

NOVGOROD, Winter, 972 A.D.

On a crisp day with a grey sky and only a blinding white smear to show where the sun lurked, the prince's executioners cut a good pine pole slightly taller than the height of a man, thin at one end, thick at the other.

The thin end they sharpened and greased, then they took the legs of the face-down woman and roped them by the ankles, pulling them wide apart. A man took a saddle-cloth, placed it on her back then sat on it to keep her still, while another bound each of her wrists with leather thongs, then tied them to two stakes, also wide apart. She screamed blood on to her teeth.

'On this day, in the eighth year of the lordship of Prince Vladimir,' intoned the crier, 'this Metcherak woman was found guilty . . . ' and so on and so on.

'Danica,' muttered Thordis, soft enough so only we heard it. 'Her name is Danica.'

Morning Star, it meant in the tongue of her Slav tribe. There would be no more morning stars for her. The stake was driven up into her while the executioners ignored her shrieks but made sure her white buttocks were decently covered as they hammered and pushed, to preserve her dignity from the

droolers in the crowd. The white shift she wore was soon clinging provocatively to her all the same, soaked with her blood.

Impalement is not simple savagery; there is art to it and Vladimir's executioners knew their work.

The sharpened stake was pushed, slowly and with skill up the woman's body. It was, in a Loki joke, a healer's art they used, for they knew how to avoid all the serious soft organs, the lungs and the heart and liver, despite her jerks and screams. There were frequent stops for adjustment, brief panting instructions and advice, one expert to another, as obscenely intimate as if they were all lovers. They stopped only once, to scatter wood shavings on the bloody snow and prevent them slipping in the slush of it.

One slash with a knife helped the point of the stake out through the skin of the upper back on the right side of the spine, proving that the stake had missed her heart; the crowd roared and the dignified, well-dressed worthies of Novgorod's *veche* nodded their beards in approval as Danica was skewered like an ox on a spit. Still alive, as was proper.

They unroped her, then re-tied her legs together to the foot of the stake to avoid slippage when they raised it – gently, so as not to jolt the body – into a hole, which they packed with earth. It began to feather with new snow as the pole was then strutted with supports – and that was that, everything done according to the law and the rights of the *veche*.

Her bound feet offered no support and slowly, agonizingly, her own body-weight dragged her down the pole. It would take three days for the moaning, bleeding woman to die, while the snow turned crimson at her feet.

There was skill there and much to be admired in it as a statement of justice that made even the hardest balk at committing crimes in a city whose people called it Lord Novgorod the Great.

All the same, it was difficult to appreciate the full merit of this justice, since I was next in the queue – but I wondered

if it was possible to find a price that would make the rulers of Novgorod keep that stake from my own puckering hole.

Would a burial mound with all the silver of the world be enough?

ONE

HESTRENG, Ostergotland, early autumn, 972AD

The day before we were due to bring the horses down, it rained. I stuck my head out the door and, from the way the wind drove it, hissing like snakes from the sea, I knew it would rain for days.

Inside, Thorgunna fed the fire, stirring a cauldron already on it. Elfin-faced and breasted like a fine ship, that was Thorgunna. Dark haired and, as Kvasir put it ‘a prow-built woman’, she had a way of arching an eyebrow and staring at you with eyes black as old sheep droppings that made most of us wither. Everyone had marvelled at Kvasir marrying her – as Finn said, drunk at the wedding: ‘Too long at sea. What does the like of Kvasir Spittle want with a wife? Six months wintering with one of those and you will be begging to be back behind the prow beast.’

Beside her, Ingrid chopped kale, as blonde and slim as Thorgunna was not, her braids bobbing as she shot what she thought were sly looks for Botolf. She was already pupped by him and promised in public.

From Gunnarsgard, the next toft over, Thorgunna was sister to Thordis, who had married Tor Iron-Hand. The sisters had half-shares in Gunnarsgard – an unnatural way to treat a

good steading, which should always go to the eldest – and their cousin, Ingrid, lived with them.

Tor had had a good life of it, some said, with three women under his roof. Those who knew better pointed out how that meant three times the trouble. He had wanted to marry Thorgunna as well and so gain the other half of the steading until Kvasir spoke up and brought her to Hestreng, with Ingrid in tow, not long after fetching up here with the rest of us.

‘What does it look like out there?’ Thorgunna asked me.

‘The yard’s a lake,’ I reported, hunkering down by the fire. ‘Throw something special in that pot – everyone will need cheering.’

She snorted. ‘No doubt. And no work done for it on a day like this.’

Which was unfair, for there was always work, even indoors. There were two looms that had never been still for weeks as a brace of thrall women wove the panels of *wadmál* into a striped sail for the Elk. Everyone had sewing, or binding, or leather, or wood to work, even the children.

Still, they circled big Botolf in the pewter dark, demanding stories. There were three older ones, all boys and bairned on the thrall women by the previous owners and two new babes by my own Oathsworn – and one cuckoo from Jarl Brand. The hall rang with the sound of them as the men straggled in for their day meal, grey shapes in a grey day, blowing rain off their noses and shaking out cloaks.

I moved to the high seat, where I wouldn’t be bothered, while the hall filled with chatter and the smell of wet wool. The Irisher thrall woman, Aoife, was trying to put her son’s chubby arms in a wool tunic and he kept throwing it off again. In the end, she managed it, just as Thorgunna smacked her shoulder and told her to fetch mussels from the store. She left, throwing anxious glances at her boy – Cormac, she called him – crawled towards the deerhounds in the corner.

I sat, hunched in wool and brooding like a black dog, the

rune sword curving down from my hands to the earth floor while I stared at the hilt of it and the scratches on it. I had made them, with Short Eldgrim's help, as we staggered back from Attila's howe and the great hoard of silver hidden there; for all I was not good with runes, they were enough for me to find my way back to that secret place.

The deaths and the horror there had resolved me never to go back, yet I had made these marks, as if planning to do just that. Odin's hand, for sure.

I had thrashed and wriggled on the hook of that and found good reason and salted it with plunder to keep the Oathsworn from forcing me back to Atil's howe. Even so, I had always known I would have to lead Kvasir and the others to that cursed place – or give Kvasir the secret of it and let him go alone. I could not do that, either, for we were Oathsworn and my fear of breaking that vow was almost as great as facing the dark of the howe again.

That oath.

We swear to be brothers to each other, bone, blood and steel, on Gungnir, Odin's spear we swear, may he curse us to the Nine Realms and beyond if we break this faith, one to another.

It bound us in chains of god-fear, drove us coldwards and stormwards, goaded us to acts that skalds would sing of – and others best hidden under a stone in the night for the shame of it. Yet, when we stood with our backs to each other and facing all those who were not us, we knew each shoulder that rubbed our own belonged to a man who would die rather than step away from your side.

It lifted me from nothing boy to the high seat of my own hall – yet even the seat itself had not been my own, taken as spoil from the last gasp of fighting for Jarl Brand and the new king, Eirik. I lifted it from the hall of Ivar Weatherhat, whose headwear was reputed to raise storms and he should have waved it at us as we rowed into his bay, for by the time

we sailed off on a calm sea, he was burned out and emptied of everything, even his chair.

After that raid, we had all sailed here. Hard men, raiding men, here to this hall which reeked of wet wool and dogs, loud with children and nagging women. I had spent all the time since trying to make those hard, raiding men fit in it and had thought I was succeeding, so much so that I had decided on a stone for us, to root us all here like trees.

There are only a handful of master rune-carvers in the whole world who can cut the warp and weft of a man's life into stone so perfectly that those who come after can read it for a thousand years. We want everyone to know how bravely we struggled, how passionately we loved. Anyone who can magic that up is given the best place at a bench in any hall.

The stone for the Oathsworn would be skeined with serpent runes, tip-tapped out with a tool delicate as a bird's beak by the runemaster Klepp Spaki, who says he learned from a man who learned from a man who learned from Varinn. The same Varinn who carved out the fame of his lost son and did it so well that the steading nearby was called Rauk – Stone – ever after.

The first time I ran my fingers down the snake-knot grooves of the one Klepp made for us they were fresh-cut, still gitted and uncoloured. I came to rune-reading late and never mastered the Odin-magic of its numbers, the secret of its form – or even where to start, unless it was pointed out to me.

You read with your fingers as much as your eyes. It is supposed to be difficult – after all, the very word means 'whisper' and Odin himself had to hang nine nights on the World Tree and stab himself with his own spear to uncover the mystery.

Klepp runed the Oathsworn stone with my life as part of it and I know that well enough, even as age and weather smooth the stone and line me. I could, for instance, find and trace the gallop of the horse called Hrafn, bought from a dealer called Bardi the Fat.

He was black that horse, with not one white hair on him and his name – Raven – sat on him easier than any rider ever would. He was not for riding. He was for fucking and fighting. He was for making dynasties and turning the Oathsworn from raiders to breeders of fine fighting horses on the pastures Jarl Brand of Oestergotland had given us in the land of the Swears and Geats, which was being crafted into Greater Sweden by Eirik Victorious.

Hrafn. I should have been warned by the very name of the beast, but I was trying too hard to live in peace on this prime land, trying too hard not to lead the Oathsworn back into the lands of the east chasing a cursed hoard of silver. So a horse called Raven was a good omen, I thought.

As was the name of our steading: Hestreng, Meadow of Stallions. Rolling gently along the edge of one of the better inlets, it was good land, with good hayfields and better grazing.

Yet it stood on the edge of Austrvegrfjord, the East Way Fjord. It was called that not because of where it lay, but because it was the waterway all the ships left to go raiding and trading eastwards into the Baltic.

The Oathsworn, for all they tried to ignore it, felt the whale road call of that fjord every waking day, stood on the shingle with the water lapping their boots and their hair blowing round their faces as they watched the sails vanish to where they wanted to go. They knew where all the silver of the world lay buried and no norther who went on the vik could ignore the bright call of that. Not even me.

I watched the women bustle round the fire, thought of the stone that would root itself and hoped I had settled them all to steading life – but all they were doing was waiting for the new *Elk* to be built.

I had that made clear to me one day when Kvasir and I went up to the valley where our horses pastured out their summer and he kept looking over his shoulder at the sea. Because he only had the one eye, he had to squirm round on

the little mare he rode to stare back at the fringe of trees, all wind-bowed towards him as if they offered homage, and so I noticed it more.

You could not see the hayfields or grassland beyond, or the ridge beyond that, which offered shelter to fields and steading from the slate grey sea and the hissing wind. But you could taste the sea, the salt of it, rich on the tongue and when Kvasir faced front again and saw me looking, he tilted a wry head and rubbed under the patch at the old ruin of his dead eye.

‘Well,’ he gruffed. ‘I like the sea.’

‘You have a woman now,’ I pointed out. ‘Learn to like the land.’

‘She will, I am thinking, perhaps have to learn to like the sea,’ he growled and then scowled at my laugh . . . before he joined in. Thorgunna was not one who perhaps had to learn anything unless she wanted to.

We had ridden in broody silence after that, into that valley with the hills marching on either side, rising into thick green forests, shouldering them aside and offering their bare, grey heads to the sky and the snow. It was a green jewel, perfect summer pasture that never got too dry. The hills at the end of it sloped up into pine and fir; fog roofed the tall peaks.

There was a hut in this snake-slither of a valley, almost unseen save by a thread of smoke, where Kalk and his son, the horse-herders, lived all summer. As we came up, Kalk appeared, wearing what thralls always wore – a *kjafal*, which had a hood at the top, was open on the sides, had no sleeves and fastened between the legs with a loop and a bone toggle. It was all he ever wore, summer or winter, save for some battered ox-hide shoes when the snow was bad.

He greeted us both with a nod of his cropped head and waited, rubbing the grizzled tangle of his chin while we sat our ponies.

‘Where is the boy?’ I asked and he cleared his throat a little, thought to spit and remembered that this was his jarl. It was, I was thinking, hard for him to believe that such a youngster was his master and that came as little surprise to me; I needed no brass reflection or fancy-glass to know what I looked like.

Thin faced, crop-bearded, blue eyed, hair the colour of autumn bracken braided several times and fastened back, reaching down to shoulders that had too much muscle on them for a youth with barely twenty-one years on him.

These shoulders and a breadth of chest told tales of oar and sword work. Even without the telltale scars on the knuckles that spoke of shield and blade, you could see this youth was a hard man.

Rich, too and travelled, with a necklet of silver coins from Serkland, punched and threaded on a thong and finished off with a fine silver Odin charm – the three locked triangles of the *valknut*, which was a dangerous sign. Those who wore it had a tendency to end up dead at the whim of the One-Eyed God.

There was a fine sword and several good arm rings of silver, too. And the great braided rope of a silver torc, the runeserpent mark of a jarl, the dragon-headed ends snarling at each other on the chest of a coloured tunic.

I knew well enough what I looked like, what that made Kalk think and took it as my due when he dropped his eyes and swallowed his spit and came up grinning and bobbing and eager to please.

Jarl Brand’s return, complete with mailed men with hard eyes, had sent more than a few scurrying off his lands and the farms they left behind made fat prizes for chosen men like me. For the likes of Kalk and his son, the change made little difference – thralls were chattels, whoever sat in the high seat of the steading.

He told us it was time to bring the horses down from the

high pasture, that one had a split hoof and of how Tor Ironhand was still turning his own mares loose in the valley, which he considered his own.

We said we would be back the next day and then rode back to the hall, towing the limping colt behind us.

‘Is this Tor’s valley, do you think?’ Kvasir asked eventually.

I shrugged. ‘I hope not. Thorgunna says it belongs to her, as her share of the stading. I use it because I am your jarl and the pair of you live under my roof – but both you and she can tell me to get out of it if you choose. Why do you ask?’

Kvasir hawked and spat and shook his head. ‘Seems as if you would know a thing like that. Owning a whole valley, like a pair of boots, or a seax.’

‘What? Should the land roll over and ask you to tickle its grass belly when you ride over it? Offer you a grin of rocks and congratulate you for being its owner?’

Kvasir grunted moodily and we rode in silence again, slowly so that the lamed grey could limp comfortably. We did not speak again that day, though I felt the brooding of him on me like an itch I could not scratch.

The next day he moved to my side, squatting by the high seat as I watched Aoife’s Cormac put his fat little arms round the neck of one of the deerhounds, which licked his face until he laughed. He was so pale-headed he might have been bairned on Aoife by the white-haired Jarl Brand himself, which we suspected, since he had been given that comfort as an honoured guest. No-one knew, least of all Aoife for, as she said, ‘It was dark and he had mead.’

Which did not narrow the search much, as we all admitted when we tried to work out who the father was.

‘What will you do about Thorkel?’ Kvasir asked eventually and I shrugged, mainly because I didn’t know. Thorkel was another problem I hoped would just go away.

He had arrived on Hoskuld’s trading *knarr*, which carried

bolts of cloth and fine threads and needles that set all the women to yowling with delight. Stepping off the boat, pushing through the women, he had stared at me with his sea-grey eyes and grinned a rueful grin.

I had last seen his grin on a beach in that bit of Bretland the Scots called the Kingdom of Strathclyde. That was where he had stepped aside and let me into the Oathsworn without having to fight, having arranged it all beforehand. I had been fifteen and raw as a saddle-sore, but Einar the Black, who led us then, had gone along with the deception with good grace and jarl cunning.

Thorkel had gone to be with a woman in Dyfflin. Now he sat in my hall drinking ale and telling everyone how he had failed at farming, how the woman had died and how he had failed at selling leather and a few other things besides.

He sat in my hall, having heard that the story of the hoard of Atil silver was true, the tale he had scoffed at and the reason he had wanted to leave the Oathsworn in the first place.

‘We should call you Lucky,’ Finn grunted, hearing all this. Thorkel laughed, too hearty and trying to be polite, for what he wanted was back into the Oathsworn and a chance at the mound of treasure he had so easily dismissed.

‘Ever since he came back,’ Kvasir mused pitching straw chips into the pitfire, ‘all our men have been leaning to the left a little more.’

I did not understand him and said so.

‘As if they had axes or swords weighing their belts,’ he answered flatly. He shifted sideways to allow a deerhound to put its chin on my knee and gaze mournfully up at me.

‘Eventually, a man has to choose,’ he went on. ‘We came up the Rus rivers of Gardariki with Jarl Brand almost five years ago, Orm. Five.’

‘We agreed to serve him every year,’ I pointed out, feeling – as I always did when I fought this battle – that the earth

was shifting under my feet. ‘I am remembering that you, like the rest, enjoyed the pay from it.’

‘Aye,’ Kvasir admitted. ‘The first year and the next were good for us, though we lost as much as we gained, for so it is with men such as we – it comes hard and goes easy. Those were the times we thought you had a plan to get us outfitted and so return to the Grass Sea to find Atil’s silver tomb again. Then you took land from the jarl.’

‘We had no ship of our own until we built one,’ I protested, feeling my cheeks and the back of my neck start to prickle and flame at the lie of it. ‘We need a . . .’ The word ‘home’ leaped up in me, but I could not say it to these, whose home was the shifting sea.

‘Anyway,’ I ploughed on stubbornly, ‘while there was red war we were welcome in any hov that esteemed Jarl Brand; when red war is done with, no-one cares for the likes of us. Why – there are probably not two halls along the whole coast-line here glad to see a boatload of hard men like us sail into their happy lives. Would you prefer sleeping in the snow? Eating sheep shite?’

‘The third year of war was hard,’ admitted Kvasir, ‘and made a man think on it, so that we were glad, then, of a hall of our own.’

That third year of red war against the enemies of Jarl Brand had spilled a lot of blood, right enough, but I had not known the likes of Kvasir had thoughts such as he admitted to now. I gave him a sharp look, but he matched me, even with one eye less.

‘Last year made it clear you were finding reasons not to go where we all thought you should,’ he declared. ‘And while we spent, you hoarded, which we all thought strange in a young jarl such as yourself.’

‘Because you spent I hoarded,’ I replied hotly. ‘A jarl gives and armrings are expensive.’

‘Aye, right enough,’ replied Kvasir, ‘and you are a byword

for the giving out, for sure. But this year, when Eirik became *rig-jarl* of all, you had to be made to start the *Elk* building and thought more of trade and horses.'

'A ship like the *Elk* costs money,' I bridled back at him. 'Good crewmen need purse-money and keep – or had you planned to go silver-hunting with what remains of the Oathsworn only? There are a dozen left in all the world and two of them are in Hedeby, one caring for the addled other. Hardly enough to crew a *knarr*, never mind go raiding.'

Kvasir rode out the storm of my scorn, then thumbed snot from his nose and shrugged. He took to looking at me with some sadness, I was thinking, which did not make my temper any cooler.

'You have tried to make those left into herders of neet and horses, with a hayfield to plough and a scatter of hens scratching at the door,' he growled.

'Shows what you know,' I snapped back, sulky as a child, digging the point of the sabre into the beaten earth at my feet and gouging out a hole. 'We coop our hens – had you not noticed?'

He wiped his fingers on his breeks.

'No. Nor want to, when it comes to it,' he replied levelly. 'I am thinking none of the others know much about hens, or hay, or horses either. They know ships, though – that's why all of them are cutting and hauling timber for Gizur every day, building the new *Fjord Elk*. That's why they stay – and I would not be concerned at gaining a crew, Orm; Thorkel, I am thinking, is only the first to arrive looking for a place at an oar. Even after five years the silver in that hoard is bright.'

'You have a wife,' I pointed out, desperate now, for he was right and I knew it. 'I was thinking you meant it when you hand-fasted to her – is she as easy to leave as the chickens?'

Kvasir made a wry face. 'As I said – she will have to learn to like the sea.'

I was astonished. Was he telling me he would take her with us, all the way to the lands of the Slavs and the wild empty of the Grass Sea?

‘Just so,’ he answered and that left me speechless and numbed. If he was so determined, then I had failed – the tap-tap of the adze and axes drifting faintly from the shore was almost a mockery. It was nearly done, this new *Fjord Elk*, the latest in a long line. When it was finished . . .

‘When it is finished,’ Kvasir said, as if reading my thoughts, ‘you will have to decide, Orm. The oath keeps us patient – well, all but Finn – but it won’t keep us that way forever. You will have to decide.’

I was spared the need to reply as the door was flung wide and Gizur trooped in with Onund Hnufa, followed by Finn and Runolf Harelip. Botolf and Ingrid had moved to each other, murmuring softly.

‘If you plane the front strakes any thinner,’ Gizur was saying to Onund, who was shipwrighting the *Elk*, ‘it will leak like a sieve.’

The hunchbacked Onund climbed out of the great sealskin coat that made him look like a sea-monster and said nothing, for he was a tight-lipped Icelander at the best of times and especially when it came to explaining what he was doing with ship wood. He sat silently, his hump-shoulder towering over one ear like a mountain.

They all jostled, looking for places to hang cloaks so that they would not drip on someone else and yet be close enough to the fire to dry. The door banged open again, bringing in a blast of cold, wet air and Red Njal, stamping mud off his boots and suffering withering scorn for it from Thorgunna.

‘The worst of wounds come from a woman’s lips, as my granny used to say,’ he growled, shouldering into her black look.

Ingrid unlocked herself from Botolf to slam it shut. Botolf, grinning, stumped to the fire and sat, while the children

swarmed him, demanding stories and he protesting feebly, swamped by them.

‘I would give in,’ Red Njal said cheerfully. ‘Little wolves can bring down the biggest bear, as my granny used to say.’

‘Pretty scene,’ growled a voice in my ear. Finn hunkered down at my elbow in the smoke-pearled dimness of the hall. ‘As like what you see in a still fjord on a sunny day, eh, Orm? All that seems real, written on water.’

I glanced from him to Kvasir and back. Like twin prows on either side of my high seat, I thought blackly. Like ravens on my shoulders. I stared, unseeing, at the hilt of the sabre as I turned it in my fingers, the point cutting the hole at my feet even deeper.

Finn stroked the head of the blissful deerhound and kept looking at this pretty scene, so that I saw only part of his face, red-gleamed by the fire. His beard, I saw, threw back some silver lights in the tar-black of it; where his left ear should have been was only a puckered red scar. He had lost it in Serkland, on that gods-cursed mountain where we had fought our own, those who had broken their Oath and worse.

There were few left of those I had sailed off with from Bjornshafen six years ago. As I had said to Kvasir – hardly enough to crew a *knarr*.

‘Keep looking,’ I said sourly to Finn. ‘Raise your hopes and eyes a little – written on water below, real enough above.’

‘Real as dreams, Orm,’ he said, waving a hand to the throng round the pitfire. ‘You are over-young to be looking for a hearthfire and partitioning a hall. Anyway – I know how much you had and how much you have laid out and your purse is wind-thin now, I am thinking. This dream feeds on silver.’

‘Perhaps – but this steading will make all our fortunes in the end if you let it. And the silver itch is not on me,’ I answered, annoyed at this reference to my dwindling fortunes and to dividing my hall up into private places, rather than an open feasting space for raiding men.

He looked at me at last, his eyes all white in the dark of his face, refusing to be put aside. I saw that look and knew it well; Finn only had one way of wresting silver from the world and he measured it by looking down the length of a blade. In that he was not alone – truth was that I was the one out of step with the Oathsworn.

‘But the sea itch is on you. I have seen you look out at it, same as the rest of us,’ he answered and I was growing irritated by this now. The closer the new *Elk* got to being finished the worse it became and I did not want to think of the sea at all and said so.

‘Afraid, Bear Slayer?’ Finn said and there was more taunt in it than I think even he had intended. Or perhaps that was my own shame, for the name Bear Slayer had come to me falsely, for something I had not done. No-one knew that, though, save the white bear and a witch-woman called Freydis and they were both dead.

I was afraid, all the same. Afraid of the sea, of the tug of it, like an ebbing tide. There was a longing that came on me when I heard the break of waves on the shoreline, sharp and pulling as a drunk to an ale barrel. Once on the whale road again, I feared I would never come back. I told him so and he nodded, as if he had known that all along.

‘That’s the call of the prow beast. There’s too much Gunnar Raudi in you for sitting here, scratching with hens,’ he said. He was one of the two – the other was Kvasir – who knew I was not Orm Ruriksson, but Orm Gunnarsson. Gunnar. My true father, dead and cold these long years.

Finn’s stare ground out my eyeballs, then he flicked it to the hilt of that rune blade as I turned it slowly.

‘Strange how you can scratch into the hilt, yet that rune serpent spell is supposed to keep it and you safe from harm,’ he murmured.

His voice was low and scathing, for he did not believe that my health and lack of wounds came from any runes on a

sword and both he and Kvasir – the only ones I had shared this thought with – spent long hours trying to persuade me otherwise.

‘The spell is on the blade,’ I answered, having thought this through myself, long since. Hilts and trappings could be replaced; it was the blade itself that mattered in a sword.

‘Aye, perhaps so, for it never gets sea-rot or dull-edged,’ he admitted, then added a sharp little dismissive laugh. ‘The truth of it is that the power of that blade is in the hand of the one who wields it.’

‘If that was true,’ I answered, ‘then you and I would be worm food.’

There was a pause, while both of us remembered the dying and the heat and the struggle to get back this sword after it had been stolen. Remembered Short Eldgrim, who had lost the inside of his head and was looked after now by Cod-Biter who hirpled from side to side when he walked. Remembered Botolf losing a leg to the curve of this same sword whose hilt now rested under my palm, heavy with the secret of all the silver in the world. Remembered all those who had chased the mystery of Atil’s silvered tomb and fallen on the road.

Then Finn shifted, rising to his feet.

‘Just so,’ he grunted heavily. ‘Oarmates have died under wave and edge and fire from the waters of the North Sea to the sands of Serkland in order to be worthy of Odin’s gift of all the silver of the world. I can hear the Oathsworn dead growl that they did not suffer all that to watch us sit here growing old and wondering about what might have been. I hear better with just the one ear than you do with both, it seems.’

There it was, that oath. ‘Odin’s gift is always a curse,’ I answered dully, knowing he was right. Every feast brought the inevitable *bragaful* – the toasts drunk and wild promises made – followed later, when the drink had made us mournful, by the *minni*, the horns raised in remembrance. It grew harder, in the harsh, sober light, to ignore either of them.

This hov had double-thickness walls, was sunk deep into the soil, windproof and waterproof and sitting in it made you feel as solid and fixed as the runestone I planned to have carved. Yet a fierce wind was blowing us all away and I felt the scent of it in the air, with the wrack and flying salt spume that leaped the ridgeline and hunted round the roofs. It was the breath of the prow beast, snorting and fretting at anchor and wanting to be free.

We sat for a while in the swirling smoke, listening to the wind fingering the door and rapping to get in, while Botolf, more belly and less muscle on him these days, stretched out his carved timber foot to ease the stump and told stories to the children.

He told them of Geirrod the Giant and Thor's Journey to Utgard and the Theft of Idun's Apples and Otter's Ransom. This last was told deliberately, I thought, for it touched on the dragon Fafnir, Regin the Smith and a hoard of cursed silver, the very one sent to Attila, the one buried with him – the one we had found.

Into the silence that followed came Thorgunna and Ingrid, doling out bowls of stew and it was so good everyone forgot Otter's Ransom. She had taken me at my word and made good cheer in a cauldron; there was mutton, hare, duck, eel, prawns, mussels, barley, onions and root vegetables in that stew. I tasted kale and seaweeds and watercress and the lees of red wine.

'By Thor's balls, Thorgunna,' growled Red Njal, 'the sea is the test of a man as the cauldron is of a woman, as my granny once said. Jarl Brand doesn't eat as well as this.'

'He does,' Thorgunna answered, 'but he adds cinnamon to his, I have heard. And watch your tongue.'

'Cinnamon,' muttered Gizur. 'There's fancy for you. I cannot think that it would add much to the taste of this, all the same.'

'We had buckets of the stuff once,' Hauk Fast-Sailor said as I elbowed him aside to get a place on a bench nearer the

fire. The high seat was my right, but too far from a good heat.

‘Remember, Orm?’ he said, nudging me so that stew slopped over my knuckles. ‘On that island where we fought the Serkland pirates? We used the dead Dane for a battering ram on the door to their stronghold.’

‘That was later,’ Kvasir growled, wiping ale from his beard. ‘The island where we got the cinnamon was where we found some of Starkad’s men who had been taken prisoner and had their balls and tozzles cut off by the camel-humping Arabs. They had killed themselves in their shame. The last ran himself at his prison wall until his head broke open.’

‘I have missed some moments, it seems,’ Thorkel said into the silence that followed. I ignored him as much as I could, though I felt his eyes on me as I spooned my stew.

The smoke eddied, dragging itself to the eavesholes and out into the rain and wind while I listened to Red Njal and Harelip arguing about where other enemies and old oarmates had died. All gone, pale-faced fetches sailing my dreams as dark shapes on a charcoal sea.

Thorgunna came softly up behind me, dragged the hair back over my shoulders and began to tie it off.

‘Don’t get your hair in your food,’ she said softly. ‘And those stories are not ones for children.’

Finn clattered his bowl angrily to the ground and rose, while the deerhounds came in among us, licking platters and fingers and wolfing scraps. Cormac came with them, scrabbling and laughing.

‘Perhaps we should set this one to routing out a stag or two before winter comes,’ chuckled Botolf, sweeping the gurgling boy up. Aoife grinned and Ingrid fired arrows at her from her eyes.

Finn looked at them, then at me, then shook his head and banged out in a blast of rain-cold wind.

‘Why does Finn have a face like a goat chewing a wasp?’

demanded Botolf as Ingrid glared at Aoife and hung on Botolf's big arm.

'He thinks we are living in a dream and going soft,' Kvasir said, wiping bread round his platter and tossing it into the snapping maw of a deerhound. He looked softly at his wife. 'Being chided for how we speak and needing our hair cut. He thinks we should be off on a hunt for silver.'

Botolf, who knew what he meant, grunted thoughtfully. Thorgunna, who simply thought it was warriors being restless, snorted.

'Go raiding then – though it is no pastime for honest men if you ask me. At least you will be putting in some effort for the food in your bowl. Seems to me Jarl Orm is overly tolerant of every lazy one of you.'

She scooped up bowls with meaningful noise and shot me one of her looks as she went. No-one spoke for a moment or two, for it is a well-known saying that there are only two ways of arguing with a woman and neither work.

There was moody silence after this.

'Play music instead,' I said to Botolf, 'in the event you find yourself attracted to the story of Otter again.'

Botolf, grinning ruefully, fetched his hand-drum and Hauk fished out his pipes and they tootled and banged away while the children danced and sang and even the thrall women joined in, sheathed in drab grey *wadmál* cloth, linen kerchiefs tied around brows and braids. For a while they stopped being chattels worn threadbare to the elbows – the power of drum and piping whistle has never ceased to amaze me.

A heathen thing that scene these days, thanks to the White Christ priests. The hand-drum is banned for being pagan and fine children all stained with bastardy, where no such mark was when Odin smiled on us and every child was as good as the next.

That day, while the wind wrecked itself against the hall and the rain battered in from the sea, it was as warming a

heartscene as any sailor could dream of on a rolling, wet deck – but somewhere, I was sure of it, Odin had persuaded the Norns to weave in blood scarlet for us.

The thought worried me like a dog on a rat's neck, made me get up and go out into a night smelling of rain and sea, to where the horses were stabled. They stirred and stamped, unused to being so prisoned, swirling up the warmth and sweet smell of hay and bedding. In the dark, the air was thick and suddenly crowded, as if a host of unseen people were there, circling me.

I felt them, the hidden dead of the Oathsworn, wondering what they had given their lives for and my belly contracted. I thought someone laughed and the dark seemed odd, somehow glowing.

It came from outside, in the sky, where faint strokes of green and red light danced in the north. I had seen this before, so it held no real terrors, but the mystery of the fox fires always raised my hackles.

'Others', too. Thorkel stepped out of the darkness and stood beside me.

'Troll fires,' he said, wonderingly. 'Some hold that the red in those fires marks battle, where the warriors fight in Valholl.'

'I had heard it marks where dragons fight and bodes ill,' I replied. 'Pest and war omens.'

'All it means,' said a voice, a blade cutting through the hushed reverence of our voices, 'is that winter comes early and it will freeze the flames in a fire.'

Turning, we saw Finn come up, swathed in a thick green cloak against the cold, his breath smoking into ours as he joined us.

'The sea will be cold when we sail,' he added and left that dangling there, like the lights flaring in the sky.