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The Whale Road



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OATHSWORN
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ONE

Runes are cut in ribbons, like the World Serpent eating his own tail. All sagas are snake-knots, for the story of a life does not always start with birth and end with death. My own truly begins with my return from the dead.

There was a beam, knotted and worn smooth where nets and sails hung, with a cold-killed spider hanging by the slenderest of threads, swaying in the breeze, swimming in my vision.

I knew that beam. It was the ridge beam of the *naust*, the boatshed at Bjornshafen, and I had swung on those hanging nets and sails. Swung and laughed and had no cares, a lifetime ago.

I lay on my back and looked up at it and could not understand why it was there, for I was surely dead. Yet my breath smoked in the chill of that place.

‘He’s awake.’

The voice was a growl and everything canted and swung when I tried to turn my head to it. I was not dead. I was on a pallet-bed and a face, jut-jawed and bearded like a hedge, floated in front of me. Others, too, peered round him, all strangers, all wavering, as if underwater.

‘Get back, you ugly bollocks. Give the boy room to breathe. Finn Horsehead, you would frighten Hel herself, so

I am thinking you should bugger off out of it and fetch his father.’

The hedge-bearded face scowled and vanished. The owner of the voice had a face, too; this one neat-bearded and kind-eyed. ‘I am Illugi, godi of the Oathsworn,’ he said to me, then patted my shoulder. ‘Your father is coming, boy. You are safe.’

Safe. A priest says I am safe, so it must be true. A moment’s vision-flash, like something seen in the night when a storm flickers blue-white: the bear, crashing through the roof in a shower of snow and timbers, roaring and snake-necked, a great mountain of white . . .

‘My . . . father?’

The voice didn’t even sound like mine, but the kind-eyed stranger called Illugi nodded and smiled. Behind him, men moved like shadows, their voices ebbing and flowing in a tide of sound.

My father. So he had come for me after all. The thought of that stayed with me as Illugi’s face faded to a pale orb; the others, too, dwindled like trailing bubbles as I slid away, down into the dark water of sleep.

But the priest lied. I was not safe. I would never be safe again.

By the time I could sit up and take broth, the story was round Bjornshafen: the story of Orm the slayer of the white bear.

Alone, when the White Bear, Rurik’s Curse, came for revenge on the son – and then, presumably, the father – brave Orm, a mere boy becoming a man fought it over the headless body of Freydis the witch-woman. Fought it for a day and a night and had finally driven a spear into its head and a sword into its heart.

There was more of the same, of course, as my father told me when he came to me, hunkering by my bed and rubbing his grizzled chin and running his hand through his lank, once-gold hair.

My father, Rurik. The man who had fostered me on his brother Gudleif at Bjornshafen. He carried me there under his cloak when I was no more than fat knees and chubby fists, in the year Eirik Bloodaxe lost his throne in York and was cut down at Stainmore. I am not even sure if that was a true memory, or one patched back to the cloak of my life by Gudleif's wife, Halldis, who liked me above the other fostris who came and went, because I was blood kin.

She it was who taught me about sheep and chickens and growing things, who filled in the rents in my memory while she sat by the fire, the great hangings which portioned the hall stirring and flapping in the winds which thundered Bjornshafen's beams.

Patient and still, click-clicking her little bone squares as she wove strips of bright wool hemming, she would answer all my piped questions.

'Rurik came back only once, with a white bear cub,' she said. 'Said for Gudleif to keep it for him and that it was worth a fortune – and it was, too. But Rurik, of course, couldn't stop long enough to make it into one. Always off on the next tide, that one. Not the same man after your mother died.'

Now here he was, sprung like a breaching whale from the empty sea.

I saw a nut-brown face and, since folk said we looked alike, tried to see more handsome in it than, perhaps, there was. He was middling height, more silvered than fair now, his face roughened by wind and weather and his beard cropped short. His blue eyes laughed, though, from under hairy eyebrows like spiders' legs, even when he was being concerned.

And what did he see? A boy, tall for his age, with good shoulders and the scrawn of youth almost gone, with red-brown hair that fell in his eyes unless someone rough-cut it with shears. Halldis had done it while she lived but no one much bothered after the coughing sickness took her.

I looked at him with the same blue eyes, staring at his snub-nosed face. It came to me, with a sudden shock, that I would look like this when I was old.

‘You are come after all, then,’ I said, feeling foolish even as I spoke, for it was self-evident he had come – and not alone, either. Behind him, in Bjornshafen’s boatshed, their temporary quarters, were the hard-faced crew of the ship he mastered. Gunnar Raudi had warned of these.

‘Why would I not?’ he answered with a grin.

We both knew the answer to that one, but I would have preferred it said aloud.

‘When word comes that a man’s son is in danger from his own kin . . . well, a father must act,’ he went on, serious as stone.

‘Just so,’ I replied, thinking that he had taken his time about acting and that ten years was more than a pause for breath in the journey to his son. But I said nothing when I saw in his eyes how he was genuinely puzzled that I would think he wouldn’t rush to my aid.

It only came to me later, when I had aged into life a little, that Rurik had done his task of raising me as well as any father and better than most – but looking at this new man, this rawboned hard man from a boatload of hard men and realising he was the one who had left me in the first place, with no word since and no prospect of one, I grew so angry and twisted with it that I could not speak at all.

He took that for something else – the moment of our meeting, the horror of what had gone before with the white bear and the snow journey – and nodded, smiling.

‘Who’d have thought that bloody little bear cub would have caused such trouble,’ he mused, rasping his chin with horned fingers. ‘I bought it from a Gotland trader, who had it from a Finn, he told me. I thought to sell it in Ireland, to make a jarl’s cloak, or even a pet, but that nothing Gudleif let it go. Arse. Just look at what happened – I nearly lost my son.’

Gudleif had cursed his brother, that bear and, in the end, the one he suspected of letting it go. It had grown too big for its original cage, so had to be tethered loose and fed mountains of good herring; the thrall had grown too afraid to go near it.

There had been about an eyeblink of cheering when everyone saw it had gone, then blind panic that such a monster was loose. Gudleif and Bjarni and Gunnar Raudi had hunted it all that year, but found nothing and lost a good dog besides.

The words were queued up in me, fighting like drunks trying to get out of a burning hall. My father was breathtaking . . . not one word about where he had been, or why I had been left so long, or what had been my life in the five years before he brought me here. Or even that the bloody bear had been his fault all along.

It was infuriating. My mouth gaped and shut like a fresh-caught cod and he saw it, put it down to the emotion of the moment, of seeing his long-lost father, and made manly of it. He clapped me on the shoulder and said, gruffly, 'Can you walk? Einar is in the hall and wants to see you.'

Fuck Einar, was what I wanted to say. Fuck you, too. Freydis is dead because of your bloody bear and the fact that you weren't around to decide what to do with it before someone got tired of it and let it escape. Where *were* you? And tell me of me, my mother, where I am from. I know *nothing*.

Instead, I nodded and weaved upright, while he helped me into breeks and shoes and kirtle and tunic, me leaning on him, feeling his wiry strength.

He smelled of old sweat and leather and wet wool and the hair grew up under the neck of his own tunic, all around, curling wads of it, grizzled and darker than that on his head and chin.

And all the while the thoughts in me wheeling and screaming like terns round a fresh catch. The years between

us and the wyrd of that white bear. How long was it free? Six years? Eight, maybe?

Yet this winter it had sought me out somehow, tracked me down and brought my father back to me with its death, like an Odin sacrifice.

The wyrd of it made me shiver – those three Norn sisters, who weave the lives of every creature, had started on a strange tapestry for me.

Finally, as I fastened and looped a belt round my waist, my father straightened from doing up my leg-bindings and held out Bjarni's sword to me. It had been cleaned of all blood; cleaned better than it had been before, for there were fewer rot spots on it than when I had stolen it.

'It isn't mine,' I said, half-ashamed, half-defiant, and he cocked his head like a bird and I laid out the tale of it.

It was Bjarni's sword, he who had been Gudleif's oarmate of long standing. He and Gudleif had taught me the strokes of it, and then Gunnar Raudi, unable to watch any longer, had picked it up, spat between his feet and shown me how to use it in a real fight.

'When you stand in a shieldwall, boy,' he said, 'forget all the fancy strokes. Hit their fucking feet. Cut the ankles from them. Stab them up and under the shield and the hem of their mail, right into their balls. It's the only bits you can see or reach anyway.'

And then he showed me how to use the hilt, my shield, my knees and elbows and teeth, while Gudleif and Bjarni stayed quiet and still.

It was then I saw they were afraid of Gunnar Raudi and learned later – from Halldis, of course – that Gunnar stayed at Bjornshafen because he had got both Bjarni and Gudleif back from a raid to Dyfflin that went badly wrong. Everyone thought them dead and then, two seasons later, in they sailed with a stolen ship, captured thralls and tales of Gunnar's daring. They owed him their lives and a berth for as long as he breathed.

‘I stole it from Gudleif,’ I told my father, ‘when it was clear he wanted me to die in the snow on the way to Freydis’s hov.’

He rubbed his beard and frowned, nodding. ‘Aye, so Gunnar said when he sent word.’

That had been the day Gunnar had cracked my world, a day that began with Gudleif sitting in his gifthrone with his ship prows on either side and himself swathed in furs, trying to be a great jarl and managing only to look like a bad-tempered cat.

Bjarni had died the previous year and Halldis the year before that. Now Gudleif complained of the cold and avoided going out much. He sat, hunched and glowering, with only old Caomh close to his elbow, the thrall who had come back as a slave from a Christ temple in Dyfflin.

Nearby, the equally old Helga shuttled a loom back and forth and grinned her two last teeth at me, while Gunnar Raudi, just visible in the smoking gloom, worked on a leather strap.

‘I am not up to the journey to the high pasture this year,’ Gudleif said to me. ‘The herd needs to be brought down and some essentials taken to Freydis.’

It was an early winter, the snow curling off Snaefel, the colour leached from the land by cold, so that there were only black tree skeletons on grey under a grey sky. Even the sea was slate.

‘It has already snowed,’ I reminded him. ‘It may be too deep to drive horses down now.’ I refrained from reminding him that I had spoken of this weeks before, when it might have been easier to do.

There was no sound save for the clack-shuff of the loom and the sputter of a fire whose wood was too damp. Halldis would not have made it so.

Gudleif stirred and said to me, ‘Perhaps. If so, you will over-winter there and bring them in spring. Freydis will have prepared.’

It was not an attractive proposition. Freydis was a strange one and, truth to tell, most people thought her a *volva*, a witch. I had never seen her, in all my fifteen years, though her hov was no more than a good day's walk up the lowest slopes. She tended Gudleif's best stallions and mares on the high pasture and was clever at it.

I thought of all this and the fact that, even if she had prepared well, there would not be enough fodder to keep the herd fed through the hard winter it promised to be. Or, perhaps, even the pair of us.

I said as much and Gudleif shrugged. I thought Gunnar Raudi was probably best to go and said that, too. Gudleif shrugged again and, when I looked at him, Gunnar Raudi was busy beside the hearthfire, too concerned with his strap of leather even to look up, it seemed to me.

So I prepared a pack and took the sturdiest of the ponies. I was considering what best to take Freydis when Gunnar Raudi came to the stable and there, in the warm, rustling twilight of it, tore everything apart with a simple phrase.

'He has sent for his sons.'

And there it was. Gudleif was dying. His sons, Bjorn and Steinkel, were coming back from their own fostering to claim their inheritance and I was . . . expendable. Perhaps he hoped I would die and solve all his problems.

Gunnar Raudi saw all that chase itself like cat and dog across my face. He said nothing for a while, still as a block of grindstone in the fetid dark. A horse whuffed and stamped; straw rustled and all I could think to say was: 'So that's where the *faering* went. I wondered.'

And Gunnar Raudi smiled a grim smile. 'No. He sent word by the next valley up. The *faering* is missing because I sent Krel and Big Nose to row it to Laugarsfel, there to send word to Rurik.'

I glanced at him anxiously. 'Does Gudleif know?'

He shook his head and shrugged. 'He knows nothing much

these days. Even if he finds out what can he do? Perhaps he might even have done it himself if it had been mentioned to him.’ In the dim, his face was all shadowed planes, unreadable. But he went on: ‘A trip through the snow isn’t so bad. Better than here when Rurik arrives.’

‘If you think so, you take the trip through the snow and I will stay here,’ I answered bitterly and expected his wry chuckle and a growl of a reply. Instead, to my surprise – of both of us, it seemed to me after – he laid a hand on my shoulder.

‘Best not, lad. What Rurik brings with him will be worse than a frozen nose.’

That was chilling and I had to ask. His eyes gleamed in the dark.

‘Einar the Black and his crew,’ he replied and the way he said it told me all I needed to know.

I laughed, but even to my own ears it was forced. ‘If he comes.’

I looked him in the face and he looked right back and both of us knew the truth of it. I was like the white bear: someone else’s property, unclaimed and in the way. My father might not get the news. Even if he did, he might not be bothered.

My father grunted at that part of the tale, as if he had been dug sharply in the ribs. But his glare made me ashamed I had said it.

I told him then that I felt no pang about taking Bjarni’s sword. Or the large amount of salt, or any of the other supplies I thought necessary. Fuck Bjornshafen. Fuck Gudleif and fuck both his sons.

My father grinned at that.

Taking Bjarni’s sword was the worst thing, for a sword then was a thing not to be taken lightly. It was expensive and, more than that, it was the mark of a warrior and a man of substance.

The Greeks in Constantinople – who call themselves

Romans, but speak no Latin – think all Northmen are Danes and that all Danes fight in mail and with swords. The truth is that most of us have only the seax, a kitchen knife the length of your forearm. With it, you can chop a chicken or gut a fish – or kill a man.

You get to be good with it, since mail is too expensive for most. Any good blow will kill you unless you avoid it and only if you must do you block it, so that the edge of your precious seax isn't notched away.

A sword, though, was a magical thing, a rich thing and the mark of a warrior, so not to be trifled with – but I took dead Bjarni's sword out of spite, right off the hook in the hall, while Gudleif grunted and farted and slept. In the morning I was gone early, before he noticed it was missing.

Bjarni would notice but I made my peace with him on my own and prayed to big, bluff Thor to intercede. Then I added a prayer to Odin, made wise by communing with the new-dead, who had hung nine nights on the World Tree for wisdom. And one to Jesus, the White Christ, who hung on a tree like Odin.

'That was deep thinking, right enough,' my father said when I told him this. 'You can never have too much holy help, even if this Christ-following lot are a strange breed, who say they will not fight yet still seem able to field warriors and sharp steel. As for the sword – well, Bjarni won't need it and Gudleif won't mind. Ask Einar for it. He will let you keep it after what you did.'

I stayed silent. How could I tell them what I had done? Pissed myself and run, leaving Freydis to die?

The first sight of those great bear pugs in the snow, maybe two weeks after I had struggled through to her hov, had set Freydis to barring doors and hunkering down. The night it came we had eaten broth and bread by the glimmer of the pitfire embers, listening to the creak of the beams and the rustle of straw from the stalls.

I lay down clutching Bjarni's sword. That, an old ash spear of her dead man's, the wood axe and Freydis's kitchen knives made the only weapons we had. I stared at the glowing embers, trying not to think of the bear, prowling, sniffing, circling.

I knew whose bear it was and, it seemed to me, it had come seeking revenge after all these years.

I woke to soft singing. Freydis sat, cross-legged and naked, the hearthfire glowing on her body, her face hidden by the long, unbound straggles of her streaked hair, one hand holding upright the ash spear. In front of her were . . . objects.

I saw a small animal skull, the teeth blood-red in the light, the eye-sockets blacker than night. There were carved things and a pouch and, over them all, Freydis hummed, a long, almost continuous drone that raised the hair on my arms.

I hung on to the sharkskin hilt of Bjarni's old sword while the dead crowded round, their eyes glittering in the dark holes of their heads, pale faces like mist.

Whether she called them for help, or called the bear, or tried to weave a shield against it, I don't know. All I know is that when the bear struck the wall, the hall boomed like a bell and I jumped up, half-naked, sword in hand.

I shook my head, scattering memories like water drops. A last, brief flash of the curving swipe of paw and her head, spinning, flailing blood to the rafters. Had there been a smile on it? An accusing look?

My father rightly guessed the memories, wrongly assumed I was mourning for the lost Freydis and clapped my shoulder again, giving it a slight squeeze and a half-smile. Then he walked me slowly to the hall across the sun-sparkled snow. The eaves were dripping with melting spires of ice.

Everything seemed the same, but the thralls avoided my eye, keeping their heads down. I saw Caomh down by the shore, standing by a pole with a ball on it – one of his strange White Christ totems, probably. Once a monk, always a monk,

he used to say. Just because he had been ripped from his cloister didn't make him less of a holy man for the Christ. I raised a hand in greeting but he never moved, though I knew he saw me.

Gudleif's hall was dim inside, misted with cold light from the smoke hole. The hearthfire crackled, breath coiled in wisps and the figures hunched on benches at the foot of the high seat turned to us as we came in.

I waited until my eyes had accustomed and then saw that someone else sat in Gudleif's high seat, someone with hair to his shoulders, dark as crow wings.

Black-eyed, black-moustached, he wore blue-checked breeks like the Irish and a kirtle of finest blue silk, hemmed in red. One hand leaned on the fat-pommel hilt of a sheathed sword, point at his feet. It was a fine sword, with a three-lobed heavy silver end to the hilt and lots of workings round the cross guard.

The other hand clasped a furred cloak around his throat. Gudleif's furred cloak, I noticed. And Gudleif's high seat – but not his ship prows. I saw them stacked to one side and the ones that flanked the high seat now were the proud heads of an antlered beast with flaring nostrils.

Hard men, my father's oarmates, who thought highly of him because he was their shipmaster and could read waves like other men did runes. Sixty of them had come to Bjornshafen because he had wished it, even though he did not lead this *varjazi*, this oathsworn band and their slim snakeship, the *Fjord Elk*.

Einar the Black led them, who now sat on Gudleif's high seat as if it were his own.

At his feet sat others, one of them Gunnar Raudi, hands on his knees, cloaked and very still, his faded red tangles fastened back from his face by a leather thong. He looked at me and said nothing, his eyes grey-blue and glassed as a summer sea.

The others I did not know, though I half recognised Geir, the great sack of purple-veined nose that gave him his nickname wobbling in his face as he told the tale of finding me half-frozen and slathered in blood, the headless woman nearby. Steinthor, who had been with him, nodded his shaggy head in agreement.

They were cheerful about it now but, at the time, had been afraid when they found the great white bear dead, a spear in its brain and Bjarni's sword rammed in its heart. As Steinthor happily admitted, to the grunts and chuckles of the others, he had shat himself.

There were two other strangers, one of them the biggest man I had ever seen: fat-bearded, fat-bellied, fat-voiced – fat everything. He wore a blue coat of heavy wool and the biggest seaboots I had ever seen, into which were tucked the baggiest breeks, striped blue and silver, that I had ever seen. There were ells of silk in those breeks.

He had a fur hat with a silver end, which chimed like a bell when he accidentally brushed it against the blade of the huge Dane axe that he held, rapping the haft on the hard-packed hall floor now and then and going 'hoom' deep in his throat when Geir managed a better-than-usual kenning in his story.

The other was languid and slim, leaning back against one of the roof poles, stroking his snake moustaches, which were all the fashion then. He looked at me as Gudleif looked at a new horse, weighing it up, seeing how it moved.

But no Gudleif, just this crow-dark stranger in his chair.

'I am Einar the Black. Welcome, Orm Ruriksson.'

He said it as if the hall belonged to him, as if the high seat was his.

'I have to say,' he went on, leaning forward slightly and turning the sword slowly on its rounded point as he did so, 'that things turned out more interesting and profitable than when Rurik came to me with this request to sail here. I had

other plans . . . but when your shipmaster speaks, a wise man listens.’

Beside me, my father inclined his head slightly and grinned. Einar grinned in return and leaned back.

‘Where is Gudleif?’ I asked. There was silence. Einar looked at my father. I saw it and turned to look at him, too.

My father shrugged awkwardly. ‘The tale I heard was that he had sent you into the mountain snows to die. And there was the matter of the bear, which had not been settled—’

‘Gudleif’s dead, boy,’ Einar interrupted. ‘His head is on a spear on the strand, so that his sons will see it when they finally arrive and know that bloodprice has been taken.’

‘For what?’ growled the large man, turning his axe so that the blade flashed in the dim light. ‘It was done when we thought Rurik’s boy was killed.’

‘For the bear, Skapti Halftroll,’ said Einar quietly. ‘That was an expensive bear.’

‘Was it Gudleif who killed it, then?’ asked the slim one, stroking his moustaches slowly and yawning. ‘I am thinking I have just been listening to Geir Bagnose recount the saga of Orm Ruriksson, the White-bear Slayer.’

‘Was he then to weigh the cost when it came at him in the dark?’ growled my father. ‘I can see you count it up, Ketil Crow – but by the time you got your boots off to use your toes, it would have been your head split from your body, for sure.’

Ketil Crow chuckled and acknowledged the point with the wave of one hand. ‘Aye, just so. I cannot count, that is true enough. But I know how many beans make five, just the same.’

‘Of course,’ said Einar, smoothly ignoring all this, ‘there is the woman, Freydis, who was killed. No thrall, that one. Freeborn and there’s a price to be paid for that, since her death came because Gudleif let the bear go in the first place. Anyway, the bear was mine and worth a lot.’

My father said nothing about whose bear it was. I said nothing at all, since I had just realised that the pole with the ball Caomh had been standing near was a spear with Gudleif's head on it.

Einar shifted again and drew the cloak tighter around him, his breath smoking in the cold hall as he declared, 'In the end, you can argue in circles about whose fault it was – from Rurik bringing the bear here, to Gudleif letting it escape. And then there is why he sent the boy late into the mountain snow to that lonely hall. Perhaps he and the bear were in this together.'

It was half in jest, but Skapti and Ketil both warded off the evil with some swift signs and grasped the iron Thor's hammers hung round their necks. I realised, even then, that Einar knew his men well.

I said nothing, rushed with a fluttering of memories, like bats spilling from a hole in the ground.

After the bear had slammed into the wall, there was silence, though I swear I heard it huffing through the snow, paws crunching. Freydis droned. The two milk cows bellowed their fear and the bear answered, drove the animals mad and chilled me so much I found myself sitting on the floor, the lantern at my feet, my breath caught, my mouth glued with dryness.

'So Gunnar Rognaldsson, will you tell all this freely to Gudleif's sons when they come? Or, perhaps, you would like to come with us? We need good men.'

I shook back to the Now of it, but it took me a moment to realise that Einar was speaking to Gunnar Raudi. I had never heard his real name – he was always just Red Gunnar to us.

And in a dangerous position, I realised. Gudleif's man and a vicious and deadly fighter, he had been left alive so far because he had been the one to send word to my father about me.

Yet it was clear he and Einar knew each other – and that

Einar didn't trust Gunnar and Gunnar knew it. I saw that Einar would not want Gunnar left to advise Gudleif's sons. Without him they would think twice about revenge.

Gunnar shrugged and scrubbed his grey-streaked head, as if considering – but the truth was that he had no choice. 'I had thought to berth here for good at my age,' he growled ruefully, 'but the Norns weave and we can only wear what they make. I will come with you, Einar. Coldward and stormward, eh?'

They grinned at each other, but it was the smile of wolves circling.

'And you, Bear Slayer?' Einar said, turning to me. 'Will you join your father on the *Fjord Elk*? I strongly advise you to do so.'

He didn't have to say more. Gudleif's sons would revenge themselves on me if I stayed, for sure, and there was nothing for me here.

I nodded. He nodded. My father beamed. Skapti called for ale.

And so it was done. I joined the Oathsworn – but there was more to taking the blood-oath than a nod and a wink, though I only learned that later.

I ate in Gudleif's hall for the last time that night. The partition hangings were ripped down (with some contempt, it seemed to me) to make room for all the Oathsworn to come in. It is the mark of a raiding jarl to have a whole hall and those who partitioned it were admitting they'd given up needing the men for raids and therefore the room for them. The Oathsworn held to the old ways and hated a hall with hangings.

We ate round the pitfire, me huddled and listening to the thunder of the wind on the beams. The fire flattened and flared as stray blasts hissed down the smoke hole and through the hall, while these growlers who had taken over Bjornshafen, just like that, fished mutton from the pot,

blowing on their fingers and talking about such strange things and places as I'd never heard of before.

They drank, too, great amounts of ale, the foam spilling down their beards while they joked and made riddles. Steinthor, it was clear, fancied himself as a skald and made verses on the bear-slaying, while the others thumped benches or threw insults, depending on how good his kennings were.

And they raised horns to me, Orm the Bear Slayer, with my father, new-found and grinning with pride as if he had won a fine horse, leading the praise-toasts. But I saw that Gunnar Raudi was hunched and quiet on his ale bench, watching.

That night, as the men fell to talking quiet and lazy as smoke drifting from the hearthfire, I fell asleep and dreamed of the white bear and how it had circled the walls and then fallen silent.

I turned to say to Freydis that her walls were well built; I was sure that we had weathered it, that the bear was gone. I was smiling when the roof caved in. The turf roof. Two massive paws swiped and the earth and snow tumbled in and then, with a crash like Thor's thrown hammer, the bear followed: an avalanche of white; a great rumbling roar of triumph.

Numbed, I pissed myself then and there. The bear landed in a heap, shook itself like a dog, scattering earth and snow and clods, and then got on all fours.

It was a cliff of fur, a rank, wet-smelling shriek of a thing that swung a snake neck with a horror of a head this way and that, one eye red in the firelight, the other an old, black socket. On that same side, the lips had been straked off, leaving the yellow tusk teeth exposed in a grim grin. The drool of its hunger spilled, thick and viscous.

It saw us; smelled the ponies, didn't know which to go for first. That was when I ran for it and so decided the skein of all our lives.

The white bear whirled at my movement – the speed of it, and it so huge! It saw me at the door, scrabbling for the bar. I heard it – felt it – roar with the fetid breath of a dragon; I frantically tore the bar off and dragged the door open.

I heard it crash, half-turned to look over my shoulder as I scrambled out. It had risen on hind legs and lumbered forward. Too tall for the roof, its great head had smacked a joist – cracked it – and tumbled it down into the fire.

I swear I saw it glare its one eye at me as it shrieked; I also saw Freydis calmly stand, pick up the old spear and ram it at the beast's ravening mouth. Not good enough. Not nearly a good enough spell, after all. The spear smashed teeth on the already ruined side, snapped off and left the head and part of the haft inside.

The bear lashed out, one casual swipe that sent Freydis flying backwards in a spray of blood and bone. I saw her head part company from her body.

I ran stumbling through the snow. I ran like a nothing thrall. If there had been a baby in my way I would have tossed it over one shoulder, hoping to tempt the beast into a snack and giving me more time to get away . . .

I woke in Gudleif's hall, to a sour-milk smear of a morning and the sick shame of remembering, but everyone was too busy to notice, for we were leaving Bjornshafen.

Leaving my only home and never returning, I realised. Leaving with a shipload of complete strangers, hard men for the sailing and raiding and, worse yet, a father I hardly knew. A father who had, at the very least, watched his brother's head part company from the rest of him and not even shrugged over it.

I could not breathe for the terror of it. Bjornshafen was where I had learned what every child learns: the wind, the wave and war. I had run the meadows and the hayfields, stolen gulls' eggs from the black cliffs, sailed the little faering and crewed the hafskip with Bjarni and Gunnar Raudi and others.

I had even gone down to Skiringssal once, the year Bluetooth buried his father Old Gorm and became King of the Danes.

I knew the place, from the skerry offshore where the surf creamed on black rocks, to the screaming laughter of the terns. I fell asleep at night rocked in the creaking beams as the wind shuddered the turf of the roof, and felt warm and safe as the fire danced the shadows of the looms like huge spiders' webs.

Here Caomh had taught me to read Latin because no one knew runes well enough – when I could be pinned down to follow his hen-scratching in the sand. Here was where I had learned of horses, since Gudleif made his name breeding fighting stallions.

And all that was changed in an eyeblink.

Einar took some barrels of meat and meal and ale, as part of the 'bloodprice' for the bear, then left instructions to bury Freydis and drag the bear corpse in and flay the pelt from it. Gudleif's sons could keep that and the skull and teeth, all valuable trade items, worth more than the barrels taken.

Whether it was worth their father was another matter, I thought, gathering what little I had: a purse, an eating knife, an iron cloak brooch, my clothes and a linen cloak. And Bjarni's sword. I had forgotten to ask about it, it had never been mentioned, so I just kept it.

The sea was grey slate, capped white. Picking through the knots of dulse and rippled, snow-scattered sand, the Oathsworn humped their sea-chests down to the *Fjord Elk*, plunging into the icy sea with whoops, boots round their necks. White clouds in a clear blue sky and a sun like a brass orb; even the weather tried to hold me to the place.

Behind me, Helga scraped sheepskins to soften them, watching, for life went on, it seemed, even though Gudleif was dead. Caomh, too, watched, waiting by Gudleif's head – until we were safely over the horizon, I was thinking, and he could give it a White Christ burial.

I said as much to Gunnar Raudi as he passed me by and he grunted, ‘Gudleif won’t thank him for it. Gudleif belonged to Odin, pate to heel, all his life.’

He turned back to me then, bowed under the weight of his own sea-chest and looked at me from under his red brows. ‘Watch Einar, boy. He believes you are touched by the gods. This white bear, he thinks, was sent by Odin.’

It was something that I had thought myself and said so.

Gunnar chuckled. ‘Not for you, boy. For Einar. He believes it was all done to bring him here, bring him to you, that you have something to do with his saga.’ He hefted the chest more comfortably on his shoulder. ‘Learn, but don’t trust him. Or any of them.’

‘Not even my father? Or you?’ I answered, half-mocking.

He looked at me with his summer-sea eyes. ‘You can always trust your father, boy.’

And he splashed on to the *Fjord Elk*, hailing those on board to help haul his sea-chest up, his hair flying, streaked grey-white and red like bracken in snow. As I stood under the great straked serpent side of the ship, it loomed, large as my life and just as glowering. I felt . . . everything.

Excited and afraid, cold and burning feverishly. Was this what it meant to be a man, this . . . uncertainty?

‘Move yerself, boy – or be left with the gulls.’

I caught my father’s face scowling over the side, then it was gone and Geir Bagnose leaned over, chuckling, to help me up with my rough pack, lashed with my only spare belt. ‘Welcome to the *Fjord Elk*,’ he laughed.

TWO

The voyages of the Northmen are legendary, I know. Even the sailors of the Great City, Constantinople, with their many-banked ships and engines that throw Greek Fire, stand in awe of them. Hardly surprising, since those Greeks never lose sight of land and those impressively huge vessels they have will go keel over mast in anything rougher than a mild chop.

We, on the other hand, travel the whale road, where the sea is black or glass-green and can rear over you like a fighting stallion, all roar and threat and creaming mane, to come crashing down like a cliff. No bird flies here. Land is a memory.

That's what we boast of, at least. The truth is always different, like a Greek Christ ikon veiled on feast days. But if anyone boasts of spitting in Thor's eye, standing in the prow, roaring defiance at the waves and laughing the while, you will know him for the liar he is.

A long journey is always being wet to the skin and the wind bites harder as a result and your clothes are heavy as mail and chafe you until you have sores where the cloth rubs on wrist and neck.

It's huddled in the dark, bundled in a wet cloak, feeling