

Spirit Warrior - synopsis

In the Bronze Age, around 1500 BC, Arn, an ordinary boy from a small village somewhere in the southern Low Lands is destined to succeed his father as a Guider: the person who takes care of the dead.

When an old warrior dies and is chosen as a Father - one of the ancestors who are supposed to watch over the land forever - Arn's father allows him to take care of the warrior's bronze sword, cleansing it before the man can be laid to rest in his barrow. After the cleansing, the sword has to be offered to the river so the water gods can free the spirits of his victims from the bronze and take them back.

All goes well and Arn takes the cleansed sword home, but he can't help touching it, cutting his finger and staining the blade with his blood. The blood of a living person will keep the spirits imprisoned, forever haunting the old warrior and bringing bad luck to the village instead of protection.

Arn tries to mask his mistake as well as he can, but it doesn't take his father long to find out. Arn is sent on an almost impossible mission: he has to take the sword back to its maker, Melor the master smith. Everyone believes the smith is the only one who knows what to do to reverse Arn's terrible mistake.

In northern Italy, Pero lives in a town that looks completely different from Arn's. There are roads, a moat, pile houses and a lively trade, particularly in amber. Pero is apprenticed to Gaeto, the greatest trader he knows. As a small boy, Pero lived on the streets as an orphan, but on a cold winter night, when Pero thought he was dying, Gaeto took him in, fed him and raised him.

Gaeto turns out to be ill, and he is afraid to die. To try and lengthen his life as long as he can, he plans to present the gods with a magnificent gift. Pero has to take the old bronze tools of Gaeto's ancestors to Melor, the only bronze smith who is able to cast a sword so beautiful the gods will grant Gaeto his wish.

Pero travels over the mountains, finds the pass to the west and reaches the sea. But when he reaches the crossing place to the island where Melor lives, the boat has just left and no one knows when it will return. At first Pero waits patiently while other passengers arrive, but after a dreadful nightmare about Gaeto he can no longer wait. He builds a raft and tries to reach the island himself. A sudden storm makes his raft flip over and Pero disappears beneath the waves, bronze and all. Just in time, he is rescued.

To explain him carrying a sword he can't use, Arn decides to pose as a warrior's son, on a journey to have his deceased father's sword melted down and cast into a new one for himself. When he is invited to a farm to get some food and sleep, the household's daughter, Lya, distrusts him at once.

That night Arn catches a bad fever, and hovering between waking and sleeping he overhears Lya and her father arguing. The girl is supposed to marry a trader, but she doesn't want to. While Lya is taking care of Arn, he unknowingly reveals his lies in fevered talk. As soon as he is awake, Lya blackmails Arn into taking her with him so she can escape her marriage. Arn continues his journey with Lya as his fellow traveller, having promised her father he will deliver her safely to her betrothed. Arn and Lya don't like each other, but when Lya gets into trouble, Arn rescues her, using the sword he is not supposed to touch. They grow closer and Arn decides to break his promise to Lya's father: he will not deliver her to her fiancée. Together they reach the sea and head south where Arn was told a boat should be waiting for them to take them to the island where Melor lives. There they meet a boy with a strange accent and an amber necklace: Pero.

When they arrive on the island after an eventful trip, Arn, Lya and Pero - who knows the way to Melor - decide to travel together. The sword Arn is carrying, keeps making people think he is a warrior. He ends up fighting for people he doesn't know and wins, which makes him doubt if he really should be a Guider like his father.

When they reach a meandering river, a boat full of celebrating people, on their way to the Stones, sails past them and they are invited on board. The Stones, they tell Arn, are a tribute to the gods, made of dozens of enormous standing stones erected by Melor's ancestors, a place where the gods will always hear you. Melor used to control who were allowed to visit at what time of year. But not anymore. His power is waning, and Arn worries if Melor really is the smith he is looking for.

After visiting the Stones, Arn, Lya and Pero head for Melor. When they finally get to speak to him, the man is tired and he hardly listens. He explains he is having a hard time now that tin, his most important trade, has been discovered on the mainland and traders overseas are deciding they would rather travel by land. He complains of people no longer listening to him and he refuses to help Arn or Pero. But Lya comes up with a plan to make Melor help them after all.

Pero will pose as a trader's son who has travelled to Melor with his wife, Lya, and their guard, Arn, to make an exclusive deal. The mainland tin has turned out to be of poorer quality than Melor's. Lya is sure that if that story spreads, Melor's trade will flourish once again. In exchange for this mummery, Melor has to help Arn and Pero.

Melor plays along and decides to celebrate the imaginary new trade agreement by organizing a feast. But that night, everything goes wrong. Arn is made drunk while Pero and Lya are lured away from the village. Arn, with a pounding head and uneasy stomach, is just in time to scatter their attackers in the dark, but not before a sword slashes across his back. Lya is unharmed, but Pero is badly hurt. They carry him back to Melor's house, where they take care of him as best they can. Arn then passes out from his wound.

When Arn wakes up, Pero has died. Melor is furious, but he is unable to punish the attackers, for the villagers seem to protect them, keeping them hidden. Slowly Arn and Lya start to realize Pero has been killed because people don't want Melor to rise to power again. And Melor must have known the plan would be dangerous. Lya confronts the smith and forces him to keep both his promises. Melor reluctantly gives in. Together they bury Pero next to Melor's grandfather's barrow, close to the village.

Arn is slowly nursed back to health. Melor casts the sacrificial sword for Pero's master and hands it over to Lya, who has decided to bring it to Gaeto herself. The only way to free the dead from Arn's sword is to melt it down. But Melor wants to cast Arn a new sword from the bronze. At first Arn refuses. How can he call himself a warrior when he couldn't even protect his own friends? But Melor is adamant. In the end, Arn accepts his new sword.

On their way back home, Arn and Lya realise they want to stay together. When Arn steps through the gate of his home, for a moment he is afraid his parents won't believe his stories. But when they embrace him and welcome Lya as family, he holds nothing back and confesses he feels he can no longer be a Guider. He is a warrior now. Against Arn's expectations, his father isn't disappointed, but proud of his son.

Arn and Lya stay with the family for a while. They enjoy the summer harvest and life is peaceful. But when Arn takes Lya to the old warrior's barrow whose sword started everything, Lya tells him she wants to keep her promise. She wants to take the sacrificial sword to Pero's master. She starts saying her goodbyes, but Arn doesn't accept her farewell. He is going with her. Together they leave the barrows behind them, on their way to a new horizon.

Spirit Warrior
by Linda Dielemans

1 Arn

The old man's face was white. Not white like snow, but like the moon, pale and very far away. Arn swallowed and tried not to look at it while working a bone comb through the man's long, grey hair. It was coarse and tangled, and the effort made his cheeks glow. He tried to be careful, but that was almost impossible. Fortunately the old man kept still, even when Arn pulled hard and tufts of grey hair got stuck between the teeth of his comb.

His shoulders were aching and his left hand was all cramped up by the time he was finished. Arn gratefully put away the comb he had been clutching and arranged the now-smooth locks of hair on the heavy, dark cloak wrapped around the man's shoulders. Except for that one matted lock. If he wanted that one gone, he would have to pull it right out of the old man's head. That wouldn't do. So Arn took the frizzy hair and stuffed it into the cloak's collar. Old Raban wouldn't mind. He was dead.

The women's distant wailing and singing reached Arn's ears while he was chopping firewood outside the sunny side of the house. They would need lots of firewood for Raban's pyre. Better be prepared. His breath escaped his mouth in little white clouds that drifted up to the edge of the thatched roof and turned into glistening drops of water between the reeds. It was a cold day, but the sun made everything better.

The bronze axe caught the light while the sharp edge whizzed down towards the dry wood to split it in two. At least Arn's earlier work had won him a pat on the shoulder from his father. The man hadn't noticed the hidden, matted lock of hair and it was true: the warrior had looked handsome and noble in his moss-green cloak, with the shiny sword on his breast. But that face, that horribly pale, slack face. Arn

didn't think he would ever get used to the faces of the dead, no matter how many he would see. And there would be many more. He was, after all, the Guider's son.

Arn sighed and split another piece of wood. His father was one of the few people in his neighbourhood who had to do more than tend a farm. Ploughing and sowing the fields, taking care of the animals and maintaining the long house with its stables provided any man or woman with enough work to fill their days. But Arn's father was a special man. He was closer to the gods than most people. He heard the gods, and they heard him. When someone died, it was Arn's father's task to make sure the body was given back to the elements by earth, fire, water or air. The right ceremony would then guide their spirit back to the gods, where it belonged.

But Raban wouldn't return to the gods. He was chosen to be an Ancestor, one of the land's protectors who rested on Barrow Hill, overlooking the fields and homes of their families. He would be a Father.

Sons and Daughters were buried in an old Barrow to aid an old Father or Mother.

That was much easier. But now a whole new Barrow had to be built. Rabans Barrow.

'We're back!'

The cheerful voice of a little girl pulled him out of his thoughts. Arn hadn't even noticed the wailing had stopped.

Asleep, he thought, I'm asleep, asleep, asleep!

He'd earned a bit of rest after all that woodchopping. And it was nice here, leaning his back against the sun-toasted wattle and daub wall of his home.

'Arn, wake up! Wake up!'

Slowly he opened one eye. A little girl, no more than five summers old, sat on her haunches looking at him. She reached to touch his face.

'You're all sticky!' she exclaimed, wrinkling her nose.

'That's because I've worked so hard,' answered Arn. 'Come here, I'll give you a nice long cuddle!'

He jumped up, making his little sister shriek and run away from him, her curly red hair dancing in the wind. Three small pigs, scrabbling the dusty packed earth around

the house, spurted out of their way while brother and sister zoomed along the picket fence that separated their yard from the rest of the world.

'I've got you!'

Arn scooped his little sister up in his arms and held her while rubbing his sweaty cheeks against hers as much as he could.

'Let go, Arn, let go!'

'No! You'll be caught in my arms forever! Never again will you smell nice or be clean!'

The girl laughed and shrieked and squirmed until she slipped out of his arms and ran away again, past the wheat shed to the other side of the house where the pigs just thought to have found some peace and quiet.

'Run, little one, run as fast as you can. You will never escape me!' called Arn. He was just about to start the chase again when their mother's voice ended the game.

'Lora! Arn! Stop it!'

Lora stood still so suddenly she almost toppled over and Arn flinched. The woman grabbed her children by the arm one by one.

'Not so loud!' she hissed. 'A little respect for the dead, please, children! Especially you, Arn. You should know better. Wild things, that's what you are.'

She shook her head, and a lock of dark hair freed itself from the braid around her head. Annoyed, she put it behind her ear. 'Sometimes I wonder if you're mine at all.' She tried to look stern, but Arn saw her brown eyes smile. She sighed.

'Arn, your father wants you to go to Raban's family. He thinks you are ready to cleanse the sword this time.'

Arn felt his heart jump a little. 'Really? He said that?'

His mother nodded and gave him a tight bundle of white fabric. 'Go. It will be alright.'

'Bye, Arn!' called Lora when he left the yard running, the precious bundle under his arm. He ran as fast as he could, turned, and raced through the fields on his way to the house that was on the other side of the Barrows.

Arn didn't like the paths that connected the four farms of his neighbourhood. They were dirty, dark smudges that divided the yards, fields and meadows into ugly,

uneven pieces. They were always muddy, and littered with deep holes you could break your ankle in. Even where the paths were reinforced with wooden beams, you had to watch your step. Arn liked to run across the grassy meadows and the wheat fields instead, even if that meant angry parents or neighbours. But at this time of year it didn't matter. The fields were empty, the grass wasn't growing. In winter, Arn could do whatever he wanted.

In his mind he repeated what he had been taught about cleansing swords. After the wailing, the women would have taken the sword from Raban's breast to his home. Now it was Arn's task to free the sword from its former owner, to remove anything that still smelled like Raban, that still carried his handprint. Raban was a warrior no more, and the gods demanded a gift in exchange for his spirit, along with the spirits Raban had taken for himself. They would be free at last.

Quickly Arn jumped the low wicker fences that defined who owned which piece of land. The houses stood alone, surrounded by their yards, while smoke drifted from the triangular holes beneath the front eaves. Apart from some birds that pecked the last remaining seeds from the dark fields, everyone was inside. Winter was a time of repair, of dragging hay into the stables, of making pots and baskets. Life revolved around the hearth under the eternal twilight that hung between the roofbeams. It was a small neighbourhood and the distance between the farms meant unwelcome trips through the icy cold outside. No. In winter, the families only came together for large repairs to a house or maybe a feast that would light up the dark days a little. Or a funeral.

If Arn didn't slow down, he thought, he would arrive all panting and sweaty. His woolen tunic stuck to his skin and his brown hair was dampening at his temples. That was not how it was supposed to be. This was a special occasion. He had to be calm and dignified, grave and confident. Like he knew exactly what he was doing. He kind of did. And he'd seen his father cleansing a sword when he was a young boy. But this time he would be all alone. Maybe the gods would help him. If they felt like it, that was.

He wiped the cold sweat from his brow, slowed down and took a deep breath. That was better. He glanced up at the treeless hillside that led to the Barrows on top. He

could just make out the shadows of the new poles, standing in a circle to outline the future Barrow. The freshly cut oak gleamed white in the winter sun. Raban lay right in the middle of the circle, on a platform, unprotected from wind and rain. In time, he would flow into the land, so that the place would know the old warrior after his bones were returned here later, reduced to tiny, white, brittle fragments by a blazing pyre.

Arn was glad the Barrows weren't very close to his home. As important as Ancestors were, they stank. Awfully.

Raban's home was right behind Barrow Hill, close to the river. It was at its widest this time of year, the dark water rushing along the now-empty meadows, all foam and spray. Raban's herd was the largest one in the neighbourhood, so his house and yard were big as well, with many stalls inside to protect the animals from the cold and cattle thieves. The back of the building bordered on the wild woods, that stretched deep into the land unto the next neighbourhood. But however hard Arn peered into the distance, all he could make out were dark, bare trees. Those houses were far away, and he had never been there.

As soon as Arn set foot in the empty yard, two grey, shaggy dogs came at him so fast he almost fled. They barked savagely and showed their yellow teeth. They should know him! He'd been here before, with his father.

'Easy,' he said while easing towards the house entrance. But his words only made the dogs growl, a deep rumbling from their throats that sounded like they would tear him to pieces, preferably right now.

'Quiet!'

The voice from within the house saved him. The dogs stopped growling and retreated to the yard's entrance without letting Arn out of their sight. He could almost feel their angry stare. At the entrance they laid down next to each other, ears pointed upwards, and started watching the gate intently. Arn hadn't even noticed he had been holding his breath.

How will I get out again? he thought for a moment.

'Ah, there you are. Your mother said it would be you.'

A sad-eyed woman had appeared in the doorway, her long blonde hair loosely covering her shoulders.

'Come in,' she said.

Arn followed Raban's wife inside, where five people were sitting around the hearth on low benches. The bright light made them look like black shadows with a glowing orange edge. They were Raban's family; his three children and two brothers. It was warm inside, and the strong, sharp scent of animals and dung filled his nose. He sneezed. However welcome the cattle's warmth was in the midst of winter, their smell could bring tears to your eyes.

'Arn is here,' said Raban's wife to the others. The black shadows rose slowly, but one of them jumped up and stumbled his way to the long side of the house.

'Tolan!' the blond woman called. 'Not so fast! This is important. Easy, boy.'

'I'm sorry, mother,' came the boy's voice from some invisible, dark corner.

Arn took a deep breath. From now on, it was real. From now on, everything had to be right.

Tolan reappeared in the circle of light, carrying a dark, long bundle in his arms. He walked slowly now, earning him an approving nod from his mother.

'Everything is ready,' she told Arn. 'We will follow you.'

Arn swallowed hard, but the woman didn't even seem disappointed he was here and not his father. He straightened himself and asked the boy with the bundle: 'Tolan, will you go first?'

Raban's son nodded, his face solemn but his eyes sparkling. With tears or anticipation, Arn couldn't tell. Arn followed Tolan, then came Raban's wife and his two brothers. Raban's two daughters were last. Not a word was spoken while they left the house and walked to the edge of the woods behind it. The dark, bare branches were swaying in the wind, creaking softly. It made Arn's skin crawl. The woods were a wild world full of secrets. Everyone knew the gods lived in the shadows between the trees. That was why the cleansing had to be done here, under their ever-watchful eyes.

Someone had prepared for a fire: small logs leaning against each other in a circle stuffed with branches and dry grass. Next to the fireplace was a wooden table with

beautifully carved legs; small, surprised-looking faces peeped through the leaves of many blossoming winders.

Tolan carefully placed his bundle on the table, while the women concerned themselves with the fire. Arn unfolded his own little bundle and arranged the grey-white cloth neatly so it covered almost half the table. Two large, leather gloves were in the centre. His father's gloves.

As soon as the flames were licking the carefully-stacked firewood, the women returned to the table. Arn was facing the forest's edge, Raban's family joining him on his right and left side. They looked at him expectantly.

He cleared his throat and began.

'Hear us, gods of the woods, of air and water, of fire and earth. Raban is no longer with us. He no longer walks our grounds, his laughter is silenced and all warmth has left his body.'

These were the words, the exact words his father had taught him over and over again. Solemn words, that were always the same, for everyone. He had heard them too often. But he had to be doing something right, because Raban's wife was crying silently.

'Raban has been chosen to become a Father,' continued Arn. 'But he was a warrior and he took many lives. Today we release Raban from his sword and his dead, so his spirit will be pure and peaceful, to watch over our lands forever. Hear us, o gods!'

The gods didn't answer. Arn could only assume he was doing alright. Carefully he opened the bundle that Tolan had placed on the table. The bronze sword shone softly between the folds of a piece of Raban's dark cloak. It had been sharpened and polished, Arn saw. Raban's brothers would have been responsible for that.

The sword was as long as Arn's lower arm, the blade slim, fastened to the dark, polished wood of the handle with shiny, bronze rivets. The handle was carved with a pattern of lines, diamonds and triangles. It was a beautiful thing. But it would rest in the murky river water soon, where no one would ever see it again.

Arn pulled on the gloves. From now on, the sword was not to be touched by human hands again. Carefully he lifted the weapon up to the sky.

'Fire will break the death-bond!'

He walked towards the fire, that he felt rather than saw in the bright daylight. The air over the logs shimmered with heat. He held the sword by the blade, lowered the handle into the flames and started turning it carefully. Raban's handprint, his sweat and blood had to be scorched from the wood. To release him from the spirits of the dead he had made. When the handle was completely blackened and on the verge of glowing, Arn lifted it up and put the sword on the white cloth on the table, the handle sticking out a bit so it wouldn't burn anything. He folded the piece of Raban's cloak and gave it to the old warrior's wife.

She nodded with red, wet eyes, hugging the bundle of cloth close against her chest before passing it to her son. Tolan pressed his lips to the cloak and gave it to his sister. When it came back to Arn, every family member had held it. He took the cloak respectfully and returned to the fire.

'Fire will break the sword-bond,' he said and he threw the cloak into the flames. The cloth crackled and caught fire, stinking smoke rising swiftly and making Arn want to cough.

Teary-eyed he turned away from the fire. The sword needed to be packed carefully now that the handle had cooled. No human being would see it again until the day it would be offered to the river gods. The white cloth was soft to the touch. There was enough to wrap the weapon neatly.

'The sword is now pure,' spoke Arn when he was done. 'It will rest now, until Raban is given to the fire and his life-bond is broken. As soon as he is a Father, water will free the sword's spirits. If the gods want it so.'

This was it! He'd made it through the ceremony, and he hadn't made a single mistake! He took up the sword bundle and walked back to Raban's house, the old man's family behind him. There he turned around, facing them, but he didn't know what to say. The ceremony was over, the rehearsed words had been spoken. Raban's wife saved him.

'Thank you, Arn,' she said. 'You did well, the gods saw you. Your father should be proud.'

Arn blushed. 'We will keep the sword safe, I promise.'

'I know. Go on, now,' she said. 'Your mother will be worrying.'

Arn said his goodbyes to the rest of the family and one by one they disappeared into the house. Arn stood alone on the yard with the dogs who came sniffing his hands curiously, their earlier hostility forgotten. He thoughtlessly scratched a soft, grey ear. 'I have to go,' he told no one in particular. One of the dogs whined softly. Arn looked down and said: 'I'm sorry. Your master isn't coming back. But you have more family. Just... guard them well.'

He tried very hard not to run. He'd done it! His first time, all alone, and he'd done it! But he wanted to stay calm, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world to walk home with a wrapped sword under his arm. Like he did this every day and thought nothing of it.

It wasn't long before the sound of fast, light footsteps betrayed his sister's coming. He couldn't even see his house yet. Did mother know she was gone?

'Arn!' she called while breathlessly running towards him. 'There you are! Phew, you smell. Show me, show me the sword!'

He laughed. 'Lora, no! Not here, not outside. Look how muddy it is. Maybe when we're home. When father puts it away.'

She pulled her pouty face, but that didn't last long. Before he knew it, she skipped and twaddled happily all the way back to their house. Right before they were there, she dashed away.

'Father! Mother! Arn's back!'

'Lora!' Arn heard his mother call from inside the house. 'Never run away like that again! Naughty girl.'

But when she stepped outside and caught a glance of her daughter's messy hair and red cheeks, she couldn't help smiling. Lora pulled her mother's skirts.

'Look, it's Arn, and he's got the sword!'

The woman looked up at him with questioning eyes.

'It went well,' said Arn. He could almost feel her relief.

'Agus!' she called. 'Your son is back!'

Arn's father was tall, so tall he had to duck to keep his head from bumping against the jamb. His grey hair was cut short and it stuck up in rough tufts. The outer corners

of his eyes drooped a bit, which made him always look a little sad. But now his eyes glistened with pride.

'Did you call upon the gods?' he asked.

'Yes, father.'

'You didn't let the handle catch fire?'

'No, father.'

'And you didn't burn the cloth?'

'No, father.'

The man relaxed, exhaled deeply and smiled.

'You did well, boy. I'm proud of you. Shall we put it in the chest together?'

Arn nodded, but Lora said: 'I want to go too! I want to see the sword! Arn promised!'

Agus tousled her red curls and said: 'I'm sorry, dear. We can't take it out any more, not while it's here with us. The sword is for the gods now.'

Lora whined and cried, even shedding real tears, until mother took her arm and shushed her. Arn followed his father inside.

The wooden platform was just behind the hearth, a small, square loft made out of polished planks. It was the only one in their neighbourhood. The poles that carried the loft were decorated with delicate carvings of lines and triangles, almost like the carvings on the sword handle. When he was younger, Arn had secretly added a few carvings of his own: a simple, small little face surrounded by thin, wavy lines and dots. He was the only one who knew where to look.

But now he was climbing the creaky wooden ladder with the sword under his arm, followed by his father who was silently cursing over the steps that were too close together for his long legs. He kept bumping his knees.

'Just make sure you don't grow as tall as me,' muttered Agus. 'Nothing but trouble.'

In the centre of the platform was a long, wooden chest, its four sides carved even more beautifully than the platform's poles. The lid showed a sword, straight and perfect, surrounded by four bronze axes. Agus walked up to the chest and slid the lid off.

'Put it in,' he said to Arn.

For a moment, Arn was afraid to move. He'd never been allowed to come here before.

'It's all right, Arn. You are my son and almost a man grown! It's time I showed you everything. The day you'll be the Guider of this neighbourhood might come sooner than we think.'

'Father...'

'It's true. I won't be around forever, son, you know that just as well as I do. I'll hear nothing more about it. Come, let's put this sword in its proper place before the water gods get their hands on it.'

The white fabric kept snagging on the rough insides of the chest. Arn had to pluck it from the wood while lowering the sword to the bottom. When the folds of fabric neatly covered the bronze again, Arn's father put the lid back on.

'I'm proud of you,' he said with a smile and an arm around his son's shoulders.

'You'll be a good Guider, I know it. People will trust you. Just wait and see, one day it will be like it's all you've ever done.'

Arn smiled, but he couldn't say anything. His throat was dry and his legs were shaking. Agus laughed.

'Whoa, stay on your feet, boy! Come down with me. You've earned a cup of beer.'

2 Pero

It was cold, so very cold... He was tired, but he couldn't sleep. Mustn't sleep. If he fell asleep now, he would never wake up again. He shivered endlessly, until his teeth hurt from chattering and his cramped muscles had locked his limbs in an icy grip. He was so young, not ready to go, not ready to die...

Pero sat up in the dark panting, eyes wide, but seeing nothing. Had he screamed? He turned towards his fellow traveller.

'The same dream again, Pero?'

The old man's eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

'Yes, master.'

'You are not dead. I found you. I took you in. You aren't that little stray anymore.'

'I know. I'm sorry, master. It was so long ago. I don't know why I have to keep reliving it.'

'We've travelled far. You're cold and tired. Maybe that is what reminds you.'

Pero shivered. Sometimes he could still feel the soft blanket under his fingers, the blanket Gaeto had put around his skinny shoulders on that terrible winter night. Without his master he would have died right there, on the hard, frozen ground between the sheep, who were so cold themselves they had shivered just as violently as the boy in their midst. He'd been a streetrat, without a home, without a family. No one would have missed him. But Gaeto had saved him. Gaeto, the most important trader in the entire village.

The villagers might not realize it, but the only reason they had it so good was because of Gaeto. Goods came and went in an endless flow; amber, bronze, horses, wheat... Everyone could always get what they wanted and live comfortably. And this man had taken Pero in, had taken care of him and had made him his apprentice. Pero still didn't know why. There were dozens of other boys in the village, smart, strong boys from good families. But he still was Gaeto's only apprentice.

'Go to sleep,' said the old man. 'We're almost home, but we still have the whole of tomorrow to go.'

How long before Gaeto's travelling days are over? Pero asked himself, following the narrow path down to the plains. He firmly held the reigns of the black horse behind him. He knew this animal. It would escape as soon as it got the chance.

The gainings of their visit to the foot of the northern mountains were tied safely to the horse's flanks: bags full of new stone molds for cloak pins, daggers and spearheads, so well-carved that the smiths in the village and far beyond wouldn't work with anything else anymore. And only Gaeto knew where the stonecutter lived. It was good business.

Pero looked back and saw Gaeto sitting between the bags on the horse's back. The old man's grip was loose and he swung back and forth with every step. A heavy cloak wrapped his shoulders and a wool scarf around his head protected him from

the icy winds. His eyes were half-closed and his chin was almost on his chest.

Normally the old man would always keep an eye on things, wherever he was.

He looks so frail.

They used to travel on foot, but Gaeto just couldn't keep up anymore. He walked too slowly and too carefully, and although the old man had never really wanted to admit that, Pero had insisted Gaeto would travel on horseback a long time ago. It was better, faster, safer. Except when the horse was as stubborn as this one.

The stallion snorted and white puffs of breath came out of his nostrils. He shook his head violently and Pero almost lost the reins.

'Stop it!' he growled. He knew the black horse didn't like him, but Gaeto had chosen it and the old man didn't know anything about horses. They were just beasts of burden to him, nothing more. But Pero knew better. He tightened his grip on the reins and led the stallion on.

'Pero...'

He looked back. Gaeto was slowly toppling sideways, sliding from the horse's back.

'No!' called Pero. He was just in time to catch the old man before his head touched the ground. 'Gaeto!'

The horse, now free of Pero's leading hand, stepped back and neighed.

'Stay!' shouted Pero, but the stallion turned and trotted away. It didn't matter. It was just a horse. They were just rocks.

'Master,' said Pero urgently. Gaeto was limp in his arms, the old man's face pale and clammy. He was not dead. He couldn't be dead. Pero was nothing without his master. He didn't want to be a streetrat again. He shook the skinny body as gently as he could.

'Master, wake up!'

Never had the sound of a coughing, rattling old man sounded more beautiful to Pero's ears. Tears of relief clouded his vision. He was alive! Gaeto was alive!

'Everything is all right, master, everything is fine. I've got you.'

'Pero.'

Gaeto's voice was nothing more than a whisper.

'The horse. Where is it?'

'It's not important. You need to rest.'

'It *is* important!'

Every wheezing breath his master took made Pero's throat tighten with fear.

'It is not... the molds. Nobody... must know... what happened. If we arrive without the horse... What then?'

'I won't leave you.'

'You must.'

'No!'

'Pero. Listen to me. Right now... Nothing is more important. Look, I'm feeling better already.'

Geato freed himself from Pero's arms and pushed backwards until his back was against a large rock beside the path.

'Master...'

'Be quiet. Give me water and something to eat. I want to be strong enough to travel when you return. Do it now.'

It was useless. Pero knew he'd lost. If Gaeto wanted him to go, he would go. He gave the old man his water skin and checked his pouch for something edible. All he had were a few pieces of dried meat. The horse carried the rest of the food.

'Good,' said Gaeto. 'I won't be going anywhere, I promise. Find that animal. Even if it takes all day.'

Night was falling. The world slowly turned a blueish grey, blurring Pero's surroundings like smeared charcoal. If he didn't pay attention now, he would never find his way back to Gaeto.

'Where are you, stupid horse?' he muttered. It was time to go back. He had been gone for too long and Gaeto would get cold without a fire. Cold and weak did not go well together. Pero refused to think about what could have happened to his master since he'd left.

Did he hear something? Something large was just ahead of him. A dark blot, just a little darker than the rest of the blots that made up the landscape, was lazily pulling leaves off the bushes. Snorting, the sound of soft hooves on the ground, smacking

lips... Finally! Carefully Pero crept around the horse, against the wind so it wouldn't smell him.

'I've got you!'

The stallion stepped back and tried to get away, but Pero had grabbed hold of the bridle and pulled hard.

'I'm in charge. Whether you like it or not. So you *are* going to listen to me.

Understood?'

The horse snorted, straining against Pero's grip and shaking its head, but suddenly it relaxed like it had always been the most well-behaved horse in the world.

'Good boy.'

The stars were already fading in the light of the rising moon when Pero returned to Gaeto. The smell of ice was in the air.

'Master?' he asked softly.

'I'm here.'

Gaeto's voice was soft but strong.

'I'll set up camp,' said Pero, relieved. He tied the horse's reigns to one of the trees, using his best knots, and collected some dead branches from the ground. Only when a small fire was crackling merrily in front of them, Gaeto sighed deeply.

'I am ill, Pero,' he said.

Pero sat down next to the old man, leaning the back of his head against the cold rock.

'I've been ill for quite a while now. I didn't want you to worry, so I haven't told you. I haven't told anyone.'

Gaeto gave Pero an apologetic look.

'But now you know. The gods are calling me and they are doing everything to make my life as difficult as possible. They steal my breath, they steal my thoughts. But they will not beat me so easily. I promise, they haven't got me yet!'

'How can a man resist the will of the gods?'

Streerat.

He would be a streerat again. Without Gaeto he had nothing. Suddenly the cold was almost unbearable. The fire had stopped giving warmth, or he couldn't feel it anymore.

'He can't,' answered Gaeto. 'But he can choose to ignore their call as long as possible. I am not ready to leave this world. And neither are you.'

'Me?'

'It's my own fault. I have worked so hard, Pero, that I never gave the end a single thought. I can't go to the gods without knowing that someone will continue what I've so carefully built. Someone I can trust. There is no one. No one but you. And you are not ready.'

'But...'

'Quiet now. The gods didn't get me today. And I will make sure to stay out of their hands for now. I promise.'

Pero didn't answer and stared into the flames.

'I am sorry I didn't tell you,' said Gaeto after a while. 'Tomorrow we will be home again. Try to forget that I am ill. Try to forget that you've had to catch me today. As soon as my illness is discovered, everyone in the village and beyond will try to steal a bit of my riches for themselves. No, Pero, you will have to make sure you are completely in control by then. *I* will have to make sure that you are. From tomorrow on, you will no longer be Gaeto's apprentice. You will be his successor.'

3 Blood in the dark

A small orange flame floated in the ever-dusty dark of the house at night. It cast a feeble, fluttering light on the things it passed. The timbers that carried the roof like a row of bare, straight trees lit up with a soft, orange glow like a tiny sun was rising and setting in a few heartbeats. For a moment the herbs that hung drying on hooks along the walls looked like they were on fire.

Arn crept past the slumbering hearth and the abandoned benches and stools around it, holding the tiny lamp in his outstretched hand. *This is wrong, this is bad, I shouldn't, I really shouldn't*, he kept repeating in his head since he'd got up. But he couldn't help it. For days now the sword had haunted him. It wouldn't leave him alone. He couldn't think of anything else. How it had gleamed, lying on the table at the forest's

edge, sharp and beautiful, almost unreal compared to the soft, dark folds of the cloak it had rested on. Its graceful form, the glow of the polished metal... Like it was alive. There wasn't that much bronze in Arns neighbourhood. Once, a thankful woman had given his father a bronze axe. Her husband had died quite unexpectedly and he had needed a special ceremony. He had been an important man, a trader, travelling far to get the rarest of goods. Arn had cut the wood for Raban's pyre with that axe. It was rather special. Most of the axes in Arns neighbourhood were made of stone. But the warriors that came here every once in a while, they carried *real* bronze. That's what Arn thought of it. A sword, battle-axe or spear that gleamed like the rising sun. Arn had always wondered how it would feel to hold such a weapon, to use it and to hear it sing. And now he couldn't resist the call of the sword in the chest any longer. He was too close. He had to see it one last time.

Carefully Arn climbed the narrow ladder to the loft, softly, letting every little creak fall together with the sounds the house always made. He'd never been so happy with the rustling reeds on the roof, the creaking beams or the wind whistling through the smoke holes. Below him one of the cows snorted in her stable.

Shut up, please shut up, please!

Arn knelt in front of the chest and put down his lamp. Its light was so weak he couldn't even see the top of the chest. But his groping fingers quickly found the seam of the lid, and instead of sliding like his father had, he lifted the lid off and silently put it down next to him.

Everything was exactly as he'd last seen it. Balancing the lamp on the side of the chest he carefully unfolded the white cloth. The fluttering little flame made it look like the shining metal was alive with fire. Bright, orange lines chased each other, melted together and split apart again. The charred handle looked even blacker in the darkness, its round, bronze rivets like small moons in a midwinter night sky. It was beautiful. So beautiful, the sword almost had to have been made by the gods. Or could it be the spirits of the dead, trapped in the bronze, dancing together? Could he be able to feel them?

Slowly Arn stretched out his left hand. A strange tingling crept through his tendons all the way up to his arm while he let his fingers slide along the smooth blade. Were

the fiery lines following the trace of his touch? Was the buzzing in his ears the whispering of the dead? What were they trying to tell him?

A sudden sharp pang in one of his fingers pulled him out of his thoughts and he quickly pulled back his hand. There was a cut in his ring finger and it was bleeding badly. Scarlet drops wound their way down along his hand and wrist.

Stupid!

The magic was gone. The sword was just a sword again, a sword in a chest. A sword that was never supposed to be touched by human hands again. And what had he done? He'd touched it. Even worse, he'd bled on it!

Arn picked up his lamp and held it a little closer to the sword, while trying to stop the bleeding by putting his wounded finger in his mouth. But the damage was already done. There was a red smear on the sword's blade close to the tip, and drops of blood had splattered the white cloth around it.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

What now? He had to clean the sword at least. He leaned into the chest and rubbed the bronze with his sleeve. There. You'd only see the hint of a red sheen if you knew where to look. But there was nothing Arn could do to make the blood on the cloth disappear. He would just have to wait and hope that no one would notice the red drops. He carefully folded the cloth back over the sword with his right hand, keeping his wounded left hand in his sleeve so he wouldn't leave any more bloodstains. It was hard to get the lid back on the chest that way, but he managed. His finger throbbed.

As fast and quiet as he could, Arn climbed down the ladder back to his berth. He blew out his little lamp and lay down next to his sister, whose slow and steady breathing told him she was sound asleep. He sighed deeply and tried to forget what had happened, to make sleep come and get him too. But his finger kept throbbing, and his ears kept buzzing. When the grey of dawn made its way into the house, he was still awake.

It was taking forever for the people to gather in front of the house. At least, that was what it felt like. From the doorway's comfortable shadows Arn was overlooking the yard, that at the moment seemed nothing more than a muddy patch with big, glistening puddles in it. Spring was on its way, but the last few days had been very bad. The rain had seemed never-ending. But this afternoon the sun had finally broken through the clouds and immediately started drying up the world.

Everywhere misty vapors were rising from the water-steeped earth.

Slowly people began trickling in now, the hems of their cloaks in their belts to keep the fabric from dragging through the mud, their legs covered by long leather windings. They talked quietly, greeted neighbours as well as friends from afar.

Inside, Arns father was preparing for his task. He would be mixing water and charcoal to paint the stripes and spirals on his face that would attract the attention of the gods. They had to be present at the ceremony to recognize Raban as a new Father and help him. It was very important that they did.

Arns thoughts kept whirling around in his head while he was trying to be as invisible as possible. Today was the day. The day Raban's bones would be buried. Everyone was here. Rabans family, the entire neighbourhood, but also more distant friends who wished to be here for the ceremony. The Barrow itself would be ready in two days. That meant the sword would be offered to the river gods in three days. Three days! And there was nothing Arn could do. He couldn't make the blood on the sword go away, he couldn't wash the red drops from the cloth that wrapped it. Now that the preparations for Rabans ceremony were done, Arns worries had taken over his every waking moment. Even his dreams weren't safe.

It had been four full moons, four full moons since he'd sneaked up the ladder to the loft and the chest it held. Every memory of what had happened between then and now - cutting the heath sods for the Barrow, watching the roaring fire eat Raban and his pyre on a clear, icy night, picking the white, brittle pieces of bone from the ashes - was darkened by the sword's shadow, looming large and ominous in his mind. The dreams were even worse. More than once he'd sat up in his berth in the middle of the night, sweating and panting and wishing he'd never seen it.

If he had tried a little harder, he was sure his father would have let him lead at least part of the ceremony today. Arn knew he had been away too often, should have stayed at his father's side more, should have asked more questions. More and more often Agus looked at him with a deep frown. Arn knew he deserved it. But the urge to get away, to escape, had been too strong. He couldn't stand to look at the man who had been so proud of him. He wouldn't be proud for much longer anyway. As soon as Agus discovered the blood, he would know what had happened, and Arn couldn't even imagine what would happen next. But it would be terrible.

He took a deep breath and stepped outside. Mother was talking to Raban's wife and children, but Arn quickly slipped past them. His little sister had already announced that she would be the one carrying the ashbread their mother had baked this morning, and she was awfully smug about it. Carrying the bread was usually Arn's task. But he supposed this was how his father had chosen to punish him. It didn't matter. All he wanted was to be noticed as little as possible until the river had safely swallowed Raban's sword. Then he could finally worry about the old warrior and the sword's spirits alone. No one would ever have to know.

The crowd in the yard fell silent when Agus and Lora stepped out of the house and slowly walked forward. Arn's father with his grave, painted Guider's face held the cloth with Raban's burnt bones in his hands, while Lora carried the ashbread in a wide basket, smiling radiantly - which wasn't very appropriate. Her face was painted a bit as well: a wide, black stripe ran from her forehead to the tip of her nose. After Raban's family had joined Agus and Lora, everyone else followed silently. Arn tried to stay in the back as much as possible. He saw his mother looking for him, but he didn't want to answer her questions and see the disappointment in her eyes.

Out of nowhere came the sound of a soft drum, accompanied by two wooden flutes: one low and soft, the other high and shrill. The procession started moving slowly along the pastures and fields to Barrow Hill. Countless times Arn had climbed this path, ever since he'd been a small boy. He'd played and run amongst the Barrows like it was his own yard. But now, surrounded by grave, sad people and the eerie mourning music, seeing the graves of the Ancestors materialize from the sun-lit mist seemed mysterious and even a little frightening. It was like the Barrows were

breathing, like every Ancestor was listening, whispering. Several times Arn even thought he saw their ghosts, white and fleeting, disappearing almost as soon as he saw them. He shivered.

Everyone gathered around the pit Arn and his father had dug in the centre of the pole circle that morning. They stood so dark and silent they almost seemed to be a pole circle themselves. The music stopped and Arns father began to speak. Lora, still standing beside him, was finally looking her part, all sadness and seriousness.

'Hear us, o gods!' called Agus loudly. 'Today the chosen one will take his rightful place. Chosen to be a Father, chosen to guard our land. The land has taken his flesh, the fire has taken his bones. The wind has swept his ashes away from us. Now the Barrow will take his spirit and bind it here to protect us.'

It was strange. After you died, you were supposed to be free at last, scattered by fire, wind, earth or water. Arn liked to think it would be a wonderful feeling, just floating around, all worries gone, and then slowly disappearing. An Ancestor was trapped in a twenty-foot circle, never to be free again. But perhaps some people were afraid of being scattered. They would surely welcome becoming an Ancestor. You'd never disappear.

Arn's mind returned to the present just in time to see his father holding the bundle with Raban's burnt bones in it over his head, before carefully lowering it into the pit. 'Let the white earth receive the chosen one. Let the Father be vigilant and drive off intruders. Let him recognize his family, even after we who are here now are gone and our grandchildren and their children are working the land.'

A poke in the ribs and an angry stare went along with the half-loaf of bread the man next to Arn pressed into his hands. Quickly Arn broke off a piece and passed it on. He put the ashbread in his mouth and chewed violently, while he tried not to think about how he was now swallowing part of Raban's bones, ground and kneaded into the dough like hazelnuts. He fought to keep it down.

Agus finished the ceremony by placing the first heath sod over the bundle of bones in the pit.

'The bread makes Raban part of us all. He will recognize us. We've absorbed his ashes like the land, fire and wind have absorbed them. Raban is no longer the

warrior we knew, but a Father. A Father to all of us. May the gods be with him always.'

Raban's wife, children and brothers were next to place a sod in the pit and first to leave the pole circle. Slowly, the people trickled away from the gathering until only a handful of men remained. And Arn. This was something he really couldn't sneak away from.

'Come on,' said Arn's father. 'Let's get to work. There isn't that much daylight left.' Arn and a few other men carried the sods from a big pile next to the poles into the circle, where the others were arranging them next to each other, covering the ground within. The layer on top of that would be smaller, so that in the end there would be a nice, round hill covering Raban's grave.

It was hard work, and it wasn't long before Arn was sweating under his wool cloak. Then the rain returned. Heavy, black clouds blocked the sun that on a clear day would have lit the top of Batrow Hill until it set. Despite the early twilight they kept working. But after a while Agus looked up at the fat raindrops and said: 'I guess we'll have to call it a day. We can't work in the dark. And it's too wet. We'll come back tomorrow.'

With sighs of relief the men put down the sods they were holding and stretched their backs. Arn was soaked, his hair releasing trickles of water that ran down his neck under the collar of his shirt.

'Let's go,' said Agus.

Inside, the hearth was burning brightly. Arn's mother awaited them with a savoury stew, bread and beer. The cold, hungry men spread out their wet cloaks beside the fire before gratefully accepting the food and drink. Arn knew he should be hungry too, but he wasn't. He put his bowl of stew in a corner for the mice to feast on. His beer lapped against the wooden cup and he drained it in two big gulps that made him cough. While the men were talking and laughing by the hearth, Arn slipped away into the shadows. Suddenly he felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

'Arn, what's the matter with you?' his mother asked softly.

'Nothing. I'm just tired.'

'Are you sure? You've been so different lately. So distant. Your father noticed, too.'

Arn sighed like her words annoyed him, but deep inside his heart was pounding.

'It's nothing. Can I go to sleep now?'

His mother's voice was sad when she said: 'Of course, Arn. Sleep well.'

Arn fled to the berths as quickly as he could. Lora was already sleeping soundly in the soft hay. Would she be dreaming of today's important task? Would she be seeing her father's proud, smiling face? Arn wished he could dream like that.

He took a few deep breaths, hoping to slow the frantic beating of his heart and crawled under the wool blanket next to his sister. His mother knew there was something wrong. And his father knew as well. Two days. In two days they would find out what he had done. And there was nothing he could think of that would make it right. There was nothing he could do to hide it.

Lora murmured something in her sleep and turned towards him. Arn put his arm around her and closed his eyes. The sword called out to him in his dreams. But he always failed to free the dead.