

Flight of the Wren (excerpt)

Epilogue...

May 1st, 1003, The Witch's Teats, Vestfold, Norway

The Witch of Vestfold dipped the long bronze-bladed knife into the roiling cauldron and held it there. She exhaled slowly, trying to calm her nerves. Though she wouldn't trade places with any other woman in Norway, there were times when the duties of her station were heavy to bear.

Hekka was called upon as an oracle, to scry into the future or past. She was an alchemist, able to brew potions for love, potency, courage, or their opposites. She was a healer and poisoner, able to cast both blessings and curses. Surgery, though sometimes unavoidable, wasn't near the top of her occupational preferences.

Norway's ranking Seiðr Woman had delivered over two hundred infants, with a survival rate that recommended her as one of the ablest midwives in the land. She was also the mother of four of her own, including a three-month-old boy, still in swaddling. All her experience suggested that this would be a risky birth. Even at her daughter's behest, she'd refused to consult the runes on her patient's behalf. If they foretold tragedy, there would be no way to hide the outcome from her overly intuitive patient.

Indeed, at age fifteen, Hilja already had enough experience as a Healer to know the risks she faced. As precocious as she was in mind and spirit, she was still little more than a girl in body, a small one at that. This wouldn't be the first time that her stature put her at a disadvantage.

It had been twenty-two hours since her water had broken and she still hadn't uttered one sound to express discomfort. This was unnerving, as Hekka relied on the normal cries and groans of childbirth to cue her movements as Midwife.

Hekka had roared like a lioness during each of her children's births. That noise had helped her through the delivery and greeted each of her young to this world. She thought it likely that some of the respect that her brood afforded her originated in the primal utterances they'd heard when they first arrived.

This infant had been stuck for hours and no progress seemed possible without intervention. One hour ago, when a cold sweat covered the exhausted Laplander, she looked up at Hekka and said, "Do whatever you must to save my baby. His name is Ulli. Tell him that his father is Paavo of Haapolu."

"You'll tell him yourself," rasped the Witch. "Helga, fetch the clove paste. Vexi, put this knife to the strop."

The Witch's older daughter nodded and obeyed. The clove paste was made from the most expensive ingredients at the imports shop in Tønsberg. It was only used for surgery, and only if the Witch was in a charitable mood. She brought the small clay pot to the bed of sheepskins where Hilja lay, attended by Impala. Vexi took the primitive bronze knife and freshened its edge with a smooth stone before pulling it twice across a leather strop. While she was busy with that, the Witch of Vestfold took a palmful of the ochre ointment and applied it to her patient's painfully stretched pudendum.

Hilja's nose twitched at the scent of the clove oil, "Is that needed?" she gasped.

"At least it'll make *me* feel better," replied the Witch as the numbing analgesic began to take effect.

"I don't...want to miss any part of this," said Hilja.

"You've lived in this cave for the better part of eight months, girl, and that's the first foolish thing you've said in all that time. You impress me, and that doesn't happen easily. You've done everything you can. Now, you must let me do my work. Do you trust me?"

"You know that I do."

"Then let's get this baby out of you."

The knife glittered in the candlelight and she realized the Witch was right. She sent her mind away, outside the cave to where her wrens were playing in the trees atop the hillock that covered their primitive cave home. She saw the sun glittering off the river and a few clouds in the mostly blue sky. It was just getting warm enough for flying insects. Her wren familiars Pipa and Bo were feeding greedily.

She thought of the surgery she'd performed on Axius. He withstood the pain silently while she whittled away the infected bone in his eye socket.

She tried to be as brave as he was, but suddenly, she felt a red spear pierce her very core before she popped like a huge jewelweed seedpod. She cried out once, "Aaah!" before everything went black.

Many children of Lapland are born to the sound of singing. Women in attendance chant sacred verses to properly greet the newest member of their tribe with the ancient songs of their race.

Things would be different for this boy. Assisted by the smallest flick of a sharp bronze blade, the son of Lapland's Lady of the Wood slid into the world to find himself in a foreign country, covered in his mother's blood, surrounded by Giants. The same knife that allowed him access to this world also inadvertently scratched a jagged mark into his tiny brow that would become a persistent scar. The next cut severed the pulsing umbilical cord still connecting him to his mother.

Vexi whined, "She said that his father's name was Paavo!"

"Well, we can't very well call him 'Ulli Pavesson,' can we?" said Hekka, "lest everyone thinks she got this babe from lying with the Pope."

Helga said, "He can't help it if his father's name sounds like the Pope. How about 'Ulli Lappison?' That will explain why he's so small, and no one will have to ask."

The Witch nodded, "That'll do for now, until his mother wakes up. Helga, run outside and fill the small basket with horsetail, hurry! Vexi, hold this babe carefully and wipe him off with that rag."

"Mama?" called Impala.

Hekka looked at her youngest, who was stroking Hilja's head. She said, "You, my little Imp, have the most important task of all: you must keep our friend with us and tell her what a beautiful boy she's birthed."

Impala looked down at Hilja's face, almost peaceful in repose and shook her head, "Sleeping. Shh."

"No, Darling Girl. Hilja walks a narrow path between life and death. Tell her about her child so she'll wish to live." Hekka busied herself with staunching the flow of blood from the incision she'd made. She hoped Helga would return quickly with horsetail. The strange, fernlike plant was very astringent and could stop the most serious bleeding. Their white shoots should be emerging from the ground this week. Her thoughts were interrupted by the first complete sentence that Impala had ever uttered.

"Your baby is a boy. A nice, handsome boy. Look at him, Hilja..."

A few tears welled up in her eye as Hekka said, "That's right, Impala, keep talking to her. She'll follow your voice back to us."

Soon, Ulli began to cry the weak and whimpering mews of a newborn. His voice woke little Thorsson Bjørn who was sleeping nearby. "Vexi, hand me that baby, then bring your brother over here as well. Hello, Little Man. I'm sure your mother would like to do this but she's indisposed right now. Take this and grow big and strong." She placed Ulli's tiny face against her breast but he wouldn't root for the nipple. Vexi handed her little brother over as well and Thorsson Bjørn began to drink in great gulps from the other breast. Eyes wide, the three-month-old reached out to touch the newborn next to him. Little Ulli stopped crying and rooted his mouth around to where Hekka's nipple poked his cheek.

"Thank you, Vexi. Now, hold this poultice in place for a while to stop the bleeding."

"Mama, this looks bad."

"I know, Sweetie."

"Can you stitch her up?"

"We can't risk the stitches getting infected in there. We must wait for it to close on its own."

"Ow. Why did you have to cut her?"

"Sometimes the baby is too big or the mother too small to make birthing possible. She's not only small, but very young to deliver a child. The first one is always the hardest, and this little man has a big head."

Some time went by while they listened to Impala trying to coax Hilja to consciousness. Finally, little Ulli Lappison latched on and started to drink the strange thick milk of the Giants.

"Will she live?" asked Vexi in a quiet voice. She winced as she peeked beneath the poultice.

"I don't know," admitted the Witch. Her head tipped back and her one eyelid quivered, "but I can tell you that her child will."

"I don't think I'll ever have a baby," added Vexi.

"You may feel differently when you're old enough to fall in love. The pain of childbirth lasts only a few days but the joys of motherhood are..." Hekka paused, her eyelid still fluttering, "...many."