

# Chronicles of Max

## A Short Story

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### Seeress and the Cat

The frost carves its way through the fjord, clawing and taking hold of the great hall. On the outskirts, rough hewn tents and weather beaten cloaks are pulled by the wind, howling like distant wolves just outside the periphery. A fine dusting of snow drifted down the worn path that led to a solitary tent set apart from the rest, stitched together from faded sealskin, bone, and what looked like strips of old ceremonial cloth. This tent belonged to the völva, a woman set apart by silence, by stillness, and the whispers of those who feared her power.

Inside, the air was thick with juniper, pine, mugwort, and a dozen other herbs meant to bridge the world of the living with the realm of the gods. A cracked clay bowl sat nestled between three stones at the center of the tent, smoke curling lazily into the still air, the flames casting strange shadows across carved bones and bundled charms.

All respected the völva's presence. She rarely spoke, even as a child. Her silence had become her strength, empowering the words that she did speak, empowering the words of the gods. She sat as she always did, cross-legged and motionless, her sightless eyes fixed not on the physical but on something beyond. Those who visited her did so with reverence and fear, as if walking on the edge of something sacred and unknowable. It had been weeks since the last vision, and though her bones ached with age, she had continued to feel the warmth and comfort of the gods she listened for, knowing they would speak soon.

Without warning, the tent flap stirred. No hand pulled it aside. There was no crunch of boots in snow or muttered greetings in the Old Tongue. The silence was

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deafening until the völvá could hear the unmistakable sound of sharpened claws against the wooden framing of the tent. A cat that was large enough to dwarf most cast strolled across the hide rug; its fur was as black as the shadows it cast, it moved sleek and deliberate, without urgency, as if this place belonged to it. The obsidian like fur shimmered like water in the firelight, amber eyes reflected something far older than any beast should carry. The cat paused beside the fire, lowered himself into a dignified loaf, and closed their eyes. They did not meow. They did not purr. They simply existed. In the völvá's mind however where silence had long been the only language, a new voice boomed.

*I have walked the winds and watched your world spin through shadow.*

The mysterious voice rang behind her eyes, slow and patient, like roots weaving into soil. It was not a sound so much as a certainty, and it settled into her with the quiet gravity of falling snow.

*I am Max*

The voice called itself not as an introduction, but as a declaration. The syllables carried no warmth, only the suggestion of knowledge unspoken, of something watching long before it was seen. The fire popped, and though the flames danced, the tent felt colder.

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By dusk the village had begun its rituals. The warriors sharpened their blades by torchlight. The women murmured prayers over their children. Snow fell in a thin veil, silent and steady. The next raid was upon them and with the fall of winter they needed to be more prepared than ever. One by one a villager would approach the tent to see the völvá, drawn by the old rhythm of fate and few. As most, if not all, believed their fate was already decided, they often turned to the Seeress to translate the gods wishes and intentions. Most of their prophecies, although many of them quite cryptic, turned out to be true. None knew however that a new force now occupied the space where their gods once did.

The first to enter was a broad shouldered warrior named Kol, known for his spear and his temper. Though it was not uncommon for him to pick fights and speak his criticisms openly to the elders, even he knelt reverently before the fire, head bowed. As was tradition, the Seeress extended her hand, palm up. Kol gingerly reached out holding the palm steady as he slowly rolled his widened tongue across, as a sign of respect towards someone with contact with the gods.

"Seeress," he said, voice low and uncertain, "what do the gods say of my journey with Jarl Sigurd? Will my blade find glory?" He waited, eyes closed, breath shallow.

The silence stretched as Max spoke in the völvá's mind, speaking to her as if he was one of the gods. The Seeress spoke each word just as Max had crafted them. She was his voice.

"The wolf's path is soaked in red. You will ride with the storm at your back, and the sea will know your name. But glory does not come without a price. One shield will break beneath your wrath. One oath will snap like frozen bone. When the raven circles thrice, do not follow its shadow, or you will not return. This, the gods have seen."

Kol's eyes widened as the words, but he did not speak.

"And sharpen your blade before the third moon. The gods are tired of watching it rust."

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He bowed deeper and left the tent, murmuring thanks. Outside, he told the others that the seeress had spoken with the voice of the Allfather himself.

Next came a boy, barely old enough to hold a shield. His tunic was too large, sleeve fraying at the wrists, and his hair stuck to his forehead in uneven tufts. He knelt awkwardly, knees knocking against the floor, and lowered his gaze to the flames. The firelight danced across his cheeks, still soft with youth. He opened his mouth to speak but faltered, swallowed, then spoke with a voice barely above a whisper.

“Will I be brave like my brother? Will I see battle?”

The hut was silent, save for the steady cackle of burning birchwood. Max, curled in the shadows beyond the seeress’s shoulder, regarded the boy with a half lidded stare, then flicked his tail once. He did not speak immediately. The völva felt the weight of his thoughts pressing against hers like a tide gathering on the edge of a shore. The silence lengthened. The boy began to tremble; not from cold, but from the unbearable anticipation of divine judgment. Finally, Max’s voice stirred in her mind like smoke uncurling from a dying ember.

*He will never touch a blade in war.* Max thought, as though it were a passing fact, not a death sentence in this world. *But his hands will be calloused with work. His name will not be sung, but it will be loved.*

The völva hesitated. She could feel the truth of it, the boy was not shaped for war. Max shifted. A low, pleased rumble echoed within her thoughts.

“You’ll father twins,” Max said, through her lips. “Name one of them Max, for he will be a great warrior.”

The boy blinked. He looked at the völva, as if unsure he had heard correctly, but she did not move. He nodded, slowly at first, then with growing conviction, as though the naming of children were the same as the swing of a sword. He stood and bowed deeply, retreating with renewed purpose.

The seeress closed her eyes. “Why lie to him?” she asked in a murmur.

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Max stretched lazily across the mat behind her eyes, his tail coiling like a serpent. "He needed a future," he said, pleased. "I gave him two." And with that, he went still—waiting, as always, for the next voice to beg for a glimpse beyond the veil.

The tent darkened as the flap lifted once more, this time framing a much larger shadow. A man ducked beneath the entry, fur-lined cloak heavy with ice. Jarl Sigurd, leader, warrior, cynic. He carried the scent of salt and blood, the cold still clinging to his beard. He did not kneel. Instead, he stood near the fire with arms crossed, gaze flicking to every corner of the tent. Searching for deception. For power. For something he could use. Max remained still. The völva did not move. The only sound was the soft hiss of smoke curling through the air.

Sigurd finally spoke. "I sail for Mercia at dawn. My men are ready. The Saxons will bleed." He tilted his head, voice colder now. "But will the gods bless my blade? Will I return with gold in hand—or not at all?"

Max did not answer right away. His presence curled tighter in the völva's mind, his thoughts moving slow and deliberate, like ice cracking beneath the surface of a lake. He whispered then—not to be heard, but to be felt. His voice fell like weight upon the bones.

"The gods do not bless blades, only stories. Yours ends far from shore."

The völva swayed slightly, her breath leaving her lips in a plume of frost. Max pushed forward.

"You will see gold, yes. You will see fire. And for a moment, you will believe yourself unstoppable."

The flames shifted, casting sharp shadows across the Jarl's face.

"But a shadow walks behind you, Jarl Sigurd. A brother not of your making. He smiles in your victories. He watches your sleep. And when the horns sound on the hill, it is his hand that spills your blood."

The völva felt her throat tighten. Her fingers gripped the hem of her cloak, knuckles pale. Max's final words landed like stones in deep water.

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"If you sail tomorrow, you will not return."

He let the pause stretch like tension drawn across a bowstring.

"But send your brother instead, and your campaign will succeed."

The fire cracked. Jarl Sigurd's face did not change at first. But his eyes, sharp and calculating, narrowed. A flicker of something ancient passed through them. He stood for a long moment, then turned and left without a word. The flap fell shut behind him.

Smoke filled the silence. The völva exhaled, slow and shaking. It was the first time her hands had trembled in years. "Why tell him to send his brother?" she asked.

His response was smooth, amused. "I like the brother more," Max murmured, stretching luxuriously across the seeress's inner vision. "He feeds stray cats."

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Night crept in slowly, curling around the village like a waiting beast. The wind had settled, and the longhouse fires outside were little more than flickers behind stretched hide and wood. Inside the seeress's tent, the hearth had dwindled to a bed of red-orange embers, breathing light onto the stones in slow, fading pulses. The scent of smoke and dried herbs clung to the air. The völva sat in stillness, her legs folded beneath her, fingers tracing the worn edge of the fur laid beside her. The trance had long since passed, but its echoes remained, humming like distant drums in her chest. Beside her, Max lay like a statue carved from shadow. His head rested on his paws, obsidian claws tucked beneath his weight. His eyes were closed, but the stillness of his body was too careful to be sleep. After a long stretch of silence, the völva spoke, her voice low, as though afraid the night might overhear.

"You feel... familiar." she murmured, the words more exhale than sound.

Max did not respond at first, but she felt it—the subtle stir of something beneath her skin, a ripple across her thoughts. Then it came, sudden and unrelenting: a surge of heat behind her eyes. The tent, the fire, the night, all of it dropped away.

Her breath caught. The vision took her. She stood again in the clearing of her youth, the one ringed by standing stones slick with moss and age. Mist clung to the ground, thick and unnatural, though no water ran nearby. The sky above was blood-colored, the trees bending inward like they were listening. Ravens circled overhead, silent, their wings cutting shapes into the air like runes. She had come seeking answers, fresh from her first trance, terrified of the voices that now lingered at the edge of her mind. The air had pulsed that night, thick with promise and warning.

Then came the shape. A black cat, large as a wolfhound, stepped from between the stones without sound. Its fur was the absence of light, its eyes twin coals glowing in its skull. It stared at her, not with hunger, but with knowing. She had dropped to her knees, overcome.

Then came the voice. Not booming like thunder. Not whispering like spirits. Just there, a thought not her own, uncoiled gently inside her mind.

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"When the night is longest and fire burns low, one will come in the form of shadow and flame. Protect it. Feed it. It is the gods made flesh. Their avatar. Their fury. Their will."

The mist had swallowed the cat soon after, and the air turned still. She had left that place changed. She never spoke of what she saw, only what she was told to say.

The vision faded like smoke caught in wind. She was back in the tent. The embers pulsed softly. Her hands trembled again, just slightly. Max lay beside her, eyes now open, watching.

"I planted it," he said again, voice velvet-smooth. "Years back. Just in case I ever needed a warm place to nap."

The seeress said nothing. Her lips were parted, but no sound came.

Max stretched lazily across the mat, tail flicking once with satisfaction. Then he smiled, not with mouth or face, but with the quiet certainty that filled the space between them. "Don't worry," he said, curling deeper into the fur. "I'll help you with your prophecies. This is only the beginning of a beautiful partnership."