

## CHAPTER 1: THE DREAM

*Lament not what you cannot change:  
The eagle flies on ill winds,  
Same as fair.  
Wise men pick their battles.  
--Haakor, The Tome, 932 AD*

Asleep on his stiff, narrow bed in line with all the others, ten-year old Anders had a dream. It was the good dream this time, his only comfort. Faraway images floated through his mind. He saw wide, sloping fields . . . tall grasses waving in the wind . . . an eagle shrieked and swooped, dark against the summer sky. He was barely a year old, running down to the massive ash tree where his sister stood, waving . . . she called the tree Yggdrasil, where the world was born . . . beneath the tree he flung bits of grass in the air and watched them drift lazily through the shadows. Sissel leaned toward him and placed her warm hand gently upon his arm. “I forgot to tell you, Anders,” she said. “It’s your birthday.”

The smell of summer grass died away and the brilliant sun faded to gloom.

Anders let out a heavy sigh as he emerged from his dream, reluctantly joining the conscious world and all of its misery. Once again the comforting land of the midnight sun had

vanished, only to be replaced by the darkened room and the dank smell of clay and stone. He stirred, then turned restlessly in his bed as the thin blanket slipped to the floor.

An unwelcome hiss in his ear shattered the quiet.

“Anders! I know you’re awake. Get up!”

Anders opened his eyes just enough to see Tomas, whose black hair and blue eyes gave him a stark look in the gloom. Anders closed his eyes and squeezed them tight.

Tomas wiggled his fingers over Anders’ face. “Stop it, Tomas,” Anders said. He shook off the intruding arms and turned toward the wall despite the forbidding chill of the stone. He touched the spot where just months ago he had scratched the date: January 1, 1038. Another year in captivity.

“It’s time for breakfast, and everyone’s gone,” Tomas said. “You’ll be the last one again, and then there’ll be nothing left.” When Anders didn’t move, Tomas picked up the blanket and threw it on the bed in disgust.

“I’m too tired.” Anders reached for the blanket and pulled it over his legs. Tiny patterns of reindeer and eagles were barely visible on the threadbare cloth. Its colors of rust, ochre and sage were as faded as all of his hopes.

Tomas studied him. “Your eyes are bloodshot, by the way.”

Anders rubbed his eyes with the balls of his fists until the dry, gritty feeling began to subside. He looked around the sunless sleeping hall where the other ten-year old boys stayed, his gaze passing quickly over the carved faces of the gods. Their noble expressions looked gloomy and critical in the darkness. He looked at the hastily made beds, empty now. “It’s late, isn’t it?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!” Tomas sniffed appreciatively in the direction of the eating hall. “Come on. Can’t you smell the flatbread?”

Anders looked away. He rubbed his hands together to deaden the pain.

“I see your hands hurt again.” Tomas paused and lowered his voice. “You’ve had another one of your nightmares, haven’t you. The ones about . . . your father.”

“No!” Black horses thundered past a burning village. “It wasn’t! It was the good one!” Anders looked at his hands again and started to mutter. “But now, even that one isn’t any good. My hands ache no matter what I dream. Good, bad, it’s all the same.” He flung himself back on his bed, wondering why the old dream with the wind and sun failed to cheer him now.

Tomas yawned. “Come on. I’m starving.” He forced Anders to sit.

Anders put his aching hands to his head and moaned. He hated this place—the deep underground where he had lived for the past nine years, two months, and seventeen days. He would never smell the sweet, summer grass again. He just knew it.

He was stuck here for good.