

The Harrowing

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HERON
BOOKS

Not much further, Tova pleads. She doesn't know how much longer she can go on. She can hardly place one foot before the other any more, but she doesn't want to be left behind and find herself alone on these hills, with night's shadow falling all around her. She presses on up the path, leading Winter, clenching her teeth as she struggles against the wind. It grasps at her clothes as if determined to tear them from her, fierce but clumsy, like the fingers of an unwanted admirer.

Her lady, Merewyn, strides on in front, leading her own palfrey, fifty paces ahead. Almost at the crest already.

She'll kill us, Tova thinks. She'll kill us both. She's brought this upon us, and now we'll probably die out here, in this wilderness. Either they'll catch us or else the cold will do for us. Because of what she's done.

Of course Tova didn't have to come. If she'd been strong enough, she could have refused, could have stayed behind, where it's safe and warm, where there's no one pursuing her. That's what she tells herself. But she knows it's not true. How could she have forgiven herself if she'd abandoned her lady in her hour of need, after everything Merewyn has done for her?

That's why she's here. That's why she came. And whatever happens now, she knows there's no turning back.

The wind whips once, twice, then dies away. A moment's respite. And that's when she hears it. Blasting out across the hillside, each time louder than the last: a sound she recognises. A sound that makes her stomach lurch and her skin turn to ice.

The sound of the horn. She turns, ready to cry out—

But there's no one. Only a goat with an injured foreleg, bleating forlornly as it negotiates a rocky outcrop and limps on down the hill. Her tiredness is catching up with her, and now her ears are playing tricks. She takes a deep breath, trying to still her nerves and her pounding heart. She glances down the path, back along the valley. Fields and hedges glisten white with frost that the day's small warmth has failed to melt. Between them winds the swollen stream: tumbling, frothing, bright with the dying sun's fire.

She shivers, and not just from the cold. If she stays in one place too long, her feet will freeze and won't want to move again. Her dress is wet at the hem, and she wishes she'd had time to gather some thicker clothes, ones better suited to the road, rather than these thin things. Gloves, too. Her hands are dry and beginning to crack at the knuckles. Her fingers might as well belong to someone else, for all that she can feel them. Sharp as steel, the wind pierces fur and wool and linen, biting into flesh: ice-burning, wounding deep. In all her fifteen years she can't remember a winter as bitter as this.

Keep going, she tells herself.

She pulls her borrowed cloak closer around her shoulders and belts it more tightly to try to stop it flapping. Someone back home will be missing it, she thinks, and for a moment she feels sorry for him. It must be a man, she decides, not just because of its size but also because of the hole in one armpit, which any woman would have made sure to mend. Was it Skalpi's once?

Probably not; Merewyn would surely have seen to it if it were. It's heavy and the sleeves are too long, but it's all she has and better than nothing. In the darkness and in their rush to leave, she couldn't find her own anywhere, and this was the best her lady was able to lay hands on. Theft, to add to everything else.

This will end up being my burial shroud, she thinks.

At last she manages to drag herself and Winter, her faithful mare, to the top of the hill. Merewyn is waiting. Her fine woollen cloak, with its ermine trim and paired silver brooches, is wrapped tightly around her shoulders. Her fair hair has come loose from its braid and flies in the wind; her cheeks are flushed pink, and her face is drawn in a stern look.

'Keep up,' she tells Tova. 'We can't stop. If they find us . . .'

She doesn't finish. She doesn't have to.

And the fact that Tova's here, helping Merewyn: will that make her just as guilty in their eyes? Maybe they'll show her mercy. As for her lady, though, she's less sure. Not after what she's done.

Tova knows, even without being told. She has seen the spots of blood on Merewyn's sleeve, at the wrist where she's tried to conceal them underneath her bracelet. Small and dark, they could be easily mistaken for spatters of dirt, like those now decorating her skirt after a day's hard riding across the moors.

But they aren't dirt. They were there at the beginning.

She remembers hearing Cene's barking, although it seemed somehow distant. She remembers Merewyn's hand on her shoulder, jolting her from her dreams.

They needed to go, she said. Straight away.

Tova didn't understand, not at first, but then in the lantern light and through blurry eyes she saw those crimson spots. And straight away she knew.

The desperation in her lady's hushed voice. The whiteness

of her face. The quickness with which her eyes darted about the room, as if she expected to be discovered at any moment. How Tova's own heart wouldn't stop thumping as she tugged on clothes and at the same time shoved what she needed into her pack. She didn't hesitate, didn't question. Instead she kept her fears bound up as tightly as she could while she concentrated on doing what she needed to do, as quickly and as quietly as possible. And so under cover of night she and her lady slipped away from the hall, from the manor. From Heldeby. From home. By the time the first sliver of sun crept above the eastern hills, they were already long gone.

It was only a few hours ago, and yet it feels like an age. She has no idea how many miles they've travelled, but she doesn't think it's very far. Which is why Tova thinks that sooner or later, Ælfric will find them. Him and Ketil and whatever band of men they've managed to gather. They'll have dogs with them to sniff out the trail; they'll have swift horses beneath them—

'Come on,' Merewyn says. 'Just a little farther, before dark.'

'Wait,' Tova says.

'We can't stop. You know we can't. If we're to have any hope of losing them, we have to keep going.'

'Going where? Do you even know where we are?'

Tova doesn't know this land, and she's beginning to doubt that her lady does too. They've been keeping off the main tracks and droveways, staying well away from any manor or vill, since two young women travelling on a harsh winter's day like this and in such uncertain times as these, are highly conspicuous and easily remembered. What they don't want is to meet anyone who can say later that, yes, they did indeed spy a lady and her maid upon the road, and strange it seemed for them to be out by themselves, and that they came through not an

hour ago, and they were riding in that direction, and that if you go after them quickly you should catch them before the day is out.

She has been trusting Merewyn. Trusting that she knows what she is doing and knows her way. But now Tova sees her hesitation. And she realises the truth.

They're lost.

Lost and chilled to the bone and starving too. Tova is no stranger to hunger: she remembers that year after the dry summer when the barley wilted in the fields, when they had to boil roots they'd dug up in the woods so that they could make what grain they had stretch through the cold months. But it's not just a question of food. They have no tent, nor kindling for a fire, nor so much as a winter blanket between them on which to bed down. Already it's growing late; the river mist is starting to settle over the meadows below. The first stars are appearing. Clear skies. A frosty night to come.

'The old road is this way,' Merewyn says, but she's only repeating what she has already said several times, and the words have grown stale. 'If we can find it, we can reach my brother's manor. We'll be safe there, I promise. He'll take us in, he'll protect us.'

'And what if they've sent word ahead? Don't you think that if Ælfric has any sense, he'll guess that's where we might go? What if they're already waiting for us when we arrive? How is Eadmer going to protect us then?'

Merewyn is silent for a while as if contemplating, but there's nothing to contemplate. Tova knows she's right.

Her lady asks, 'What would you have us do, then?'

Tova glances towards the west, where the tiniest gleam of sun is still visible. It won't be for much longer.

'We need shelter. Some place where there's fodder and food

and a fire, where we can rest until we work out what to do next. We can't keep travelling through the night. We don't know the paths. What if one of the horses loses its footing and goes lame? What if one of us falls and breaks an ankle?

Merewyn bites her lip. It's fear above all else that has kept them going all day without food or water, with hardly any pause. That same fear is what drives her still. But for the first time since this morning Tova sees doubt in her eyes: a sign that reason is at last beginning to win through.

'I thought I saw a hall about a mile back, maybe a bit more than that,' Tova says. 'We could ask the people there if they could spare—'

Merewyn presses her hands against her forehead as though an ache has been building for some time and won't go away.

'It's all right,' Tova says. She puts her arm around Merewyn as she turns and buries her head in Tova's shoulder.

'I never meant to do it,' Merewyn says, sobbing. 'You know that, don't you?'

'I know.'

But she doesn't know. Still all these hours later Merewyn hasn't told her the whole story of what happened, and Tova doesn't feel it's her place to ask. So she's guessing, filling in the details as best she can, piecing the story together from what she already knows.

'This is all my fault,' says Merewyn.

'Don't say that.'

To the west, the sun has at last vanished below the hills. If they're going to find somewhere to spend the night, they need to do so quickly. Tova doesn't want to be stumbling across these hills in the moonlight.

'Look,' she says. 'It's not far back to this hall. If we try, we can probably still make it before dark.'

Merewyn wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. 'All right,' she says as she pulls away, breathing deeply, trying to regain her composure. To reassert herself. 'But we tell no one who we really are. Do you understand? No one. We're travellers – pilgrims who have lost the road and are looking for somewhere to spend the night.'

Tova nods. As if she needed to be told. She understands they need to be careful. She only hopes that the folk are friendly, that they have food and ale to spare, and a bench by the wall or a mattress of straw set aside where guests can bed down.

And then tomorrow, she thinks, we'll do this all over again.

She knows something isn't right long before they reach the hall. Night has fallen. Only the faintest ribbon of orange above the woods to the west. The wind has eased, at least, and for that small mercy she thanks God. Her hunger has gone too; her stomach seems to have given up any hope of food. All she wants is to sit in front of the hearth fire, to dry these damp clothes of hers, to warm her ice-bitten hands and to feel the glow upon her cheeks.

Except as she gazes across the vale she sees no smoke rising from the thatch, nor from any of the field labourers' cottages and laithes that surround it. Not a wisp anywhere. And no smoke means no fire. Yet it isn't that long since dusk. Surely it can't be that everyone is already in their beds.

It's quiet. Not a bleat nor a whinny from byre or stables; no goatherd calling out as he rounds up the last of his lord's flock, nor the sound of a child crying, nor gentle music carrying softly from the hall. Only the owls calling to one another across the valley.

'What's wrong now?' Merewyn asks.

'Listen,' Tova says, surprising herself with her own forcefulness.

‘For what?’ Merewyn asks, her frown darkening. ‘I don’t hear anything.’

‘That’s what I mean.’

It’s as if everyone who lived here has simply disappeared: flown away on the wind to join the swallows wherever it is they go for the winter, leaving their homes and all their possessions behind them.

‘Do you think we should go on?’ Tova asks. Her feet won’t carry her much further, certainly not as far as the next nearest village or manor, wherever that might be.

Her lady doesn’t seem to hear. She glances about, suddenly anxious. But everything is still: no sign of movement anywhere.

Tova asks, ‘What?’

‘I don’t know,’ Merewyn says. ‘Stay close to me.’

There’s an unwelcome feeling in the pit of Tova’s stomach, the same as the one she had when Merewyn woke her in the night. She can’t help but feel that someone, somewhere, is watching them.

She remembers the stories the grown-ups used to tell when she was young. Stories of the shadow-walkers, creatures that stalk the night, which were said to come when the moon is new, as it is tonight, to steal away children and livestock to eat or sometimes to sacrifice to the Devil. Tova never paid much heed to those tales; it didn’t take her long to work out that they had been made up only to frighten children into behaving. The closer they get to the hall, though, past the churchyard and the empty sheepfold, the surer she becomes. Something’s out there. A shadow-walker, in one form or another.

Enough, she tells herself. You’re letting your imagination get the better of you.

She keeps a tight hold of Winter’s reins as they approach the hall, which is built in the old style, like a boat turned upside

down, wider amidships than at bow and stern, the keel arching towards the sky. Like the one at home, until it burned down five years ago and Skalpi had the new one built. Nowhere near as grand, though. It seems a poorer place than Heldeby; at most a dozen families must live here. Or lived. The roof of one of the barns has collapsed in on itself, while the cob is crumbling away, exposing the wattle. Hoes and shovels have been left propped up against walls. Pails stand half-full of murky water.

They come to the yard, which is bounded on one side by the hall and on two others by squat timber-and-thatch buildings that might be storehouses or kitchens or stables. Tova thought that maybe someone might have come out to greet them, if not from the cottages then from the hall itself. But no one does.

‘Where is everyone?’ she whispers as they near the well in the middle of the yard. She feels the need to be quiet, in case whatever it is that’s watching them should also be listening. The wind has died to nothing. Silence hangs everywhere like a shroud.

‘Stay here with the horses,’ Merewyn says.

‘Where are you going?’ Tova calls after her, but Merewyn is already making her way across the yard to the hall door. Taking charge. Her skirt trails in the mud, but she’s too preoccupied to notice or care. She hammers with pale fists upon the oak, calling to whoever’s inside, asking if they’ll offer respite to two weary travellers. When there’s no answer, she shakes the handle, but it won’t budge.

Tova glances around, searching the shadows. Whatever happened here, she decides, it can’t be good. As desperate as she is for food and warmth and rest, suddenly she wants nothing more than to leave, and as soon as possible. Out here in the yard they’re too exposed. Whatever was watching them before is still out there, and she doesn’t like it.