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THE ASHEN SERIES
BOOK ONE

DEMI WINTERS



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PART I

FLAMES

Fear not death, for the hour of your doom
is set, and none may escape it.

—VÖLSUNGA SAGA

CHAPTER I

Skarstad

Silla Nordvig believed in the little signs the old gods left for mortals—red skies to foretell surprise, the flíta to usher in change, and the black hawk as a herald of death. Above all else, she knew that bad fortune came in threes, so it should not have come as a surprise when those wretched bells started ringing. She jumped in fright all the same.

After washing the bread dough from her hands, Silla dried them on the coarse material of her homespun skirts. *Ashes*, she thought. This week was truly taking a toll on her.

It had all started to unravel when Olaf the Red had requested tenancy payment a week ahead of schedule, stretching their threadbare budget beyond its limits. Next, Silla had burned her thumb while pulling barley cakes from the embers, dropping the full batch into the cookfire. Grains were growing more and more costly—after three long winters in a row, crops were stunted, and the harvest would be grim. Silla had earned herself a stern verbal lashing for her mistake.

And now the third instance of ill fortune this week—those foul-some bells.

Silla smoothed the floral embroidery along the belt of her blue apron dress, the same worn by all of Jarl Gunnell's domestic hands, and made her way outdoors. The jangle of iron keys signaled the arrival of Bera, Jarl Gunnell's wife and head of the household. Silla

quickly found her place in line, fingers threading tightly together as Bera counted them.

“Twelve. All right, on your way, you lot,” she said in a gentle voice, ushering them out. “Let us hope this is swift. For all involved.”

A light breeze caressed Silla’s face and pulled a few chestnut coils from her tightly woven braid as she stepped along the path. For a gray day, it was pleasantly warm, the sun obscured by clouds. A wasp buzzed at her face, and she swatted it away. Birds twittered from the gardens of the homestead. It was almost peaceful for a moment. Until the following toll of the bell, long and so loud, it set Silla’s teeth on edge.

She matched her steps to the others, keeping her eyes on the blue skirts of the girl ahead of her. They walked in a single line, making their way down the rutted lane. Silla didn’t have to look to know Jarl Gunnell and his men—warriors, stablemen, and field workers alike—would be following behind. The jarl was one of the few members of nobility who did not use enslaved thralls brought over from Norvaland, but if he had, they would join as well. The bells were nothing if not the great equalizer, demanding the presence of every Íseldurian over ten winters of age, regardless of class.

Silla glanced toward the stables but could not see her father. He’d be there, somewhere among the field workers, in his dirt-stained gray tunic. He’d be wiping grime from his face, worrying about her, about *them*, deciding they’d lingered too long in Skarstad. It would be time for a fresh start. Another one.

They walked along the packed-dirt road and through a gate in the stockade walls of the village, past timber homes topped with thatched roofs. While orderly woodpiles were stacked neatly before the homes, the cabbage yards overflowed with kitchen herbs and vegetables. Skarstad itself was small and unremarkable, interchangeable with most towns in Sudur lands. Silla should know; she’d lived in so many of them. Neatly laid out and encircled by tall defensive walls, it held two main thoroughfares that intersected in a central, tree-lined courtyard. The mead hall was neatly maintained, the stoops well swept, the square stained with blood.

The bells grew louder as they approached the square, each clang

more menacing than the last. The sounds vibrated through Silla’s bones, ratcheting her insides tighter and tighter with each step closer. Men and women, merchants and farmers alike joined them until a throng crowded the road. At last, they rounded the corner into the central courtyard. Silla shuffled toward the towering Klaernar warrior standing by a wagon piled with jagged black rocks; he passed one out to each who entered the courtyard. Silla kept her eyes low as she waited, knowing what she’d see if she lifted her gaze. Muffled voices floated through the square, pleading. Begging.

It is in vain, she thought with distaste.

The oppressive presence of the Klaernar warrior looming before her stifled the air. Occasionally called the Claws of the King, the Klaernar were all physically imposing, and Silla kept her gaze trained on the warrior’s boots. They were worn, smudged with dirt, a sight she found oddly comforting—proof he was, in fact, human. If she lifted her eyes, Silla knew she’d see he wore a shirt of black chain mail, punctuated by screaming bear shoulder plates in shining silver. Knew that she’d see three claw marks tattooed along the man’s right cheek.

She’d heard rumors that the second sons of Íseldur were changed not just physically once they took the claw, but mentally as well. Something happened when they went through the Ritual and pledged themselves to King Ivar and his Bear God, Ursir. No matter how diminutive their stature before the Ritual, they returned transformed—tall and built like mountains, their newly inked faces etched in permanent scowls. It was said they carried Ursir’s blessing in their veins, which only deepened Silla’s unease.

As the King’s Claw placed a chunk of raw obsidian in her palm, Silla’s hand dipped under its weight. She stared at the flat, glossy surface. How could something be so beautiful and yet so ugly all at once?

The resounding chimes startled her from her thoughts, so loud they were near deafening in the square. Silla lurched forward, eyes darting in search of the blues of Jarl Gunnell’s help. Somehow, she had lost them. Silla lifted her eyes, just for a heartbeat, to try to get her bearings.

It was a mistake; she'd known it to be but couldn't stop herself. Three sets of V-shaped columns stretched up from the circular dais in the center of the square, a runic altar stone centrally positioned. Each condemned was secured to a set of wooden pillars, arms stretched wide between them, feet secured together at the base. Iron bridles muzzled their faces and smothered their voices. A pity the contraptions didn't shield their eyes; those unfortunate souls saw it all—the crowd, the rocks, the imminence of death. Anticipation was an equal part of the punishment, Silla supposed.

She stood on shaky legs, her gaze locking with that of the woman in the middle. Her eyes were wild with fear, the whites flashing. Heart dropping like a stone, Silla realized she was not a woman at all but a girl in her early teens. The girl's face swam, her brown eyes dissolving to Mother's vibrant green, urging her to look away—

No.

With a shaky exhale, Silla forced her gaze to the ground. Now was no time for those memories to surface.

"Next!" boomed the Klaernar, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Eyes searching, Silla finally caught sight of the blues and browns to her right and made her way quickly toward the group.

The little blond girl was with them, small and out of place among Jarl Gunnell's help. Her unkempt hair was plastered to her neck, her face smeared with dirt. Haunting blue eyes, which tilted up at the outer corners, looked at Silla as the girl fidgeted with the hem of her torn and rumpled nightdress. "You should pay better attention," came the girl's young voice.

Silla had tried to guess the girl's age, and her best estimate sat at five or six winters. "And you should mind your manners," she said absently.

"What did you say, Katrin?" asked Bera, her voice stern.

Silla's gaze shot to Bera's steely face. "I—it was not you to whom I spoke," she muttered.

"Who then? Who were you speaking to?"

Her eyes flicked back to where the girl had stood moments before—now nothing but empty space. *You've said enough*, thought Silla, pressing her lips together. *Gather your wits, Silla Margrét.*

"So hard to find good help," muttered Bera. "Lazy or touched in the head."

Silla inhaled deeply as she looked away. Spotting a familiar blond head threaded with gray, her eyes locked onto her father's. He seemed to sag when he saw her, as though he'd been holding his breath. Beside him stood the kindly stablehand who'd provided them with furs and a few kitchen provisions when Silla and her father had first arrived in Skarstad—Tolvik, if memory served her. A grim smile upon his face, Tolvik's silver head dipped, and Silla returned the gesture.

The clouds parted, sunbeams streaming down from the sky, catching sparkling minerals in the flagstones of the street and warming Silla's back.

Mercifully, the bells stopped. Several minutes passed, and the crowd grew larger, filling the square and spilling out into side streets. Hushed conversation and restless energy descended into the courtyard; the tension was so thick, you could cleave it with an axe.

At last, the Speaker of the God entered the courtyard. Ursir's Gothi was a tall man, his pale, bald skull glinting in the sun-filled square. He wore flowing brown robes clasped around his shoulders, the hem embroidered with shining golden runes. Two tall Klaernar warriors flanked the Gothi, bear pelts wrapped around their shoulders indicating their rank as kapteins at the very least. Like all of the King's Claws, they wore their beards long and woven into twin braids; handaxes, swords, and daggers were strapped at their hips.

One of the kapteins procured a piece of parchment and began to read, his voice rising loud and clear through the courtyard. "By order of King Ivar Ironheart of the great line of Urkan Sea Kings, son of King Harald of Norvaland and great sovereign of the Kingdom of Íseldur, we have brought Agnes Svrak, Lisbet Kir, and Ragna Skuli before us in our sacred duty to pass judgment. They stand accused of the willful use of magic." The kaptein looked into the crowd. "What say you, the people of Skarstad, of these women who so flagrantly disregard the rules of our kingdom? These women who do not believe in our laws?"

"Guilty!" chanted the crowd. It was an empty ritual, these trials. Never did anyone call out for the condemned to be freed.

With judgment passed, the Gothi stepped to the first of the condemned, drawing a sacred dagger and golden bowl from the folds of his robes. The woman pulled against her bindings to no avail, her muffled pleas growing more desperate as the man sliced into the vein of her inner elbow, collecting a stream of blood in the gilded bowl.

"As are all of the Galdra, they are sentenced to death by stoning," boomed the kaptein. "But first, a Letting will pay penance to the King of Gods."

Ravens cawed ominously from the top of the bell tower as the crowd waited in silence. The rock grew unbearably heavy in Silla's hand. After a long minute, the bowl had filled, and the Gothi dipped his fingers in the blood before dragging them in a series of lines and circles along the woman's forehead—the runic symbol barring her entry to Ursir's Sacred Forest in the afterlife. The bald-headed man moved to the altar stone, chanting in Urkan as he poured the remainder over the runic inscriptions.

As the Gothi moved to the next condemned, Silla's gaze was drawn to the puddle of crimson on the dais, blood falling in a slow drizzle from the first woman's elbow. How many times would this happen? How many men and women would die before the Bear God's appetite for blood was satisfied—before Ivar Ironheart's hatred of the Galdra was quelled?

The muffled pleas of the condemned grew more desperate, more urgent, and Silla realized that the Gothi had fulfilled his role and had turned to the crowd.

"Now you will prove your loyalty to Ursir, to King Ivar Ironheart, with their blood!" The crowd cheered, though some looked simply resigned to the gory task at hand.

The first stone was cast, thudding through the silence of the square. Silla's vision twinned for a brief moment, her mother's screams ringing in her skull. Gritting her teeth, she struggled to rein in the memories. She could not fall apart, not here, not now.

More stones were thrown. A squelch preceded a muffled cry. Silla

kept her eyes downcast and gripped her rock tightly as the cries of the villagers and the screams of the women wove together, a jarring melody that made her skin crawl. Edging toward the dais with the rest of Jarl Gunnell's help, she saw Bera cast her stone from the corner of her eye. But Silla was frozen in place, staring.

Anger sparked inside her like a firestone struck. *Wrong. This is all wrong.*

"Throw it," said the little blond girl. "Your skin is too smooth for the whipping post."

Silla sucked in a deep breath, pulled her arm back, and launched the rock toward the dais. She did not look to see if it hit its target.

On and on it went, an unending torrent of blood and fury. The ravens screamed overhead; blood pooled on the dais long after the women's screams had faded, long after their battered heads hung limp. The Klaernar roamed through the crowd in search of uncast stones while the aftertaste of violence hung heavy in the air.

The kaptein's voice rang out. "Let this serve as a warning to those drawn to the temptation of magic. Ursir will set you a fate you cannot escape. You will pay in blood." With that, the spectacle had ended, and the crowd turned to leave. Silla's nerves jangled, her feet heavy as iron.

Think hearthfire thoughts, she imagined her mother saying. *The kind of thoughts that warm you through.*

Baby seals. Sneezing. The scent of books.

A cry rose up, disrupting her thoughts. Silla's eyes darted up, with the rest of the crowd, to the sky, where a shape crawled slowly across the sun. The light was swallowed, leaving them in ghostly twilight.

"The sun is stolen!" cried a woman, and Silla realized at last—it was an eclipse.

"Sunnvald is angered!" came a man's ragged voice . . . a familiar voice. "He shows His disapproval for the slaughter!"

Heart thudding, Silla's gaze flew to the Klaernar kapteins, observing a quick succession of hand gestures. Three Klaernar rooted the culprit from the crowd, over where she'd last seen her father.

Panic rose within her as the kapteins dragged the man to the dais, and she looked at his face.

It was Tolvik.

Silla exhaled in relief, then chastised herself. It was not her father, no, but Tolvik was a good and kind man. Bile rose in her throat, and she could not look away as the tallest of the Klaernar cut the binds of one of the condemned free. Her corpse landed with a loud thud, limbs protruding at unnatural angles. With ruthless efficiency, the kaptein began to secure Tolvik's wrists to the pillars.

But the old man seemed only to be spurred on. "The old gods will not stand for this! They punish us already with the long winters!"

"Silence!" bellowed the kaptein, his palm cracking across Tolvik's face.

Tolvik blinked, then his eyes flashed with determination. "They will cleanse the lands with fire! It has been done before! It will happen again!"

Silla's stomach clenched tight as the second kaptein stepped to Tolvik, wrenching his mouth open. A blade flashed through the air, Tolvik's screams reaching a shrill crescendo before dampening to choked sobs. The kaptein turned to the crowd, something landing with a wet thud. Tolvik's agonized face came into view, blood leaking from his mouth, and nausea clawed up Silla's throat. His tongue. They'd cut out his tongue.

"Has anyone else pagan thoughts they'd care to voice?" bellowed the kaptein. The crowd grew silent, and the shadow moved from the sun, casting the square in a luminescent golden hue—wrong, all wrong, for the somber mood hanging over the courtyard.

"There is one true God," shouted the Gothi, slicing into Tolvik's vein. Blood drizzled from his elbow into the golden bowl. "The King of Gods. The *Warrior* God."

Deathly silence filled the square as the Gothi drew the runic symbol on Tolvik's forehead, as he poured the blood over the altar stone. A kaptein passed the Gothi a gauntlet, and he pulled it on, steel claws glinting from the knuckles.

"He is the God of Tooth and Claw. And His name is Ursir!"

Look away, Silla urged herself, but she could not. Not even as Tolvik's tunic was lifted and the claws raked across the soft flesh of his belly. Not even as the older man's entrails spilled out like pink, twisting eels. Tolvik screamed with agony Silla felt in her bones, in her very soul.

He was still alive when the crowd flowed from the square.

Still alive when the ravens swooped down from above.

Still alive when they began to feast on him.

Silla tried to block all of this from her mind, focusing with all of her strength on the blue skirts of the girl in front of her—tracing the rough-spun threads, counting the scattered holes where sparks from the cookfire had landed. Dazed, Silla followed these skirts down the trodden dirt road, through the stockade walls, and up toward Jarl Gunnell's homestead. It was miraculous that her feet were moving, as numbness had taken over, her mind frozen.

She was not sure how far she'd walked when a dull sound droned in her ears, a small yellow-and-black creature entering her vision. Another wasp? Silla blinked as it buzzed right at her face, landing on her nose.

"What—" she started, swatting it away.

"Old fool," muttered Bera, distracting Silla from the insect.

Her thoughts returned to the square. What had come over Tolvik? He'd been clever and kind. To speak of the old gods, to invoke the name of Sunnvald in the presence of the Klaernar, was to ask for death. Silla's father had made it clear enough to her that while it was their duty to honor their ancestral gods, it must be done behind closed doors. And so long as King Ivar sat on the throne, that was how it must be.

Had Tolvik forgotten himself?

Her mind circled back to the eclipse. There was no doubt now; there was no clearer indication that it was time for them to leave. If history had taught her anything, it was that an eclipse was a harbinger of darkness—bad things inevitably followed.

They passed the outbuildings and reached the door to the long-

house, pausing to wait for Bera to slide a key into the iron padlock. Silla felt as though the single hour had lasted an entire week. Muscles aching as if she'd walked all day, she was a husk of herself.

"Well now," said Bera as they entered the longhouse. "Who's ready for a hot cup of róa?"

CHAPTER 2

Silla leaned against the heavy ashwood walls of the stables, glancing toward the fields of stunted barley and rye in search of her father's tall silhouette. Although the seventh chime had sounded, the late summer sunset meant the homestead was still well lit.

After the eventful morning, a peace had settled, and the air was silent save for the gentle whicker of horses and hushed conversation from within the stables. Despite this, Silla was sick over what had happened to Tolvik earlier in the day. Perhaps she was a coward, but she could not bring herself to go into the stables to see the faces of those who knew him well. She simply wished to see her father, hear his calming voice, and reassure herself that he was all right.

Silla pulled the leather tie from her hair, then unthreaded the braid that ran down her spine. Curls sprang loose around her shoulders, and she worked her fingers to massage the ache from her scalp.

The heavy doors to the stables thudded shut, and Silla jumped with a loud gasp.

"I did not mean to frighten you." A dark figure had emerged, changing course and moving toward her. Silla squinted, trying to make out his face. As the figure moved out of the shadows with a slow, ambling gait, she recognized him as the farrier. Scratching his beard, the man smiled at her. "You're Hafnar's daughter, are you not? Katrin?"

Silla stared blankly for the span of a heartbeat before remembering that Hafnar was the name by which Matthias currently went. "Gods' ashes," blurted Silla. "I'm twitchy as a squirrel today. Yes to

both questions." Her eyes locked onto his—dark and kind with creases from smiling. "And you're Kiljan, correct?"

He nodded, extending a hand. "Well met."

Silla slid her palm into his, eyes darting down. His tanned hands were large and well muscled; she supposed one's hands must grow strong in his line of work. Kiljan leaned on the wall beside her, the faint scent of horses and coal dust meeting her nostrils. "You work the cookfires?"

"Yes. I've been assigned breads, which I don't mind in the least. Did you know there are *nine* different types of bread? With loaves and flatbreads and panbreads, how could you ever be bored?" Noticing the blank look on Kiljan's face, she paused. *You're babbling again*, she chastised herself. *Ask him about himself*. "And you work with the horses?"

He nodded.

Silla smiled. "That must be nice. I love horses. I hope to have my own one day."

"They do make for good company."

She leaned closer. "Between us, I prefer horses to some people. Several of them, really."

"I'd have to agree with you, Katrin." Kiljan chuckled softly. "How does Skarstad suit you?"

"Oh, it's lovely," she replied, then frowned. "Though this week has not been quite as lovely. How fare the stablehands after what happened to Tolvik?"

Kiljan looked at the ground. "Mood is somber."

She hugged herself. "I can imagine. Did you know him well?"

"Worked with him for five . . . six turns of winter now? I cannot believe it."

She frowned. "How awful—"

"It's time to leave."

Silla's head snapped up at the familiar voice, her gaze locking onto eyes of icy blue. While he moved like a young man, her father was beginning to show his age through streaks of gray in his blond hair and beard and the lines etched into his pale forehead. She took

in the rest of him—dirt-stained gray tunic layered with a leather jerkin, hevrít, handaxe, and daggers sheathed in his belt.

Never unarmed, this father of mine, she thought wryly. As a child, she'd found herself wondering if he slept with his hevrít and had pulled back the blanket to find out—only to have him grasp her wrist and twist it roughly. As sleep had dissolved from his eyes, he'd apologized profusely, warning her never to startle a sleeping man. He'd then shown her the long blade he indeed kept beneath his pillow, his favored bone-hilted hevrít.

The tension inside Silla slid away, and she launched herself forward, hugging her father tightly. His heavy arms wrapped around her, and for just a moment, the foulness of the week seemed to melt away. She drew back, and her father pulled on her elbow, steering her down the lane toward their home on the outskirts of town. Silla glanced back at Kiljan, whose mouth opened, then closed.

"Until tomorrow, Kiljan," her father said, his voice gruffer than usual.

Silla frowned. It had been abrupt and perhaps a bit rude of a departure. "Well met, Kiljan!" she called feebly over her shoulder with a small wave.

Silla blew a wayward coil of hair away from her face. After twenty turns of winter, she had never kissed another. It had been so long since she'd had a true friend. She loved her father. She was safe and loved in return. Things could be worse. But they could also be better.

She craved something. She craved *more*. Friendship. To fall in love. To live. How could she do this while always looking over her shoulder, while she and her father floated through life like wraiths in the darkness? They lived the life of survival, doing what they must to earn enough sólas to survive, never staying more than three months in one place. Silla had always found work by the cookfires, and her father usually obtained labor on a farmstead. She admired the way he melded into each new job and each new town seamlessly—he reminded her of the frost foxes, whose fur shifted colors to blend in with their surroundings.