



RULANTICA (Vol. 1)

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The Nordic saga is brought to life in the first volume of the two-part novel RULANTICA!

Short summary Vol. 1

Aquina the mermaid has always felt different to the other merpeople of Rulantica. Not long after her twelfth birthday, she learns something incredible: she has a twin brother. Mats is a human boy! And right now, he's in great danger. There is no holding Aquina back, she has to find her true family before it's too late.

Mats has grown up in an orphanage, since he was found on the beach as a baby. He's always been afraid of the sea and the water. But he has no idea that he's about to dive headlong into the greatest adventure of his life!

When Mats and Aquina meet, they fulfil a centuries-old prophecy by the Nordic gods – and it can mean either the salvation or the end of the whole island world of Rulantica...

About the author

Michaela Hanauer was born in 1969 and lives with her husband and cat in Munich – when she isn't off on her travels, exploring the other side of the world. If she hadn't become a children's author, she would have taken flying lessons on a magic carpet, raced dolphins through the sea or started a time travel agency. She met Aquina, Mats and Snorri so they could tell her their story and she could write it down. And so she knows exactly where Rulantica lies – but she has promised never to reveal the secret!

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PROLOGUE

The story so far...

Loki's cunning OR How the island of Rulantica came into being

Once, the god Loki broke off a little stone from Asgard, the home of the gods; he was jealous of the other gods and their close relationship to mankind, and wanted to prove how imperfect and weak the mortals were in reality. The stone landed in the ocean and became an island. Loki was well aware that a piece of the gods' magic had been brought to earth along with the stone. He soon went exploring on his island, delighting in its idyllic woods, mountains and rivers – though he could also see its fiery soul. He was particularly taken with a grotto where a spring bubbled away merrily. This seemed like the ideal place for his sneaky trick. At the spot where the spring flowed out of the ground, he spat out a pip from a golden apple of immortality into the earth. From then on, the seed gave to the water the power of immortality that it had received from the goddess Idun.

Loki was sure that no human would be able to resist that temptation. Pleased with himself and his work, he kept watch for a suitable victim, and quickly found one in Viken Rangnak, the leader of a Viking clan. Loki revealed himself to Viken and showed him the way to a promising new homeland: Rulantica.

The Vikings liked their new home, and they built Rangnakor, a town on stilts. One day, when Viken and his men were cutting down another tree for one of the houses, Loki made the strong Viken stumble, and he was hit by the trunk as it came crashing down. When his men rescued their badly-injured leader, the Vikings' shock and sadness was great. Loki's hour had come: he spread a rumour among Viken's followers that there was a healing spring on the island. All too readily, they carried their leader – who was only just clinging onto life – to the grotto and bathed his injuries in the spring water. They watched as all his wounds closed up and Viken opened his eyes. He had been miraculously returned to them from Hel's kingdom of the dead. After that, Viken led all his people to the spring, so that everyone could bathe in it. The water made them not only impervious to injury, but also young and strong. They praised and worshipped Loki, who had brought them eternal health and youth, and laughed at the other gods, who had never paid them any attention.

Odin, the father of the gods, was beside himself with anger. How could these human upstarts dare to make fun of him and the other gods? He mounted his many-legged horse Sleipnir and rode off to Rulantica, intending to destroy the island.

Odin's wife Frigg decided to follow her angry husband. When she arrived, Odin had already called up the giant sea serpent Svalgur, to devour the island and every living creature on it. Only Frigg was able to stop him, asking to hear the Vikings' side of the story first. Viken and his people threw themselves at the goddess's feet and begged her forgiveness. They told her what had led them to the island and how they had come to know about the spring after the accident.

Although they didn't mention Loki's name, Frigg recognised that this was his work, and whispered her realisation into her husband's ear. Odin's rage was lessened a little, but not fully quenched. He transformed Viken and his clan into mermen and mermaids. From that day on, they had to live in the sea. Their fate was to keep watch and make sure that no human ever set foot in the spring again and misused the water to make themselves immortal. As a warning, he created a giant hall of ice and trapped the sea serpent inside it. If the oath should ever be broken, the ice would melt, allowing Svalgur to fulfil his destiny and devour the island. The grotto that held the spring, once a shrine to Loki, now became Frigg's temple: the merpeople worshipped her for having saved their lives. Unseen, Loki watched all this from a safe distance. He was saddened by how easily the humans had abandoned their praise of him. But the game wasn't over yet. He alone knew how to find the island, and he would make sure that one mortal after another would find their way to Rulantica and the spring of immortality. But Frigg was not idle, either: she left a young mermaid with an amulet and words of hope that one day, in some far-off time, their fate might be changed again...

Rulantica - Chapter 1

A lesson on the coral reef

“Aquina.”

“Aquina, it’s your turn!”

“AQUINA! Your skjol, please!”

Aquina feels an elbow dig her in the ribs – it belongs to the delicate little Orchid, who is perched beside her on the large coral reef and now rolls his eyes to the front as discreetly as possible. She takes his hint and finds herself looking into the strict face of Manati, the old singing teacher, who reminds Aquina a little of a sea cow – with the same wrinkles and the flat nose and, if you look closely, even a few whiskers on her cheeks. It’s clear that Manati is waiting for something; she is drumming her fingertips together, ever faster and more impatiently. The other eleven merchildren have now all turned to look at her.

“Sing!” hisses Jade, who is twelve years old just like Aquina, and is sitting on her other side.

Oh, so that’s what this is all about! Aquina quickly raises her tail fin, clears her throat and begins. Her voice is soft as she searches for the first notes. Aquina’s mind is still on the graceful backwards-fish she has just been watching at the edge of the coral reef. They swim tail-first. People say that anyone who gets into their shoal finds that even time moves backwards. When she was little, Aquina tried it out, but she still couldn’t say if it was true. Not enough happened in the brief moment when the shoal passed her by to notice any change. Apart from a few fish gently brushing past her arms, strictly speaking nothing happened at all. As always down here at the bottom of the sea, all was peaceful and quiet.

Aquina packs all this into her melody. How incredibly beautiful it is in the underwater city of Aquamaris – and it is beautiful, without a doubt – but also, how unexciting. Aquina herself notices how, even without words, her singing describes what is going through her mind. She has now found her full voice. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees a little neon starfish, hanging on the wall of rock shaped by the currents beside the coral reef, and changing its colour in time with her melody. Now Aquina makes her song more urgent and tempting, as clear as seawater on summer days. It takes on the delicate shades of red, purple and orange that mix with the blue of the water and form the different layers of the reef. On top of the gracefulness of her surroundings, she puts her own longing into the notes.

When she has finished, Manati shakes her head disapprovingly. “You’re daydreaming again! When are you going to understand that we want to scare people off, not lure them in! Sit down!” Her eyes roam over the group. “Who can give me a proper skjol? Larima, do you want to try?”

The particularly pale mermaid with the slime-coloured hair leaps up as if she was just waiting to be asked. She starts up a growling, thundering and rumbling sound, like a storm front approaching. Finally, she makes the hiss of a bolt of lightning, sending it in Aquina’s direction with a superior smile. It even makes Manati twitch – briefly, but obviously – and Aquina suddenly wants to growl too, with rage. This is just typical of that teacher’s pet, to not only do it perfectly but to rub Aquina’s nose in her own failure, to boot.

“Very good, Larima!” Manati praises her, though there is really no need. “The rest of you, take that as an example of how to use your voice to protect our island. Now, before tomorrow you can all think about what other off-putting noises might be suitable for this great task.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Jade whispers to her as they leave the coral reef with the others for their siesta. “Your voice is much more beautiful than Larima’s.”

Aquina pulls a face. “What good is that if I’m not allowed to sing the way I want to?”

Jade doesn’t have an answer for that. “Well, come to High Cliffs with me and Ruby, and take your mind off it. Apparently there are loads of oysters up there!”

Aquina shakes her head. “Thank you, but I’ve stopped eating fish.”

Jade’s green eyes widen even further. “Really? Shellfish too? You’re still going through with that?”

Aquina sighs. Why doesn’t even Jade understand her? “Fish and shellfish are my friends, just like you are. I wouldn’t bite your nose off or eat your little sticking-out ear for breakfast!”

“Sticking-out ears yourself,” Jade mutters, but immediately tugs her long black hair over her ears all the same, though they’re no more hidden than they were before. “So, what *do* you eat?”

“Sea salad, sea asparagus and algae pesto. And I’m growing my own sea herbs,” Aquina explains proudly.

“You’re doing WHAT?” Jade forgets her ears at once.

“Ye-es, that’s kind of how my mother reacted, too.”

“I’m not surprised! You’re the only – er, what do you call it exactly? ‘Non-fish-eater’ in the whole of Aquamaris?”

“I prefer *algaetarian*.”

“Alright, you crazy algaetarian. I’m sure there will be some delicious algae for you in amongst the oysters!”

Jade peers after the group, who are already a good way off, swimming up to High Cliffs. “Or you could come home with me and I’ll show you my herb garden,” Aquina tempts her. “And you’ll get a delicious sea cucumber at our house.”

“But sea cucumbers aren’t plants!” Jade exclaims.

“I know,” Aquina smiles, “but my mother thinks she can trick me with them. Like she did with the fish in the crispy sea salt last week. But if you eat my portion for me, I’ll be left in peace for a few more days!”

“I’m not sure I should get involved...” Jade says uncertainly.

Aquina reaches out and hooks her silvery-turquoise tail fin around Jade’s green one. “Oh, come on, you’re my best friend, we have to stick together!”

“Tomorrow,” says Jade. “I’ll come to yours tomorrow, I promise. And then I’ll stuff myself with as many sea cucumbers for you as you like. But today, let’s go to High Cliffs!”

Aquina pulls her tail fin back. “No problem. You swim off to the oysters, then, and I’ll go up to the surface.”

Jade almost chokes on a mouthful of seawater. “You’re going up there? But you know we’re not allowed to without our parents!” She stretches her white arms out as if to prove a point.

“The sun is dangerous for our mermaid skin and could even dry our fish-tails out!”

“What rubbish!” Aquina laughs. “I stopped believing that fairy tale when I was six years old!”

“Have you gone up there on your own a lot, then?” Jade asks timidly.

“Of course,” Aquina boasts, “so many times I’ve lost count! Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

Fear and curiosity are very clearly struggling with each other on Jade’s face. But then she shakes her head firmly after all. “I don’t dare. But tell me all about it in lessons this afternoon – promise?”

“Promise,” says Aquina.

She is a tiny little bit disappointed, although she knew all along how the conversation was going to turn out. All the same, she doesn't begrudge Jade and the others having fun at the edge of the town. She even considers going with them, but she feels much more strongly, almost magically, drawn to the surface.

Aquina glides through the water. Almost weightless, she moves forward with an occasional, gentle swish of her tail. She's in no hurry. Down in the depths where Aquamaris lies, almost all the colours look like they have a blue filter laid over them; the reds and yellows in particular. But the closer she comes to her goal, the more enticingly the sun casts lush, bright yellow points of light on the surface of the water, to which Aquina is drawn as if hypnotised. Why do the other merpeople hardly ever come up here? She loves the sun, the warmth and the bright colours. Taking a happy breath, she turns onto her back and lets the waves carry her. How carefree the world is here. She could lie like this forever. Aquina blinks in the sunbeams that tickle her nose. What would it be like, to be human? Like her forefathers? Aquina squeezes her eyes shut as she thinks about it.

Her mother told her that they were humans, once – Vikings – when they came to RULANTICA. Back then, their leader was Viken Rangnak, who went in search of a new home for his clan when their barren island couldn't produce enough food for them. He called on the old Nordic gods for help in his search. At first, none of them seemed to hear his plea, and the Vikings sailed aimlessly around the North Sea, until the cunning god Loki finally revealed himself. He broke off a horn from his mighty helmet, gave it to Viken and told him to blow into it after one more day at sea, as soon as they reached a thick wall of fog. Viken followed Loki's instructions and a promising island really did appear out of the fog. Viken and his clan explored it, and decided to settle there. They called the island RULANTICA. And that is its name to this day.

Beneath the island lies Aquamaris, the underwater city where they live now. And so that neither Aquina nor the other sirens will ever forget how it all started and why they are here, Kailani started Frigg Day, on which they tell the story of Odin's curse, forcing them to forever guard the spring of life or be devoured by Svalgur – and of course, the story of Frigg's prophecy. Aquina knows these stories off by heart; she could recite them in her sleep. And that is because Kailani is not only the leader of the sirens, but also Aquina's mother. Aquina

knows that as Kailani's daughter, she has all kinds of privileges: a lovely home in the shell palace, access to a huge number of sagas and legends... but the other side of the coin is the many things she is not allowed to do.

Aquina lifts her head a little way out of the water and peers over at the land that rises out of the sea just a few metres away. There is the island, solitary and peaceful. How stupid that her ancestors didn't see the trap Loki was luring them into. Otherwise they would still be humans today, and Aquina could go off and see the whole world, instead of being stuck in the three-mile zone around RULANTICA. And she could sing as beautifully as she wanted, and would have to do a scary *skjol*.

On her excursions to the surface, she often imagines how her ancestors lived in the Rangnakor Viking settlement. From the water, she can still see a few of the tall stilt buildings with their carved wooden gables. The paint on the beams has long since flaked off, the buildings are weather-beaten and some have collapsed, while in others, birds of prey like the great black mauks make their nests. But in Aquina's imagination, she sits with the Vikings around their fire pits, stirring a huge cauldron and preparing to set off in one of the proud Viking ships. She wants to see new cities and countries, talk to people she hasn't known all her life, and have adventures. Or at the very least, to explore every corner of the island that she can't see from the water. How must it have felt to live on land and be able to walk everywhere?

Kailani could tell her: she is one of the ancient immortals who were transformed from humans into merpeople. But whenever Aquina starts to ask her, her mother just plays it down: "Yes, but we couldn't swim very well."

"But at least you could swim a bit," Aquina says then. "I can't walk *at all*, not even for a minute!"

"Believe me, it's much nicer in the sea than it is on land," Kailani says every time, trying to reassure her. And she never forgets to add a warning: "Keep away from RULANTICA! Even from the water around it, do you understand? They say dangerous creatures have moved into the old stilt town of Rangnakor. That's no place for a young mermaid like you!"

"But there are dangerous creatures here, too. Like grey sharks and manta rays," Aquina objected once.

But Kailani refused to let her daughter persuade her. “That’s entirely different. You’ve learned how to deal with the dangers of the sea, from me, from Papa and at school. You’re prepared for those, but not for the ones on land!”

The warnings just make the island more attractive for Aquina. For a while now, she has been venturing closer and closer, trying to see as much of the island’s surface as possible. She wisely says nothing to her mother about this.

The longing to travel pulls and tugs at Aquina like the burning of salt on the skin. She can just about stand it, but it will never completely go away until she finally does something about it.

As if someone has read her mind, there is a sudden howl that puts even Larima’s defence song in the shade. Quick as a flash, Aquina rolls over and tries to spot the source of the noise. There is nothing to be seen. But it is clearly coming from the island, and Aquina has a terrible sense of foreboding about who it might be. At a speed that would make a swordfish look like a sea snail, Aquina heads for the shore. The beach of RULANTICA comes closer, shining in the sunlight – it used to be called Golden Sands for that reason. Although now, all kinds of flotsam and jetsom has collected there. Mainly from all the ships that Exena, the leader of the spring guardians, has sunk here over the centuries, the wrecks of which are gradually being washed up. Aquina snakes her way through the rubbish, looking around over the surface of the water. She just manages to dodge a mast that is sticking up like a spear just below the surface. And then – swoosh – her tail immediately scrapes the next mast. Hopefully it hasn’t scratched off any scales. She ducks her head underwater to at least get her bearings for a moment and see where the next obstacles are. It’s very foolhardy to go swimming about in the labyrinth of shipwrecks. There’s only one creature who would be reckless enough to risk it anyway, to get to the beach...

From a long way off, her suspicion is confirmed. On the golden sand, she spots a bright blue, ball-like head and five tentacles waving wildly about. The sixth tentacle seems to be somehow stuck in the washed-up rubbish; the little ball head is pulling and tugging and keeps howling in the most heart-rending way. Aquina swims up as close as she can, but there is still at least a ship’s length between them.

“Snorri!”, she shouts. The little head turns towards her as far as it can. Unlike Aquina, her six-armed octopus friend can also walk around on land. Usually she envies him for it, but

today his curiosity seems to have got him into trouble. “What are you doing here, Snorri? The shipwreck beach is dangerous with all this rotten junk everywhere!”

“SNRRR, SNG, SNGG!”, he replies shrilly. Aquina knows he’s understood her, even if he can’t answer and she can only vaguely interpret his language, too. But Snorri’s whimpers are enough to tell her that he has got his arm trapped, and can’t get off the beach.

“What shall I do?” wails Aquina. “I can’t come ashore to help you.”

“SNNN-NN”, goes Snorri, instead of suggesting anything. The pink comb on his head is already swollen and fiery red with the effort of trying to escape. Aquina tries to raise herself a little way above the surface to see what Snorri has got stuck in, but it’s impossible to tell from a distance. Across the waves, Aquina senses the little octopus’s rising panic. Snorri can survive for quite some time out of the water, but if he’s stuck there, he’ll be easy prey for seals or other predators. Or the sun will gradually dry out his delicate sea-skin. Aquina swallows hard; she can’t just watch and do nothing! Oh, if only she could just walk onto the beach and free her friend from this situation! If only she had legs... But she doesn’t, so she will have to come up with something else. She certainly can’t and won’t watch as her octopus friend meets a terrible fate. He’s the only one who understands her longing, even without speaking. The only one she can go exploring with, without having to hear how dangerous that is for a mermaid.

(3623 words)

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