

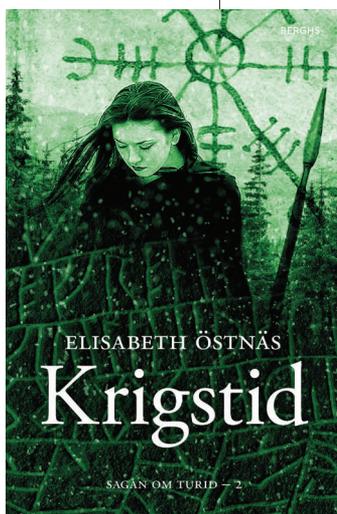
from:

The Time of War *(The Saga of Turid, vol. 2)*

Elisabeth Östnäs

introduced and translated by

Rachel Willson-Broyles



In her trilogy about the teenage Turid, Elisabeth Östnäs gives us a tale of a curious, kind and fiercely intelligent young woman who finds herself questioning elements of the society where her father is king. Turid's stepmother resents her, but wants to teach her to become a seeress. Turid is promised to a man she has never met, but she would rather learn to read and write and learn the ways of her mother's people in the North than become a wife. When her village faces famine and war and the decline of her father the king, she must decide what she is willing to do to for her people.

The reader is immersed in Turid's world, thanks to Östnäs's meticulous attention to the details of daily Viking life. The setting feels rich and sharp even as life within it is often bleak and even brutal. The language may feel stark and formal, especially for a young adult novel, but it is also a world-building tool – and I have tried to capture that in my translation of this first chapter of *Time of War*.

Krigstid (Sagan om Turid; 2)
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This book is reviewed on p. 60 of this issue.

I am no one. No one knows who I am. The words ring in my ears, keeping time with my steps.

I am covered in cold sweat. I smell like soap and wool and smoke. I smell like fear and loneliness.

I am no one. My steps are long and even. But my heart is beating out of time. I ball my hands into fists. Unna's back is the only thing I can see. I do not stumble, although the path is uneven and treacherous roots try to make me fall.

My heart is beating so loudly that I can't hear anything else. Unna turns around and beckons me. Her lips move but I hear no words. She waits for me to catch up and lays a hand on my arm.

'We'll keep going. I don't think they will try to find us. They never leave their ships,' she says close to my ear. 'But we can't stay, not now.'

I don't respond, but I keep walking. Unna pats my cheek and smiles. A

crooked smile. A fitting smile.

We have fled the devastation. Our village, my house, is burning. The screams of the almost-dead pulse in time with my heartbeats. I can't hear them any longer, and yet I will always hear them. The sight of the dead burns my eyes.

Stinging nettles and thorns make my legs bleed, and yet I feel nothing. I use my arms to clear a path through the thicket and soon my palms are covered in blood.

I am no one. *I am no one!* The realization slowly sinks in, like a birch-bark boat taking on water and vanishing under the surface. If someone were to see me now, they would see a girl with unkempt hair and a torn shift. They would see a girl sobbing, panting. They would see me and Unna and maybe they would not understand the difference between us. No one would know that I am Unna's housemother and she is my thrall. My slave. Maybe they would see Unna's rosy cheeks and pale hair, maybe they would see the black bristles of my hair. Maybe they would think that I was the thrall.

I fumble under my shift. Hanging there is the blue bead I got from Sten, my childhood friend, and the amber that Frode, my betrothed, gave me. There is my *völva* staff, firmly knotted against my breast by a thong.

I squeeze the blue bead and the amber. They feel warm. I try to breathe in time with my steps, force my heart to stop its galloping. Unna's back shimmers in the evening light. I follow her.

'I am Turid Ulvsdotter,' I whisper. 'I am Njord's sister and Ingeborg's foster-daughter. I am Unna's housemother and queen of Åslunda. I am a *völva* and a wanderer. I am Holme's friend.' And then I choke on my words and I have to clear my throat to go on: 'I am Sten's friend and Frode's betrothed. I am all of that and more.'

I run out of words. Some of them ring true; some get caught in my mouth. 'I am a *völva* and a wanderer,' I insist, making my voice louder.

Unna hears me and turns around. She nods.

'That you are, Turid.' Her words become the bark float that keeps me above the surface. I smile at her. She stops walking.

'Night is starting to fall,' she says, and I look at the sky in surprise. It's true. The sky is darkening to the color of violets. Off in one direction there is a blaze of fiery yellow; my village is still burning. To the other direction is a calm, deeper color.

We have walked all day, after what happened.

This morning I woke as usual and ate the morning meal as is my habit. I helped Sebba and Ingeborg full the fabric for my mantle.

And then, Ragnarök.

My world vanished.

We stand on the rise that wraps itself around our bay like a cat curled around her kittens. In one direction: the bay, and death. In the other: the place where we will travel.

Thirst burns my throat. The early summer is hot and dry. The grass has already turned yellow. As Unna and I fled, we heard the sound of thatched roofs catching fire. The crackle of sparks against the sky. The sound of our village in its death throes. The roar of emptiness. Fire eats the dead and swallows their shadows. No one there will walk again.

Now thirst is the only thing I feel.

ELISABETH
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Other YA books by
the author, published
by Berghs Förlag:

Kungadottern (The
King's Daughter), The
Saga of Turid, 1, 2015

Korpgudinnan (The
Raven Goddess), The
Saga of Turid, 3, 2016



Adult fiction:
Feberflickan (The
Fever Girl), Columbi
Publishing, 2012

Feberflickan was
reviewed by Janny
Middelbeek-
Oortgiesen in SBR
2013:2.

Kungadottern was
awarded the Slingshot
Prize for Best Debut
of the Year.

Kungadottern was
reviewed by Darcy
Hurford in SBR
2016:2.

'The ground is wetter here,' Unna says, showing me a muddy finger. 'Look at the plants. They are thicker and greener. Soon we will find water.' She smiles at me, turns her back, and continues to walk down the slope. I follow her.

The sun has gone down. I stumble. Without a word, Unna tells me to sit down. I lie on a bit of yellowed tallgrass and pull my knees up under my skirt. Unna drapes the mantle fabric over me. I burrow my face into it and close my eyes.

Not a single night has passed. That is how little time it took for everyone to die.

I hear a sharp noise and jump up.

'Be calm. It's only me.' Unna looks at me with kind eyes. Then she comes closer and puts out her hand, stroking my hair. 'I broke off a stick. I will find water.'

I can still feel her hand on my head, but she turns around to go. Night is falling quickly and she vanishes into the darkness. I see how she holds the twig before her. A divining rod, a water-finder. I lie down and close my eyes again.

My insides are full of thirst and sorrow and I don't know which one burns more. I clench my fists and welcome the pain when my nails dig into my skin.

Suddenly I wake. Unna has her arm around my shoulder and is pressing something to my mouth. It is the edge of a small vessel. The contents lap at its sides. My thirst rises with a roar and I drink without breathing, drink and swallow and let my tongue lick up what little runs down my chin. I must not waste a drop!

Unna laughs and pulls the cup back. 'Not too fast,' she says. 'You've been thirsty for a long time. If you drink too quickly, you will throw up.'

I nod and reach out for the cup again. It is small, of birch-bark; she must have twined it together while I slept. She gives it to me and I drink up what is left in small sips. At last I lick the inside of the cup.

She smiles again. 'There is plenty of water. This is ripe ground.' Then she yawns and wipes her hands along her sides. I see that she is covered in mud.

'Here,' I say, holding up a corner of the mantle fabric. She slips in and nods her thanks.

We never slept in the same bed at home. She is a thrall; I am the daughter of a king. But my village is dead and Unna saved my life.

Her body is warm against mine and I curl up against her and fall asleep.

The evening is full of sounds and smells. I can no longer smell the smoke from the fire or the burning bodies. I wake with my nose against Unna's back and I don't know why I have woken. Then I feel eyes on me.

It is dusk and the trees are black. Unna's chest rises and falls gently and I see her pale forehead, her hair falling over it in locks. I sit up suddenly. The rustling is getting closer. Someone is coming towards us.

'Unna!' I shake her and she wakes without a sound. She rises in a smooth motion and puts her hand out toward me. I take it and stand up, squeezing it hard. She shakes herself loose and turns her face to me with her finger before her lips. Then she moves away. I take the mantle fabric from the ground and sweep it over my shoulders.

The movement makes the fabric catch on some bushes, and a branch flies at me with a loud sound. I scream.

The rustling is even louder and I look around. We fell asleep at the foot of a

boulder, the slope below us. My ears catch the sound of running water. The trees are tall and the ground is ripe.

I see nothing. The twilight is too dim. Unna is gone.

I hear the rustling behind me and I turn around, clutching the mantle at my throat. Fear squeezes my throat and I let out a croak. Like the High One's own raven.

Then the rustling stops and for a moment the world is quiet and still.

A shadow falls over my face and I see the source of the danger and I try to run. The fabric falls down and entangles me; I scream as I fall.

I scream for help, for Unna. My scream also becomes my sorrow for the village, for Father and for Mother who died so long ago.

I fall to the ground and scream and the shadow leaps at me and puts a pair of soft paws to my chest.

Then the animal opens its mouth and I see its pink gums and its sharp white claws. It is a lynx. I am lying on my back with the animal on top of me. My arms are pinned down by the weight of the cat. Its claws are sharp and cut right through my shift to claw my breast.

I can smell the carrion on its breath and I watch as it opens its mouth wide once again. I quickly clench my fist and aim it between the razor-sharp teeth. I feel warmth and moisture, teeth and breath. The lynx is heavy and I can't get loose. It sinks its teeth into my flesh and the pain is icy and clear like a winter morning. I scream.

'Unna!'

My cry is dull; the cat is a weight on my chest and we are breathing the same air. Its eyes are yellow with narrow slits that widen as it pushes its face right up to my own. I can see my flesh gape where the white teeth cut into it, and the pain pounds in my ears, roaring through my whole body.

'Unna! Help me!'

The air is starting to run out. I gasp for breath. The air I breathe in is rank with the cat's animal stench. It turns my stomach. I try to protect my throat with my hands. She lodges her teeth in my hand.

The lynx presses me to the ground; her face is right up next to mine. I see her sharp teeth and realize that she is dangerous; my life could be over now. An image of Frode flies through my mind like a sudden flash of memory. I remember his lips.

The cat hisses, bares her teeth, and shakes her head. I feel the skin peeling back from my hand. I struggle as hard as I can and try to twist away, but the cat's claws hold me in place. All I can see are the yellow eyes and the white teeth; everything else is a blur. I try to listen for Unna. She has run off. You can't trust a thrall.



'I will kill you,' I hiss. My rage gives me strength and I am able to jerk my upper body off the ground a bit. The cat loses her foothold and opens her mouth just a little and I am able to pull my arm back. The chill hits it and the pain drills right through me but I clench my teeth and give a wordless hiss. I try to drive my thumbs into the animal's eyes but it dodges away, shaking its head and opening its jaws again. I whip my arm over my throat, so that at the last second the cat's teeth sink into my elbow instead of around my neck. The pain makes me scream in rage. The weight of the cat, and her warmth on my chest; her eyes that stare into mine without blinking. I writhe from side to side as I protect my throat. I will not let this cat kill me! I have just survived a raid; I have watched my village be wiped out. Cats should be soft and sleepy, not like this crazed predator.

I scream again and manage to heave myself up on one elbow, the one I'm not holding to my neck. Unna. Where is she? Did she just run away?

I see nothing, but beyond the pounding of my heart and the buzzing of my rage, I hear a voice. The cat shoves me down again, opens its jaws, and leans forward. Its mouth is all I see, the teeth, the tongue. Its acrid breath, the stench of dead meat.

I hear the voice again, someone calling.

Then everything goes black.