

The Lifeblood of
Ill-fated Women

Kevin James Breaux

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This book is dedicated to all the gamers out there.

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Gretchen,

Thank you for challenging me to let go and not hold back with my writing.

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Chapter 1

812 AD, Scandinavia

"Astrid, you must wake."

The young woman ignored the softly spoken command and rolled to her side, the crackle of the dry hay beneath her louder than her sister's hushed voice.

"Now, you lazy cow!" Astrid's sister spit, shoving her with both hands.

"What is it, Yrsa?" Astrid peeked with one eye out of the wolf furs she was wrapped snugly in.

"We're being attacked!"

Astrid's ears were suddenly overwhelmed with noise, a rush of sound that moved like the cold water that swelled the rivers that flanked the city of Birka. Dire combat could be heard from all sides of the small, stone home. The clang of swords and axes vibrated across her skin, while the screams of her kinsmen echoed, making her stomach feel hollow.

Astrid tore the wolf furs from her tall, naked body. She jumped to her feet, but panic gripped her when she gazed down at the empty beds of her sibling's two children.

"Where are the others, Yrsa, the young ones?" Astrid's mouth grew drier with each syllable.

Yrsa, her only sister, cracked the door just enough to peer out. A gust of wind blew in, scattering Yrsa's straggly, blonde hair across her face. The smell of burnt wood laid atop the cool damp air, so strong both women could taste it.

"Father ordered us all to the fortress. We must go now." Yrsa gazed back at the empty beds. "Gyrd took the little ones and left me to rouse you, the hibernating bear."

Astrid moved once she heard that her niece and nephew were safe in the hands of Yrsa's husband, a seaside guard. A trained soldier herself, she dashed to her armor where it hung on its old, wooden stand.

"Your husband moves too slow," Astrid said, repeating a statement she had made many times in the past. "He'll need my help."

"Bite your tongue! There's no time for your ego."

Astrid found her arm suddenly restrained by her sister's trembling fingers.

"We must go now, Sister." Yrsa's words were punctuated by the sound of something slamming against the roof.

Astrid pounded her chest above the hang of her full breasts, her long blade and wooden shield, both beloved heirlooms, held tight in her

hands. "Then I will fight naked like my ancestors' ancestors," she boasted proudly. "Father's blood in my veins, Thor's strength in my limbs, and Odin's blessing on my soul are all I need."

"Here." Yrsa handed Astrid a long cloak. "Gyrd will be glad to see you draped in his favorite bearskin, instead of unclad for all the children to gawk at."

Although she suspected it would hamper her ability to fight, Astrid donned the heavy fur.

"Ready?"

Astrid gave her sister a nod, and Yrsa swung the heavy wooden door open.

"Death to the enemies of Birka!" Astrid let loose as she launched herself out into the town over a pair of dead bodies like a deer vaulting over a felled tree. As loud as her scream was, it was overwhelmed by the hiss and crackle of flames. Birka, her home, the city she loved, burned all around her. "Astrid, to the fortress!" Yrsa tried her best to scream over the sounds of battle.

"I will be right behind you, Yrsa."

Astrid felt the shifting wind as it caressed the tops of her shoulders but not her back. *There must be someone behind me. Only a sellsword, thief, or assassin would sneak in from behind in hope of a quick kill, cowards one and all.*

Astrid turned, expecting, wanting to find her first opponent. *Whoever dares to challenge me today will go to the afterlife knowing*

the families of Birka are not so easily defeated. Shield up, Astrid swung her long sword, yet her blade found no target.

"Do not run from me. Come out and fight, coward!"

Astrid crept forward, her eyes panning the town. Smoke and fire filled her vision. She spotted a man whose legs had been severed at the knee. When she looked closer, she realized the back of his head was caved in and charred black, still sizzling with white vapor. Sadly, the man was not alone; he was holding hands with a boy, most likely his son, who was nearly hidden in the shadows of their damaged home. Blood spilled from a gaping wound that resembled a large claw in the boy's back. The sight made her shiver.

Astrid heard her sister call out again but could not see her through the fog. Sensing movement, she jerked her gaze back to the man. She could have sworn she saw his arm twitch.

"Yrsa! Where are you?"

As she warily turned from the man, a jolt from the ground made her lose her balance and threw dirt into her eyes. She drew in a deep breath and blinked...and her eyes opened onto a new scene, a world awash in the brightest golden light she had ever seen, a light so powerful everything else was eclipsed by it. Unable to move or even feel the ground beneath her feet, she panicked.

What's happening to me? I need to go. I need to fight. I need to protect my sister, my family, my city.

But she was suddenly filled with a potent sense of peace, and her heart and thoughts slowed. *I must be dead; this light the great golden hall of the gods: Valhalla.*

Astrid exhaled slowly, closed her eyes, and accepted her fate.

Nothing was left.

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Chapter 2

Astrid's eyes fluttered open, and she took in the clear night sky, a black canvas sparkling with bright white diamonds. The world was calm and quiet—it felt wrong. The recent violence flashed through her mind and she saw dying men—hundreds, maybe thousands of them—all reaching and calling to her for help. Every nerve in her body screamed to flee; her reflexes told her to seek shelter, yet her body did not move. She looked down her body and saw she was lying in a deep cradle of fresh snow.

As Astrid sat up, she felt the weight of her thick armor trying to shove her back down. *I am clad for combat—but how...*

Her eyes took in the wolf-skin leg wrappings she wore and where they ended at her thighs and her bare flesh began. Soft snow had crept under the pleats of her heavy, leather skirt and numbed her mound. Astrid scooped a handful of snow from between her legs and raised the quickly melting powder to her face, so she could examine its color—pure white, no blood. She breathed a sigh of relief; her fears of being

raped after bested in combat were quickly put to rest. Astrid sifted the snow through her fingers—she saw no sign of urine either. *I haven't been lying in the snow for very long...*

"What happened?" Astrid said to herself.

She rose to her knees and brushed the snow off her bare arms while she examined her surroundings. Nothing was familiar—not a tree or hill on the horizon. There was only pale snow as far as she could see.

Astrid stood slowly and found her legs as strong as ever. "The mightiest of oaks carry my daughter from plunder to plunder," Astrid's father always boasted. His hearty voice echoed in her mind, pulling at the corners of her mouth until a smile formed.

"Was the battle all a dream? Or was it you, Father? Another test?" Astrid yelled into the darkness. "Did you see me drunk before you abandoned me here in the wilds? Has your daughter not proven herself to you time and time again?"

Her father's voice did not answer; instead, the shrill howls of a pair of wolves replied. The two large, grey wolves snarled as they cut a path toward her.

Instinctively, Astrid reached for her longbow, yet her fingers found only splintered wood and a limp, lifeless twine. This may have panicked someone else, but not her. Astrid had fought wolves up close before, armed with only sticks and rocks; all members of her family had.

"So be it."

At her waist hung a long, two-handed sword she called Uglá, and in her right boot was a silver dagger, but it was the largest weapon, strapped to her back, she intended to use. Right hand over her left shoulder, Astrid untied her battle-axe.

The weapon's weight swung it free of its harness and down to her side as she watched the wolves approach; the smaller of the two would attack first, she guessed—a dire mistake for him.

Astrid took a defensive stance and waited for the beast to lunge, the three-foot battle-axe hefted in both of her hands. Frothy slobber spilled from the wolf's mouth as it snapped at the air between them. *The beast is touched, diseased.* She could see it now; the marks of mange were much clearer at this distance. Rabid or not, the wolf roused her blood no more than sparring with her sister's husband.

When it finally lunged, Astrid sidestepped it and positioned herself to drop the axe on the animal before it landed.

Crunch.

The sound of the wolf's spine being severed was both wet and dry—the brittle *snap* of bone, the moist *thunk* of meat and gore.

Astrid cheered as she withdrew her bloodied axe. *Too easy.* When the other wolf growled, she growled back, her teeth bared as fiercely as the beast's. The wolf immediately cowered, submissive. Astrid advanced, slamming a hand into her breastplate, and shouted, "Face me! Face Astrid the White!"

The wolf circled her twice, never removing its eyes from the tall warrior woman. At the start of its third turn, it dashed off, following the tracks it had made when it had approached moments before.

"Great Allfather, I pray this test was for the wolf and not me," Astrid called to Odin in Asgard.

As she slowed her breath, she took her first long, careful look around. The murky night had stolen away any details. *Where am I?* she wondered. *Which direction is home?*

Axe returned to her back, Astrid thought about the fire. *Birka must have been razed. Could that be what happened? Was I laid wounded upon a dead cart and rolled from the town?*

The thought stirred her blood more than the attacking wolves had. Had she been on top of the pile, she could have slipped off and fell to the snow without a sound, left to die in the cold. A good enough explanation, even if the thought enraged her. Yet, as Astrid gazed at her long limbs, she found no wounds.

The bright light. What was it? Was I burned? Could I be so eager to serve the gods that I mistook the flames that surrounded me for the golden glimmer of Valhalla? Wait...I was not dressed to fight. Who... She paused to consider the possibilities. I thought I was dead. Others must have thought I was dead too. It's the only fitting answer...one of my siblings found me, and must have dressed me for the pyre.

Again, Astrid looked at her arms and legs. What bare flesh there was, was unmarked by fire. Her mind was full of questions, but she quieted them. Her father always taught that a good warrior did not

allow her weak mind to overcome her strong body. These mysteries would have to wait until after she found her way home.

Tilting her head up, to look the stars, Astrid felt her long braids slide down her back; wet and cold, they weighed the same as thick ropes. *I should ask Yrsa to trim my hair before it ends up as long as hers.* Astrid's concerns shifted to her sister, unarmed when they had left the house, a mere milkmaid not known for her skill with any weapon. *Yrsa...* A tremor ran down Astrid's body when she thought of her name. *I failed you, Sister, and now you're no doubt dead...or worse.*

"Yrsa, I pray your death was quick and noble." Astrid forced a smile. "I pray you find peace in Freyja's meadow."

With her eyes shut tight, Astrid held back her tears. When she reopened them, her only thought was of vengeance.

The stars were bright in the sky, there was not a cloud to disguise their design, yet they appeared misaligned. Astrid traced constellations with her eyes until she found what she was looking for: the North Star.

The dark that lay north of her position held many possibilities. Her father had trained her extensively in map reading. Astrid knew that north of Birka stood the frozen wastelands, a stretch of desolate territory that went on and on, seemingly with no end, but no man in her lands had ever ventured far enough to create a map. Such a trip would be deadly if one attempted it unprepared for the deep winter snow and Hel's icy grip.

To travel far south of Birka meant to cross paths with dozens of small, poverty—and disease-stricken villages. Rumored to have suffered the plague for a dozen or more years, there was no end to what horrors would be found.

Astrid's sense of ambivalence gave way to one of frustration, and deep concern for her family crawled back into her heart. When a tremble of remorse ran through her chest, Astrid stomped in anger.

"No!"

She yanked the dagger hidden in her boot free, drew a shallow line across the meat of her forearm, and let the blood dribble down her elbow and onto the stark white snow.

"Gods, I call upon you with a gift of blood, an offering to protect the blood of my kin. See that the young ones are safe, and I promise to present to you more blood, that of our mutual enemies."

A brisk wind blew through the valley, and Astrid knew it was her gods' acknowledgment. She also felt that the answer to what direction she should travel was but one more offer away.

Astrid trudged back through the deep snow to the wolf carcass several feet behind her, grabbed the wolf's tail, and lifted the beast from the ground until its nose was the only thing that remained in the powder. She cut through the thin bone with her sharp dagger, and with a thud, the carcass fell to the ground.

"I welcome your wind, my gods. Now I beg of you: clear this haze and reveal to me the direction of my fate."

With the tail pinched between her index finger and thumb, Astrid raised her hand high above her head. Instantly, the wind whipped it about, and Astrid released it, the current carrying it several feet before dropping it to the snow.

"So be it. I shall travel south."

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Chapter 3

Astrid walked for four long days before the snow cleared and wet, green grass replaced it under her boots. Her eyes blurred from fatigue, she did not realize she had wandered into a field of wildflowers. When the stem of one of the larger plants snapped under foot, Astrid stopped and forced her eyes to open wider. Beneath her was a large patch of Reinrose. *Never have I seen such an abundance of them; it's so beautiful. And now... It's too early for these to bloom.*

Two years ago, days before her twentieth birthday, Astrid had marched a longer trek than this, her brothers at her side. They had sung, joked, and jeered, without so much as a groan or moan. It was during that trip that Astrid's brothers had showed her another side of their father's teachings about the mind and body: the advantages of a strong willpower. From that moment on, when Astrid's body told her to stop, to complain, to give up, she thought, *Lift, step, lift, step. March on. March on.*

Now, her eyes and shoulders forward, Astrid had not looked up from the ground in ages. Her mind and body were in total conflict; hunger

had bested nearly all that she had learned. Her stomach growled, a reminder to eat the last small chunk of wolf meat she had. Astrid patted her stomach over the thick armor. The hollow sound the metal made when struck by her thick leather glove made her frown. It seemed she had grown skinnier in the past days, her breastplate looser now than ever.

She shuffled forward another few feet, her teeth gritted. The voice inside her head mocked her again. She had repressed it for much of the day, but it would not go unheard any longer. *This is not the direction of Birka. This is not the direction of Birka. This is not the direction—*

An unfamiliar voice rang out to her left. Her eyes suddenly heavy—nearly impossible to lift—but still she looked. A tall, middle-aged man adorned in peasant garb waved as he led a fat cow out of the dense forest. Astrid sized him up and quickly noticed his lack of metal armor, furs, and visible weapons.

He was calling out to her in a language she was unfamiliar with. Astrid sneered at its twang and jittery sound as she tried to decipher it.

The man's handsome face wore a smile that was so large it made her uneasy. She never felt comfortable under the steady gaze of men outside her family; a smile always seemed to lead to a lustful remark or advance, and each of her brother's friends had suffered a black eye or broken rib at one point as a result.

As she watched him, the smiling man called out to a shorter portly man, who jogged up to his side and immediately began to speak in the same language.

Astrid did not move. She simply watched them. When the smiling man took two steps forward, her combat training overcame all else. In no time, she had examined his every detail for weakness. *His stance, strong and steady, does not match his overly friendly expressions. His muscles, large and well-sculpted, they belong to a man who has swung a heavy sword, not a shovel. He is no farmer.* After another few steps forward, the smiling man spoke again.

"Stop," she commanded in a voice so deep and stern it made both of the men's seem girlish.

She withdrew her sword, and both men raised their hands, palms out; they were unarmed. His hands up, the closest man continued to speak. Astrid marveled at the flash of his pearlescent teeth; men where she came from rarely had a mouthful, let alone ones so bright. She could not break her focus from his smile... He meant to hurt her—she could sense it, but unless he had more friends hidden in the forest, she knew he would not take her so easily.

"Do you seek a fight, odd man?"

The smiling man peered over his shoulder; the portly one shook his head in response. Astrid assumed it was some sort of signal between the two—a clash was imminent. "I have faced the Stone Giants of Halostadt and the Dwarven Iron Raiders of the Endless Isles in daylong combat. I

have hunted and killed the Great Red Wolf of the Black Forest. You two and your cow are no match for me!" Astrid shouted.

The taller man hushed the shorter one before he knelt slowly. He picked up a small, broken branch, deliberately turned it over, and pressed its tip into the muddy ground.

Astrid followed the man's motions with the tip of her sword, the lines forming symbols, but then suddenly blurring and overlapping. Astrid's eyelids felt like they were weighted with anvils, and the sword in her hand grew heavier with each shallow breath.

What's wrong with me? I have never suffered as such before, not even as a child. The meat... she thought. Was the wolf I killed so greatly diseased that its meat was tainted?

Astrid blinked and realized she had let go of her weapon, that it was lying in the mud beside her. Bending to retrieve it, the downward motion of her head could not be stopped. Tumbling to the ground with a heavy, moist thud, Astrid's world went pitch-black.

Chapter 4

Warren and his younger brother, Hammond, stood in silence a moment. Neither man wanted to move, and neither was sure how to proceed. After studying the way the woman dressed, Warren was only sure of one thing—she was ready for combat. *Barbarians have not been seen in our region for many years. I should know...*

"H-her voice... So strong. It carries her stern language well. Have you encountered its kind before in your travels, Warren?" Hammond asked.

"There must be several dozen different barbarian languages, Brother. You don't seriously expect me to remember them all, do you?"

"Well, what do you think happened to her?" Hammond asked.

"She looks ill. Hurry, run back to my farm. Retrieve my mule and wagon."

"To move her? You plan to bring her back to your home? Are you mad, Warren?"

"Look at her, Hammond. She's unwell. She needs our help."

"Sure, then. If she wasn't quite the beauty, maybe covered in boils and missing teeth—oh, like old Miss Miller—would you still be so quick to help?"

"Hush and do as I ask."

"Right, right."

After Hammond dashed back through the forest, toward town, Warren knelt at the warrior woman's side. Hammond was, in part, right. She was even more beautiful than Warren had allowed himself to realize. Her face was free of scars, her nose straight. He placed a hand on her skin; it was surprisingly hot to the touch. On the inside of her left arm were faded marks from old wounds and a fresh bruise. Near her wrist, there were signs of a callus. *Produced by the straps of a shield*, he thought with a quick peek at his own arm, where he had similar marks.

"Let us see what all you have stashed."

It had been seven years since he had stepped foot on a battlefield, but it felt like a mere week suddenly. He knew that, just because she had collapsed, it did not mean she was no longer a combatant, and although he meant her no harm, he could not say for sure the sentiment was mutual.

Warren turned his gaze from the old leather band that wrapped around her forehead and kept the broken strands of her long hair out of her eyes, to the thick fur boots she wore. The shiny handle of a large dagger sparkled in the sun.

"Well..." After he carefully pulled it free of the sheath tied tightly to her calf, he tossed the blade to the side, near her sword. "Do not worry. I will see your weapons cleaned and carefully stowed. If you are a soldier, like I was, I know their importance to you."

His attention shifted to her armor. He had seen female barbarians before, even faced women on the battlefield, yet none wore such heavy plate. With his knuckles, Warren tapped it gently. Polished to a bright shine, a spiral design weaved up and around the armor corset and circled the two large cups her breasts filled. *Distracting*, he thought, unable to take his eyes off it even after he told himself to.

"Thankfully, I never faced an opponent with your armor," Warren whispered to her as she lay unconscious.

Back on his feet, he gazed at the tall, exotic warrior head to toe. Her cloak, which was split down the back so that her battle-axe could be reached, splayed out to the sides like the large, brown wings of an eagle. The sight, Warren thought, was oddly angelic.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

Moments later, Hammond returned with the mule cart. He seemed more anxious now than when he'd left, and Warren thought he knew why.

"You told Helen, didn't you, Brother?"

"She asked me if we found your cow. I may have let slip that my older brother found a new set of teats to milk."

"Your vile humor is wasted on me."

"It was wasted on her too. Regardless, Helen doesn't want me to touch any strange women."

"Have you told her about Anabel yet?"

Hammond chuckled as he dismounted the mule cart. "Look who jokes now," he stated.

"Well, if Anabel is a joke, then many of the men in our town have told it."

Hammond thumped his brother's arm with his fist, a clear signal he was done being teased. "Bastard."

"Help me lift her up." Warren pointed to Astrid, who had not stirred the entire time. "I'll take her shoulders. Her top looks much heavier than her bottom."

"You think I am not strong enough to lift your woman?"

"Yes."

Hammond laughed. "Perhaps we should arm wrestle later today. Winner gets a boot of ale."

Warren grunted and grumbled through his clenched teeth as he lifted. "Be sure to bring enough coin. I'm very thirsty."

Hammond did, in fact, strain to get the woman's legs up and into the cart. "Look, we best move," He said over the creak and moan of the old wood of the cart. "The wheels are sinking! Lords, she's much heavier than she appears, Warren."

"It's her plate armor—very thick and quite the fine craftsmanship."

"Her armor? That old thing? Are you sure?" Hammond motioned to her belt. "Perhaps those pouches are full of gold coin."

"I doubt it. Anyway, that pouch there." Warren pointed to the leather bag on her right side. "See the bloodstain? That one holds raw meat."

"Ah, at least that explains the smell."

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Chapter 5

Astrid dreamed of her family. Her father was the most important man in her life, and for the past twenty-two years, she had loved and worshiped him like a god. She had seen him at his best, fearless against two dozen men on the battlefield, like Týr himself, and at his worst, humbled at the bedside of her mother as she died.

The youngest of his children, Astrid was unmarried. With more adeptness in combat than farming or household chores, she fit in well with her four brothers—at times, they even called her their fifth brother. Ulf, Vignir, Hak, Jokul: the sons of Kol, the Ruler of Birka.

Astrid dreamed of a day they had all spent together, a great deer hunt in the dense forest outside of Birka. It had been a contest to see who could provide the most meat for the town, and Astrid was determined to win. She had already felled her third deer, a large buck that would make a great trophy, when her youngest brother, Jokul, had marched to her spot in the forest with a deer over his shoulders. Without a word, her brother dropped the dead animal into her pile. With a smirk, he

withdrew the arrow he had fired into the deer's neck, snapped it in two, and tossed its pieces into the thick brush.

Astrid had asked Jokul to explain himself, but he ignored her. Her brother had simply walked past her, grabbed one of her arrows from her half-full quiver, and returned to her pile of kills. He plunged her arrow into the deer he had killed, marking it as hers.

"Why?" she had asked.

"You deserve this, Sister," he replied, as he combed dry leaves from his waist-long, blonde hair. "You deserve this."

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