A shame, huscarl," said the wise man. "Such sagas they

might have written about her."

As his companions began binding the legs of the slaughtered horse to carry poles, Mikko turned on the gothi, so quickly Hilde flinched. A coldness clouded the old warrior's eyes, come out of nowhere, darkening his already hard expression. There was an implied threat of violence there, and it caused a shiver – *of excitement?* – to race down Hilde's spine. He was aged and frail, but a strength remained.

"You want to meet the shieldmaiden?" shouted Mikko, his seemingly oblivious chieftain still as one with the God Tree. "Perhaps we can rouse her from her slumber, eh?"

The gothi shook his head, respect making his voice crack. "No, my friend. Best to let sleeping dogs lie."

As quick as that, the threat had passed, and the calm Mikko returned.

Siv let out a guttural cry, her midnight feathers batting the side of Hilde's face. "Let us away."

Girl and raven set off down the steep cliff path back to the village, leaving Jarl Frida behind. Though treacherous, it was the quickest route back to the settlement, switching this way and that as it hugged the jagged granite of the cliffs. Some thirty paces down the trail they passed by the wattle and daub hut that was the gothi's home, its makeshift door a deerskin curtain that clapped in the stiff breeze. Spattered with gull guano and lichen, the shelter was wedged into the rockface, a wholly unwelcoming abode. As they rounded another bend in the path, Hilde glanced back. The God Tree and the gothi came back into view, and she caught the wise man watching them depart.

"Did you ever see her fight, Siv? My mother?"

"No, child," said the old bird, a note of sadness in her voice. "But I'm told she was fierce. A force of nature, they say."

"He might be a wise man, but the gothi would be a fool to get on the wrong side of my mother."

"Let's not be badmouthing the gothi, child," said Siv, tapping Hilde's head with her shiny, black beak. "Lest he put a curse upon you."

Hilde grunted. "He's welcome to curse me. My life couldn't be much worse. I'm already stuck on this rock when there's a world out there waiting to be explored."

"Your mother explored plenty yet turned her back on that life to settle here. That should tell you something."

That didn't cut it for Hilde.

"You heard what Mikko the Silent said: *she had a child*. That 'force of nature' would probably still be out there sailing the seas and forging a saga and a great name if I hadn't come along."

Siv flapped her midnight-black wings, batting her young charge's head in the process.

"Your mother's deeds as a shieldmaiden are legendary, never forget that. That blood runs through your veins too, that lineage reaching back to the golden age of gods and monsters. Jarl Frida is touched by the Old Ways, Hilde, and so are you. Her name was known, and feared, from here to Uppsala."

Hilde's imagination was instantly fired: *gods and monsters*. It had a ring to it, undoubtedly, and Siv was well-versed in all those old tales. A gifted storyteller like many of her kin, there was little the raven didn't know about the sagas. The notion

of a bird that could speak left the Picts on Unst both fearful and suspicious; here was a living, breathing, crowing remnant of that time of gods and monsters, as alien to the islanders as the gods of Asgard themselves. And Siv was painfully aware of those prejudices, keeping her chatter reserved for Norse ears as much as possible. Many was the time she would nestle beside her young charge before the fireside, filling Hilde's head with wonder.

As they reached the village edge, the raven regarded the cliff top where Jarl Frida was now in conversation with the gothi.

"That woman did more in her youth than many achieve in their entire lifetimes. And then she'd had enough. Your mother chose to leave that life – and that name – behind. Just you remember that."

"All because of me," grumbled Hilde, which earnt her a nipped ear.

"There was a little more to it than that, child."

Hilde frowned. "Did you know my father?"

The bird cackled. "No, that was before my time. You were already born by the time I was blown onto Unst by an ill wind. All I know is he used to sail with her, back when she was still a Viking. Quit dawdling, now."

Hilde made her way down the mud-churned path towards the heart of the village, passing stalls set up ahead of the day's market. She craned her neck, spying several unfamiliar boats moored to the jetties. More strangers were destined to materialise from the churning veil of sea mist throughout the day. Directly ahead, the jarl's longhouse dominated the surrounding buildings, twice the height and length of any of

its neighbours. Unlike the other homes in Unst, which were stone structures with turf rooftops, the *jarlshof* was wattle and daub with a thick thatched roof. A ribbon of dark smoke curled from the tall central chimney, as preparations for the evening feast were already well underway.

The chatter of cheery voices grew as the freshly baptised emerged along the shoreline, cutting across the path of Hilde and Siv. Many were children, soaked to the skin but grinning and embracing one another, the freezing tide having failed to dampen their spirits. Aidan Erskine, the butcher's boy, was already staring open-mouthed at Hilde as she approached, no doubt contemplating some witless insult. Cormac Tulloch was amongst them, shaking the sea from his shaggy matted hair as his bare feet squelched through the sucking mud. Spying her through the throng, her friend gave her an enthusiastic wave.

"You here for a baptism, Hilde?" he asked, his teeth chattering through his grin as he held a small wooden cross in his hand. "C-c-come on in, the water's lovely!"

"You stick to your god, Cormac, and I'll stick to mine," she replied, as Siv took flight from her shoulder.

"It's not as c-cold as it looks, I promise," said Cormac.

"I suppose this Christian god can't be all bad," said Hilde with a sly look. "He got you to take a bath, and that's nothing short of a miracle."

Cormac gestured at Hilde's face with an awkward nod. "You've got something on you."

"Huh?"

She raised a hand and wiped her face, the palm coming

away bloody. With the sleeve of her woollen smock, she gave it an embarrassed scrub. Then the monk was stood before her.

His brown habit was wet and heavy with seawater from the waist down while his face was flushed red. So young for a holy man. Hilde always expected them to be old and gnarly like the gothi, as if a stiff fart might break their backs. Annoyingly, the monk shared a similar joyous smile to those he had anointed moments earlier.

"So, you're Hilde?" He placed a pale hand on his chest. "I'm Brother Benedict."

His accent was peculiar to Hilde. He was no Pict, that was for sure. A Saxon, perhaps? She eyed him suspiciously, choosing not to reply.

"Cormac has told me all about you," said the monk cheerily, fishing about in a deep pocket of his habit. His hand emerged clutching something, which he instantly handed over to Hilde.

"For you, jarl's daughter," said Benedict, placing the small, crudely carved crucifix into her open palm. "A gift from our Lord, the One True God, to you."

Hilde was unsure of how to respond. The gathered villagers looked at her with surprise, delight, and no small amount of hope. All except for Aidan. The gift drew a sneer of disapproval from the butcher's boy. But Cormac's expression was more gormless than ever. He gave her a nod.

Take it.