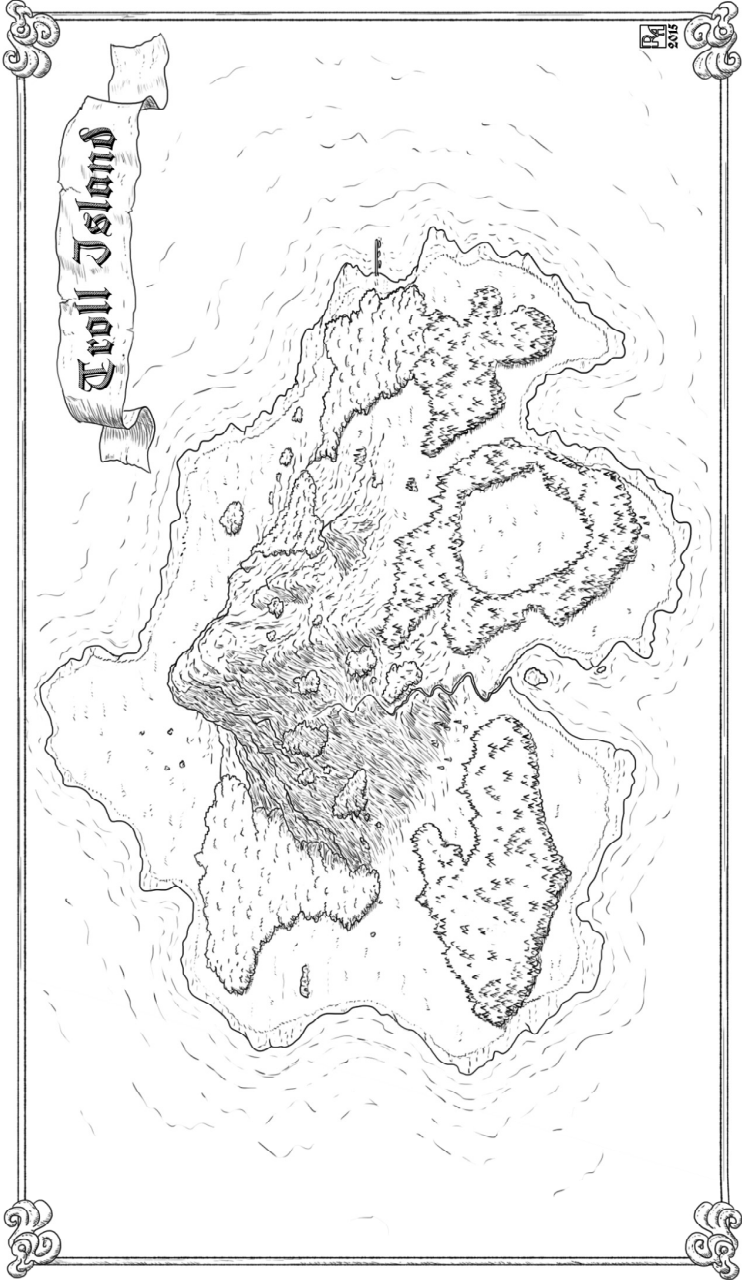


Petrified



Olaf Moriarty Solstrand

Petrified

Solstrand Publishing

Copyright © 2016 Olaf Moriarty Solstrand. All rights reserved.

No part of this document may be reproduced in any form without prior permission from the author. Within reason, of course. Making copies for personal use is okay. So is sharing the book with close friends or family, or donating/selling your copy of the book to someone else when you've read it. Also, should you be interested in creating fanfiction or other non-profit derivations or adaptations of this text, go ahead, that's awesome! If you're not 100 % sure if your intended usage meets these criteria, please contact the author. You'll find updated contact information on the website address provided below.

ISBN 978-82-998751-6-5 (printed edition)

ISBN 978-82-998751-7-2 (Kindle edition)

Solstrand Publishing
P.O. Box 40
N-1401 Ski, NORWAY
www.olafmoriarty.com/petrified/

Originally published in Norwegian as *Trolløya : eit godnatteventyr*.

Translation by Translated.net
Proofreading by Tom Speelman and Kasey Cassells
Cover design by Derek Murphy, CreativIndieCovers.com
Map of Troll Island © Robert Altbauer, www.fantasy-map.net.
Used with permission.

Set with Sabon, 11/15 pt.
Chapter titles: Deutsche Zierschrift, 14 pt.
Dropcaps: Royal Initialen, 85.5 pt.

Printed by CreateSpace, an Amazon.com company

Chapter One

Gunnhild

“Mom?”

“Ylva? Haven’t you gone to bed yet? You have school tomorrow. And afterwards you’re going to your Dad’s. Do you know what time it is?”

“Yes, it’s just... I can’t get to sleep.”

“Ylva... is there something you want to talk about? You can talk to me about anything, you know.”

“No, not really. Why do you ask?”

“Your teacher called me. I heard that something happened at school today.”

“...do we have to talk about this now?”

“Not if you don’t want to. I realize that it’s difficult to talk about it. But if there’s anything at all I can do for you, I hope you’ll let me know.”

“I was just wondering... could you... tell me a story?”

“A story? It must be four or five years since you’ve asked me that. I didn’t think you were interested in that stuff anymore.”

“I know, I just... I just would like to hear you tell me a bedtime story again.”

“Okay. If I do, do you promise to go to sleep afterwards?”

“Of course.”

“So what do you want to hear? What about... this book?”

“No. I just read that one.”

“Okay... Well, you have a shelf full of books, so we must be able

to find something we can read.”

“But... I’ve read all of them. I want to hear something exciting, something where I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Mm. And how do you expect me to do that?”

“Can’t you tell me a story? Just make something up? The way you used to do when I was smaller?”

“I don’t know... that’s a long time ago, Ylva. I’m not...”

“Please?”

“Well, okay. Move over a bit in the bed so I can sit here on the edge then. Right, let’s see. Once upon a time...”

* * *

It was very early in the morning and the sun hadn’t risen yet. But Gunhild was already awake. She didn’t really have a choice: she was a knight in the Royal Army and now she had been commanded to go out and kill a troll. Well, it was perhaps more precise to say that she had volunteered, but why shouldn’t she? It had become all too common for trolls to come down from the mountainside where they lived in order to help themselves to the goats that grazed on the large fields by Einer Fjord. That was bad enough, but in recent weeks, they had started to become more aggressive. A week ago one troll had managed to sneak up to the castle – which stood in the center of the capital – and break a hole in the wall with a boulder. Even though the guards had managed to scare the troll away to prevent it from getting into the castle, they realized that they had to stop the troll before it came back. And so naturally, Gunhild had volunteered – should she just sit back and trust her lethargic colleagues to take care of this? She was the expert. She was perhaps one of the youngest of them, but she was still the most experienced troll killer in the Army. She could handle this.

Now she hid behind a boulder outside a cave on Gray Mountain. Gray Mountain was full of caves which made it such a coveted home for a troll. Here they could tuck themselves away and merge in with the boulders. If an inexperienced troll hunter came looking for them, it would be impossible to find the right cave. Trolls were big and heavy and left clear footprints on loose soil, but on bedrock it required many years of experience to find troll tracks. It had taken Gunhild many hours to find the right cave but now she was here.

Her plan was the same as always: she had to be able to lure the troll out of the cave and keep it there until dawn. What made it so difficult to kill a troll was that their gray skin was as hard as granite and this made them invulnerable to most weapons – especially inside their caves. Their only weakness was sunlight. It was just an old myth that sunlight made a troll crack or turn to stone, but they *did* become weaker in sunlight – so weak, in fact, that it was possible for a human of above average strength to kill them. And because even trolls were smart enough not to come out of their caves in broad daylight, you had to trick them to come out just before sunrise and distract them until the sun came up. Even for an experienced knight like Gunhild this was extremely dangerous, but it was the only way. To try and go into their caves – even when the trolls were asleep – was insane.

Gunhild looked up at the sky and tried to work out how much time she had. Two or three minutes until sunrise? She should be able to hold on. Time to lure the troll out. Gunhild found a stone on the ground and threw it at the mouth of the cave so it smashed against the rock and then she climbed up on the boulder she had been hiding behind so that she was clearly visible from the cave. She saw that something was moving in the shadows inside, and eventually a troll emerged. The troll was quite burly and, like other trolls, was gray all over to blend in with the mountain, apart from

the moss green hair and beard. At about ten feet tall, the troll was almost twice as large as Gunhild and she felt excitement shivering up and down her spine. She held her left hand ready to take hold of the sword, but the troll made no sign of approaching. It looked at her, then it looked up at the sky. It looked as if the troll's instincts were working, continuously assessing whether there was a threat if it came out of the cave or if it had time to slaughter Gunhild before sunrise. Gunhild started getting impatient – she had no time for this. To lure the troll further out, she pulled the sword six inches out of the scabbard and ran her hand against its edge until she had a large, bleeding wound on the palm of her hand. She knew there was nothing better at luring a troll than the smell of fresh blood and it was evident from its face that it wasn't going to hold out much longer.

And then it happened – the troll leapt out of the cave opening at full speed towards Gunhild. Gunhild quickly grasped the sword with her good hand and just managed to parry the troll's blow at her. The edge of the sword sparkled as it struck the rock hard forearm of the troll and he growled in discomfort, as if he had been stung by a mosquito. Gunhild saw the troll raise its other arm to knock her off the boulder and she parried it quickly with the sword. With one eye locked on the troll, she cast a glance around her to spot a better place to stand. The boulder gave her an advantage in that it helped her to equalize their height differences, yet she had to concentrate to hold her balance. Her gaze fell on a knoll in the mountainside approximately three feet above the ground and Gunhild jumped quickly over to it without dropping the sword. The troll turned after her as quickly as it could, aiming to strike her with its right fist. Out of pure reflexes, Gunhild managed to avoid the fist that was larger than her head as it came closer and hit the rock wall behind her. Gunhild felt the adrenaline boiling through her body and she was immediately on her feet again so that she

could quickly send several thrusts of her sword at the troll's chest. The troll grimaced in pain but showed no other signs of weakness.

Gunhild tried to climb higher but was careful never to turn her back on the troll. The troll struck at her several times; each time she managed to parry the blow with her sword and each time, sparks flew from the sword as it hit the troll. With each parry Gunhild became more tired. Shouldn't the sun have risen by now? It was at least five or six minutes since she had managed to lure the troll out and she didn't know how long she could hold on in this kind of fight against a troll at full strength. As she parried another blow from the troll, she glanced up at the sky. She was startled when she realized what she had overlooked: *Gray Bone Ridge*. Between her and the sun there was a small peak, so small that she had hardly given it thought, but now that she suddenly found herself in its shadow, she realized how stupid she had been not to take it into consideration. Down in the town the sun was probably already up, but up here, *Gray Bone Ridge* was in the way and it was probably going to take ten to fifteen minutes before the sun emerged from behind the mountains. Gunhild swallowed hard. She didn't have the energy to stand here and parry the troll for a quarter of an hour. She wasn't even sure if the sword could endure it.

The troll struck at her again and Gunhild managed to parry the blow, but she didn't see the next strike coming. She was pushed off the mountain crag and landed hard on the soft grass. The troll came slowly towards her and Gunhild tried to get up but her whole body was in pain. She suddenly noticed that she didn't have the sword anymore before spotting it lying in the grass a few feet away. She tried to reach for it but noticed that she was dizzy after the fall and she couldn't move her left arm, which had suffered most of the blow from the troll. She tried to think things through. If she could only manage to crawl over to the sword and grab it and somehow keep the troll distracted until the sun rose, this could still end well.

But how on earth would she do it? The troll was getting nearer and was taking his time on purpose as if to tease her. Gunhild needed a miracle. She needed a god. Suddenly Gunhild realized what her only option was. She had no god, but she had something that was almost as good: she had Balder.

Gunhild quickly took hold of the whistle that hung on her leather belt and blew a couple of blasts, almost like a short melody.

Please, Balder, she thought. Please be awake and close now.

Now the troll was right next to her and it stood bent over her as she lay on the ground almost lifeless. Gunhild felt her energy slowly coming back and that she was almost strong enough to stand up again, but without the sword she had no chance against the troll standing there examining her. Suddenly the troll turned its head, confused. It heard the same thing that Gunhild heard: something was approaching at full speed. At full gallop. The troll then turned and saw what had to be one of the biggest bull moose it had ever seen. Gunhild smiled, exhausted.

“Good boy, Balder,” she said softly to the moose. “Sorry I had to ask for your help, but...”

Gunhild didn't need to say more. The moose realized immediately what had to be done and ran toward the troll with its antlers lowered. The troll saw it, confused. He raised his hand to strike Balder, but the moose managed to avoid the strike at the last moment. The troll was even more confused when Balder turned and took yet another run at full speed toward the troll with its antlers lowered. The troll looked put out, as if it did not quite understand why this moose thought that it was a threat to an adult troll. Nevertheless, Balder was coming at him and the troll struck at it again, but once again Balder was able to twist away. When Balder then fled, the troll was provoked and started to go after him as fast as he could. This was the signal Gunhild had been waiting for: now that the troll was distracted with Balder, she managed to stand up

again. She took the sword with her right hand and swore, annoyed that she had cut herself ten minutes earlier to lure the troll out of the cave. But she didn't really have a choice: she was not strong enough to hold the sword in her left hand, so she had to use the right. She whistled and Balder came running toward her. The troll turned and tried to grasp what was happening. He just had time to see Gunhild throw herself onto Balder's back and grab onto his antlers to keep herself firmly in place. There couldn't be many seconds left now.

The troll came running at them. Gunhild rode Balder at the troll. "Can we get behind him?" she shouted to Balder, who just about held back from storming toward the troll with a purposeful look. The troll struck at them, but Balder twisted away. The troll struck again, but Gunhild managed to lift her sword and parry the blow at the last moment. The troll lifted his hand to strike them yet again, but just then it happened: The sun rose and the troll was bathed in sunlight.

The whole of the troll's rock-hard skin sparkled for a moment and Gunhild knew he was vulnerable now. The troll realized the same thing and glanced around to try and find a way back into his cave. The caves were now a long way behind it, so it turned and started running. Balder ran up beside the troll and Gunhild stood up on his back, managing with one leap to jump up onto the troll's shoulders. With her final burst of energy, she managed to plunge the sword so hard into the troll's back that the sword tip came out through its chest. The troll grunted loudly in pain before it collapsed on the ground with Gunhild still on its back.

Gunhild was hardly able to get up, but she was safe now. The troll was dying. She had seen this many times before. In fact, the troll lay trembling on the ground. Over the next thirty seconds, the whole big body stiffened in death. There was complete silence and it was impossible to distinguish the lifeless body from one of the

boulders surrounding it.

Gunhild managed to get over to the place where she had left her knapsack. She took out a piece of bread and gave it to Balder, who accepted it with pleasure. “Eat up,” she said, exhausted. “I couldn’t have done that without you.” She patted Balder while he ate and nodded to let him know that it was okay if he went back into the forest to rest. Then she found a slip of paper and pencil in her knapsack. She wrote “Mission Accomplished” on the paper and blew another little tune on the whistle. After a few minutes a crow landed on the boulder in front of her. Gunhild attached the piece of paper to the crow’s leg and sent the crow on its way again, towards the town. Now her work was done. Now she could finally start back home.

* * *

It was still early morning when Gunhild finally arrived home to the little hut she shared with one of the other female knights in the Royal Army. She was exhausted when she came in and closed the door behind her. Solveig, Gunhild’s roommate, came out of the bedroom when she heard the door.

“Gunhild, is that you? There’s a...” Solveig gave a sudden start when she saw how Gunhild looked. “Are you okay? Have you been wounded?”

“I’m fine,” Gunhild replied, tired. “I still have all my limbs and nothing is broken. I’ll go down to the infirmary later today.”

“Would you like me to fill the tub for you?”

“Later. First I’d like to just sleep, if that’s okay. I’m on guard duty for the coronation ceremony at the castle tonight and I need to rest before then.”

Although the only thing she wanted right now was to be in peace,

Gunhild realized Solveig had a point. She felt a little better now, but she had to look absolutely terrible. Her left side was one long bruise all the way from her shoulder blade down to her heel. Her right hand was covered with a makeshift bandage. She was probably quite pale as she had given all her food to Balder. The black sweater that she had worn to hide herself in the dark was full of sticky troll blood. She dared not think how her hair must look. Yes, she should definitely take a bath and find some clean clothes before the evening.

“Okay,” said Solveig. “I just wanted to tell you that the letter you’ve been waiting for has finally arrived.” Gunhild raised her eyes and managed to smile for the first time that morning. It wasn’t that she did not like being a regular knight. But she dreamed of something more. She dreamed of rising through the ranks and one day becoming general in chief of the Royal Army. Perhaps the country’s first female general. So about a week ago, she had finally plucked up the courage and sent in an application for promotion to sergeant. Since then, every day she had sat and waited by the mailbox, in the hope that she would get an answer. And now the answer lay there, in an envelope on her bed; an envelope decorated with the general’s personal seal. She sat down on the bed, took a deep breath and opened the envelope.

“What does it say? What does it say?” asked Solveig, almost as excited as Gunhild herself. She knew that Gunhild preferred being alone when reading mail, but she was so excited now that she had not been able to hold back from following Gunhild into the bedroom. Gunhild read the entire letter and her smile gradually disappeared as she read. She began to read again, as if confused.

“We have received your application for promotion and we are sorry to tell you that...” Gunhild threw away the letter in annoyance. “What the heck? I am the toughest, boldest and strongest knight they have here! I should be first in line for promotion!”

Solveig sat down on the bed and put her arm round Gunhild.

“These things happen, I guess,” said Solveig cautiously. “And you can try again next year, can’t you? Do you want some breakfast? I’ve made...”

“No, these things don’t just *happen*,” Gunhild shouted in annoyance as she jumped out of bed. She was angry – so angry that she was no longer thinking for a second about the pain in her left side. The battle with the troll felt like a long time ago. “There’s no reason why I shouldn’t get this promotion.”

“Perhaps they think you are too young,” said Solveig cautiously. “You know that I think you’re a wonderful knight, but you are only seventeen.”

“This has nothing to do with age,” said Gunhild bitterly. “I have been serving for four years already and others have been promoted after only two or three years. And there are no knight privates at the moment who have killed more trolls than I have. Don’t be stupid, Solveig. You know why I haven’t been promoted.”

Solveig moaned. “Not because you’re a woman?”

“Of course it is because I’m a woman. And this isn’t acceptable.”

“But you can’t know that for sure! The general has almost certainly taken many factors into account when making the decision. It could be that...”

“You are sickeningly optimistic at times, Solveig,” interrupted Gunhild. “But that’s not how the world works.” She went over to her wardrobe, took out her red uniform and put both the uniform jacket and pants on the bed. “If you are still interested in helping me fill the tub, it sounds like a very good idea now. I’ll have a bath, try to collect my thoughts a little... and afterwards, I’ll go see the general.”

* * *



he general's secretary sat writing a letter when Gunhild stormed in through his door. "Is he in?" she enquired.

"Hello, Gunhild," replied the secretary, a young man who looked like he might be in his twenties. She knew she'd heard his name once, but she could never remember what it was. He checked his papers. "Yes, he is free now. Do you have an appointment?"

"No," Gunhild replied and went directly through the door to the general's office. This wasn't the first time she had been in this office, but the last time she was here, General Bjerkedal had been in command. A few months ago, the old fogey had finally retired and his second in command, Aslak Espenson, had taken over. At thirty, Espenson was only half as old as Bjerkedal, but he had been an officer for many years already and had worked with General Bjerkedal over the last few years, so everyone had agreed that he was the best choice to take over the general's chair after Bjerkedal left. Now Espenson was sitting at his desk making a sketch. For a few seconds he looked a little surprised to see Gunhild, but he quickly regained his composure.

"Private Baardsdotter," he said, nodding towards a chair on the other side of the desk to indicate to Gunhild that she should sit down. Gunhild went straight up to the general and threw the rejection letter down in front of him.

"What is the meaning of this?" she said.

"Ah. I should have guessed."

"You have no right to do this."

"You are wrong. To assess an applicant's qualifications for promotion is not just a right I have, it is my duty as a general."

"You have no right to discriminate against me because I am a woman."

"What are you talking about?" The general looked surprised.

“Did you think that was why you were rejected? But... didn’t you read the back of the letter?”

Gunhild looked down at the letter. There actually was something written on the back of it. The general tried to stifle a smile.

“We can do it verbally,” he said politely. “I’ve looked at your personnel file, Baardsdotter. By all accounts, you’re one of our best knights. Your grades are excellent and you know all the fighting techniques we have taught you better than people who have been knights for twice as long as you – it wouldn’t surprise me if you’ve even come up with a few techniques yourself. And I would be blind not to have noticed that none of the other knights here can use a sword as well as you.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is your attitude. You’re eager. You’re impulsive. You’re brave...”

“Since when is that a problem?”

“It is a problem when you are as brave as you. How many trolls have you killed in the last month?”

Gunhild did some quick mental calculating. “Five.”

“So, about one a week. Did you know that, on average, the other knights kill three to four trolls *in a year*? And that few of them ever set out to kill a troll all alone, but rather make sure that there is always a helping hand in case they need it?”

“Are you trying to say that the reason you’re refusing me a promotion is that I am *better* than all the others? Where’s the logic in that?”

“I haven’t finished.” Espenson had got up and gone over to a cupboard full of paper. There was so much clutter in the cupboard that Gunhild wondered how he was able to keep track, but he quickly picked out a folder from the cupboard and it was quite obviously what he wanted.

“Tell me,” Espenson said sitting back down, “how many times

have you been hospitalized in the past month?”

Gunhild blushed. “Two, maybe?”

“Four.” Espenson looked at her with seriousness. “There is nothing wrong with you being brave, but time and again you have overestimated your own strength. You do not assess the risk of a situation before you throw yourself into it. I have talked with your doctor and she believes that in at least two cases, it was just luck that stopped you from being killed.”

Gunhild felt herself getting angry again. “I maintain a hard line because I care about this army. I care about the job we do to keep the kingdom safe. That’s not something I should be punished for, it’s something I should be...”

“...praised and rewarded for?” interrupted the general brusquely. “No, I don’t think so. Every time you put your life on the line to take up a challenge, when your courage makes you overestimate your own strength, the army is in danger of losing one of its best soldiers. We need you here, Baardsdotter. We do not want to lose you.”

“Okay,” Gunhild mumbled. Damn. She had prepared a long speech about how it was unfair that she didn’t get promoted, but she was in no way prepared for this argument. “So I did not get promoted because I put my own life in unnecessary danger?”

“No,” replied the general. “It’s bad enough that you put your own life in danger. If I promote you to sergeant, it’ll be even worse. If I had given you the job, you would be responsible for a troop of knights. If I gave you that responsibility, it would no longer be just your own life at stake every time you threw yourself into a situation that you failed to master. That could mean five lives; that could mean ten lives. A couple of our sergeants have responsibility for troops of over twenty knights. That is just not a chance I am willing to take.”

There was total silence in the room. Gunhild knew she did not

have a single sensible answer to this. After what felt like four hours, the general put the papers down on the desk. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No,” Gunhild mumbled. “That was really all.”

“Good,” replied the general. “I heard you managed to crack the Kauna case. Good job!”

The Kaun... ah, yes, the sergeant had said that was the code name for the troll she had killed today. “It was my pleasure,” she answered quietly.

“He was a big one. How did you do it? Did you get someone to help you?”

“Just Bal...” Gunhild stopped suddenly. She did not want to tell her supreme commander that she had needed the help of a moose to kill a troll. But somehow it seemed as if he had known what she was going to say.

“That’s okay. You don’t need to tell me. But I understand that you have a knack with animals. I want you to know that that is something I admire in a knight; if the stories I’ve heard about you involving wild animals in your battles is true, there are many in this army that have quite a lot to learn from you. And I hope it’s something you mention when you make a new application for promotion to sergeant next year.”

Gunhild was unable to do anything but nod. She got up and began to move towards the door.

“One more thing, Baardsdotter.” She turned to face the general again. What could it be now?

“I know you had a lot of problems with General Bjerkedal. He was a good soldier and understood battle tactics, but I’ll be the first to admit that his idea of women was a little...” Espenson hesitated, as if he could not find the right words.

“Remote from reality,” Gunhild suggested. Espenson laughed.

“That is probably a nicer phrase than anything I could have

thought of. Don't tell anyone I said this, but Bjerkedal was an old fart. In his day, he was strongly against women becoming knights at all. Unfortunately, he could never rid himself of this attitude and you were probably one of them he took it out on. I cannot disregard the fact that it is possible that you might have been eligible for benefits that you have not received because of it."

"What is your point?"

"That I am not General Bjerkedal. I try to find the solutions that are best for everyone, regardless of factors such as gender, and I want you – and all the other knights – to know that. Okay?"

Lacking the words, Gunhild nodded once more, before she turned and walked out again. It felt as if she had been with the general half the day. But it was still the middle of the day when she came out onto the street again. It was just as well. She still had to pay a visit to the infirmary before she had to work again. In addition, she would need many hours to digest all that the general had said. On the way to infirmary, she could not help but wonder what else there was in her folder. Detailed portrayals of her childhood? A report about the time she almost chopped off her foot? Her first kiss? She shivered. She really didn't want to know.

* * *



he castle hall was full of people. Not so surprising, since the coronation ceremony was the social high point of the year. It was a month since the king had died and now his son, Prince Sigurd, would take over the throne. In practice Prince Sigurd had ruled since the king died, but the coronation ceremony would mark when he would officially take over the royal title and be awarded the amethyst crown that the king always wore on his head during special

occasions. The amethyst crown was far and away the most beautiful object in the whole kingdom. The crown itself was silver and around its edge there were motifs symbolizing the seven brothers and sisters who, nearly a thousand years ago, had combined their powers to make the country safe and founded the kingdom. In addition, there were seven beautiful amethyst inserts on the front of the crown: three small amethysts in a triangle pattern on both the left-hand and the right-hand side, and a large amethyst in the center of the crown that probably shone brighter than all the other six put together. The reflected light from the chandeliers in the ceiling made the small purple stone more impressive to gaze at. For the first time since the previous coronation ceremony almost forty years ago, the amethyst crown was now being exhibited on a table in front of the throne guarded by two knights from the Royal Army, while waiting to be placed on the prince's head in half an hour.

Gunhild stood by the large entrance door and tried to stifle a yawn. Fortunately she had grabbed a few hours' sleep before she had to work, but she did not enjoy events like this. She felt that there were too many people here. If she had not had to work here and instead had been one of the lucky few from the upper class who received an invitation to the ceremony, she would probably have declined. She looked around. There were possibly forty to fifty guests here, most of them in lavish garments which probably cost more than Gunhild spent on herself in a year. Some of them were nobles; it looked as if all the major landowners in the country were in the room. A couple of the most important merchants from the town had also been invited. And the guards, of course. The general had certainly done a good job of planning the security. In addition to the two guards protecting the crown itself, there were two guards standing at the entrance. A guard had been placed at every window and there was also one guarding the door on the other side of the room from Gunhild. This door probably led to the prince's