Hildur

A Short Saga

By Maryanne Peters

My people came from Birka, in the middle of the western coast of the sea that they call the Baltic, opposite the Bay of the Finns that leads to the rivers of the Rus.

From the time I was very young my people would venture into the lands of the Rus, rowing and sailing our long boats to the Neva River and then the great Volga River into the heart of that country. Some even drew their boats to other rivers on cut portage paths, to voyage on other rivers and to go still further east, or south to the sea called Black and from there to the sea that the Romans call the Middle of the Earth.

We were farmers and craftsmen, no matter what others may say. We lived in peace, and we traveled to trade. But if people would not trade with us then we might seek to persuade them that it was the better course, by showing them our weapons at close quarters. We might even take a few things from them. It is no theft if we offer to return with things of value, even if they choose not to accept.

My father would say to them: “When next we come back, let us trade and avoid this bloodshed”. But the truth is that there was never too much of a fight and the blood was rarely ours. Our men could turn their hand to fighting and when they did, they were hard to match. Our craftsmen made weapons too – good ones.

Our men were brought up to fight. I was brought up that way, because I was to be a man. Boys learned to be tough – to fight with weapons and with hands, to bear pain, to know exhaustion, and to fight on. We learned strategy, and tricks. We would pray to Thor for strength and Loki for trickery. Both are important in battle. As well as being traders, we were warriors.

For some reason I did not develop as the other boys did, but my father said that the whiskers would come. I wore my hair long and braided as my father did, but he had a beard to braid too. If I was mistaken for a girl then it made me even more determined to prove that I was a fighter. What I lacked in strength I made up for in speed. Instead of the heavy sword or the axe or the hammer, I chose the light lance and the long dagger. I knew swordplay as well if not better than others my age, but the swords that our craftsmen made were too heavy for me.

Still, my father watched me and approved of my skills. He said that I was ready for my first voyage.

Spring came and we made ready. The voyage could be long, and we needed to return for the harvests and to winter in our lodges. Three ships set out across the sea and up to the Neva River at the eastern limit of the salt water. My father was captain of one, my uncle the second, and the third was led by a man called Kanute. He was not a man I knew or liked what I did know of him.

We sailed east while the water was salty for some days until the Bay of Finns became narrow and we reached the delta of the Neva River with its little fishing villages. We sold hooks for salted fish as fresh fish was plentiful. We entered the river where it is a single channel and we rowed or warped our ships with ropes along the bank, up the river to Lake Ladoga.

My own village is on a lake called Malaren, but it is narrow and has many islands. Here was a lake like the sea. You cannot see the other side. But you can drop a bucket into it and drink the water. There are many rivers that drain into it.

We followed the southern edge of the lake past the wide Volkhov river to the next large river, and this led us to another lake - Lake Beloye. From there we headed south to Ryban [Rybinsk] which was a town that my father had visited before.

There the people had goods to trade, but they did it reluctantly. My father said that bargains would always be in our favor if the other party feared for their life. It seems that was the way we did business. But nobody died while we stayed in that place.

It was in Ryban that we met a man called Stanish who spoke to us in our tongue of riches further east.

“Why trade with peasants when you can trade with the Great Khan himself?” he said. “Leave this place and go back to Lake Ladoga and then south to Velk [Veliky Novgorod]. But do not tarry there, for the great river Volga will lead you to the shores of the Khazar Sea and the capital of the Khazar Khanate – the great city of Atil-Khazaran.”

My father knew of Velk, but also that it was fortified. He said to Stanish: “You will come with us and lead us to this great city. But be warned that a disappointed Swede is an angry Swede”.

So we took a small profit from Ryban and headed back and up the river Volkhov. Stanish met with the keepers of the river north of Velk and we sailed right past the fortress despite the fact that it looked like the largest city we had seen. Stanish said that it was his hometown and that he had arranged free passage past the fort for us, but we later learned that he was happy to lead us to our deaths and if we escaped his people would pick up what might be left from or decimated crews.

But for the time being he was out guide and while my father did not trust him, he had heard of the Volga River and the riches of the Great Khan. That was our target.

But not far south of Velk where the Kama river joins the Volga is a flowing lake two leagues across. The Khanate lay in front of us, and then on the left side of the river as we continued downstream towards the sea. But the first town we came ashore at was called Samara.

I felt that even the well-travelled in our company were unprepared for what they saw. These people of the Khanate were not of one race but many. Some were tall like our people, some with blue eyes, but with brown or reddish brown hair; some had small dark eyes and yellow skin, some has skin almost black with straight black hair on the head and on their bodies, and many were brown skinned and with dark hair.

There were many beliefs too – some followed the book of the Christian god; some only the first half of that book; some the book of the prophet said to speak of the same single God; and there were those with many gods like us,; and some who worshiped only ghosts and spirits in the rivers and the trees. But they all spoke a common language and used a common coin. That meant that trade could be easy.

From us they were interested in furs, hides and wax and honey, and some handicraft items made with skill, and weapons. We had such things. What they had for us was silk and jade and baked earthenware as white as snow and decorated with many patterns, and they had coin which would allow us to buy many other things.

But we were told that we could get more for our goods and discover even more treasures downstream at the great city of Atil-Khazaran. But in Samara Stanish invited aboard another tribesman from a place further on and his name was Ilaya and his town was called Sarepta.

Sarepta was a place where a loop in the Volga river came close to the River Don and where ships could be dragged overland from one river to another. Ilaya said that his town was a good place to trade. He said that we could go to Atil later and what he said would be proved true.

But he had no intention of us reaching the capital of the Khazar Khanate. He and Stanish had a plan and they were not alone. One of our number was ready to turn on us. It was the master of the third boat, the snake that they called Kanute. It seemed to me that he was not a man at all, being without loyalty or honor.

My father was excited at the prospect of crossing over to the Don River, as he knew that this river led to the Black Sea and to the great city of Byzantium, now said to be richer than Rome itself. But he agreed that this would mean a voyage that could not be completed in a single raiding season. His plan was that we should trade for Khazar coin and return the next summer and winter in the great enclosed sea at the center of the earth. That would mean the profit from this season would not be shared but coin kept for a bigger journey next year and the year after that.

Kanute had laid his plans before this idea was even discussed, but he saw the opportunity to turn this to his advantage. The first thing was to lay the seeds of doubt in his own ship first: What would we have to show for this summer? Were we able to trade with the great empire or would they squash us like a bug? If we are away for two years who will bring in the harvest? Who will keep our wives warm over the winter months. The simple truth is that Kanute was not happy with his share even if he was to receive it, but he had an ambition to be the chief of our village. He had now met two foreign villains who might allow his to achieve that.

My father decided that a group would walk the portage. The captains knew their boats best and Stanish and Ilaya knew the language and claimed to know the land. So there was my father, my uncle and Kanute and there were two other warriors from Kanute’s boat, and there was me because I begged to go. We set off overland on what was a wide cleared path in places with buried logs covered in animal fat to allow for a ship to be easily dragged. On the far side the river was small but channels had been cut so that a boat of good size could be dragged to deep water. My father was pleased with what he saw. We camped and we drank and we talked of future adventures.

The worst death for any Viking is to have their throat cut while they are sleeping. To die in battle is best, but to die in your bed with your family about you hearing stories of your victories is also a death with honor. Kanute and Stanish and Ilaya denied my father and my uncle a proper death. They may have only lived for a few seconds to wake as the blood drained from them in the light of the dawn.

But they had a worse fate for me. There were times that I wished that sharp blade had cut my neck too, instead of my groin. But Stanish said that I was too pretty to be killed, and would be worth more sold.

One of my braids had come undone while we drank, so I took them both out as we slept. Stanish told me later that as he saw the first rays of the sun strike my golden hair spread across the bearskin I slept on, he saw gold in his pocket. But he there was no place for a boy warrior in the slave markets of Atil. There they would buy a pretty eunuch, and that is what he made me.

As I said, I wished for death, but what kept me alive was the need to avenge my father. But for the days that followed the assassination of my father and my uncle and my own maiming, I was in a fog and pain and shame. I cannot even recall how I was taken to the great city of Atil Khazaran, but it was not by our ships. Those returned home, carrying the bodies of my father and my uncle and marking me as “taken by the Byzantines”.

I later learned that Kanute returned to the Volga with Stanish and Ilaya and with the bodies of his leaders claiming they had all been ambushed by men from the Roman Empire. He said all had fought well with the best of them taking the front and dying. Urged by Kanute and his crew our expedition ended that day, but it was not without profit for those who survived.

And what of me? I was meant to live, but without my balls. But it was worse than that. The other part of my maleness began to putrefy, and I was rushed to the great city to have my injury attended to. It was decided that I was worth saving so they had a surgeon from Greece attend to the removal of what hung there, leaving me with a piece of hollow bird bone inserted into me to piss through, as a woman would.

I lay with other slaves, almost on top of one another on a covered balcony above the slave market in the great city of Atil, looking across one of the channels of the Volga delta at the fortress of Khazarian

I learned that the Khazar Khanate is ruled by the great Khan who is a descendant of one of “the Golden Horde” who came from the East. His seat is in Atil, but across a narrow channel in the fortress there is a co-leader who is known as the Bak who is in charge of the military. The Bak was one of the “White Khazars” who were fair skinned and formed a ruling class. One of that ruling class as the man Yitsak who bought my body at the slave market.

Yitsak was of the faith of Moses and Abraham, as many of the ruling elite of the Khanate were. He had but one wife, but he had several concubines. I was to be one of them, but a curiosity among them – a woman without breasts or a vagina. We all stayed together in a house not far from his own. When I recovered I was free to roam, but I did so with at least one of the other girls.

I say “other girls” because I became of them. They were welcoming and I was at a very low point for obvious reasons. They helped me through my recovery. They did not speak my language, but they spoke with their kindness, and with their laughter, which was a language that I could reply in as time passed. But slowly I acquired skill in their tongue, and also in their script. I knew only a few runes from my own youth, but the Rovas letters were sounds so that any language could be written.

The others called me Ashina which means blue in their language. It was the custom of concubines to put kohl powder in the eyes to surround them with a black outline. On me it made my blue eyes look even more blue.

I began to lead the gentle life of a concubine. I could tell myself that it was because of my suffering - I had witnessed the death of my father and my own mutilation, and it was as if my will had been ripped from me as had my cock and my balls. But there was a flame inside me that would ensure that the fire would come back. I just needed time.

And I discovered that my existence was better than tolerable. Yitsak was a gentle man, who would not have his way with me without consent. I thought that I would never give myself in that way, and that I would die first, but I was wrong. The other concubines said that it was my duty. They taught me the ways of a woman. Pleasing a man is one of those things, and a vagina is but one tool that a woman has – some would say with risks attached.

Attending to the desires of Yitsak was a function, but it became a pleasure too. If I spent the night with him it would be spent by him talking to me about all the places in the world that he had been and people he had met. If the price for that is to allow him to enter some part of me, then I would pay it, and even come to enjoy it.

He would take me with him sometimes as he went to parts of the city. He enjoyed the fact that people would stare at me and my tall slim figure, bright blond hair and brighter blue eyes. It marked him as a man of wealth and power who could have such a prize clinging to his arm. I could repay him by holding tightly too him and looking at him with admiration. The truth is that was easy, as I did admire him.

In time I could walk the streets of the great city of Atil-Khazaria as I pleased, with my new sisters or sometimes alone. I enjoyed the sights of the place with the many different races and beliefs, and the smells of a hundred different dishes and all the herbs and spices needed. At home I had known only salt and horseradish.

I would go to the markets, sometimes with Yitsak, and see the huge variety of goods available. The Khanate stretched from the Dinester River to the west of the city of Sambat [Kiev] all the way to the sea called Aral at its eastern limit; to the north the highest mountain of the Urals and South to beyond the Caucasus Mountains to the border of Armenia; to the Southwest their neighbor was the Byzantine Empire, and what was left of the mighty empire of the Romans. Yitsak had been there too – to Byzantium – Constantinople. It was all the stuff of dreams.

And Yitsak had journeyed to the holy city of his faith, where a King called Solomon had built a temple where they could recite their prayers in a strange language from scrolls or books such as I had never seen before. He knew the world, and I knew so little.

Yitsak was a trader, but never seemed to move goods. He seemed to trade only with coin, which is something I found hard to understand. The way he explained it is that if people trust you, you need no goods. You take 100 coins from 1 man and you give him paper. You give the coins to another man and ask paper from him. The first man still has his 100 coins, and the second man has 100 coins. That is 200 coins – 100 more than he started with.

I had much to learn. It seemed that my life was nothing compared to his. I had a childhood based on the seasons: winters by the fire, spring in the fields, summer when the men would go raiding, fall for the harvest and storing for winter. Until I sailed east that was my life. It now seemed that most of my real life had been lived since then. I had been prepared for my journeys with the sword and the lance and the bow, but without knowledge.

“Show me what you learned as a child,” said Yitsak. So I did. We fought with wooden swords. It was amusement for him, but for me it reminded me that I was a warrior. I remember when I forced him back and he tripped and I was on top of him, the point of my wooden weapon at his throat, but my blonde hair tumbling in his face. The point was sharp enough to kill him from there, and my blood was up. It seemed that I glimpsed a short instance of fear in his eyes. But then he smiled. He said: “You do not belong here, Ashina. You are not meant to be a slave.”

He gave me my freedom just like that. He told my sisters that I was not one of them in my heart, but still I found it hard to leave them. A warrior I might be, but it seemed to me that I was not just no longer a man, I had become a woman. And that made me proud. There is no pride in being a eunuch, but a woman can have her own power.

Yitsak arranged for me to go up river to Samara. He gave me some coin and asked that I return it to him as furs and honey from my native land, but only if I wished him well. And rather than send an escort with me to the edge of the Khanate he gave me a sword. It was what they called a Khazar saber and it was curved one way and then the other and was scabbarded in a highly decorated box case which I could wear at my waist in colors that matched my wealthy woman’s robes.

I kissed him and then I bade farewell to all of my friends, and I set forth, in pursuit of revenge.

The river led the way. My first stop was Sarepta in search of Ilaya. I left the boat and entered the town – a tall golden haired woman travelling without a man by her side but instead a sword on her side. Men suggested that my search might end with them, but I told them that if that were true they might regret it. I had coin for lodging and time to wait, but I did not have to wait long.

Ilaya sought me out, but not for a confrontation. The man was a simple thief and made his way into my room at night. It was dark so that I could not even see his face when my sabre entered him. As he spluttered blood, I lit a lamp so that I could see his face and he could see mine, before life left him. I like to think that in that moment he recognized me, but because I will never know that, I left Sarepta dissatisfied.

I took a boat to Samara which I learned from merchants in Atil was the home of the villain Stanish. This time I wanted to face him, and for him to see me. I decided that I should make it a show, and for that I went to the market and bought some new clothes to shape my body and display the softer parts, and I had my hair dressed in an ornate Zhazarian style. I found the inn that Stanish frequented, and I was told when he had arrived there.

When I entered, all eyes were upon me. I had learned the lessons of a concubine. A woman can stimulate desire by simple movements and expressions. I knew that every man in the place (and it was mostly men) would be my servant if I were to ask. But I was only concerned about one.

In his tongue, which I had learned well, I said: “Stanish. You have dishonored me, and you have dishonored my family. Stand and die!”

Now I could see what I wanted to see. He saw the blonde eunuch that his knife had made. He stood and drew his sword. Others tumbled clear when I drew mine. Perhaps I might have enjoyed it more had I parried more than just three strikes before my blade ran right through him and out his back. He died in an instant, with little blood pumped out from a heart stopped by my steel. There was more satisfaction than Ilaya, but still not enough.

I needed to place my delicate boot on his chest to pull my sword out. I pulled the felt hat from his head to wipe the blade before I threw it and some spittle on his body. I walked away and down to the wharf and nobody stopped me. I had killed him in the light of day and expected that maybe he would have family who would seek their own vengeance, but none came forward.

I now had some belongings. My next boat was another trading vessel that would take me to

Velk and from there I would find my way back to the Baltic sea and my home. Traders from the Khanate would not venture beyond Velk, but I knew that Norsemen would be there to trade in the summer months. From there I could return to Birka and find Kanute.

It did mean staying in Velk for some weeks. While there I met some traders who did business with the Norsemen and who sought better bargains with my help. I had learned from Yitsak some lessons in such things, including how to turn one coin into two.

I took the name Hildur, from the word for battle. I always wore the sword that Yitsak had given me. Word had gone out that I had killed a man in a duel in Samara.

The first of the Viking boats arrived late in the summer, because the rivers were in flood further north. The people of Velk told them that trading goods were all in the hands of the beautiful Hildur, the Viking woman who lived in the town. And so, they came to me.

They all came and the business I transacted was fair for all parties concerned, including myself. I could speak both languages well. I knew the value of goods on both sides. And I understood coin. My father would probably have demanded a discount of me. I can imagine that if I had asked him why he would simply have patted his sword. But most men are not like my father. They take a good deal and spare blood.

But then Gunnar arrived. His problem was that he had nothing to trade. He had no intention of trading. He was there to steal. He was equipped for battle only. But he had heard of me, so he came to meet me. He had with him a brother and another man called Orm.

“You have goods so we will take them,” said Gunnar. “And you are beautiful. I think that you will look even better on my cock, so I will take you too.”

“I will need to defend myself,” I explained. There were three of them, and I was alone except for some simple bookkeepers. Still, I am a child of my father and must fight even if the odds are against me. I drew my sword.

“A pretty blade,” he said. “A pretty blade for a pretty girl. I will take that too.” He drew his sword, and his brother placed a hand on his. Orm just smiled in the background.

My father always said that to underestimate an enemy is to go into battle naked. Gunnar’s sword was not wielded to strike me but to terrify me. He expected me to drop my weapon and whimper like the girl I appeared to be. A quick slash cut his throat from ear to ear and he fell. His brother’s lunge was aimed to kill, but he stumbled on Gunnar’s body. This time it was the back of the neck that took my blow.

“Will you join the pile?” I asked Orm, pointed to the two bodies stacked as they fell.

But his arms were folded. He was a spectator. He said: “No. I am a trader like you. But all I have to trade is two swords and some armor, which you appear to have taken already.” He nodded at the brothers’ corpses.

I liked him. He was a good-looking man with an even better looking smile. It spoke of a shrewdness missing in his dead leaders.

“If you are next in command then maybe you can do some trading,” I said. “Will you take me home to the land of Svear? I will bring my own goods and share some for the price of passage.”

He said: “My Lady, it would be my honor to return you to your village.”

It turned out that more than half of the crew were less than loyal to Gunnar, and those that still harbored the idea that his promises of glory and booty were real I was able to convince had been deceived.

“The Khanate is where the money is, and that is too powerful. You would need one hundred longboats to even be taken seriously.”

Orm gave me Gunnar’s bed to lie in and sought to share it. I explained to him that I was not what I appeared to be, but that did not concern him. I invited him into that bed, and we were both happy that I did.

The journey is downstream from Lake Onega, and there was wind to carry us across the Gulf of the Finns. When we got to the Soderstrom River I told Orm that there might be a fight when we reached lake Malaren and my village. So, we rowed up at night and took an indirect route to get rest and sharpen our weapons, before we ventured in to the jetty in the morning.

Orm called out that his boat came in peace and to return somebody to the village who had been lost for many years – somebody of the family of the Chieftain.

On to the boards of the jetty strode Kanute, saying: “I am the chieftain of this village, and all my family live here. Who have you brought here.”

I wore my best dress but my long blonde hair was washed in the waters of my lake and was free and bright. Orm told me later that I was the image of Freyr herself, but with a sword in my hand, my Khazarian sabre, with to curves and sharp enough to split a feather.

“I am returned, Kanute,” I cried out stepping off the boat. “No longer a son of this place, and not quite a daughter, but a child of the man you murdered.”

There were men behind him who were armed. For each on of them Orm had one of his warriors stand behind me.

“Ah, the eunuch lives as a woman now,” sneered Kanute.

“A woman who will slay you if you will come forward to meet me!” I started to walk towards him alone.

I could see that he was considering his options. It would be in his nature to send his men forward to meet me, but I heard a woman from the shore shout out: “Kill him Sister and do the village a favor!” Then another called out: “He could never kill anyone face to face, not even a woman!”

He looked to the crowd for that voice as the words had stung. He drew his weapon and advanced towards me cautiously. He had not seen me fight for real, but he knew my father, so he would not under-estimate me.

It would be a finer story to tell if the clash were a mighty one, but he raised his arm too high for the first stroke and my weapon cut his sword hand off at the wrist as if it were made of beeswax. I then cut of his other hand as he stood there screaming. This time I would take time. First, just to repay in kind my blade opened his breaches and then with a simple flick did what had been done to me. He dropped to his knees, blood flowing from three places. It would drain out of him as I watched. As we all watched.

Now, that is revenge.

“Who will come forward to put more blood in our lake?” I shouted.

One man came forward. He was huge and his face and bare arms showed the marks of maybe a hundred battles. A worthy adversary.

“Welcome home, Sister,” he said.

My village became well known for the women fighters that followed me. I returned it to the ways of my father. I was the first Queen of the village of Birka, but I knew in my heart that I would not be the last.

I returned to the life that had been my childhood. There was harvest to be brought in, a winter of feasting, spring for planting, and summer for raiding.

Often times I travelled with Orm and some boats from his lands. We returned to the rivers of Rus and the Atil-Khazaria to return the investment of my first man Yitsak. We made that rip down the Don and across the Black Sea as my father had dreamed. I visited the great city of Byzantium and the great sea at the center of the earth.

We went west from my village too, Orm and I. We went to the lands of the celts and the Franks, and we sailed or we traded or we fought by day, and by night I was his wife. And all orphans became our children.

But my life draws to a close and is now the stuff of the sagas we tell over the winter fires in our great hall. Stories of the far corners of the earth, or the peoples of many races, and many faiths and many languages. Tales of the many products that we traded and the huge wealth we had handled. Tales of blood and plunder, and of treachery and revenge, but also of love. Orm would take my hand every time that word was spoken.

I am Hildur, shield maiden. It is known that I am a woman but without time for motherhood. I have a thousand sons - every man who sails with me is a son. Every man who trades beside me, or battles beside me is my son. We are Vikings, and that is what we do.

The End

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*The fundamental element of Erin’s seed was the Viking conquest of Russia, and the son of a Viking chief is caught and emasculated. In her tale he is returned to his people but as he is less of a man he is to be sacrificed by his own family, but escapes. I took a different angle.*

*I actually chose the town of origin, Birka, completely at random from a map of Viking villages, without having any knowledge of “the Birka Female Viking Warrior” – so what are the chances of that?! But that could not be Ashina as the archeologists have used the bones and trace DNA to confirm that she is female. She seems to confirm that shieldmaidens were not just fighters but leaders.*