

THE LORDS OF ALEKKA : BOOK ONE



EYE

Sometimes the biggest

OF THE

secrets are the ones we

WOLF

keep from ourselves



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## CHAPTER ONE

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Alys was eager to escape the cottage.

Arnon had been in a dark mood since his return.

The men had been away raiding for weeks, yet they had come home empty-handed. There was little to find along the Eastern Shore, which had been ravaged by torrential rain and storms throughout the summer and into autumn. Ruined crops lay abandoned in fields, children died of hunger, merciless plagues came to steal their parents and grandparents away.

There was little to find, yet the men of Ullaberg still had to try, for they had their own families to feed over winter, and few stores left with which to do it.

Alys turned away from the tiny coastal village, towards the sea where the sun was struggling up over the vast horizon. It was a bitterly cold morning, and the sky was a grey reminder of the suffocating gloom winter would soon bring.

Her two children were playing behind her.

She could hear them laughing, teasing each other, and her spirits lifted as she walked. They sounded happy, silly, and she almost smiled.

‘You look terrible.’

Alys froze, suddenly aware of how cold the sand was on her bare feet. How brisk the wind as it battered her bruised face, sweeping her long wheat-coloured hair behind her like a galloping horse’s mane.

She swallowed, looking around, checking on the children.

‘He will kill you one day, Alys. I truly think he will.’

Stina Arnborg was a good friend, a loyal friend, some ten years older than Alys. Widowed young and childless, there had always been a sadness about her that Alys was drawn to.

She supposed it was like looking in a mirror.

Alys sighed. It was hard to hide the truth when that truth was all over her face. And turning back, she braved her friend’s concerned eyes. ‘It’s not so bad.’ She looked past Stina, out to sea, listening to the comforting whoosh of the waves rushing the shore. ‘There’s nothing I can do. Not yet.’

It was a lie, but Alys needed to keep her secrets hidden for the children’s sake.

‘The raid was not a success. Again. And soon, winter will come. Soon it will get harder to leave. And then...’

Alys didn’t want to think about winter.

She would be gone by winter. She had to be.

Nodding, smiling, she grabbed Stina's gloved hand, squeezing it with a grin, trying to pretend she wasn't covered in bruises. Trying to imagine she was as she wanted to be: free, safe, happy.

Loved.

'Let's not worry about it now. That wind feels like an ice giant coming to crush us, but I think we can still enjoy our walk, don't you? Without worrying about winter and what may happen. And especially without worrying about Arnon. I don't want to think about him.' She dragged Stina along, spinning around to see what had happened to Magnus and Lotta. 'Don't get too far behind!' she called, seeing that Magnus was leading his younger sister on an expedition into the steep sand dunes that bordered the tiny village.

They had grown apart lately, Magnus not wanting his little sister's company as much, so it warmed Alys' heart to see him gripping Lotta's hand, pulling her after him.

Turning back around, she froze, shivers racing up her body like streaks of lightning.

Stina, still gripping her hand, could feel it. 'What is it?'

They were just about to round the headland where the beach would turn into a series of sheltered coves, where the Ullaberg men kept their ships and fishing boats.

'Alys?'

'Run!' Alys screamed, turning, charging towards her children. 'Magnus! Magnus! Take Lotta and hide! Run! *Run!*' She spun back to Stina, who was looking after her in surprise. 'Raiders!'

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It was a small village.

Ullaby? Ullaberg?

Reinar Vilander couldn't remember. He hadn't been there before, but he'd decided that it was worth trying. There were no walls. No fortifications at all, apart from a few dunes and boulders, and a lopsided wattle fence barely strong enough to hold in a few chickens. He saw that as he rounded the headland, running through the sand, winking at his brother, though he felt no joy as he gripped his sword in one hand, his battered shield in the other.

Their no-quite-sixty men ran behind the Vilander brothers, up the white-sand beach, a bitter wind at their backs, the screams of the women rising ahead of them in a great shrieking storm.

Sigurd stopped, letting his older brother take his men ahead while he drew the archers back towards the sea. Nocking an arrow, he pulled the bowstring past his ear, feeling the flutter of the fletching brush his cheek. The waves were surging forward. He could taste salt on his tongue, hear the cries of hungry gulls, suddenly loud in his ears.

Or perhaps that was the women?

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Alys ran towards the village, heart pounding, watching Magnus and Lotta before her. The sand was no trouble for them. They scattered like two little beetles seeking shelter and safety, racing past her husband.

Arnon stumbled towards her, half-asleep, naked from the waist up, sword in hand, eyes scanning the beach. He didn't appear to see anyone but the men chasing them all.

'Keep going, Magnus!' Alys screamed, her voice breaking, whipped away by the wind. 'Hurry!' She stopped for a moment, closing her eyes, hoping to get through to him somehow.

Panic exploded into chaos and terror as the raiders surged towards the villagers, bellowing, swords clashing with the first men who had hurried down to the sand, hoping to mount a defense.

Alys could see it as she opened her eyes. She watched Magnus turn around, tugging Lotta's hand, his shoulder-length hair, dark, his sister's so fair it was almost white. He looked up, searching the beach, and for the briefest of moments, he met his mother's eyes.

And Alys knew he could hear her.

'Go,' she breathed. 'Go, my loves.'

Arnon roared before her, sword out, lunging for the big raider who was rushing him, ducking his blade, aiming for his waist.

The arrow shot past Alys, thrumming like a speeding bird, lodging in her husband's bare chest. Arnon looked up in surprise, puffy eyes meeting his wife's, then moving past her, seeing the men who were running, ready to grab her, before staggering backwards, shock flooding his body.

Reinar was irritated as he spun around, glaring at Sigurd and his archers. He was the leader, the Lord of Ottby; he didn't need his little brother watching over him. He turned back as the man collapsed to the sand, eyes fixed on the grey sky, before bellowing at his men. 'We move quickly! Take slaves! Take treasure! Fuck, take food if you can find it! Then we go!'

Arnon lay in the sand, perfectly still, arrow moving about in his chest as the wind picked up, fluttering the white goose feathers of the fletching. Alys couldn't move. She stared down at her husband, feeling nothing. After more than ten years of terror and love and everything in between, she felt nothing at all.

Not even relief.

How could it be over so quickly? So suddenly?

And then a hand, roughly grabbing her arm, yanking her backwards.

Alys tried to turn, inhaling sour ale breath, a smoky beard. She stumbled in the sand, attempting to stay on her feet, eyes up again, searching for Magnus and Lotta as the man dragged her away, growling in her ear; threatening sounds. She was caught, wanting to fight, to run and escape, but she needed her children to escape more.

Fingers digging into her, the man pulled her back down the beach towards the ships.

'We need to gather them together!' someone yelled.

Alys could understand them. Alekkans.

Arrows whistled overhead as the man dragged her across the sand. His stink was overpowering, and she turned her head, struggling to breathe.

Struggling to think.

'Get her with the others!'

And roughly thrown towards a huddle of sobbing Ullaberg women, Alys was suddenly free of the man. She saw Stina, mouth open in shock, long dark hair whipping around her face; some of the other woman clinging to their children.

'We're not taking children!' came a sharp voice. 'What are you thinking, Rutger!'

Alys glanced at Marren, a mean-spirited gossip who clung to her son with panic in her tear-filled eyes.

'Please! No, please!' Marren begged over the terrified wails of her boy. 'Don't take him from me! *Please!*'

But the man slung his bow over his back, snatching the boy away from her desperate arms. Marren's son bit the bearded warrior, kicking and shouting at him, not wanting to go.

‘Mother!’

Other children were screaming, their mothers desperately holding onto them, pleading to stay together.

Alys was shaking now. The wind cried painfully, lifting the hem of her faded green dress, flapping it like a banner. She didn’t notice, not even trying to hold it down.

Beside her, Stina was shaking, and Alys gripped her hand, attempting to steady them both.

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Sigurd Vilander was getting annoyed. He spun around, frowning.

There were too many children.

It was bad enough that they were doing this at all.

He wasn’t going to take fucking children.

Rutger shot him a sour look, spitting on the sand, before turning back to the women, tearing their children out of their arms. ‘Go! Go on, go!’ he yelled to the boys and girls with bulging eyes and tear-wet faces. ‘Run away, little piggies!’ He laughed, throwing one girl to the ground, her mother trying to run after her. ‘Not you, beautiful.’ And pushing the woman back towards the huddle, he ran a filthy hand down her petrified face. ‘You’re not going anywhere.’

Frowning, Sigurd inclined his head to Bjarni, knowing that he was likely the only one clear-eyed enough to see what needed to be done. And how.

Bjarni gave him a nod. He was a short, wide man, with a calm disposition and a friendly face. Trusted. Loyal. One of the only ones left now.

Reinar ran past them both, a broad grin on his blood-splattered face, a piglet under each arm. ‘They’ve got some livestock!’

Sigurd turned after him. ‘What about the menfolk?’

But his brother kept running, followed now by more of their men, arms loaded with barrels of ale; baskets of turnips and onions; a small chest of silver ingots and coins, a couple of them trickling out onto the sand. It was a nothing sort of village, Sigurd thought with tense shoulders, doubting its lord was wealthy enough to be hoarding anything more.

The women’s wails rose as they were separated from their children, who were now being chased up the beach by Rutger, and Anders, who though not as sadistic as Rutger, was not to be trusted either. But at least they were both away

from the women.

Sigurd turned back to Bjarni. 'Get them to the ships quickly. Divide them up. Ludo!' he called, turning to the young man slouching awkwardly behind him. 'Take half to *Dagger*. We may as well take the louder half!' He grinned, though he did not feel happy.

This was not who they were. Not who they had been.

Not who their father would want them to be now.

Sigurd's eyes drifted to one of the women. She wasn't crying, or making any noise at all. Her eyes were fixed ahead, down the beach, perhaps taking one last look at her children? Her dress was green; her hair long and golden. He could see freckles scattered across her nose like tiny grains of sand. Her eyes were blue or green, like the sea which turned from one colour to the other, depending on the weather. She was quite beautiful, and for a moment, Sigurd wasn't aware of anything else. He blinked, noticing that Bjarni was trying to shepherd her along with his group. 'Bjarni! Not her!' Sigurd called. 'Give her to Ludo!' And with that, he turned around, heading for the village.

Alys watched him go as though she was having a dream. He was in charge, she thought. He seemed calm, whereas most did not. There was so much noise and panic swirling around the beach; so many tears and frantic goodbyes. Terrified mothers watched their helpless children run away from them, wanting to hold on to the memory of those precious faces; not wanting to think about what would happen to them without their mothers, and perhaps their fathers too.

She stumbled, pulled away, conscious of Stina working hard to stay beside her, still gripping her hand, her long face the colour of snow, her grey eyes full of tears.

'You want to take any men?' Rutger snarled at Bjarni who had three other men helping him tie up his group of women; rope around their hands, all bound together. They couldn't afford to have even one of them escape. They were going to need the coins they would earn from every last one of them.

Bjarni shook his head. 'You know what Reinart says. No men. Only the women. They're fetching higher prices in Goslund. They like an agreeable house slave in that snake pit.'

Despite the blur of confusion and noise, despite the chaos and panic, the whistle of the wind, and the terrifying song of screams and blades, Alys was listening to the men.

Goslund. Slave capital of Alekka.

She felt a well of pain and fear rise in her chest, shutting her down, and then

another, more powerful feeling: that of survival. And closing her eyes, seeking out her children, Alys tried to hold on to a morsel of hope.

Magnus was a clever boy, a good brother. He would keep Lotta safe.

If he could just get to their secret place in time.

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Magnus had dragged his sister into the barn as soon as they'd run back into the village. His mother's voice rang in his ears, urging him on through the chaos; that and the frantic beat of his heart which pounded like a storm, making him want to cry.

He was so scared.

His father was dead, his mother captured.

The men would have taken her, he knew. There was nothing she could do. She was not a warrior, and even if she was, Magnus could hear warriors screaming and crying all around him as they dropped to the ground like felled trees. Some had been mighty in their time, but they were no match for fearsome raiders with the element of surprise.

It was early. Many of their men had been asleep, drunk from the night before, celebrating their return, though it had been a quiet, morose sort of night. Most of the men were just angry. Bitter and sad. Wanting to hide from what waited for them outside the hall doors.

Lotta was oddly silent beside her brother; her blue eyes blinking rapidly in the windowless barn. Men were shouting outside, though the battle to defend Ullaberg had ended quickly. The raiders were ransacking the village now, taking their livestock, their meagre stores, their treasure. Magnus wrinkled his freckled nose, doubting that Ullaberg had any treasure. Not with a lord like Arald Husak in charge. He was not a warrior, just a fat old man with a bright red nose, who held a cup in his hand instead of a sword. Likely dead, Magnus decided, shaking suddenly, listening to the barn doors rattle.

Someone was outside. Coming in.

Lotta clung to him, snowy hair, luminescent skin, big eyes like two moons staring out of a tiny round face. She had lost a tooth that morning, and she'd carried it in her hand ever since. Magnus could see her gripping it now. He took her other hand, lifting a finger to his lips, urging her to come with him.

Quietly.



They crept through the straw, ignoring the rats who were nibbling on a parsnip they'd stolen from Urna's stores. Nobody loved a parsnip more than Urna Kraki. She grew too many to eat herself, so she was always sharing them around.

Lotta stumbled after her brother, biting her lip. She didn't cry out, though, well aware of how much danger they were in. Magnus pointed to the cart, and Lotta nodded, creeping after him as he crouched down, crawling around the big wooden wheel, quickly brushing away the mounds of straw which hid an old chest. Beneath the chest, Magnus had dug out a deep tunnel, and he pushed his sister into the dark space, grabbing the straw and pulling it back to cover them.

The barn doors creaked open, one man walking inside, sword out, poking through the straw. He kicked out at the rats who squealed, abandoning their parsnip, burrowing into the straw, making a hasty escape.

And then another two men burst inside, brandishing swords, panting.

'Anything?'

'Hasn't been mucked out in some time, that's for sure,' grumbled the first man, gagging at the smell. 'Nothing that I can see.' He lifted his eyes, noticing the thick cobwebs stretching up to the rafters. 'Nothing here at all.'

Magnus held his hand over Lotta's mouth, hot all over. It was a freezing cold autumn morning, but he felt ready to rip off all his clothes and run into the sea. Lotta shook, her back trembling against his chest as they cowered in the hole.

Waiting.

'What's over there?' The second man was not prepared to be dissuaded so quickly. He hadn't found anything worth taking back to the ship yet. It was such a pitiful place, but he couldn't head back to Reinart and Sigurd Vilander empty-handed. 'The cart?'

Magnus' eyes bulged, his mother's voice suddenly loud in his ears, warning him to keep his sister quiet. He gripped Lotta tightly, afraid that she might cry, listening as the heavy footsteps stomped closer.

The men were at the cart now, rummaging about, though there was nothing but cobwebs to find; sticky masses of cobwebs which clung to their bloody fingers, despite their best efforts to shake them off. Cobwebs and a few old tools.

Nothing of any use.

Magnus held his breath, trying to think of what he would do if the men discovered them. His father had shown him how to use a sword and a knife, but Magnus had neither on him. He'd barely been dressed when he'd run out of the cottage to follow his mother and Stina down the beach. He'd been desperate not

to be left behind, worried that his sleeping father would wake up.

The men walked around the cart, listening.

Crouching down.

Running their hands through the straw.

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Some of the women were fighting, tearing at their captors with sharp fingernails, kicking out with unbound feet. Most of the men dragging them on board the two ships which waited in the shallows of the cove were not in the mood to be sympathetic to their plight. They tugged the women along, threatening them with hands, big and filthy, gripping them tightly.

Stina cried out as she was hoisted over the gunwale, into the first ship, rough hands digging into her waist. Both ships were bigger than any seen in Ullaberg before; longer, with more oars.

Real warships.

Alys stumbled, almost thrown over after her friend, her rope, attached to Stina's, dragging her forward, unbalancing her. The young man leading them was awkward. Too tall. Hunching. Big eyes, full of shame.

'Gather here!' he called, trying to make himself heard over the cacophony of panic and terror. 'You will all gather here! Nothing will happen to you! Stay calm, now!'

'Ludo!' Rutger threw the last woman on board *Dagger*, swaying down the deck towards him. He wasn't anywhere near as tall, but his body was stocky, thick with muscle. Threatening. 'You want them to run away?' he snarled. 'Tie that one to the prow. You know what happened last time!' He lowered his voice, eyes up, glancing back at the headland. 'You let any of these bitches escape, what will Reinart think? Forget Sigurd. It's Reinart you need to worry about. He's not going to care about a few bruises, is he? Not when you risk losing one of his pretty prizes.'

Ludo looked surprised, though he knew he shouldn't be. Rutger Eivin had a big mouth; a mean one too.

More men were clambering on board in a noisy, disorganised rush. Ludo heard a goat bleating, panicking as the ship tilted. He glanced at the women, who clung to each other, some weeping, all of them in shock. Guilt nagged at him, and he felt ill with the thought of what they were doing, but he knew that Rutger

was right. Reinar would be wild if he were to lose even one of the women. They needed to get them to the slave markets at Goslund quickly. After the disaster of their last raid, they couldn't afford to make another mistake.

'Alright,' he mumbled to Rutger. 'Help me.'

Alys was yanked forward by the ugly, angry man. He was a threat, she realised quickly. The young man was not. But that angry man? Alys knew men like him. His eyes were on her breasts, and then, so was his hand.

Ludo made a noise, almost like a squeak, though one look at Rutger and his eyes were up on the headland again, and this time he saw Sigurd coming, his long brown hair tied into a topknot that was coming undone in the wind. Relief flooded Ludo's tense limbs as he started wrapping the ropes around the curled dragon prow.

Rutger could sense his skittery companion relax, and seeing Sigurd coming himself, he gave Alys' breast another tweak, winked at her, and disappeared down the ship to greet his leader.

'More men are coming!' Sigurd was yelling, arm in the air. 'More men! Oars in!' He spun around, happy to see his brother jumping on board *Fury*, clapping Torvig Aleksen on the back. Sigurd tried not to roll his blue eyes. They were surrounded by sick little turds. Everywhere he turned these days another cockroach crawled out of the woodpile, and Reinar seemed determined to bring them all into the fold. Murderous, self-interested, desperate men who took an oath in return for coins. There was no loyalty anymore, no shared purpose, just pure, unadulterated greed.

It was not going to end well, Sigurd was sure.

The way things were going, it was definitely not going to end well.

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A shout outside the barn stopped the bloody hand in mid-air. Lying in the hole, Magnus could see it coming towards him, about to part the hay that hid the chest. But the noise caused the hand to retreat, taking its owner with it, and soon the three men were rushing through the straw, out of the barn, all thoughts of searching for treasure gone.

Magnus could feel Lotta collapse against him, his own shoulders loosening with relief. He held her tightly, one hand over her mouth, the other over her heart.



Their mother would come for them.

She would.

And in the meantime, he would get Lotta to safety.

The hole they lay in was narrow, but Magnus knew that inside the chest his mother had hidden saddlebags stuffed with food and clothes, a tinderbox and waterskins. There were fur bedrolls, linen sheeting, and knives. A small cauldron too.

Everything they would need for the journey.

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Sigurd's eyes were on the clouds tumbling overhead, darker than he would have liked, sinking lower. His crew was at the oars, all but Ludo, who was fussing around the women, and Bolli, whose calloused old hands were gripping the tiller as *Dagger* backed up into the waves.

Sigurd liked raiding. Or he had once. But, he thought, one hand holding down a panicking goat who was going to drive everyone slowly insane, this was not the sort of raiding to make the gods smile.

And then the clouds opened, rain cascading over them like a waterfall.

Big drops. Cold too.

Grabbing the goat by the scruff of the neck, Sigurd dragged it down to Bolli whose own eyes were already screwed up against the torrential rain.

'I don't want that whiny beast for company!' the old helmsman grouched. 'Why do we need a goat?'

Sigurd grinned, grabbing a length of rope, tying it around the goat's neck as it skittered around, unhappy with the rocking ship. The waves were rolling like the clouds now, and he was struck by the overwhelming certainty that it was going to be a rough ride home.

'Though, I suppose, rather a bleating goat than those bleating women!' Bolli snorted, listening as the sobbing in the bow grew into a great chorus of misery. He hoped the wind would pick up further. That searing whistle would surely drive the pitiful wails out of his head. He kept his eyes to the right, not wanting to catch a glimpse of them.

Alys was being jostled about, struggling with her balance, worried that she was going to fall onto Stina who was sobbing, shock replaced by grief and misery now. They all were.

Except Alys.

She was trying to think of a way to stop them from going to Goslund.

They couldn't go to Goslund.