



A  
SWORD  
GIRL  
NOVEL

# WINTER BY WINTER

JORDAN STRATFORD

**WINTER  
BY  
WINTER**

**Jordan Stratford**

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*Hew wood in wind, sail the seas in a breeze,  
woo a maid in the dark, for day's eyes are many.  
Work a ship for its gliding, a shield for its shelter,  
a sword for its striking, a maid for her kiss.*

*– Hávamál 81*

For the shield-maidens. You know who you are.

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*“There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldiers’ skills... They put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm’s embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill.”*

*– The Danish Histories of Saxo Grammaticus,  
12th Century*



*I remember giants from the earliest of times, they who raised me long ago. Nine worlds I remember, the nine great realms hanging from the world-tree, all beneath the earth.*

*A tall ash-tree, Yggdrasil, sprinkled with the white waters, from which come all the dews of the valleys, stands evergreen above the Well of Urd.*

*And to this tree come three wise maidens from the pool beneath. One maiden is called Urd, the other Verdandi, and the third Skuld. Past and present and future, together they carved the runes, issued laws, and gave orleg—fate—to the children of men.*

## — PART I —

**A** swan. Whiter than the mist, though dappled with red and orange. That's the fire's light reflected in her feathers. She swims on, calmly.

It's still morning. Mist on the water, and the sun has yet to chase the chill from the air.

A barn, and a drying shack, I seem to remember. That's the light that paints the swan, paints the mist. That's the fire. The stench of fish, so, probably. I've never spent much time on this beach, not really. But this family's home is in flames, or at least I think it belongs to the woman whose screams stopped only moments before. Moments or hours, it's difficult to keep track. It's like I'm waking up, but of course I've been awake for hours.

Hours and hours.

The toe of my boot makes little boat-prints in the sand. The smoke from the shack stings my eyes, as the soot has stained the mouths of many here, black smears around lips and noses, flecked with spittle and blood.

The rowers pulled the staves from the goat pen and made a sort of cage for us, a meandering arc like half a ship open to the tide. There is nowhere to go – even if the three hundred of us were to run into the

sea we'd be visible from all sides of the bay, and an easy target for stones or archers. And then there is the chill of the bay itself, of course. Mostly children and grandmothers left, and not so many of us strong for swimming.

We could turn and overrun the goat-pen. But they have thirty men ashore with shields and axes, some still blood-drunk from the night's work. Each of them could cleave a dozen of us before we reached the trees, and then they'd run out of people to kill.

Even if we made it, where to go? There are another hundred men sorting through what's left of the village. Little silver, if any, so that means grain and meat, some wire and iron. Nothing worth dying for. So even if I pushed past this small crowd, sick and lowing with grief, through the shore-hammered rank of posts, and somehow made it through the men who reek of smoke, and sweat, and blood, when they stand close and if some weapon found my hand, how many of them could I kill before the trees and then? And then? Then home, in flames or perhaps just ash and smoke now, it's been hours, and only more killing, them or me or both. But I don't move.

I hold my sisters close. Kara, exhausted, has stopped crying. Her fingers seem tiny when she reaches out to play with my hair, not as blonde as hers, but still blonde as ashwood. Rota hasn't cried, but she's shaking with anger. Rota would have killed three or four of these rowers before dying, I think, but she stays with us, to protect us. That's her.

We were taught, all of us, to pray in such hours. To swear vengeance or keen for those who now trudge

whatever road to the doors of Valhalla. But I see little of this. We're still too bruised, too numb.

I'm thirsty.

We shuffle away from the rising tide, flotsam pushing us against the staves. It makes the men nervous, and their grip chokes up on their axe handles in anticipation. But we aren't going to do anything. They won't kill us all.

The biggest treasure is not whatever they might find in the village—not the bronze bell, or the plows, and tools, or scant silver. It is ourselves. Those of us who survive the journey will do well at the slave-markets of Upsalla, or Birka.

It can't be the cruelest of lives, to be in thrall. You rise, you work, you feed, you sleep. I've never seen a slave mistreated. They're too expensive. There is no freedom, no, not for yourself or any children you might have. But that's not so different to village life. And everything can be taken from you, just as it has from me, in the hours before dawn. They'll make me a slave then.

But it would kill me to be separated from my sisters, so I think we would all rather die.

I'm not myself. I am not the temper every villager knew and feared since I could walk. I am a numb thing, a frozen thing, cowed and broken.

I'm looking at myself, scared and tangled and matted, the drying blood of others on my dress and my face, and somehow I'm laughing. Just laughing. I can't stop.

Kara's eyes are wide. She's frightened of my laughter. But the thought of me as a slave is too ridiculous, and it's outweighing my self-pity.

Me, Ladda, a slave. I can't imagine it. Nor could anyone else. I used to bite people when I was small just for asking me to do anything, let alone ordering me around.

So I'm laughing and Kara shushes me. She's afraid, afraid that the men will come closer or take me from her or notice me at a time she desperately, so desperately, wishes to be invisible.

"You!" he says, one of the rowers who has penned us, herded us against the ice of the tide. "You'll laugh through a hole in your throat if you can't shut your mouth."

"I already have more than one hole to laugh at you with," I snort. The folk around me cringe as though bitten. The rower comes closer.

"I'll fill your holes with my axe," he says. It's a game now, but he doesn't know it.

"I think your axe is too small to fill any hole," I say, and the older women snicker despite themselves.

"Come here," he commands. I laugh again, though by now Rota has put her thick arms around Kara and drawn her backwards into the crowd of aunts and grandfathers.

"This is my beach," I tell him. "My land. Mine. You don't command me. You're no Jarl, and no husband, and no mother." I don't move. Honestly, I have nothing to lose by taunting him.

Nothing but my life.

"If you come closer, I will drown you in this very bay," I say, which is either challenge or invitation.

He doesn't know what to do.

"Look. That was an offer," I say. "You come over here and I'll drown you, and you can go bathed to

your gods. It might take some time to get the fish stink out of you..."

"Bitch!" he barks. This just makes me laugh louder, and others are joining in. It's crazy. I'm getting us all killed. What in the name of Hel am I doing?

"That is a thing boys say to women when they are afraid," I say. "Don't be afraid, little boy. Come here and let me bathe you. Or are you going to threaten me with your... little... axe?" I illustrate this insult by lifting my little finger and wiggling it in the cool salt air. The aunts all laugh out loud now.

Enraged, he turns himself sideways to wriggle through a space in the posts, but he snags himself on his belt. I dip to the shore and take a handful of sand in one and a rock in the other.

He's free now and five, four, three paces from me, so I throw the sand into his eyes and the rock to his forehead. One of the aunts sticks out a foot, and he's on his knees on the beach.

I step back because I don't need to see what's happening to him, as the lame uncles and little boys, the aunts and grandmothers of the village, all grab whatever they can of the man and pull, pull hard, until he is torn open by their fury and their retribution, until he's a picture of the wounds we all bear now, drawn in flesh and spray and jutting bone.

Some of us have started to die. The other rowers have seen this havoc and have thrown axes and stabbed spears into the pen. Some are stupid enough to join their comrade, though those are soon dragged to their deaths, even though five, eight, a dozen of ours die to one of theirs. Each stone thrown from the pen is a spear tip thrust into it, until we

settle and drag our dead closer to the water, though we can't say why. We have been, for a brief moment, agents of our own death, and that is enough of a life for some.

I would pray to Skathi, or Vor as my mother would want me to do. But it is still not the time for prayer.

One of theirs jerks like a puppet. Mouth thrown open, hands wide, head snapped back. A storyteller conveying surprise, though awkwardly. Comically. And his companion too: jerked back, shoulder-bitten.

Maybe someone in the pen has been praying. Maybe I should have been doing the same.

Then a third rower struck, though in falling we see the arrows jutting out of him, and the rowers turn and scan the beach.

I don't remember picking up this axe. It's curious. I remember my first comb, the first fish I ever speared. I remember deciding to run away from home when I was very small, planning the night before what bread I should take with me and a small pot of honey. I remember the face of the first drowned man I ever found, and the second. But how the axe came to my hand I can't say, and if you told me the goddess herself had put it there, I couldn't argue with you.

It's a small axe, the head the width of my palm, the handle alder. A throwing axe.

So I throw it and it finds the back of the skull of one of the Swedish rowers, the shock of his death reverberating through the air and back into my hand like I never let go.

The rowers turn now and run to the tree line above the beach. I'm stupid for a moment and simply stand there thinking about the man I've just killed. Two men, I suppose. One with my tongue, the other with that axe. I walk forward slowly to retrieve it when I see the posts are gone, trampled into sand, and the villagers tear after the fleeing men before they can escape.

More are coming. More men. A ship's worth of shields, maybe two. Yes, a full crew of eighty men and women, and whatever sunlight makes it through the mist glances off spear tips and axes and even a sword.

I think they've come to cut us down.

But among the men there are archers, and they let loose a volley into the backs of the retreating rowers. None make it to the forest, each with a thigh- or a shoulder-full of shaft and fletching and screams.

As the last of them falls, the eighty descend on them in a roar. Shields are driven into spines and skulls of our captors. The beach is a crunch and a howling.

Something moves past me, solid and fast as a boar. Though it misses me, the air around it shakes, slammed like a door. The fallen man, his back in the sand and now without his spear, looks at me with panic.

"Kill me," I say.

He looks for his friends dying on the beach, and back to me, not understanding.

"Well?" I challenge. "You have arrows in your leg. Pull one of them out and kill me with it."

He almost does it. He grips a shaft and winces, but that's all I need, and I fall on him, both hands on the axe handle, with all my weight, all my fifteen years of village life uprooted and lifted and hurled to the earth on the blade of an axe-head, crushing sternum and ribs and heart and ribs again.

The studs of his leather shirt bite through my dress into my knees. It hurts. My throat hurts, too, from thirst I think, but no, it's because I've been screaming, roaring, growling into the face of this dead man, this corpse whose shirt is hurting my knees through my dress, which I'll have to wash in the sea, or dye, because I've emptied him of blood and it clings to the wool and how long has this howl been in my throat?

Rota's arm wraps around my waist and lifts me up like I'm a doll. Even though she's fourteen, a year younger, she's stronger than me, stronger than anyone. There's an axe over her shoulder, sticky with blood.

"Come, sister," she says. "Ladda, come on."

I nod, looking back towards the water, catching a glimpse, over Rota's shoulder, of a single white swan.



"Take me to their camp," I ask Rota, still outside myself. The ones who killed the rowers, I mean.

"They're not setting camp," she answers. "They're going to follow them North, to Nidaros in the Trondelag."

“How do you know?” My voice is still hoarse, and I’m combing blood and sand out of my hair with my fingers.

“I heard them talking,” she says. “Made sense to listen.”

I nod. “I should go back. To the village.”

“No,” Rota answers again. “There’s nothing.” And she places in my palm a disk in silver, cold and hard, folding my fingers over it. A brooch. Our mother’s. I can tell without looking. I search her eyes.

She shakes her head. The slightest of movements. So.

“Where’s their chieftain?” How long was I on the beach? I look to the trees for shadows, but the fog has barely lifted and there’s no telling the hour. A day without hours. Fitting.

Rota nods a direction, and I stumble following her. I take her hand, and it’s only then I see she’s cut her hair. Ragged, the line. Hurriedly, with a knife. Her hair is sometimes brown, sometimes copper in the light. I would braid it for hours when we were young, but I’ve stopped years ago. There are only Kara’s birch-white locks to braid now.

“Kara,” I say, remembering.

“She’s... alright,” Rota says. “She’s safe. Come on. We should hurry, they’re getting ready to leave.”

Three men, in a circle of men. One tall and broad, with a youth’s scruff of beard on the end of his chin like a goat, his hair pulled back in a knot. He stands easy, like he’s waiting for fish or peeling an apple. Like war was nothing.

The other older, but not by much, and clearly wealthy by his tunic and collar. The third an

advisor, with sun-bronzed skin and kind eyes, a step behind his wealthy master. The men around them part to make room for us, Rota and me.

"I killed a wolf once," calls out the bearded youth to me. "It was watching a squirrel up a tree. So I speared the wolf. Today, you were our squirrel."

"You were watching?" I ask.

"Waiting," he says. "We've been following these ships for three days. They must have thought us farther behind..."

"I'm no squirrel," I tell him.

The bronze-skinned advisor steps forward, smiling faintly. His eyes are brown. "This is your King, Ragnar, King of the Vestfold and of Jutland."

I pause. He doesn't look like a king. He is very tall, but his clothes are rough, and his breeches are unshorn goatskin so the sand and salt cling to the hairs lashed to his legs with leather thong. He looks half-animal at best.

"King," I say.

I reach up towards him and slap his face as hard as I can, my mother's brooch digging into my palm in my other hand as it makes an involuntary fist. There is a roar of laughter, as Ragnar dramatically staggers, rubbing his face for comic effect, mocking me. I have every right to expect a spear in my ribs now, but I don't care.

"King?" I yell. "You bring war to my village and I'm supposed to welcome you like a king? Where were you at dawn? We're all dead, save for the grandmothers and children! Some king." I spit at his feet. My hand hurts.

He considers this. He looks to one of his men and points, accepts something from him.

“For you, then, not-a-squirrel. Take it.”

He hands me a sword without a scabbard. I take it, and it’s lighter than I expect it to be. There are runes set into the blade, but I can’t make them out. I’m too exhausted and too angry and too thirsty to read.

“I can’t feed my people with this,” I tell him.

“That’s no ordinary blade,” he says carefully. “It’s worth the price of a kingdom.”

I thrust the sword’s handle back toward him. “So sell me one.”

He doesn’t accept it, but he smiles, and not unkindly.

“You can’t stay here,” Ragnar says. “They may wheel back to escape us, or Fro may send for more ships.”

“Fro?” I’ve never heard the name.

“King of Uppsala,” says the counsellor. “His armies have killed your people and your king, Sivard. Ragnar has come to avenge him.” I haven’t heard any of this. Not a rumour.

“Do you have somewhere to go?” asks Ragnar. “Kaupang?”

“Kaupang?” I ask. “We are farmers. Fishers. We have no business in Kaupang. There’s barely three hundred of us left. The market would swallow us whole.”

“You would be safe,” he replies.

“We wouldn’t be anything,” I answer. “No stories. No village. No names. We’d be undone.”

“Somewhere else, then,” says Ragnar’s companion, the rich one. “Somewhere safe. Together.”