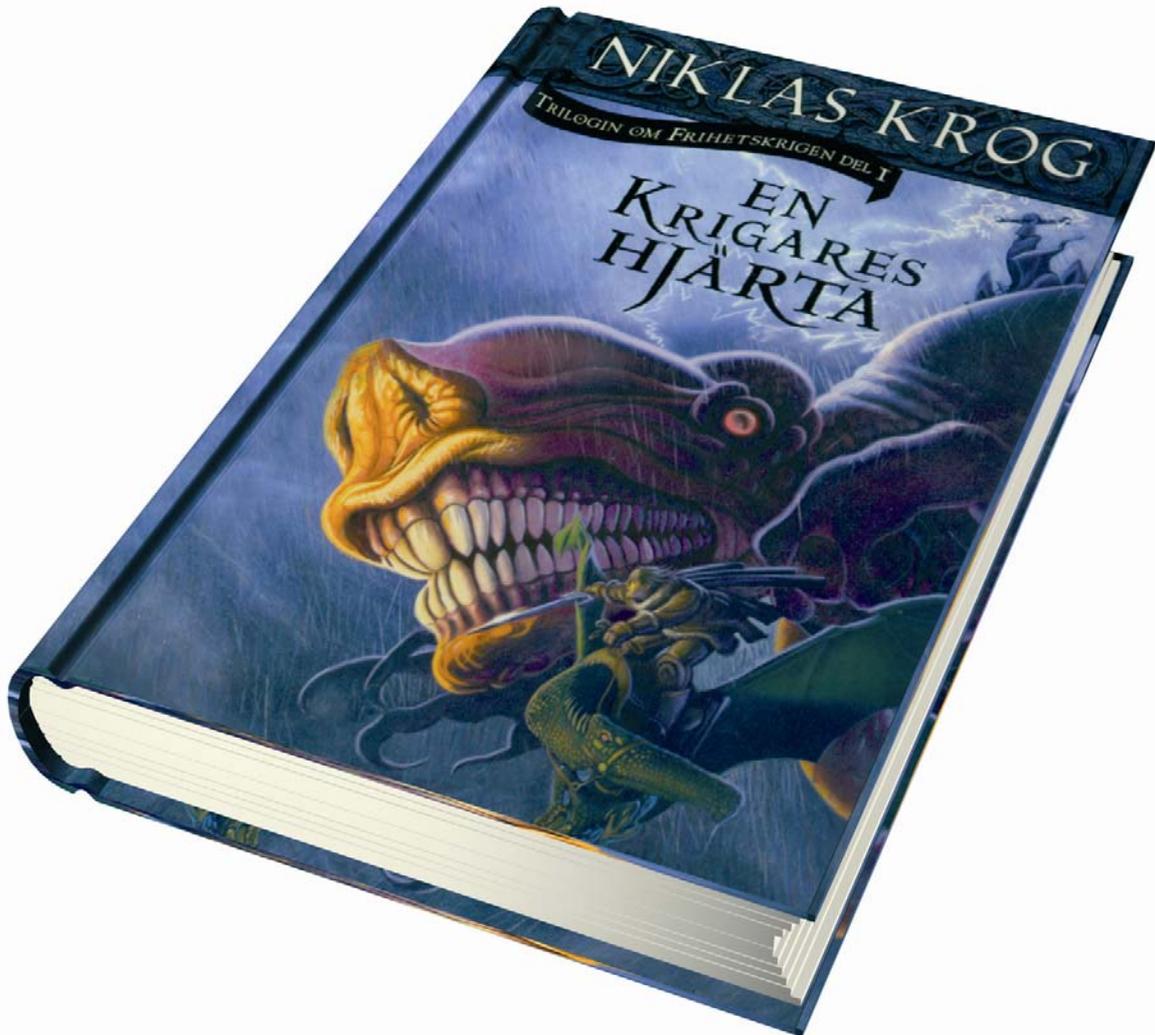


Heart of a Warrior



Heart of a Warrior is the first book in the Freedom Wars trilogy. It's a standalone story of the young warrior Sayn and his best friend, the warrior-wyvern Sheeba. 383 pages.

An ancient realm is breaking up and the young warrior Sayn and his friend Sheeba has been ordered to an outpost on a faraway island in the Northern Sea. As soon as they arrive at the outpost a rebellion breaks out. The island is attacked by men from the North, commanded by a black cloaked figure, enormous Warriorbeasts, wizards and foul creatures. Sayn and his fellow warriors must put their faith in their own skills and a farflung hope of help from the wizard's Great Council. But doubts grow, are they fighting for the right side?

Chapter 1

The wind tugged and tore at his thick fur clothes. The loose end of a belt flapped angrily an arm's length behind him, but he could hardly feel it any longer. It had been flapping that way for more than a day and a half, and would continue flapping for a long while yet.

He sat in the saddle of his wyvern Sheeba, high above the violently heaving surface of the Northern Sea, and she flew them with long wing strokes straight through the storm.

When the force of the wind increased and hit him in the chest, he felt himself lifted out of the saddle for a moment. In the short time before the wind lost its grip on his body and he realized that he was sitting as securely in the saddle as ever before, he involuntarily clenched his fists harder on the reins. It did not help that he knew he was securely fastened into the saddle with his waist strap and his boot holders.

For a day and a half the weather had been the same, and it irritated him that he had not got used to it. It was the first time he had flown under these conditions, the weather was worse than he could possibly have imagined and, despite his thirteen years of almost daily training on Sheeba, he felt very small. But it irritated him all the same.

They had been paired off on his very first day at warrior school, the boy and his wyvern. He had been six years old and she four. And since that day they had been inseparable.

All the training and play throughout the years had created a trust between them that nothing could ever shift. They knew each other as well as two living creatures could. Sheeba flew and he fought. Together, they constituted an almost unbeatable unit.

He stroked her scaly back with his gloved hand. Just under the skin, he could feel her gigantic muscles calmly and steadily bringing them towards their goal, far out in the seething icy sea.

It had taken the Garrison hundreds of years to breed wyverns that could ride out storms like the one raging around them, despite the relationship between the early wyverns and the ancient dragons. The new breed was bigger and stronger – it was called Onak wyvern, after the westerly region where they first had seen the light of day.

"I could never have imagined that it would be this bad" said the boy over their link. "Never." How many times he had already said this, he did not know.

"Don't tell me you weren't forewarned, Sayn", replied Sheeba, as she had done every time. "Nowhere else do you find storms like this. And we couldn't help chancing into one of the very worst, could we?"

"No", he said as a new gust of wind tore at his body. Again, he felt his hands closing harder on the long reins, but almost the same instant he forced them to relax.

Smiling slightly at the half-victory, he leant back in the saddle and let his thoughts roam free.

Six months earlier, he had learnt that after thirteen years of training, he had been found ready for his first tour of duty. He had exulted at finally being able to leave the warrior school. Nothing would become any easier once duty started, but reality did not frighten him. He had finished playing.

At warrior school, pupils learnt how to use swords, sticks, knives, axes, bows and their bare hands, They learnt how to fight in a group and on their own, on foot and on their wyverns. When they were ready, no method of fighting must be foreign to them.

They also learnt how to think independently. It was difficult, for many the most difficult thing of all, but one of the tenets of the Garrison stated: "Only the body and the mind that is completely unaffected by outside loyalties and requirements functions at its fullest capacity." These words had been indelibly impressed into each pupil.

But at the same time as the pupils learnt independence, they must also place the security of the realm first. This part of the education was the most delicate balancing act for the teachers, and already at the age of five, just after admission, the young boys received their only lessons

in the difficult subject. The idea was that this first influence – the imprinting – would remain at the bottom of the consciousness for the rest of their lives, under all the impressions and memories stored on top, like a catfish at the bottom of a lake, hidden under mud and sludge, yet always awake to prey. This was the theory. Sayn would never know if it worked, as he had never taken part in any imprinting.

When his father tried to get him accepted at the age of four, the man who managed recruitment had refused him, due to Sayn's background. Sayn's father was one of the most prominent swordsmen ever produced by the warrior schools, but his woman had been an Ashtar, a northerner, and therefore Sayn was undesirable.

It had been a great blow, but Sayn's father accepted it, used as he was to always obeying orders. And in his heart, he never stopped hoping that the Garrison would one day make an exception. Therefore Sayn was subjected to the same hard training as the other children at warrior school. Sayn submitted to his father's wishes - to begin with to please his father, but later because he found joy in pushing his body to the edge. The training was also a way of being together with his only remaining parent, who he adored.

When Sayn was four years old, a man named Korgath had proclaimed himself Gorhaan of Ashtar. No-one in the south knew who he was, and the rumours filtering down over the Annath Sea said that the man was not even an Ashtar, that he came from the south. But nobody had known for certain.

The first thing Korgath did was to issue a pardon to the descendants of the prisoners who had once built the castle at Akraig-im-Salem, and who had for several centuries lived in exile in the south. Sayn's mother was one of them.

She never hesitated, some kind of inborn homesickness pulled her back. And despite never having seen her homeland and hardly knowing anything about it, she abandoned home and family and went back with her returning countrymen in The Great Reconciliation. An exile lasting more than three hundred years was over, and after this all contact was broken with Ashtar.

Sayn stayed with his father, and his parents never saw each other again.

He only had a few memories left of his mother – a small, dark woman, with a soft, consoling embrace and a rippling laugh. Rahwn had been her name, and her father had missed her so much he practically lost his mind. Sayn had been too small when she left to feel any real sense of loss, but sometimes he wondered whether she had found a new home up there in the north, whether she was alive at all.

His father had never got over his loss. When Rahwn left them, it was as if something inside him died. His smile disappeared, and the laughter grew silent. Like a shadow of his former self, he wandered through the remainder of his life.

Sayn continued training, and under his father's supervision he made rapid progress. At the age of five, he could swing his father's longsword with such power that he could fell a sapling.

But during long periods his father was forced to be away from home, putting down disturbances in the realm, and when Sayn did not have anyone to correct him, his training suffered. He lost ground in skills compared to his contemporaries, and he missed his father.

Things would probably have continued this way, and he could then have become a fully trained warrior in the Urhaan's regular troops. If fate had not stepped in one day.

One cold morning early in spring, when Sayn had just turned six, his father was hit by a stray arrow during a skirmish in the south-eastern provinces of the realm. The arrow passed under his father's raised sword arm, missed the breastplate by a whisker and went straight into the armpit. Its speed was so great that it sank it up to the feathers and ended with the point of hardened wood visible through the linen garments just under the other armpit. On its way, it punctured both lungs and cut straight through the heart. Sayn's father was dead before his body hit the ground.

Suddenly, Sayn was alone.

But during his life, his father had made many good friends in the innermost circles of the realm. Faced with a fatherless child, they quickly arranged what Sayn's father had never given up hoping for.

The fatherless child was accepted at the nearest warrior school. Finally, he had got where his father always wanted him to go, where he had wished to go himself. If only he could catch up on the training, his future was secure.

Despite the loss of his father, he knew that he would make it.

He started school almost two years late, and had missed much at the age when children find it easiest to learn. But he was determined. His father had taught him to train with a fixed purpose, and he knew that the results would come.

It did not take long for him to catch up with and surpass his contemporaries in most of the warrior games.

The only problem was his size. His mother had been one of the short northerners, and he was shorter and lighter than the others in his class. This was most noticeable in fighting sports, where weight and reach played a great role and, despite the fact that he could outweigh

his opponent's advantage in weight and height with a lightning turn of speed, he often cursed his small size.

The boys in his year found it difficult to accept being beaten by a smaller opponent, and one who was also a half-Ashtar. The taunts and sly kicks were many, even though it soon became clear that Sayn could beat any one of the others.

But he learnt to look beyond the bullying. It spurred him to train even harder, with fixed determination to show that he could become better than anyone else.

And he succeeded.

A flickering light that would soon burn down was the only company for the man in the cold room. The room was located almost at the top of the black cliff, and during the day he had a glorious view of the sea that surrounded him. But now it was night. And stormy.

Outside the only window, the wind screamed against the granite, which eons of storms and harsh weather had polished as smooth as a tabletop. The violent gusts made the high cliff rock from side to side.

Small streams of air found their way in through cracks between the steel shields that covered the window, and the small candle flickered and faltered, on the brink of going out. Groping shadows moved across the walls, like participants in a ghostly dance, but the man was not aware of any of this. He only saw the three tidy piles of paper on the table in front of him.

They had arrived by carrier falcon during the previous day.

The man had read through the messages several times during the day. One of them had particularly caught his attention – or displeasure.

“When will they ever learn?”, he muttered quietly. “We don't need to import problems. We have enough trouble with our own.”

It had started to rain, a heavy rain that hurled against the boy and his wyvern from all sides. The drops were cold as ice and slowly penetrated the clothes, through to the body. After a couple of hours, Sayn was wet through and, without the heat from Sheeba under him, he would have frozen.

“How much further do you think it is?” He peered through the rain, glad of the link between rider and steed, glad not to have to fight the roar of the storm to make himself heard. The link meant that they could talk directly with each other, through body contact.

“Not too far now.” Sheeba’s wings beat even strokes against the howling wind. “Two, three hours, not more.”

“Good. I think my nose might be getting frostbite.”

He clamped the reins in his armpit and pulled off a glove. Carefully, he lifted the scarf made from foxtails, which was wound several times over his nose and mouth, and smoothed his hand over his face. There was no danger yet.

He rewound the scarf around his face and carefully pushed the ends down into his bear pelt jacket. Without a scarf, the remainder of the journey would be arduous.

He left a small crack for his eyes. You could never be sure you were alone up in the air.

Not even on a night like this.

The man’s eyes swept across the paper, time after time, ever faster. Finally, he rose and started walking to and fro across the floor of the little tower room, a proof of the irritation he would never have permitted himself to show to any visitor. As commander – Erhaan – of the Garrison on Akraig-im-Salem, there were certain things he could not do. And show his feelings was one of them.

After four and a half years on the coldest and most distant outpost of the realm, Argos Altea was one of the first to acknowledge that the years had taken their toll of him. He often felt tired, so tired that he asked himself if he was really doing the right thing in remaining there.

It would be tempting to renounce all his responsibilities and withdraw. But, no, barely six months – not even two hundred days – remained of his final field appointment. It was so little that nothing should be able to happen.

He dragged a hand through his black hair and continued pacing.

In two hundred days’ time, he could retire from his last appointment as Erhaan. Two hundred days stood between him and a report full of excellent testimonials, yes, two hundred days was all that remained of a life of daily danger and sacrifices.

A staff job awaited him, with all its advantages – comfortable climate, regular hours, better housing, time for himself and for amusements. Things he had learnt to live without during thirty years spent in outposts around the realm.

But if he now asked for early retirement, none of this would be his.

No, two hundred days remained and two hundred days it would be. Nothing would be allowed to change this. Least of all a problem from the mainland.

He stopped and drew a deep breath.

He was of middle height. His shoulders were broad and, even if they had bent a fraction in later years, he still carried his almost fifty years well. His hair was almost blueish black, without the slightest hint of grey, and framed a coarse, weather-beaten face. His eyes were narrow, almost black and luminous, despite their darkness. They lit up his face and left the rest of the body in shadow. They were what you remembered after having met him for the first time. Nothing else.

The second time you met the man, you saw the rest. A strong body with arms and legs almost disproportionately long compared to the torso, coarse and shaped by many years of service to the realm. The longsword at his hip, the knife in the boot top and the flexible leather hauberk he carried with an assurance that made them almost invisible. His entire being exuded authority and self-confidence, which made it difficult to question anything about him. Everything was in its place and seemed always to have been there. Only a life filled with responsibility and unrestricted power could foster this type of self-assurance, and he had lived just such a life.

Outside the cliff wall, barely an arm's length from him, the wind still howled angrily as it hurled itself untiringly against the wall. The storm still had power remaining before it had done its bit for this time. And it was firmly determined to take it all out on the small and lonely island in the middle of the Northern Sea. All the men on the island could do was to wait. It could not last forever.

“What was that?”

The question cut through the night and the darkness and woke Sayn from his half-slumber.

The next instant, he could feel it himself. It was as if a cold hand, much colder than the storm around them, had stretched out and closed on his heart. An inexplicable terror seized him. With the storm raging around him, he raised himself bolt upright in the saddle. His entire body screamed at him, warning him of an approaching danger.

He tried to look around, but the darkness remained. He could barely see his hand before him. He felt panic coming, and gasped for air.

Then it was gone. As suddenly as it had arrived. All that remained was a fading memory of something incomprehensible and awful.

“Namun, what was that?” Sheeba's voice was high and shrill.

Covered in cold sweat, he shook his head.

“I don't know...”

What could have shaken them so?

They were trained to resist all types of magic. They should not have been able to react as they had done.

So what?

“Something that doesn’t belong in this world.”

“I thought it came from the air around us.” Sheeba’s voice was no longer as shrill.

“But out here?”

“Yes.”

“Then there is only one place around here that it could have come from - or be on its way towards.” He drew a deep breath.

“What if we tried to hurry up a bit? If nothing else, we get to eat and sleep a bit sooner.”

Sheeba did not answer. Instead, he felt the strong muscles under him swell and get a bit harder yet. Slowly, the speed of the wing beats increased, and increased again, until they were darting through the storm-wracked night like the black shadow of a gurefalcon.

“He is a loner, badly imprinted and with his own idea of what is right or wrong. He is difficult to control and is already one of the Garrison’s best warriors. He outgrew warrior school several years ago, but we have delayed his placement for as long as possible. We have now decided that the best solution is to send him to you. You are in charge of the most dangerous of our outposts, perhaps this might make him settle in, which would be the best for everybody.

He is too good a subject to give up on this early. But if there are any problems, you can do as you find best. We trust your judgement. But we would like to point out that we find it better that you execute him and make an example of him than risk him spreading dissent.

It is important that you remember that he is insufficiently imprinted. You cannot be sure how he will react in any situation. But – he who expects the unexpected will never be surprised...”

“And he who does the expected can never surprise.” Argos shook his head. He still remembered the old precepts. Nobody need doubt that. Least of all his superiors.

He stroked his chin with a coarse hand, heard the scrape of his day-old beard and continued reading.

“As you will see, it is not an easy task before you, but life is not meant to be easy – difficulties encourage development.”

Argos sighed, half amused, half resigned.

The letter continued in the same style, with admonitions and precepts following one after the other, but nothing more of importance was mentioned before the final: “Long live our Urhaan!”

This is, after all, the easy solution to your problem, he thought and pushed the paper away. But hardly to mine. Oh well, no young brat on his first posting shall be allowed to damage my reputation.

But he was full of disinclination about what the paper hinted he might be forced to do.

“There is the island!”

At the same time as Sayn heard Sheeba’s voice in his head, he caught sight of it himself.

Like a black hole, into which all light was sucked and disappeared, they could feel the island as a darker shadow against the dark blue sky behind.

Awestruck, they continued their approach.

Foaming breakers formed a white wreath around the cliffs, constantly replenished by the waves that rolled in with a deep roar. Without them, it would have been impossible to see where the sea ended and the island took over.

The island looked even bleaker than Sayn could have imagined. This was where they would pass the next three years of their lives, this was where they would live - he shuddered with uneasiness. He had never before seen anything so cold and hostile.

“It can’t be as bad as it looks, or nobody could live here”, said Sheeba.

“Let’s hope so.” He did not know if he dared to be convinced.

But they had found the island, despite the storm. Only the landing remained.

Sheeba was caught by a gust of wind, and managed to glide a stretch.

The distance to the island shrunk and more and more details emerged from the darkness. The island was hilly, it looked like a big hump with a higher, pointed peak in the north-eastern corner. From the high peak, the cliffs dropped sharply into the stormy sea.

“Can you see the castle courtyard?”, Sheeba asked, and started beating her wings again.

At the same moment, the terror struck them. Sheeba lost control, the storm grabbed her and hurled them away like a leaf in autumn. The world spun. They fell like stones, and the island disappeared in the blackness.

Sayn lost all sense of time. Perhaps they just fell for an instant, perhaps it was all eternity. Black waves rushed up to greet them.

Then Sheeba managed to extend her shaking wings. An instant later, they were no longer falling.

Last time, the terror had disappeared as soon as it arrived. But this time it remained even after the first wave had passed, a furious pulse that made their hearts beat like tilt hammers.

But they were trained to survive everything and their bodies had already started to adapt. The instructors at warrior school had said that they were immune to magic. This was wrong, but nor were they helpless.

They managed to twist out the grasp of the inexplicable and regain some control. Sayn clenched his hands tighter on the reins and was glad that he had Sheeba with him. Together, there was nothing they could not tackle.

With clenched teeth, they struggled on.

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Niklas Krog

Stolpev. 18

168 56 Bromma

Sweden

Phone +46 8 257960

niklas@niklaskrog.nu

www.niklaskrog.nu