

THE TREE OF SACRIFICE

extracts



VI

THE NIGHT IN THE PILGRIMS' HUT

In northern Sweden, there were once many simple huts built for pilgrims who sought shelter for the night. All they had to do in return for their stay was to chop new wood before leaving. Deep in the vast forest of Ödmården stood one such hut.

On a cold April evening in the distant past, two pilgrims arrived there and put down their heavy packs at its door. More than three days had passed since they had last seen a single human being. They were therefore glad to discover that another pilgrim had already prepared his night's lodging in the hut, with a blue woollen blanket and a sheepskin. He himself was not to be seen, so they assumed he had gone into the forest to procure something or other.

The two rolled out their blankets and built a fire. Darkness fell, but still the third guest did not appear. Worried by this, the pilgrims had difficulty falling asleep, but eventually settled down.

When the night was at its darkest, one of them was awakened by a sound. The door of the hut opened slowly with a faint creaking of the rusty hinges. A dark figure stepped inside. It was difficult to discern much in the dim red glow of the fire's dying embers. But an odour hung about him. An odour like that of a dead body.

As the man sat down heavily on the bench by the fire, his face was illuminated. It was not the countenance of a living person. The nose was missing, and the skin seemed to be covered with bluish-purple stains. Still drowsy, the pilgrim groped around the floor and found the rock used as a door-stop. In desperation, he threw himself at the man by the fire and slammed the rock into his temple. He struck again and again until the body became still. His travelling companion woke up and was told what had happened. It all sounded like lunacy to him.

True, the slain man had no nose. On the other hand, outlaws sometimes got their noses cut off as punishment. And while there were obviously blemishes of some sort on his skin, that could have many explanations. If the man was indeed an outlaw, it was no issue that he had been killed. Yet, they did not know that for sure.

To avoid getting into trouble, they dragged him and his belongings out into the forest. At the break of dawn, they continued their journey, having agreed to never again mention what had passed. All day they walked in silence.

In the evening, shuddering from the cold, they arrived at another hut. As they approached it, they at last started talking to each other again. They could not wait to build a fire and get warm. Laughing and joking they filled their arms with freshly chopped wood. But as soon as they entered the hut their faces turned white with terror. On the floor lay a sheepskin with a blue woollen blanket on top.



XXXVI

SUGAR KRINGLES

Shortly after Anna-Karin Marhage's first monthly bleeding, her dreams became strange. Further, more real than any before. And every month, the dreams returned with the blood.

She dreamt of walking backwards through the doors of a large farmhouse. Inside, the Grandsire was sitting in a high-backed chair of blackened oak and she shook his left hand. She was invited to sit at the table with him and a group of girls her own age. They were offered drinks and a silver platter with stacks of sugar kringles. This knotted pastry had always been her favourite, but towards the end of the meal, the kringles turned into snakes. Those girls who screamed when the true nature of the fare was revealed were whipped by the Grandsire with a whip of intertwined snakes. If they managed to control their distress, the Grandsire gave them a golden bracelet in the shape of a snake. Anna-Karin was always among those who got to taste the whip instead.

Anna-Karin's parents were wealthy and owned quite a bit of forest. In August 1899, on her sixteenth birthday, a distinguished gentleman came to the farm. He said he wanted to buy part of the forest at a generous price and brought with him two girls about Anna-Karin's age. Though he introduced them as his daughters, they looked nothing like him. While he was pale and black-bearded, they were rosy-cheeked and fair-haired.

The visitors shook hands with everyone in the family. When it was Anna-Karin's turn, she was startled to be offered their left hand instead of the right. The man's cold handshake sent a shiver down her spine, and she shivered again when she saw that the girls' wrists were adorned with bracelets in the shape of snakes. She had never shared her dreams with anyone for fear of being considered crazy. Now was hardly the time either.

After a stilted and awkward dinner, her father and the gentleman retired to a back room to talk business. Mother tried to converse with his daughters, but they remained reserved. She told them about Anna-Karin's plans to become a nurse, but they gave no response. Anna-Karin by turns sweated and shivered with cold as she looked at them.

When father came back, his face beamed with satisfaction.

»My dear daughter«, he said, »I have arranged for you to stay in Sundsvall so that you can study to be a nurse as you have entreated me.«

Anna-Karin stared at him for a moment and then cried »No!« as she seized a poker from the fireplace to defend herself. It was a terrible scene. Her hysterical crying, attempts to attack the guests, and incoherent ramblings about snakes soon convinced her parents that she had gone mad. They wrapped her tightly in sheets so that she could not move and put her to bed.

It was daytime when her father entered with a serious face. He explained that the visitor was a doctor at a clinic for the mentally ill. The doctor had been told that buying forest would be a good way of investing a large sum of money that he had inherited. After yesterday's commotion, he had offered to take Anna-Karin on as a patient instead of as a lodger in his home. She would accompany him and his two daughters back to the clinic right away.

Anna-Karin sobbed that she had seen the man in her dreams, but her father would not listen. He tried to reassure her by telling her that the food at the clinic was apparently excellent.

»You will even get sugar kringles sometimes«, he said comfortingly.