

SHE WOLF

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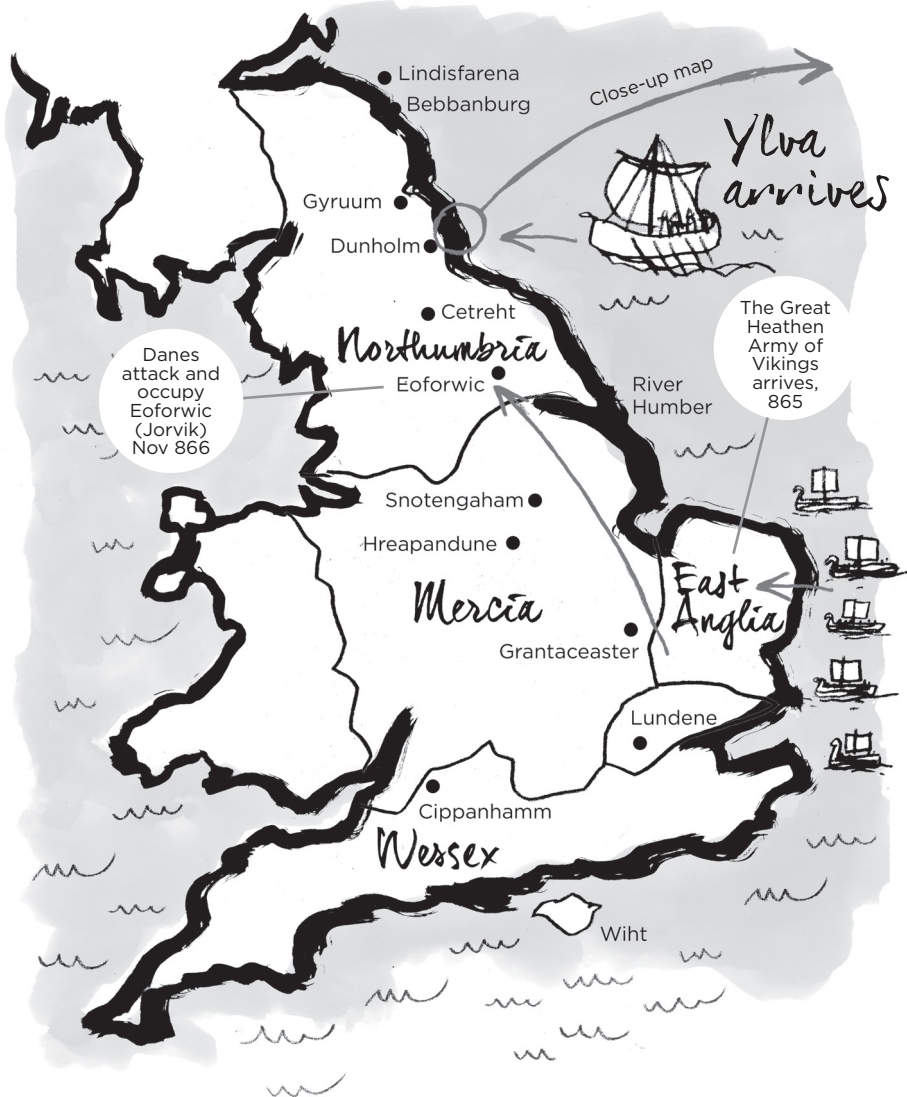
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*For Anisha and Ashwin.
Be kind. Be brave. Be strong.*

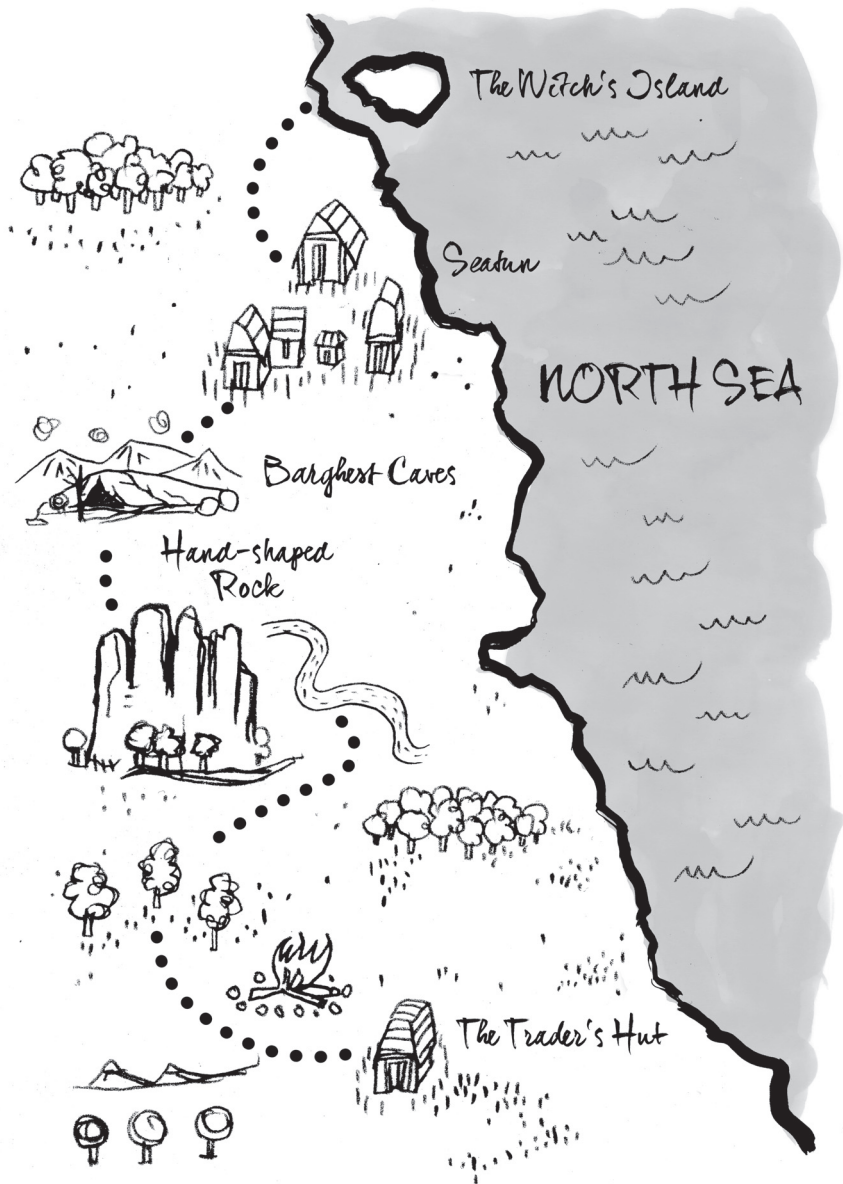


866 NAME
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Ylva's Journey

December 866



Ylva

(eel-va)

NORTHUMBRIA, ENGLAND.

DECEMBER, AD 866.

The Three-Fingered Man



Ylva flinched when she heard Mother shout. It was unexpected, and the sound was so full of fear and pain, it took her a moment to realize what it was. A second shout told her she hadn't imagined the first, and when it cut short there was only silence from the hut.

Crouching in the snow-covered bracken at the edge of the forest, Ylva kept her arm around her dog, Geri, and stared across the track at the lopsided door of the trader's hut. Her fingers tightened around the leather-bound handle of her axe, hard enough to make her knuckles pop.

Trees creaked and cried in the wind that flooded the mountainside.

When the door opened, a bald and bearded giant of a man emerged and stepped down into the deep snow

that lay on the track. As tall and wide as two ordinary men, he had blue-tattooed runes arched over each ear, and a history of past battles etched in scars on his face. Rings of black kohl were painted around the palest blue eyes, making them fade into his skull like the eyes of the dead. A Viking raider, Ylva thought, probably from the same shores she had sailed from. Dressed in grey wolf furs, he moved slowly like a beast, walking with his head down, a sword hanging loose in his left hand. The blade was wet with blood.

The two smallest fingers on the man's right hand were missing.

As soon as he was on the track, the man stopped and raised his face to the darkening sky. He sniffed hard and turned his head the way a predator tests the air for the scent of its prey.

Instinctively, Ylva pulled Geri down so she and the elkhound were lying flat on their bellies, side by side. The snow was perishing and her insides flushed ice-cold as the man on the track opened his mouth and tasted the breeze. There was a flicker in his pale eyes, and his lip curled ever so slightly at one side.

'You smell something?' A woman appeared from the hut behind him. She was tall and strong, with braided hair the colour of burning winter sunsets.

'Can't be sure.' The man's voice was the rumble of wagon wheels over wood.

The flame-haired woman twisted a necklace around the knuckles of her right hand; the same necklace Mother had been wearing when she had entered the hut. Nothing more than a leather cord and a small,

wooden coin-shaped locket. It was simple. Worthless to anyone other than Ylva.

‘I don’t smell anything.’ The woman lifted her nose to the freezing air. ‘You’re just— Wait.’ She put the necklace over her head and stepped down on to the track. She drew a short sword from the folds of her furs and peered into the trees.

Geri squirmed as if he wanted to make a run at the woman – like a fox pouncing from a tuft of grass to catch a rabbit. But this woman was no startled rabbit, so Ylva pressed him to the ground and wished they could become part of it. She held his mouth closed to stop him from making a noise, and let the deep snow cocoon them. Ylva took tiny sips of air, afraid the steam of her breath would give them away. She dared to lift her head only just enough to see over the top of the icy crust.

The woman stalked across the track and stopped at the treeline. She scanned left and right, then stared ahead, as if she were looking directly at Ylva and Geri, half-buried in the snow. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I smell it too.’

She took a step towards the bracken, hair shining in the last of the day’s light, but stopped when a wolf howled in the mountains behind the hut. The haunting cry echoed in the dusk, and the woman paused with her boot mid-step. Her eyes narrowed and she glanced over her shoulder at the man.

‘Let’s move,’ he said.

Her foot pulled back and the woman returned to the track. She stood for a moment, peering into the dark forest.

‘The day’s wasting.’ The man flicked his sword hard, sending a spray of red across the crisp snow. He wiped

the blade on his breeches, then jammed it into its scabbard and went to where his horse was hitched. Raven-black, with a long mane, and a shaggy coat, the animal's legs were thick and its back was wide. It must have been the only horse strong enough to carry such a giant of a man. Perhaps the biggest horse in all of Midgard – certainly the biggest Ylva had ever seen. Right then, she believed only Odin's mighty horse Sleipnir could be bigger.

The three-fingered man swung up into the saddle and waited for the woman to mount up. When they were both on horseback, they reached into the collars of their furs to pull scarves over their mouths as they looked back at the trees where Ylva and Geri were hiding.

With their noses and mouths covered, all that was visible of the raiders' faces was their kohl-lined eyes. But there was a clear white design painted on each black scarf; the bottom half of a skull. Upper and lower jaws. Teeth. And even from beneath the bracken, Ylva saw that the incisors were long, like a wolf's.

For a moment, she was watching monsters and she wanted to scream. But she didn't dare move. She *couldn't* move.

All she could do was bite the inside of her cheek and lie paralysed beside Geri as the two Vikings finally turned and rode away, the shields on their backs like eyes watching her. And in the centre of each black shield was the same painted design; a wolf skull.