

CHAPTER 1

THE BEGINNING

The young mother sat propped up in the hospital bed, her hands restless against the coarse blanket. The room carried the faint odour of antiseptic. A jug of water and a glass sat untouched on the table beside her. She stared at the door, wanting, needing, it to open in the hope that one of the passing footsteps would bring news of her new born son.

Finally, a knock broke the silence. Her pulse quickened.

“Come in,” she called, her voice expectant.

The door opened slowly, and the Old Man stepped in, his face lined like a map of ancient lands. His grey eyes sparkled as he smiled.

“Ah, good. I’m glad to see you are awake. How do you feel?” he asked gently.

“I’m fine,” she replied, sitting straighter, her chest tightening. “Where is my son? Is he alright?”

He nodded and closed the door behind him, his movements deliberate. “May I sit?” he asked, his voice soothing.

She nodded, and he took the chair beside her bed, folding his hands in his lap.

“Your son is healthy,” he began, “You need not worry about his well-being.”

Her breath rushed out in relief, “When can I see him?”

“Soon, but you need to know...” he continued, his voice softening further, “he is... unique. And that uniqueness requires a kind of care that we are providing now.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, urgently. “Why have you not brought him to me? Why can’t I see him? What’s wrong with him?”

“Nothing is wrong,” the Old Man assured her quickly, leaning forward. “In fact, he is... remarkable,” he said choosing his words carefully.” And, sometimes, special children need a little more help at the start. The Sisters are with him now, ensuring he is as strong and healthy as he can be.”

Her hands clenched the blanket, her knuckles white. “I need to see him, haven’t even held him yet.”

He hesitated. “You need to be patient and, you need to rest. It’s just a precaution,” he said.

Her brow furrowed. “A precaution? Against what?”

“Complications,” the Old Man said quickly.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. He could see the questions forming in her mind as she tried to piece together the answers he would not give.

“What complications? Will I be able to see him soon?” she whispered finally.

“Yes,” he replied kindly. “As soon as the Sisters are finished with their work. You’ll hold him, and you’ll see how strong he is. I promise.”

The Old Man rose, his movements slow and deliberate. "Have faith in the care he’s receiving," he said.. "And have faith in your son. He’s stronger than you realise."

She nodded and tried to smile but her eyes betrayed the worry she felt.

With a final look the Old Man turned and left, the door closing softly behind him.

In the hallway, the Old Man paused, his hand tightening around the shaft of the staff he had left beside the door when he entered. He glanced down the corridor toward the room where the Sisters worked behind sealed doors. Only he knew the truth: the child was not just a boy but a Khymer, a being of legend, a being of entities tangled together in one fragile body. The Sisters’ task of separation was delicate and dangerous, but, he believed, it was the only way the boy could survive.

The Old Man exhaled slowly and walked away, his steps heavy with the burden of what lay ahead.

II

The Three sisters stood in front of the Old Man the first and third carried babies wrapped tightly in blankets, the one in the middle was empty handed.

The Old Man smiled and said, "I see you were successful,"

"Only partially," said the three in unison, although their lips did not move.

Puzzled, the Old Man said, "But you carry two, why do you say you were only partially successful"

"There were three," they said, once again in unison.

"Three? Unusual but not unknown. Where is the third?" The Sisters were silent. "Tell me of the third, did it not survive the procedure?" insisted the Old Man.

"The third is a ... wrym," whispered the sisters.

"Why was it not removed," demanded the Old Man

"It was too firmly seated and it refused to relinquish its grip on that child. It is already a powerful beast, and we think it will protect this child for all its worth." They intoned.

Taken aback the Old Man said, "Show me the mark," the urgency in his voice was impossible to miss.

The Sister on the left unwrapped the child she was carrying and showed the Old Man the small mark on the back of the child's leg. The Old Man looked carefully and after a few minutes said, "The mark is made up of ancient runes. Now, show me the mark on the other."

The Sister on the right did not unwrap the entity she was carrying but fumbled with the blankets until she exposed a leg. The limb was slightly withered, the skin, was pale and greyish and had a scaly quality. The Old Man studied the back of the child's leg for some minutes.

The Old Man's fingers twitched as he studied the pallid limb, his breath catching in his throat. The runes etched into the skin were jagged and harsh compared to those on the leg

of the other child. He leaned in closer, his finger tracing the shape of the markings, careful not to touch.

For a long moment, he said nothing, his brow furrowed deeply. His lips moved, mouthing the names spelled out by the runes, but no sound escaped him. The Sisters exchanged glances, but remained expressionless as they waited for him to speak.

At last, the Old Man lifted his head, his face pale. His voice, when it came, was unsteady. "These... these runes. They are not merely a mark. They spell out names, true names."

The Sister quickly wrapped the withered limb back into the blanket. "True names? Of the children?" they asked in unison, their monotone showing no emotion,

The Old Man hesitated, choosing his words carefully, "Three names, names that must not be spoken, names that they cannot know."

The Sister on the right tightened her grip on the child she carried. "And what does this mean, Old Man? Speak plainly," they asked in unison.

"It means I must seek clarification. I must consult the ancient texts to understand the full nature of these names and what they foretell."

The Old Man's voice grew insistent. "Listen well, for what I tell you now must be followed as if your very lives depend upon it."

He paused and drew in a deep breath, "The one with the wyrm, he must remain under the care of the mother. Let her nurture that child as if nothing is amiss. Keep her ignorant, Sisters. She must not suspect the enormity of what lies within her child."

The Old Man's voice softened for a moment, though it lost none of its intensity. "It is not her burden to bear, and she must not know of the other. The one with the withered limb..." He paused, as though the words themselves resisted being spoken. "This child must be kept secret and safe. Hidden from all, even from the mother. If she knew, if she even suspected, she might seek to intervene. She must not leave the hospital. Do you understand me?"

The sisters nodded together.

Satisfied but still concerned, the Old Man stood and gathered his robes around him. “I go now to consult the ancient texts, to seek wisdom that has long been buried beneath dust and time. What this birth foretells, I do not yet know, but I fear it echoes an ancient and terrible truth. Keep to your duties, Sisters.”

With that, he turned, his staff striking the floor with a hollow sound that echoed as he made his way out of the room. The sisters remained in silence for a long moment, the gravity of the charge they had been given settling like a leaden cloak upon their shoulders.

III

The Old Man stepped out of the icy blue of the shimmering into the dimly lit catacombs of Althingi. Here, legends, tales, plans, prophecies and the whispers of history were kept hidden from prying eyes and unworthy hands. Stood before him was the Lady Ojaga, keeper of the Archive.