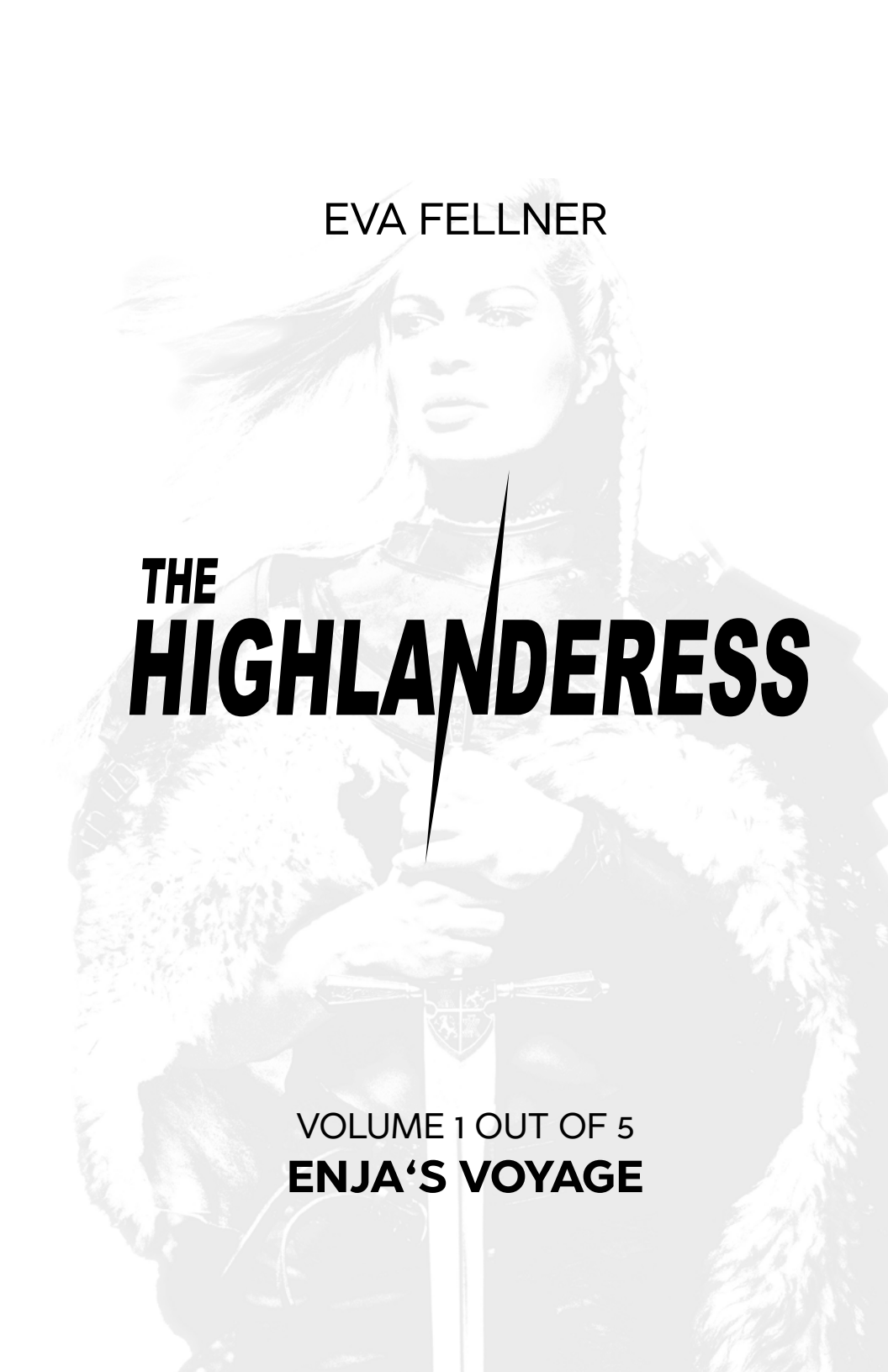


A movie poster featuring a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a brown leather tunic with a fur collar and a small cross on her forehead. She holds a sword vertically in front of her. The background is a dramatic landscape with mountains and lightning in a dark sky.

EVA FELLNER

**THE
HIGHLANDERESS**

ENJA'S VOYAGE



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**THE
HIGHLANDERESS**

VOLUME 1 OUT OF 5
ENJA'S VOYAGE

For additional Bonus Material
please visit

www.highlanderess.com/clan



and follow the process outlined there.

*Caught in the chaos of warring lands,
Where love ignites 'midst bloodied sands,
Enja stands with fate in hand—
Duty calls; she must command.*

*Shall she yield to passion's flame,
Or lead her kin to endless fame?
In battles fierce, with blade she fights,
And carves her name in legend's might.*

*A warrior queen, defying all,
Who dared to rise, to heed her call.
She shattered norms, claimed what was hers,
And stood where only fate concurs.*

*Yet love doth whisper soft and near,
Shall peace in passion soon appear?
Or will she forge a path of power,
And stand alone in victory's hour?*

*Bear witness to her epic quest,
Of rebellion, strength, and fearless breast.
For in her heart, unyielding reigned,
The spirit of a queen unchained.*

For my boys. I am so proud of you!

My dearest reader:

From the desk of Eva Fellner

Welcome to this Voyage! In everything I've written across the five volumes of *The Highlanderess*, I believe in the extraordinary power of liberty and leadership inspired by higher values.

You are holding in your hands the first of five volumes of a heroine's story of bold emancipation set against the harsh backdrop of 14th-century Scotland—one of the most challenging times for women, ever.

Driven by the motivation to forge new and difficult paths, our heroine embodies the spirit of adventure, boldly stepping into the unknown with courage and determination. Enja is a cool, James Bond-like character, wielding her katana and proudly bearing her tattoo, originally branded on her as a slave, which has since pivoted to become a powerful testament to her strength and resilience.

As her journey unfolds, the voyage itself becomes a powerful reflection of the modern high-performance warrior—a fierce and unyielding fighter, both in her world and ours.

These values often transcend what we encounter in today's business world and cultural contexts. The purpose and

mission of the five Highlanderess volumes are to emphasise and celebrate these qualities, showcasing how Enja—and women in general—can develop into outstanding individuals with strength, wisdom, and a deep sense of purpose.

In this first volume, through the journey of Enja and the other characters, I aim to portray a narrative where leadership is deeply rooted in family values. You will discover that some families don't need to share the same blood to stand together with decisiveness, freedom, vision, persistence, and even natural healing. By weaving these elements into this historical novel, I hope to inspire you to recognise the potential within yourself and the people around you. From the very first moment, you should understand that this historical series isn't just about telling a powerful story set in mediaeval Scotland; it's about encouraging a shift in today's perspective towards more meaningful, compassionate, and empowering leadership for both women and men alike.

The Highlanderess is a literary series of five volumes that follows Enja and her clan. The five books—Enja's Voyage, The Quest, The Clan, Enja's Fight, and The Legacy—bring to life a world where an exceptionally strong woman leads with both strength and grace.

All the stories are filled with powerful themes of connection, bravery, and outstanding healing knowledge that would be great for many to have today. By engaging with this historical narration, you are invited to explore new ways of thinking about pioneering and community building.

At the end of this volume, there's a special note for you that might just spark a change in your life and in the lives of others. You'll reach it at the perfect moment for you. For now, we will prepare you for that with Enja's Voyage, which I hope inspires you to embrace the values she represents.

Now: Enjoy this book!

Eva Fellner

Chapter 1

Scotland in May 1307

What the devil has gotten into me lately to stumble upon such a mess? I couldn't shake that thought all day long—it kept echoing in my mind. The heavy dress stuck to my body, wet with sweat. The chest and waist were laced up tightly, with only enough room for shallow breaths. The tailor had done a good job. The tight collar threatened to suffocate me, and the brocade bodice rubbed uncomfortably against my ribs. It's your own fault, I thought, you probably want to prove yourself to everyone again, Enja.

The bridesmaids had placed the bridal wreath on the white silk fabric as a sign of my chastity. Under the veil that covered my face protectively, I grimaced at the thought of my own folly. I scanned the ranks of the bystanders as I walked slowly down the aisle. Nobody suspected anything under the veil other than the face of a typical Scottish bride. More precisely, they expected the face of Elisabeth Armstrong, the beautiful daughter of the powerful clan laird, Alexander Malcolm Armstrong. In size and hair colour, Elisabeth and I hardly differed, but otherwise, we were probably as different as day and night.

Durham Cathedral was overcrowded. The English families looked at me with a mixture of boredom and disgust. If only they knew. With painfully slow steps, I moved to the altar on the arm of the old laird. "Slowly," the aged lady's maid of the Scottish princess had drummed into me. "Slowly." So, wearing my boots, I put one foot in front of the other, always careful not to stumble over the hem of the dress that they had forced me into, which was much too long. I felt ridiculous in that outfit and feared that no one would be convinced by this deception!

The maid had tried to assure me that in this dress, I could even fool the old laird himself. Laird Armstrong had resolutely put the plaid with the colours of the Armstrong clan around me and fastened it with his wife's silver brooch. None of the English guests in the church had seen his daughter before, and all of the Armstrongs were fully aware of what was about to transpire.

The tailor had made sure that my arms, hands, and neck were carefully covered with fabric up to my chin, as appropriate for a chaste bride. Thereby, he also cleverly covered my fair skin and my strong muscles. Underneath I wore black trousers so that I could get rid of the bridal dress if necessary. The tightness and the heat of the outfit made me feel like a tethered beast.

The laird next to me held my hand, and with a serious expression, nodded affirmatively. It had been his idea to escort me to the altar instead of his daughter so as not to have to

marry her off to the English baron Henry de Keighley. For this he risked the enmity of the English king, not to mention his life. And I was offered as the best suited person for such a daring deception since, for me, it was a matter of personal vengeance against King Edward as well as a sign of resistance. In the battle against the despised English, all means were right and proper. I realised that the plan to assassinate the baron at his own wedding was brazen, but it was possible.

In these days, Edward I, King of England, weakened by illness, shrewdly wed the women of the Scottish nobility with the English barons and lords in order to ensure the consanguinity of the difficult-to-control clans. The other way around, Scottish aristocrats were required to marry English ladies. If the aristocratic families refused, they were threatened with death for high treason.

Some of the old Scottish clans were unpleasantly surprised by the English king's marital politics. One day, the battle-hardened Scottish clan of the Armstrongs, led by the proud chief Alexander Armstrong, whose seat lay between Cumberland and the Scottish border, were outraged to hear the news that Chief Alexander was now to give his only daughter in marriage to Baron Henry de Keighley of Lancashire to support Edward's peace plans. The chief's protests fell on deaf ears.

Alexander's beautiful daughter Elisabeth was to be a pawn in the gruesome game that Edward played with his feudal lords. The English king, deeply in debt by his failure

in Flanders and the Scottish War, tried brutally to subjugate Scotland, whose rebellion he regarded as a revolution in his own country. Cruel executions of high traitors were intended to deter and nip the resistance in the bud. But they only continued to kindle the wrath of the Scottish noble houses.

Confidently, I squeezed the calloused hand of the old knight next to me. He must also be very nervous; I could clearly hear his gasping breath. We had now completed the march on the stone floor up the aisle in Durham Cathedral, all the way to the altar. Henry de Keighley was already there, looking at us expectantly. Not really a bad looking man, I noticed briefly, but unfortunately, he was English.

Politics required sacrifices; that had been the motto of my Grandmaster, the assassin leader Hassan I-Shabbah. I couldn't suppress a smile. With my free hand, I felt for the dagger, which was carefully hidden in a fold of the dress. How good it was to feel the cold steel of the weapon under my fingers. Immediately, my heart stopped beating quite so fast and my breathing calmed down a bit. What a mockery of fate that no one would examine the bride for weapons. All the men here had to lay down their weapons in front of the holy church.

It would be an easy game for me. The groom had no idea. Before he even recognised me, he would be dead. A strange premonition came over me, as always, when my senses were focused on an impending assassination.

The young Baron de Keighley was a little taller than I and slim and athletic. In courtly fashion, he bowed his head as I approached him. He took my hand from the laird's arm and kissed it. He carefully helped me straighten my dress so that I could kneel on the bench that had been provided. I had practised this a hundred times over the last few days to make it look as graceful as possible.

I didn't hear anything about the actual ceremony. Again and again, my glances slid to the wooden choir stalls, then to the altar with the stone pillars on each side. Bishop Antony Brek's monotonous phrases interested me as little as the sentences dutifully repeated by my groom. His voice did not match his appearance; it was far too high. Without really thinking about it, I also repeated the previously spoken sentences. The seconds passed by, and impatiently, I waited for the moment when Henry was to raise my veil to kiss me.

That was the moment in which he would be distracted and vulnerable. That's when I would strike. I took a deep breath. Again, the voice of the bishop rang out. Then the voices of the many people behind me, who answered his prayer. Now was the time.

"You may kiss the bride!" The bishop's words were the cue. I turned toward the man next to me. He raised both of his hands to lift the veil. Carefully, he pulled it up over my face.

Bafflement. That was the first thing I saw in his eyes as they wandered from my mouth to my forehead, to the small tattoo of the cross above. His expression was one of surprise.

Only when it turned into a grimace did I know that my dagger had not missed its aim. It was the ugly mask of death that now covered his visage. I stabbed him above the fifth rib, near his breastplate, directly in the heart. He died instantly.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose in Durham Cathedral.



The self-appointed Scottish King Robert de Bruce seemed weaker than ever in the following days. For months, he had been hiding in the Hebrides in the far north of Scotland to avoid his pursuers, the English troops. Edward the First, once again assembled his troops to deliver a final blow to the Scottish resistance, which repeatedly flared up like an inflammatory hotspot in the contested land.

The people in the borderlands between the two rival kingdoms had little peace. Their region became the destination for Scottish as well as English robber-knights, who took advantage of their insecure position in no-man's land like wolves in a herd of sheep. The unity of the Scottish clans came heavily into play since the families banded together to protect themselves against the despotic advances of the outlaws of both countries.

In any case, the noble families of Scotland were, in the main, powerless, and heavily under the influence and authority of a ruthless Edward, whose forced intermarriage

between the people of both nations caused a great deal of suffering.

In a desperate attempt to save his daughter from such a marriage, the clan chief, Alexander Malcolm Armstrong, turned to Enja, an assassin from the Orient, who firmly resisted all English aggression and who would murder the English bridegroom. With her daring and unusual fighting techniques and abilities, she had almost become a living legend in the Scottish Highlands. The bards of the country now mentioned her in the same breath as the exploits of William Wallace or James Douglas.

Lady Enja von Caerlaverock could never have imagined how that fateful wedding in Durham Cathedral would alter the course of her life. On that unforgettable day, May 7, 1307, she unwittingly penned a new chapter in the vibrant saga of the Scottish bards' exploits.



Berwick, a few days later.

The inn in the tranquil town of Berwick was bustling with activity that evening. As one of the few establishments offering guest rooms, it was a favoured gathering spot for traders and travellers alike. That night, the taproom was filled with guests from every corner of the kingdom.

Berwick-upon-Tweed, situated in the contested borderlands, had long been a flashpoint for the bitter struggles between the Scots and the English. Just a few years earlier, in August 1305, the town's mayor displayed the severed arm of William Wallace, who had been brutally quartered, in the market square—a grim act that fuelled resentment among the locals. Politically, the town swayed back and forth between English and Scottish control, like seaweed caught in a shifting tide.

The Scottish bard Alistair MacMhuirich, famous in the Highlands, was sitting comfortably in a corner of the spacious dining room. Surrounded by noisy gossip, he had eaten the dish of the day, a stew with vegetables, barley meal and wild boar bacon. With relish he brushed the leftover food out of his greying beard and let out excess air with a belch. Basking in the warmth, he had taken off his felt cap with the plaid, placed it next to him on the bare wooden bench, and ordered a second beaker of Uisge beatha, the Scottish whiskey, from the stout maid. Despite her bulk, she moved nimbly to the bar to get the jug.

Indeed, the bard had managed to attract the attention of visitors by announcing outrageous reports from neighbouring Durham. In no time at all, the landlord and guests of all types had invited the educated storyteller to a plate of stew and the Scottish liquor to catch up on the latest news. The cold of the night barely managed to counter the heat of the crowd and

the fire that shot up in the fireplace. Even the fighting dogs finally shut their snouts to hear the bard's words.

Alistair looked around at the traders and travellers that now hung on every word that crossed his lips. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. But it took another sip of the high-proof brew to loosen the tongue of the bard.

"Worthy ladies and highly esteemed gentlemen," he said, beginning the ritual that had emerged as an established evening's entertainment in the Highlands for centuries. Even the great leaders of all the Highland clans listened to this man when he had something to say.

A murmur and hiss went through the crowd, and now the last guests in the room finally fell silent. Curious, they leaned toward the person at the table for one, who was besieged by the English as well as the Scots, the maids, and the cooks.

"A few days ago, the sixth Sunday after Easter, the young Lady Elisabeth Armstrong, the only daughter of Alexander and Catherine Armstrong, and the Baron Henry de Keighley, Knight of Shire in Lancashire, were to marry"

This news had been proclaimed a few weeks ago, so Alistair was only repeating what many already knew. He cleared his throat, and in a hoarse voice, let his words sink in.

"I was invited to the celebration as a bard for the Armstrong family and am expected to report on the wedding."

"Was the bride as pretty as she is said to be?" A young maid interrupted shyly and was immediately rebuked by a grunt from the stout cook. You don't interrupt a bard.

But the cosmopolitan man with his silver-grey beard, who was well past forty summers, smiled indulgently and said, "She is as radiantly beautiful as the light of the sun when it is reflected in the sea in the evening."

A deep sigh escaped the women who had gathered around him in large numbers.

"She just didn't show up, unfortunately," Alistair continued dryly, delighting in the perplexed faces of the audience. A laugh like a billy goat pealed from his mouth. His beard trembled with the rhythm and his shoulders shook. Again, he allowed himself a draught from the pitcher, and stirred up an expectant tension.

"As it happened," he finally explained, "the real Lady Elisabeth had been replaced by another person who stepped through the church to her bridegroom to marry him before God and the Church!"

"In her place?" came the horrified shouts. "Then it wasn't Lady Elisabeth who stabbed the baron?"

This time even the cook didn't seem to have anything against the maid's question, who now put her hand over her mouth in shock. Of course, the news of the bridegroom's death had long preceded the bard and still horrified the people of the city. Now they had a witness who knew all the details of this incredible story.

"But no!" confirmed the bard. "On the way to the wedding, the carriage was stopped and the rebel Enja von Caerlaverock exchanged places with the bride, who was brought back

unharméd. Lady Enja, who has taught the English what fear is in many battles, had agreed to walk to the altar instead of Elisabeth, and then to stab the bridegroom on the spot and rebuff the king.”

This sparked a discussion in the back rows, including some voices that the bard recognised as English. Alistair spoke in Scottish Gaelic, which all residents of the border country spoke or at least could understand.

“How do you know for sure that it was Lady Enja?” interjected a clearly English voice provocatively.

“How could this woman get so close to the groom? Surely, he must have realised that it was not his bride?” asked another with a heavy Welsh accent.

Alistair raised the goblet with the brown liquid to his lips again and took a sip with relish. As he lowered the drink, he belched loudly, showing his appreciation for the host. At the innkeeper’s suggestion, a maid quickly brought him a small wooden board with pieces of cheese, which the cook had made himself from the milk of his goats. Gratefully, Alistair picked up a piece with nimble fingers.

“Well,” said the bard with his mouth full, “it is said that not even the bride’s father knew that it was not his daughter who was under the bridal veil. Then how should it be for the groom who had never seen her before?” Not a muscle twitched in his face as he sent forth this lie into the stale air of the taproom.

“As is customary in noble houses,” he explained succinctly, “the king determines the marriages on paper. Normally, the spouses see each other only on the day of the wedding. In fact, the bride wore a veil that hid her face. Otherwise, the black cross in the middle of her forehead, which Lady Enja has borne since childhood, would have been noticed.”

“A cross? In the middle of her forehead? How cruelly disfigured must this woman be?” The sympathetic comment came from one of the women.

“I can assure you, dear people, this beautiful woman wears this mark with such pride that it simply forbids this assumption In any case, the bridegroom had no chance because the moment he lifted the veil in front of the altar to kiss her, her dagger struck him right in the heart.”

“Oohh,” gasped the women in the room. “That’s unheard of!” said one of the women. “No lady is that sly!” said another.

With a narrator’s calculation, the bard let the outbreak of female indignation have its effect without comment. In the meantime, he took another sip of the Uisge beatha, which the host had made himself.

“Did he look handsome, that knight Henry?” crowed the young maid, who had previously asked about the woman’s appearance, and earned a rebuff from the cook’s elbow.

The question elicited a raised eyebrow from the narrator. He nodded gently, raised his eyes thoughtfully to the ceiling, and with a mischievous smile under his beard, explained, “Baron de Keighley was tall and slim. His finely cut face was very

pale, and a black beard graced his chin. He would certainly not have been a bad husband for Elisabeth Armstrong,” he mused, “if he hadn’t been English.”

This provoked a lot of laughter from the audience, to which the English only responded with derogatory outbursts. The atmosphere in the room was filled with the tension that prevails in places where men of different origins meet.

“I hope they killed the murderer on the spot!” someone shouted in English and was cursed wildly by the Scots.

Alistair knew how to keep the audience under his spell by holding up his hands soothingly and asking for silence. A young servant hastily put some wood in the large fireplace. He didn’t want to miss any of the story, either. He sat back down just in time to hear the bard’s next words.

“The brave warrior who had wedged herself into the wedding dress with the green and blue colours of the Armstrongs was now exposed to the English guards without protection. As you can imagine, Durham Cathedral was crowded. The bride’s Scottish family and her clan had been relegated to the back of the church, while the English nobility stood in the front rows. Women, children, knights and nobles watched helplessly as the young Henry de Keighley was stabbed to death by a murderess before their eyes!”

Actually, Alistair not only repeated the shocking scene, but managed to arouse the horror of the audience anew. He leaned forward and struck his fist with force on the table, which made everyone in the audience hold their breath in

shock. “But apart from the murderer,” he hissed menacingly, “there was not a single person in the church who had a weapon at that moment!”

With big eyes and open mouths, the amazed audience stared at Alistair.

“Not a single one ...”, the bard repeated. He theatrically raised his right hand and clenched it into a fist.

“Lady Enja was the only one with a dagger in her hand and thus held Bishop Anthony Brek in check; he was so afraid that he almost wet his vestments!”

This time, the laughter came from all sides; after all, it was not every day that a bishop was so clearly a dupe.

Alistair MacMhuirich sat back and studied his audience. In addition to the servants and maids, there were also some merchants and Scottish knights among his listeners. Surely, they would put a little silver in his cap later that evening. He patiently let the laughter die down before telling the rest of the story.

“I was standing in the back with the family of the Scottish bride. Suddenly, a burning bale of hay fell through the open side window—and then another! But the bales were damp and smouldered more than they burned. They covered the church in thick smoke. You can imagine the panic this created with all the women and children!”

A look around at his audience confirmed that they knew of the dangers of such fires. Insufficiently dried hay had often caught fire in the haystacks and the fire surprised people in

their sleep. The wood crackled in the fireplace, seemingly in agreement, and a few glowing logs slid along noisily. The people looked reverently into the bard's face, who now leaned forward conspiratorially and lowered his voice.

"The screams of the people alerted the guards, and they attempted to enter the cathedral against the current of those who wanted to escape from there. In the midst of this melee, the murderess managed to drag the bishop with her. Despite thick billows of smoke, I could clearly see the woman in front of the high altar respectfully saying goodbye to the priest with a slight bow. Now I knew it was her. Enja von Caerlaverock!"

Challenging anyone to disagree, he looked around.

"I could look directly into her beautiful face with the painted cross between her eyes. She looked proudly in my direction and raised her hand, perhaps to ask forgiveness for the Armstrong family. I was frozen by the gesture. How gracefully she stood there ..."

His gaze wandered into the distance, as if he saw her before him. Without haste, she then slipped out of the dress under which she was wearing men's clothing, and carefully placed it on the altar. Then she put the dagger in her boot and swiftly climbed the ornate high altar.

He pointed with his hand to the ceiling, which was barely two yards above him in the inn. All eyes followed his hand movement upwards.

The bard bridged the meaningful pause with a strong sip from his goblet, which the maid immediately refilled. The countless spellbound eyes were now fixed on the face of the man who had been an eyewitness to these extraordinary events.

“I’ve never seen a person, let alone a woman, soar nearly nine yards so quickly. It was as if she had wings that lifted her up and made her disappear from view forever ...”

Now some of the audience members turned pale. A winged murderess? But the bard hurried to erase this image by quickly following with the explanation.

“She had worked her way up the ornate stone pillars on the left and right of the altar, up to the window, opened it, and swung through it like a cat, under the angry roar of the English people present. The people ran in panic in all directions.” With that, he spread both his arms to a brilliant climax.

“She escaped?” squeaked a horrified voice that actually belonged to the fat cook. A film of sweat had clearly settled on his balding head.

“Why was she able to escape from there?”

Other heads nodded in agreement. Everyone imagined how the church must have been surrounded by the English, Scots, and a large crowd of onlookers. Such an important event drew people from everywhere, not the least of which were merchants selling their wares.

“Well,” the bard crossed his arms over his chest and raised his thick eyebrows, “apparently, she had accomplices outside the church who had positioned themselves with a hay cart in front of the altar window. She jumped on the hay cart and hid in it. The cart then left the church grounds unobtrusively and the perplexed guests were at a loss. Neither the Scots nor the English found their tracks. She seemed to have vanished into thin air, and with her, the hay wagon pulled by a black stallion—a horse as black as the night, with eyes that could see into the souls of every sinner.” At this last sentence, his voice deepened, and a shudder seized the audience throughout the room. Only the crackling of the logs and the sighing of the women could be heard as Alistair MacMhuirich sat back contentedly and turned his cap upside-down on the table to receive his tips.

This was his story. At least, it was the one meant to reach the ears of the English king. The old laird had paid him handsomely for it. Alistair MacMhuirich had been part of the daring plan orchestrated by the young woman. “Edward will have you quartered as a traitor!” he had warned that madwoman from Caerlaverock back then at Hermitage Castle in Cumberland, the seat of the Armstrong clan.

“He’s already tried, Alistair,” she had replied with a laugh, “and he won’t succeed this time either. Those who challenge the devil will reap death.” Her eyes had sparkled like ice crystals as she spoke.

How could he ever forget her...

Chapter 2

Iceland in 1289

Tam-tam, tara-tam, echoed through the mountains, where the small huts of the inhabitants blended inconspicuously into the forested valleys like mushrooms merging with the background. Tam-tam, tara-tam, the drumbeats vibrated in my ears, signalling the start of a ritual: the handing over of a young girl. The closer we got to the spot where the ship waited, the louder the drumming and the singing grew, as the people prepared for the most important event in their community. Tam-tam, tara-tam...

It was early in the morning, the moon had not yet fully retreated from the night sky and wrestled with the sun over the transition from darkness to day. Various shades of grey defined the silhouettes of people and the landscape.

The whole village had accompanied me and my mother, and now the crowd was singing and dancing, moving en masse towards the sea. There, torches lit up the grey of the waning night, revealing their glowing, excited faces. The excitement seemed to capture everyone who walked with me down the steep path from the village to the jetty to witness this moment. I would have felt almost as sublime as them if I hadn't known that a turning point in my life awaited me

down there by the sea. It would be an agonising separation that I couldn't avert. This was my destiny.

As if the excitement surrounding him left him completely cold, my wolfhound, Rocca, cheerfully panted beside me, his tongue hanging out of his chaps like a wet rag. From time to time, his clever eyes looked at me curiously; for him, it was just another outing together with the family.

With mixed feelings, I now waved to the people who had all come to say goodbye to my mother and me. I should be proud like these people and especially my family here. But the thought of losing loved ones, family, friends, animals, still gnawed at me. My heart was heavy when I walked down from the village for the last time, to the jetty where the ship was waiting for me. Every single stone and stalk on this path was so familiar, and holding my mother's hand, I absorbed every little detail like a sponge to keep it in my memory forever. My little feet could hardly keep up with her firm, unhesitating steps.

There was a chill in the air on this spring morning. Although the days were already getting warmer, the nights were still bitterly cold. The north wind blew so hard in my face that it brought tears to my eyes. Or were they caused by the pain of farewell?

My mother squeezed my hand. She seemed to sense that I was struggling with myself. She smiled at me cheerfully as we walked the last few metres to the jetty on the weathered wood of the pier. My legs were tired because of the long

walk, so she slowed the pace a little. Or was it just to see the faces of those who had loved her and me? Friends, relatives, the whole village actually, had come to celebrate this big day with us.

The view back was impressive: a dense cluster of people stood there, wrapped in thick fur skins against the icy winds, at the edge of the sea. They screamed and shouted, and many also sang to the gods who were to protect my mother and me on our journey. Numerous torches surrounded the whole scene, which had become a wild and powerful spectacle. Even the fog that hung majestically over the water and mixed with the smoke of the torches seemed to pay homage to our journey.

My father, who had been following us silently, came up to me, took me into his arms, and pressed me firmly to his chest. The thick fur, which he had thrown around his shoulders like a blanket, tickled my nose. I will never forget its familiar smell of leather, smoke, and fish oil, while enjoying his caress with an intensity that arose from the certainty that it would be the last time—the last time before I grew up. Then he held me at a little distance from himself and looked at me with a serious expression. His bright blue eyes with their sharply drawn black brows looked lovingly at me. Long, light hair surrounded his face tanned by the icy air. Bright beard stubble glistened on his face, framing his smile like stars around the moon.

"I'm very proud of you, Enja. The whole village is proud of you, and we are sure that you will not shame us. No matter what happens, the gods, your family, and all our people are with you. Don't ever forget that!"

My heart made a sentence, and I had to swallow before I could answer. "I'm going to make you proud, Papa," I said, "just like all the other girls made their fathers proud before me!"

This seemed to make an impression on him, because he kissed me again on the forehead before abruptly letting me go. Maybe he didn't want me to see his tears. I noticed them, but I would never have said a word.

My sister, Jalla, in her leather dress with the embroidered fur collar very similar to mine, was now pressing herself close to me. She had remained mute all the way to the pier and did not react quite so warmly, which was understandable under the circumstances. In tears, she handed me a bouquet of flowers, sniffled, and quickly turned around and disappeared behind the countless legs of the surrounding crowd, whose feet were wrapped in sheepskins held together by leather cords. Jalla was the only one who didn't understand all of this and wasn't proud of me. She was only infinitely sad, but in her quiet way, could not say so. It gave me a stab in the heart, and I wanted to run after her just when my father decided to push me towards the jetty.

Now it was time: our ship laid majestically in the water; at the bow, a mighty dragon made of carved wood bared its

teeth and threatened anyone who dared to approach. I was always afraid of this demon, which looked like a petrified beast riding on the water that could come to life at any moment. Anxiously, I stole a glance at the wooden head as we passed the bow, and followed my mother, her long fur coat flapping in the wind, along the narrow path over the footbridge. Mama hoisted me over the railing of the ship onto the rough wooden planks without effort and followed me with a big step onto the boat. Then she turned me away from her so that I could look back to the shore, with both her hands placed proudly on my shoulders.

“See how they rejoice! A chosen one from our village. That’s you, my daughter!” she said to me proudly.

A shiver went through me. In fact, I was indeed the chosen one. What an honour! For one moment, like a cold shower that almost took my breath away, a wild resolve supplanted my sad thoughts. This pride and the firm hands of my mother saved me from jumping back over the railing of the ship, which was now moving away from the shore as the villagers roared. As if guided by a ghostly hand, the dragon’s head seemed to move towards the open sea. My gaze caught the faces of the people in the front row, illuminated by the early morning light, for the last time. I desperately tried to internalise forever the image of the large figure in the middle, which was unmistakably my father. His hair danced in the wind, and his face shone from the tears that he shed.

“I will never forget you, Papa!”

It was only when the black mass of the island had swallowed people's silhouettes and all that could be seen was their faint outline protruding out of the sea that I realised my face was hot from the tears running over it. Gently, Mama wiped the wet drops from my face with her sleeve and took me in her arms.

"Everything will be fine," she murmured. "If you see us again one day in the hereafter, you will be like the gods. You alone have the power to do so with your destiny."

Despite all the great expectations and intentions, I just didn't feel up to great deeds at that moment. Sobbing, I burrowed into the lap of my mother, who gently cradled me and stroked my hair.



"Enja!" An elbow jabbed painfully into my rib. "Wake up, you stupid girl! You're dreaming with your eyes open..."

I blinked, turned my head towards the hissing voice, and looked into large, dark eyes set in a freckled face framed by brown curls. A worried look scrutinised me.

"Is everything alright?" the voice whispered again.

"Yes, of course," I stammered, a little dazed, and also whispered, "I was just somewhere else in my thoughts."

“I noticed that,” Jasemin remarked mockingly. “You had a very glassy look ... pssst, Master Abdallah has already seen you; he will surely...”

Jasemin stopped in the middle of the sentence. The said master had just cast his falcon-like gaze at me as she leaned in my direction. Master Abdallah was a haggard-looking man; his unevenly striped kaftan hung on him like a bedsheet on a clothesline, and his nose resembled a beak, sharp-edged like that of a falcon. His eyes matched the imposing centre of his face. They lay deep in the eye sockets and now flashed at me furiously. His head was covered by a blue turban, the end of which he had draped loosely over his shoulder. He crossed his arms, looked at me sternly and bowed his head gracefully.

“Do you sully my lessons again with your unworthy chatter, Enja? Where do you get this self-confidence? As if your words were more important than mine? Come here to me, immediately!”

His words came as a threat—quiet, demanding, arrogant. How I hated being judged by him! But what else could I do?

I did not want to be punished for disobedience, so I untangled myself from my cross-legged position, stood up, and stepped in front of him. I wasn’t very tall yet and just reached to his stomach, but I answered his furious gaze with respect.

He clearly enjoyed showing his power in front of the other children. As a strict and also somewhat arrogant teacher, he was not used to contradiction, and now he made me suffer

for it. Slowly, he looked over the children squatting on the floor and back to me, making me feel my indignity. The small room was pleasantly cool; it lay in the shade of a large palm tree, and the open air-slits in the walls allowed a pleasant breeze to cool the hot air.

Still, the sweat formed on my forehead. I knew, of course, what was to come, and I was preparing inwardly for his attack. I hadn't followed his lessons, and he had noticed. What would he come up with to punish me? His hand lay heavy on my right shoulder and pressed it down firmly; he deliberately wanted to make me small.

"Tell me, Enja," his anger echoing through his soft voice, "how do you translate 'don't talk when the teacher speaks' into Farsi?"

I thought for a moment and confidently spoke the Persian words. After a little pause, I put another phrase behind it—the translation of his title and his name. His face did not indicate whether he thought this was right or wrong; he only looked at me with his dark eyes, sighed, and then started again.

"You don't pay attention, but you still understand me." This was not a question; it was a statement.

"Uh, how do you mean that ...?"

"Translate!" he hissed impatiently.

I swallowed in disbelief but followed his order.

His face twitched; did he disguise a grin?

This time, he addressed me in the language of Persia.

“How do I do this? I don’t know, Master. It... it’s in here,” I said hesitantly, and I pointed at my forehead, embarrassed. “And it’s suddenly there...”

Even I realised how stupid this sounded, and I looked at the floor, ashamed. My bare toes dug into the hard ground. The other children began to giggle, and Jasemin was among these traitors.

“Come to my study today after the evening meal. I need to talk to you.”

An outstretched arm directed me to my place. I settled down again gladly next to Jasemin, who held her hand in front of her mouth so as not to make any noises. Her cheeks were red, but her gaze was trained stubbornly downwards.

Master Abdallah looked at me thoughtfully and snapped his fingers. “Quiet!”

Not a minute later, he spoke about the subjunctive, probably inspired by our little battle of words—his girls now all attentive listeners. Master Abdallah was indeed a strict Farsi and Arabic teacher. If he was in a bad mood, a blow with his stick could also be expected. If he was in a good mood, his lessons were even fun, and his mood improved when his students made no mistakes. So, I wasn’t punished this time because I had done everything right. It’s strange, however, that he wanted to speak to me alone later. Was something wrong?

So while sixteen girls followed his lessons attentively and diligently practiced Arabic numbers in Farsi, my thoughts drifted back to the ship on the open sea once again. And to my mother.



We had been on the water for hours now, with no end in sight. There was no land to be seen anywhere, just the endless sea with its unfathomable depths.

I clearly remember my mother standing proudly, high up at the bow of the ship, right next to the dragon's head. Her hair was braided, smooth and white, woven like silk threads into a work of art. A few strands were plucked out by the wind, which played a lively game with them. The early spring sun warmed our faces a little, but the breeze was even more refreshing. She faced the sun. High cheekbones framed an even, classic face with a long, straight nose. Her closed lids hid the deep blue eyes that were so similar to mine. She was a beauty, a goddess. Anyway, my father called her that, and he certainly knew what a goddess looked like.

Her beautiful face turned to me, and her lips twisted into an uncertain smile that barely disguised her discomfort. "Seems like we're going to have a rough night; the weather is changing in a few hours. Try to go to sleep right now. Who knows if we're going to get much tonight."

Since I had never experienced ‘a rough night’ and had no idea about what was coming, I left it at that. She willingly stretched out her arms, and I clung to her. Smiling, she wrapped me in her coat, made from the warm fur of a polar bear that my father had killed with his own hands. I was able to cuddle close to her body. Her nearness and warmth allowed me to be the little girl that I still was, and with a pleasant feeling, I asked, “May I sleep next to you, Mama?”

“Of course, my love; come, we’ll lie down next to this crate, where we’ll be protected from the wind.”

There happened to be a large wooden box on the deck, which probably contained ropes and rudders. It provided us a sheltered place from the wind, but still let us enjoy the warmth of the sun’s rays. I curled up tightly in Mama’s lap under the coat and watched from under its hem how the men on the ship were doing their work. Quietly and without talking loudly, they did their jobs, tying ropes, nets and chains, and tying loose boxes and barrels, as if they were preparing for a strong storm.

My limited view reached just as far as the horizon, with whitecaps bouncing all around in the endless water. Papa said we would be travelling for a few days and there would be a lot more water to cross; weeks would pass before we reached my destination. What will become of my sister Jalla now that I am no longer there? I thought. Will she miss me or forget me?

Papa had told me about the other girls who had taken the same journey each year. They were to assist the gods in the battle against the volcano Hekla, who, from time to time, opened his big mouth to devour everything that stood in his way. People, animals, houses and even entire villages! I was just not sure what to do on the way to be well received by the gods, but my father had looked at me proudly and assured me that I would be accepted by the gods at Olympus without pain—a great honour, which was bestowed on very few girls in our tribe!

The thought that my sister would now have Papa and Rocca all to herself annoyed me a little. But I had my mother to myself now, which wasn't bad, either. My little hand crept into her wool vest, my head lay leaning on her chest, and the world around me became unimportant. She had wrapped her warm fur coat protectively around me to keep the cold winds away from me, at least a little.

With the even rhythm of the waves accompanied by the creaky lullaby of the ship's planks, I fell sound asleep.

Mama suddenly lurched so violently that she cried out. Immediately, I was awake. A lightning bolt had struck one of the masts with a crack so loud that it resounded in my ears. The mast splintered and hit the ship's planks with a huge noise. Ropes, sails, and wooden parts flew through the air. The men were able to save themselves by jumping to the side, but everything happened fast and furiously.

With great presence of mind, my mother tore me away from our sleeping place before it also fell victim to the faltering mast. Pure chaos prevailed all around us. Again and again, the lightning flashed brightly over us. Frightened, I clawed onto her leg, which was wrapped in soft leather. In disbelief, I stared at the ghostly scenery: glistening light that illuminated the surface of the deck in snapshots gave a glimpse of the devastation. Like bones, the charred shards of the main mast reached up from the bottom of the ship. Around us, the sea was foaming and hissing, the wind whipping the rain almost horizontally over the deck. It was a shocking sight! At that moment, the ship suffered a heavy blow and left us both tumbling toward the railing where we sought to hold on. The torrential rain made the seafarers' hair stick like wet algae on their faces as they tried with all their might to drag the mast into the water. In rushing around, they severed the rigging, which still connected the mast and the sails to the ship. Unfortunately, the greater part still hung on deck, and the mast barely moved from the spot. For the first time, I felt something like fear among the experienced men; the casualness and calm had given way to desperate hectic effort.

Mama held me in front of her tightly with both hands. We had moved further and further back along the railing to the stern, and I felt the ship rolling and roaring under us. Desperately, we clung to anything that could not be washed away. The bent mast put the hull in a dangerous position, and

we propped ourselves up at the rear end of the ship's edge so as not to fall over the railing. Water hit hard over the bow of the ship every time it plunged toward a wave. The demon's head, flashing its teeth, fought against a wall of water, which, in our helplessness, mocked us, and gurgled, and demanded sacrifices. Would we be the next?

Eventually, I felt Mama bind her shawl around my chest; cleverly, she attached me to her own body with the cloth to make sure I wasn't going to be swept overboard.

"I'm not leaving you alone, my little one," she whispered in a firm voice into my ear, as if she had guessed my thoughts. But I saw her fingers trembling. "The gods will protect you; you are..."

A loud noise drowned out her voice, and a huge arsenal of lightning illuminated the horizon. Behind me, I felt my mother's body recoil. She had seen it, too! I was still small, and everything around me seemed big, but I thought that what I saw in the flash of white light was incredibly huge. Mama, too. A black wall had risen up threateningly right in front of us, the height of several ships moving in our direction, like a mountain that had been set in motion to crush us.

Behind me, a terrified cry emanated from my mother. "By all the gods, what is that!" And all of a sudden, time stood still.

We stared at the giant black wave without realising what was going to happen. Even the sailors gave up their efforts to clear the ship again. They just stared motionless at this

billowing wall that had appeared in front of our bow, because they knew there was no chance of escape. Fate had caught up to us with a wave of death.

As if in slow motion, I saw that water monster pushing the ship up in front and lifting it along the wall of water into a vertical position. The wooden hull rattled and groaned under the load. The mast, now destroyed, rumbled past us into the depths and, with it, a few lost sailors. The screaming of the men was drowned out in the noise; I could hear my mother's screaming only because my ear was so close to her mouth. I saw the dragon's head still steadfastly breaking the crest of the waves, then the ship turned over on its back, and the black water embraced me, and all those who shared my fate, with its icy arms.

All was suddenly quiet. Very quiet. The sounds of shattering, the bursting and cracking of metal and wood were smothered under water. I could hear a dull bubbling and felt my mother smashing about and paddling vigorously. Maybe, only maybe, I heard the screams of the sailors. But could one hear screams underwater?

I remained surprisingly calm. The panic of the previous day gave way to a sense of certainty. I accepted my fate and let myself float. And in the blackness of the deep, I felt strangely safe, somewhere between heaven and earth, as if the sea had welcomed me like a guest. Was it the water or the peace? The cold was not unpleasant; I always felt comfortable where others froze bitterly. I almost felt it was beautiful underwater,

had it not been for the shortness of breath and the burning in the lungs. With a whoosh, we penetrated the water's surface, paddling wildly, wheezing and panting; Mama had managed to bring us both back to the top. She had sacrificed her polar bear fur, which now floated through the depths of the sea. Gratefully, I soaked up the precious air.

"Are you alright, Enja?" Panting, Mama choked out the question as she frantically doggie-paddled on the water's surface.

"Yes ... I'm fine! Please let me swim on my own!"

I was still tied to her, but now she pulled the shawl away from me, trembling, and held me fast with her hands. She knew I could swim well. She was probably just afraid that the raging water might pull me away from her. It was now easier for her to stay on the surface because she no longer had to carry my weight.

The sea around us was still raging, although the waves were a little flatter. In a lightning flash, we tried to recognise parts of the ship, but only a few broken pieces could be identified. The giant wave must have crushed the ship and buried the men under it. How and why we were able to survive was a mystery to me. In the meantime, I felt the coldness of the water slowly moving into my bones. As comfortable as I felt in the water, the cold would kill us in no time.

"We won't survive long if we don't get out of here. Look out for something floating, maybe a piece of wood from the ship..." Her voice sounded weary, she shivered from the

cold, and small clouds of steam came from her mouth. The lightning slid further behind the horizon, and the thunderbolt followed at greater distance. The dark, grumbling clouds withdrew with the thunderstorm and sought new victims. The waves no longer roared and did not rock us back and forth quite so angrily on the agitated surface. But the moon came out behind the clouds, shining bright and round. It hung loftily above our fate, illuminating our misery in full light. Far and wide there was no human soul, no land, and no ship in sight.

“Will we die now?”

My voice was just a whisper, but she could hear it over the rattling of her teeth.

She wheezed as if the cold had frozen her lungs. “No, it must not be, it simply must not be ...!” came from her trembling lips. Her growing desperation was palpable in every fibre and made me cry. My proud, confident mother no longer knew what to do. Her helplessness became a reflection of my dwindling hope.

Was this the end? Could it be that the gods had sent us on this journey to kill us? Wasn’t I the chosen one, or were they angry about something?

I saw similar thoughts in Mama’s face illuminated by the moonlight, even if she tried not to show her fear. Her lips were moving. Perhaps she was praying for a little miracle. How small humans were when the gods waved their fists!

I paddled wildly with my arms to keep myself afloat. Again and again, water splashed into my face and my eyes, which were already burning unpleasantly from the salt. But at least a little bit of warmth was generated in my body from the effort.

Suddenly, I saw something that caught my attention: “Mama, look, there!” I pointed to a shady shape not far in front of us, something that was floating in the water. “It floats! Maybe it can carry us!”

With a final mustering of our dwindling forces, we managed to swim to the object, which was quite stable in the water. It was the wooden crate next to which we had slept. It must have come loose from the ship, and now it was drifting upside down in the sea. Mama helped me pull myself over to its surface, and I lay stretched out on the crate like a dead fish, struggling for balance.

“There iss sp ... space fff...for two!” I cried, trembling, clinging to the wooden handle of the box. Mama tried to pull herself up, and the wood bobbed dangerously under the surface of the waves. She stopped immediately and let herself slide back into the water. The base wavered menacingly from left to right. Her head protruded just a few hand-widths from mine out of the water, pale and in deep shadow. Her wet hair shimmered silver. She was breathing calmly and flat now, almost as if she were gaining strength for a new attempt. But she didn’t move, holding the box only at the edge. What was going on with her?

“Mama, you have to get out of the w... water, n... now!” My voice was very thin, like her voice before; fragile. I knew what was to come and fought against fate with all my might. I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth until they crunched.

“You can do it, I’ll hold you...” I managed to say.

The water seemed spiteful, cold, and deadly. When she spoke, her voice was soft and sounded infinitely tired. She had stopped shivering. “The wood is not strong enough to carry us both, only you. It will save you. You will live, Enja. You are the chosen one, and the gods will help you.”

Now I could see through my weakened senses how her strength was failing. Her voice was just a whisper. “I love you, little one. I will always be with you. Here, take this and wear it. It will protect you. It is the bond that unites us!”

Using the last of her remaining strength, she pulled the cord with the amulet off her neck and stretched out her trembling hand. I grabbed it just before it could fall into the water. It was the oval stone with which I was always allowed to play when I sat on her lap; it was smooth and black in

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