From *When the Land Darkens*
(*Når landet mørknar*)

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Published by Samlaget, 2018

Translated from the Norwegian by Alison McCullough

Extract pp 1-128 + pp 141-142 + pp 441–451 (end of novel)

Part 1

THE YOUNG MAN AND THE WALRUS

Greenland's Western Settlement, AD 1293

The walrus cuts through the fjord's undercurrents, a shadow darting across the pitch-dark rocks below. A ghost in flight.

But what he seeks from the depths, that which has so often enveloped him, is all but gone.

His lungs burn, increasingly desperate for air, and yet the long wooden poles sunk deep into his body still refuse to loosen their grasp. He had been sure they would release him once he was far from the surface, but they only seem to bite harder, ever more unyielding, into his flesh and blubber, as if they have already passed judgement upon him. His wide, pale blue eyes seek the protection of the silent depths as his fear drives him ever onwards.

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Five hunters, rowing to the same rhythm. With each stroke, every time each man leans towards the man on the next thwart, their strength courses through the ten-oarer. The boat cleaves the swell, spray roaring at the prow. It was once the finest vessel in all the Western Settlement.

A young boy sits on the third thwart. A light-haired, long-armed youth, his hands still lacking the heft and breadth of the men's fists – but he rows well. The thole pins creak with his long, supple strokes, the blades of his oars twisting free of the water to leave eddies dancing on the green skin of the fjord just as violently as those made by any of the men. His arms burn, as if already strong as *svarðreip*, as rope made from walrus hide.

He is fifteen years old, and this is his first walrus hunt.

The boy's face is soft and unblemished, almost like that of a young girl. As if the land that has nurtured him is yet to harden him; as if it has decided to wait before toughening this young hunter from one of the Western Settlement's mountain valleys. He glances back over his shoulder from time to time, to the right or the left, but as yet the walrus are nowhere to be seen.

The boy has a glint in his eye, a glint of the future. He thinks of all that lies ahead of him, how this is only the beginning. How one day the walrus hunts will transport him through the wake of history to the shores of Norðsetr.

But the boat he rows is now a grey-white ghost, a skeleton. Its wooden hull, once so well-oiled and polished that it reflected the light, is now shrunken and grey, ravaged by the passage of time. The strength that once filled it now no more than a defiant memory.

Only rarely, so rarely, does the future turn out as imagined.

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He swims up from the darkness, towards the light, and for the briefest of moments half his body hangs suspended above the water. An immense body, a mountain of flesh and blubber, the skin of his neck and back red and disfigured by unsightly scars and growths.

He rotates there against the sky, his long tusks and bristling whiskers pointing momentarily heavenwards as he draws breath. Then he falls, slamming sideways through the surface, beating foam into the air. His squinting eyes have confirmed his fears –they are waiting for him, there up above. There is no way out, and all at once everything is changed, for even the air he breathes and the water through which he swims is filled with the predators' stench, and he knows he can no longer evade them.

The pain pounding within him and the fear that has so mercilessly hunted him – transformed him into a wretch fleeing the only world he's ever known – are gone. All that remains is rage.

And so the boy and the walrus lock eyes for the first time, their gazes meeting as the beast whips back towards the boat. The men at the gunwale recoil in fear – they can see there is no stopping him. But the boy is fearless.

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On the previous morning a man had ridden up to Himin-Gorm's farmstead at Åsastad. He was a young, red-faced man; his horse had a chestnut coat with a blaze and socks of white. Four dogs had come up and started snapping and yelping at the horse's legs, the horse pawing at the ground and circling the otherwise empty yard, its rider unsure whether to dismount.

A heavy, dark grey wooden door had opened, and the chieftain of the Western Settlement's mountain farms emerged to stand on the slab of stone below the eaves. He had whistled sharply; the next moment, the dogs were gone.

He'd stood there in his rough, wadmal trousers, broad-chested and burly. A sixth generation descendent of Himin-Gorm the Old, who had once stood at Law Rock when the assemblies were gathered, and proclaimed that he would never forget the betrayal of those who had turned to the new customs and the new god. And that from that day forth, such families should stay far from the farms under his command – or he would see to it that they were put to death.

Relations between the farms by the fjords and those in the mountains had been tense for well over two hundred years. Of course, their inhabitants would often meet – there would be occasional marriages between them, or they would join forces on hunting expeditions or voyages west, or on raids against the Skraelings – but the mistrust was always there, like a legacy handed down from father to son. Not a generation had passed without familial feuds, without murder and bloodshed.

Himin-Gorm had raised an eyebrow.

'It's been so long since I last saw fjord men up here,' he said. 'I'd started to hope they'd died out.'

The man was too apprehensive to recognise the playful undertone in Himin-Gorm's voice.

‘I come with a message from the lawspeaker,’ he answered stiffly. ‘From Hafgrim of Svartfjord.’

Himin-Gorm nodded.

‘The curses of Greenland rarely vanish of their own accord,’ he said as if to no one but himself.

Two women came out from another door in the long building. The man on horseback could hear voices inside. Still uneasy, he said what he had been sent to say:

‘The walrus has come to the fjords.’

The walrus – beast of riches. Promises of ivory tusks, meat and rope for the ships; glossy oils that would burn in the lamps through autumn and winter. No other animal provided the wealth offered by the walrus. They were once found in such numbers, such herds as to make the very beaches and rocks themselves seem alive, and the *landnámsmen* – the first settlers to arrive here and establish their farms – had known how to hunt them and grown rich as a result. Here in the far north they had built the finest farms in all the Norse lands; ships to equal those of the Eastmen; great halls of thick timber and stone. But just as the walrus herds had withdrawn from Iceland four hundred years earlier, so they had vanished from Greenland’s coastal settlements, and just a short time after the colonisation the walrus was almost entirely absent from the settlement fjords.

Himin-Gorm had nodded. For the past 250 years the Western Settlement’s Althing had decreed that all farms should be notified when walrus arrived in the fjords. They all had an equal right to join the hunt.

‘How many have you sighted?’

‘Around thirty. Hûnvarg of the Hafgrims spotted them as they entered the fjords. They’re in Botnsvik now. The hunting party plan to set out at daybreak tomorrow, Odin’s Day.’

Himin-Gorm fixed the messenger with his gaze, biding his time for a moment, as if to mock him. Then he nodded.

‘We’ll be there.’

Just a short while later, half a dozen horses had thundered out of Himin-Gorm’s farmstead to tell the twelve mountain families to prepare for the walrus hunt the next day.

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Arnar had ridden with his axe in his fist that night. He could have secured it behind the saddle or hung it loosely over his back, but it sat so satisfyingly there in his hand, keeping time with the horse’s rhythm. Sometimes the iron glinted where he had sharpened the curved blade with his whetstone, glimmering like frost or dew.

He and Sel-Floke had ridden north from Dyradal, through the silent, bare hills, the sky curving high above them. The route across the broad mountain plateau towards Vassfelldragsdalen was magnificent. A fitting path for two young men riding through the late summer evening, dreaming of all that awaited them, of all the days yet to come.

Arnar had been only five years old the last time walrus had been hunted in the fjords of the Western Settlement. He remembered the carcasses on the beach, the tusks carving rifts through the shingle, the smell so rancid that he had retched, almost vomiting. He remembered the oil pits, the bloody cuts of blubber, the burning driftwood and peat. The oil that had come running out, yellow and clear; the dancing flames reflected in the eyes of the men and women who stood by, watching. How the oil had never stopped running.

They had ridden side by side every now and then during the night. Exchanging thoughts, jokes and ideas; discussing hunting and girls and making idle conversation. Their friendship was strong, the four years that separated them of little consequence.

On the previous day, a rider from Åsastad had come thundering into Vilhjalm Rågsson's farmstead in Dyradal. Vilhjalm and Arnar had been standing in front of the squat farm building, a turf-covered house in which the farm's four residents lived with their animals, all under the same roof. The messenger had told them to send two men to the hunt, one of whom was to be the servant, Sel-Floke.

As soon as the rider disappeared from view, Arnar turned to his father.

'May I go too, Father?' he asked.

Vilhjalm had smiled affectionately at his son, as he often did, being a man of warm disposition. He had thought the boy too inexperienced to join a walrus hunt just yet, but he also knew that times were changing. The walrus, once so abundant, were moving ever further north; the settlement's boats becoming more dilapidated year by year. Who could say whether this would be the last walrus hunt to take place in the fjords of the Western Settlement?

He had clasped the back of the boy's neck and said:

'Yes. From this farm, it will be you and Sel-Floke who go.'

And in the silence, as Arnar sprinted across the farmyard and disappeared into the house, Vilhjalm thought that although his son was prone to losing himself in daydreams and forgetting what work there was to be done, and though he was at times both stubborn and unruly, he was still a good son. And though life was likely to deal him a knock or two – and undoubtably give his obstinance a beating and leave some of his dreams in ruins – in the long run, as the years went by, things would turn out well for him.

And so Vilhjalm Rågsson felt that he had glimpsed the contours of future, unknown days, the shape of things to come. Where light and darkness endlessly encircle one another as if in balance, but where nothing is what it appears to be. He turned these thoughts over in his mind as he made his way inside to help the two young men find the provisions they would need for the hunt on the fjord.

Arnar and Sel-Floke reached the southern shore of the Agnafjord at dawn, riding in the wind along a pebbled beach to the meeting place at which horses, boats and men had already arrived. The men of the Western Settlement, of this headstrong land. Those who had refused to give in or succumb – who continued to hold on. Farmers and hunters, descendants of the earliest settlers, sons of the land's endless familial feuds. Those who remained.

Arnar and Sel-Floke rode among them, greeting the occasional familiar face before dismounting and leaving their horses with those who would tend them. The final preparations were underway, the hunting gear being loaded onto the boats. Some of the men were already aboard, sitting on the thwarts. The first boats had just put out, with Himin-Gorm's vessels just a stone's throw from the others. His men seemed ready, and their oars were out.

Hands helped them aboard; smiles and greetings bid them welcome. They stood in the largest of the three boats from Odin's farms, still holding their ropes and weapons, Himin-Gorm himself before them. He stepped forward and clasped Sel-Floke at the back of the neck, giving him a friendly shake.

'Sel-Floke! Let me tell you why I sent for you.'

Sel-Floke managed to grab the hide of Himin-Gorm's garments, bracing himself against the shaking and quick-witted as ever in his reply.

'Because you needed at least *one* man who knows how to throw a harpoon?'

Several of the men in the boat chuckled. Sel-Floke was no more than a servant, and yet here he was, holding his own and making witty remarks before the chieftain of the mountain farms.

'I saw you in Sandnes this spring, when you won the servants' spear-throwing competition,' said Himin-Gorm. 'I saw you throw. That's why you're here, and why you'll be bowman and harpooner on this boat.'

Eleven boats lay out on the fjord, each of their slim hulls resembling warships bearing rough-haired warriors, each man armed with weapons for the hunt: axes and hakapiks, bows and spears, harpoons extending from prows or lying across the thwarts.

Greeting passed between some of the boats. The odd conversation could be heard breaking the morning stillness, but not a word was uttered between the vessels commanded by Himin-Gorm and the boats from the farmsteads by the fjords. For few friendships crossed the lines that the men of the White Christ and the descendants of the old gods had drawn between them.

Arnar noticed the occasional curious look thrown his way from the other crews. Many took their chance to get a glimpse of Himin-Gorm, that stubborn brute of a man of whom so much was said. Wearing an open grey coat of ringed seal skin, Himin-Gorm stood facing away from the other boats, staring off down the fjord, as if deep in thought. His *skutill*, the harpoon he held in one hand, had a wooden shaft as long as a man was tall, with a shining tip of grey-blue polished iron, its two barbs three and a half inches in length. A braided hide rope was attached through a hole in the iron. If the harpoon penetrated deep enough and the men pulled hard enough, this rope would be the means by which they hauled in the walrus.

Himin-Gorm's two brothers, Steinulfur and Burfell, were oarsmen in the same vessel. Burfell was a lean, long-limbed man who seldom spoke and smiled even less, but he was regarded as an indefatigable worker who could easily hold out from sunrise to sunset. Steinulfur, the third of the brothers, was built like Himin-Gorm, thick-necked and broad-chested, but more amiable and talkative than his siblings.

Steinulfur cast a glance at the last boats to arrive, shaking his head despondently.

'Such a shame, putting something like that out to sea.'

The boats were patched with crooked, roughly-hewn bits of driftwood and sealskin. Many of the strakes were so rotten it seemed a single rough wave would smash them to smithereens.

Seeing the decay laid bare by such vessels made Steinulfur uneasy, but he was also aware that their own boat was nowhere near what it had once been. It too would probably have to be patched up with sealskin and whalebone soon enough, unless Himin-Gorm saw fit to use a couple of logs from his deep forest lake to make the necessary repairs to its hull.

Around a century earlier there had been some ten to twelve powerful families in these settlements, with fine seagoing ships capable of sailing as far as Vinland or Iceland. The Church and many a trader had also sailed their elegant vessels here to the north. From this Arctic outpost goods had been traded that were among the most highly valued to be found at any of the world's markets: polar bear skins, ropes of walrus hide, live polar bear cubs, the tusks of walrus and narwhal, and white gyrfalcons. *Greenland gyrfalcons*. There had been years so plentiful it seemed the riches bestowed upon the settlements would never cease. But like the silver coins of Paris after Ragnar Lodbrok devastated the kingdom of the Franks, and the golden treasures aboard Harald Hardrada's ships upon his return from Constantinople, it had all trickled away, and gradually their prosperity had crumbled. The farms were left destitute, the boats run-down or destroyed by ice and snow, others dragged ashore and left to become no more than grey skeletons in the wind.

The last voyage to Vinland had taken place almost forty years ago; hardly any of the families of the Western Settlement had the means to make such a journey now. With the exception of Himin-Gorm, only the Hafgrims of Svartfjord and a couple of other large farms still kept passably serviceable boats.

No signal was given for the fleet to depart, for there was no single leader upon whom they could all agree. But as soon as the last boat put out from the shore the vessels began to turn up the fjord. Soon the blades of the oars carved the sea, strong backs straining at the

shafts to pull each stroke through the cold water. In the wake of the boats, eddies began to ripple and swirl.

They knew how to row, these men. Even the boats that had looked the most wretched ashore gained elegance as they cut their lines through the fjord. Three ten-oarers, two vessels with four pairs of oars, four with three pairs, and a couple of smaller boats with just two oarsmen each. All left their gleaming green wake in the mountaintops' dark shadows.

Arnar felt that not a sea creature nor sea god would have been able to stop their boat today. He knew Steinulfur and Burfell possessed incredible strength – he could feel their strokes pulsing through the hull. The others, Vermund and Gunnar, might lack the same power, but he could see that they too were highly-skilled oarsmen. And Arnar was determined to prove himself worthy of his place on the boat. From this day forward – from today and on all the walrus hunts to come.

They edged ahead of a double-ended, four-oared boat from Hornfjord. Its gunwale was grey and cracked, and Arnar saw that a couple of its crew were shabbily dressed. They left them behind, catching up with other boats whose men pretended not to notice Odin's vessel gaining on them.

At the front of the hunting party was another ten-oarer, a long, fast vessel with old runes carved into its prow. It was rowed by five men from the Hafgrim family of Svartfjord; Hafgrim the lawspeaker himself stood at the vessel's stern. Soon the two boats were side by side, barely five fathoms apart, and through the crashing and hammering of the waves Arnar could hear the heavy breathing of the other boat's men. Two boats of the same length, travelling at the same speed; identical bow waves rushing beneath their prows.

Without a word being spoken, both crews understood that a race had begun, their shoulders folding even further forward with every stroke they took.

Himin-Gorm's dark figure stood erect and proud at the stern. As they rowed, his men could sense how resolutely he urged them on. They knew Himin-Gorm would gladly cut off one of his own fingers to beat the Hafgrims in a race on the fjord.

Then one of the Hafgrims turned towards them, his closed mouth like a black scar that cut across the jaws of his broad face. Arnar met his gaze. The man could be barely more than eighteen or twenty years old, and yet he was huge as a troll, the tendons in his thick neck standing out like ropes. When Arnar refused to look away, the giant sneered and spat in the sea, the gesture filled with contempt. Both understood that from this day forward, there would be nothing but enmity between them.

But no matter how mercilessly the two boats drove each other onwards for the sake of their deep-rooted, mutual hate, neither was able to secure a victory before the entrance to Botnsvik opened up to the north-east. Both Himin-Gorm and Hafgrim Svarte, at the stern of the Hafgrims' boat, were forced to halt their crews and wait, so as not to disturb the walrus before the rest of the boats arrived. They sat there, gently rocking, in the two-foot waves.

When the other vessels finally caught up, four boats were roped together in a line that spanned the shallow entrance to the cove, from shore to shore. They lowered nets and barriers into the sea below them to block the walrus's escape.

The remaining boats then entered the bay, rounding the point that blocked their view. It was impossible to know whether the animals would still be there, or whether they had already left, and so a tense silence descended on the crews as they rowed. But when Arnar saw Himin-Gorm smile, he twisted halfway round to catch a glimpse of the beach behind Sel-Floke's hunched back. And then he saw them – the walrus. Three or four fathoms above the high-water mark were between twenty and thirty enormous bodies, motionless, as if all dead.

The men rowed carefully, so as not to splash their oars now, the roaring below their bows reduced to the slightest ripple. If they could reach the beach without disturbing the animals, their catch would be ensured. The colossal beasts always took the shortest possible

route down to the sea, and if they came hobbling along between the boats, the men would be able to thrust their harpoons straight into the animals' backs at close range.

Seven slender hulls in formation. All boded well for the attack.

One walrus in the group suddenly reared its head, its long tusks swinging around. Had it caught a whiff of something bitter in the air? The beast's flat face turned towards the fjord; when it caught sight of the approaching men it let out a hoarse grunt, heaved itself halfway round, and hobbled quickly towards the sea. Several of the others lifted their heads now, too, and suddenly the enormous mass of flesh and blubber had come to life. Greyish-red necks and broad backs staggered hastily towards the water, flippers slapping against rocks and pebbles. The animals rushed towards the waves as if gripped by an ever-increasing panic, grunting and groaning, each of them heavy as ten or twelve men.

Sel-Floke yelled out in the hope of scaring them back, but the animals were already in the spray – there was no turning them now. They reached the waves, heaved themselves into the water, and immediately a transformation took place. All their former stamping bulk disappeared as the walrus became nimble, flickering shadows, darting towards the abyss – towards freedom. In just a few moments they were so deep they were beyond the reach of the men's weapons. Steinulfur lifted one of his oars from the water as he rowed backwards with the other; several of the other men joined him and the boat began to turn.

'By Helheim and Muspelheim!' Sel-Floke bellowed, 'Now prove that you can row!'

The other boats came slowly about and likewise began to row back out. They rowed in this way for a while, upwind, with Sel-Floke eagerly on the lookout like a weasel, occasionally swearing at the men for not rowing hard enough. Himin-Gorm's eyes narrowed and darkened at the sharp reflections on the water.

When the walrus breached the waves ahead of them, Himin-Gorm lifted his harpoon, holding it at arm's length. The shaft shook in his hands as he pointed the tip straight at where the beasts' heads were drawing breath.

Steinulfur steered the boat in the same direction. He was rowing stroke, setting the pace for the others. As he turned the boat, he saw the iron tip of Himin-Gorm's harpoon slowly turn towards the prow. He pulled on his oars for all he was worth.

They followed the walrus across the bay, until the creatures encountered the blockade in the shallows and turned back in confusion. They went deep again, searching for shelter other than the open sea, splitting up, no longer swimming as a group.

The next walrus to surface was already on the same course as the boats. Himin-Gorm pointed his harpoon in the beast's direction.

'There! … There! … There!' cried Sel-Floke. 'Let water spray! Make your oars weep!'

The walrus had returned to the depths by the time they had taken another two strokes, but they continued to slice their way through the water, following in the animal's wake. Himin-Gorm's harpoon indicated the direction in which the beast had fled, the braided hide rope dancing at the harpoon's iron tip signalling that the hunt had now truly begun. Sel-Floke's expletives, curses and shrill orders continued unabated. Until they could use their weapons, this was the bowman's most important task – to harass and frighten the animal so it would dive before it had managed to fill its lungs with air. From the other boats came the sounds of the other bowmen, each with his own refrain – some howled like wolves; others cursed and bellowed. But none could compare to Sel-Floke, who roared regardless of whether the walrus was above the water or below it, his abuse and curses echoing off the faces of the surrounding cliffs.

They rowed back and forth across the bay at the innermost end of the Agnafjord, until their arms and hands ached, until they hardly believed they had any strength left to give. But

on the fifth crossing, when the walrus surfaced for air before vanishing once again, he was much closer than before, little more than half an arrow shot from the prow.

Steinulfur's heaving breaths could be heard above everyone else's.

'If I didn't know it was you, Steinulfur, I'd have thought we already had a walrus on board,' Sel-Floke called out.

Steinulfur was unable to answer – he didn't have the breath. But then the walrus leapt from the waves again, as if spat from the depths in a sudden fit of rage. An aura of seafoam encircled his head, his long cream-coloured tusks furiously carving the water's surface. The creature's mouth was wide open, his breath hollow and rasping. Then the sea closed over his head and he vanished once again. They were still out of range.

Himin-Gorm turned his body and the harpoon in the direction the beast had gone. Then a shadow fell over his face. Dead ahead of them was the Hafgrims' boat, blocking their course, its oars in the water. At its stern, two men were tying a dead walrus to floats made of inflated sheep stomachs. The men on board were laughing, as if they'd just been telling a joke about the mountain folk of Odin's farms.

Pulling hard, Burfell and the others managed to set the boat on its new course.

'Move aside!' Sel-Floke bellowed at the men in the ten-oarer.

But not a single man among the Hafgrims appeared to be rowing. One of them shook his head.

'Row around,' he called back.

But Himin-Gorm held his course; the boat had already gained momentum and was accelerating with every stroke. On the other boat, Hafgrim Svarte Hafgrimsson raised a rough hand.

'Row around!' he shouted. 'We're stringing up a walrus here.'

'Move your boat aside or go below, to the sea giants!' Sel-Floke yelled back.

Arnar turned on his thwart and saw the angry faces of the kin of the Hafgrims; the iron of the harpoons glinting at the prow. Hafgrim Svarte Hafgrimsson cried out once more.

'Row around, you mountain vagrants!'

But Himin-Gorm only smiled and jabbed at the air with his harpoon in the direction of the Hafgrims' boat. Steinulfur recognised Himin-Gorm's expression – he had seen it before. He shook his head as he braced himself against the thwart and floorboards, gritted his teeth, and pulled.

Arnar, too, channelled all his strength into his oars. He was determined that should the two boats collide, splintering and going under, and the walrus return as an avenging beast among the men as they flailed in the water, fighting for some remnant of the wreck to hold on to – nobody would be able to say that he had succumbed to his fear.

Further shrieking cries were exchanged between the two vessels, but their meeting was inevitable now – the Hafgrims on the central thwarts let go of their oars and scrabbled away. One of them slipped on the gunwale and fell backwards into the sea.

Then the ancient oak keel of the boat from Markland crashed hard into the gunwale of the vessel blocking its path. Its high, arched prow rose, lifting from the water, the keel and carved heads at the front heaving up and into the middle of the Hafgrims' ship, keel and clinker-built strakes scraping and wailing as thole pins and gunwale planking gave way, splintering under the weight. When the boat stopped, it towered above its adversary like an eagle above its prey.

With his fists on the gunwale, Sel-Floke leaned out over the prow to watch the Hafgrims' port side being pushed deep below the surface, green waves foaming over the thwarts, the water rising cold around the men's ankles and legs. Himin-Gorm came running from the stern and up the thwarts of his ship, putting all his weight behind his steps in an attempt to destroy the Hafgrims' boat below him.

‘Force them under! Get them in the water!’ he bellowed.

Arnar saw the terror that now spread among the Hafgrims, because not a single one of them could swim. The naked fear of being swallowed by the deep was evident on all their faces.

The huge young man who had stared so defiantly at Arnar as they raced threw himself down to grab hold of the clothes of the man who had fallen into the water; as he pulled, the man was cast back into the boat as if he was no more than a child, his body seemingly weightless. But water was now surging over the gunwale with increasing speed. One of the Hafgrims could be heard invoking Jesus Christ in his fear, but Hafgrim threw himself towards Himin-Gorm’s boat.

‘Push the devils from us!’ he yelled.

The ten-oarer rolled slightly to port under his weight. Following their chieftain, the Hafgrims now ran to join him from both sides, casting themselves at the keel and hull that had crushed them from above while Himin-Gorm, like a thundering god at the end of days, stood over them, roaring:

‘Sink in Rán’s deepest darkness!’

The water was already halfway up their calves; as soon as it became level with the sea outside their boat would sink helplessly below the surface, leaving the Hafgrims floundering in the waves.

Then suddenly there was movement. Only slight – just two or three inches. The hull that crushed the Hafgrims had shifted, and their faith returned. At the next heave the damaged gunwale screeched, and the iron-hard oak keel slowly began to slide back to whence it came. One of the Hafgrims raised an oar, taking a swipe at Himin-Gorm in an attempt to beat him before he got away. But Himin-Gorm grabbed hold of the oar and tugged it from the man’s hands, using both fists to shoot it back at him like a spear. The oar hit the man in the chest, causing him to call out and fall backwards into the water between the thwarts.

Suddenly the boats were free, the hull of the Hafgrims’ ship rocking like a drunk. Using bailers, wooden pails or simply nothing but their hands, the hull still rocking perilously from side to side, the men began to bail out their vessel with careful, downtrodden movements.

‘You were lucky this time, fish spawn,’ Sel-Floke called out. ‘This time you were lucky, but next time you’ll go under. Next time, fish fry, you’ll all be nothing but fish food.’

Hafgrim Hafgrimsson gripped the harpoon at the prow behind him; the huge man who had stared at Arnar cast his pail aside and took up a spear. Himin-Gorm and Sel-Floke already stood with harpoons in their fists; Burfell managed to grab a spear as Arnar bent to find his axe from under his seat.

Weapons in hand, these enemies of blood faced one another, just as they had so often come face to face at *Blodgrasvollen*, the battleground of the lineages of the Western Settlement, where so many families had been destroyed. They stood there filled with a hate wrought from former grievances; hardened by strong wills and kin who refused to forget. An old hate, but one that still glowed red-hot in its intensity.

Hafgrim shook his harpoon.

‘Heathen devils! You’ve not heard the last of this!’

But the wind drove the two vessels apart, carrying one away and leaving the other – that which still sat low in the waves – behind.

The walrus cut through a world of green-black seaweed, shells and molluscs – a gently swaying primeval forest, dark as night. Through foliage that reached out to him, whispering of times forever lost.

The roaring of the creatures from above still rang in his ears; he could sense their heavy slapping against the water's surface. The strange, rhythmic sounds of the hunt. And with each stroke he took with his mighty flippers, each turn of his body, he felt an ominous yearning deepen in his chest.

When he again ascended from the darkness, from the world that had surrendered him, into the light, he saw it glittering like a mischievous, scintillating dawn.

He had revealed himself to them, laid bare his back, and they had thrust two spears deep into his body. From a distance of no more than three fathoms the men had groaned as they thrust their weapons downwards, the iron tips piercing hide and blubber to pass deep into his chest and back.

For a moment it seemed he failed to notice the spears, but then the sea around him turned a dark shade of red, and as he struggled to beat his flippers and rolled onto his side in an attempt to disappear into the depths once more, they saw him gliding slowly beneath the waves, the harpoon shafts ploughing the water's surface above him like the masts of a ship sailing to its doom.

Then the shafts, too, were gone. Only the rancid, whale-like odour of walrus remained, along with the ever more dilute streams of blood in the patch of dark sea where he had last been seen.

But ropes followed him into the deep this time, each trailing its harpoon. Brownish-black ropes of bearded seal skin, strong as iron and bound hard as bone to the harpoon tips. Length after length of rope poured over the gunwale, and Himin-Gorm and Sel-Floke stooped to adjust the floats. Three to each rope – oval, greyish-red sheep stomachs inflated and drawn closed, tied to the ropes of hide.

They bobbed there incongruously on the surface for just a short while, until they trembled, pulling taut, as if attempting to move away from the boat. As the walrus dived deeper they were ripped from the surface, one by one; plunged into the depths below. He must still have great strength left in him yet, this long-tusked whale-horse of the seas.

The water was choppier now. The waves beat against the hull, making the vessel shudder and roll as the wind chased along the black mountainsides of the fjord.

The men were panting again, groaning intently. And above them stood Himin-Gorm, with his hawk's gaze fixed upon the deep.

Then the tugging on the rope released, and soon after the floats were visible once more. The men on the thwarts swung in their oars and grabbed their weapons. Himin-Gorm and Sel-Floke held on with all their might as the ropes pulled tight and the boat turned towards the ascending walrus. The gunwale was pushed low to the water as the men forged their way forward, the waves crashing against the strakes and sending spray into their faces.

The walrus breached the surface in a cascade of foam. As he circled around to swim away, two arrows pierced his body to become embedded in his blubber like stiff quills. The ropes attached to the arrows were also pulled taut, and four men began to haul him towards the boat.

The walrus heaved and struggled against them. One of the arrows snapped and the wooden harpoon shafts shook on his back, but he was unable to break free. And then suddenly it vanished – the fear that had guided his flight. It was simply no longer there, and so he turned sharply towards the men, his breath like a panting moan, advancing in rage. Steinulfur and Gunnar grabbed hold of their spears and swung them forth, like lances from a parapet. He charged into them, forcing the men who grasped them to stagger backwards, like reeds in the wind. His tusks were raised as if to strike; gleaming whiskers and eyes distorted beyond reason.

And so their eyes met. Those of the boy and the walrus.

Seven men stood at the rope, all straining against the beast in the waves, believing that only the final notes of the hunt's melody now remained to be played.

But now, as the water droplets on his head glistened like pearls of iron, and as some of the men were driven back by his sheer force, Gunnar and Vermund felt their courage slip away, and they recoiled to avoid being struck by his tusks.

But Himin-Gorm did not recoil. For the rage that burned in him towards any living being that dared to oppose him – whether animal or human – was untameable, inextinguishable. And so by virtue of this rage, he went up against the beast from the depths.

Arnar, too, stood firm as the spears snapped like dry shafts of bone around him and the sounds of the animal and the sea rose into a crescendo. Life itself seemed to sing within him – *this* was why he was here.

As another wave crashed towards the boat, and as destiny and the powers that preside over all living beings held back time for just a moment, as if to fantasise about the outcome of the imminent encounter, Arnar stood there, directly in the path of the animal's onslaught, and when the moment had passed, and the walrus's head, like a battleground of scars and healed gashes covered with water droplets sparkling with rainbows, hurled towards him, he swung the head of his axe above him in a long, shimmering arc.

He brought the blow down at the intersection of two scars, where they formed a rough cross. The blade cut through skin and bone to sink deep and hard into the walrus's skull.

The beast turned sideways towards the gunwale, then thrust himself backwards, out into the sea. Other weapons immediately came forth – axes and spears were thrust into the walrus's body, now in its death throes, the strength that had driven him onwards now gone. The waves that rolled over him had already begun to wash the blood from his wounds.

After the hunt, as they rowed towards the southern end of the Agnafjord towing three walrus carcasses behind them, Steinulfur turned to Arnar.

'That blow you struck today, Arnar – that's a blow you'll be remembered for.'

'It didn't take much,' Arnar replied. 'All I had to do was stand firm when he came.'

Vermund glanced at Arnar then, to see whether any contempt lurked beneath his words, but there was no discernible insult or mockery in his face. Only an open smile, which seemed to Vermund to proffer nothing but goodness; a surety that all the mysteries of the world would one day be revealed.

But when Himin-Gorm spoke from his position at the stern, Vermund had no doubt that contempt nevertheless existed among them.

'Indeed, the most important thing is to stand firm when the walrus comes,' said Himin-Gorm. 'It shouldn't take much – and yet not everyone is given to do so.'

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He stood on the beach at the southern end of the Agnafjord. It was evening, and most of the sixteen walruses slain during the hunt had been hauled ashore. The inhabitants of the surrounding farms had arrived, and here and there, in small clusters along the shore, the butchering had begun. Blubber flensed from the carcasses was placed in the stone pits like glowing coals, and covered. Soon the oil would start to run.

The men from the fjords butchered their carcasses, while Odin's men butchered theirs. They eyed one another with suspicion, keeping their distance, but the scene was bustling, the air filled with laughter. Children played; a group of boys ran from walrus to walrus arguing loudly about which one had the longest tusks. Two horses and half a dozen men and women hauled yet another beast ashore using a strong length of rope.

High above, seagulls and terns drew their expectant circles over the people and dead beasts below.

The walrus lay at his feet. Its wounds, flushed pale and repulsive by the sea, were no longer bleeding. Greyish-black sand from the beach below streaked the animal's hide.

He bent down and took hold of a tusk in an attempt to move the great creature, but it barely shifted. He got down on one knee, about to whisper to the beast, wishing to honour it with his words in the way he knew hunters of old sometimes honoured the animals they had slain – but he was interrupted by the sound of soft footsteps. When he lifted his head, two girls were standing before him. One of them was staring at him boldly, meeting his gaze; her eyes were green, inquisitive and clear. The plait of shiny brown hair trailing over one of her shoulders was as thick as her arm. She must be several years younger than him. He couldn't remember having seen her before – she was probably from one of the surrounding coastal farms.

'Did you kill it?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Why do you hunt such ugly animals?'

Her words were impudent, but her expression curious. He got up, not knowing how to reply. The mighty walrus lay there at his feet. He was the animal's slayer, she just a young girl, and yet her eyes seemed to be laughing at him.

She glanced at the walrus again, stretching out her foot to touch the creature with the toe of her dainty goatskin shoe, then looked back up at his face.

'No, really, why do you hunt such ugly animals?' she asked him again, even more unabashedly than before.

Her friend could no longer contain herself – her giggling burst out into laughter. All the dignity he had felt while alone suddenly vanished.

'He's not ugly.'

'Not ugly? He's the ugliest creature I've ever seen.'

Her eyes were so strangely bright in her tanned face, framed by her strong, straight brows. He wanted to give her a cutting answer, but she mimicked his gestures; her arms loose at her sides, her mouth contorted into a contrived grimace. Her friend's gleeful laughter returned.

'So run back home to your mother,' he said. 'Then you won't have to look at him.'

The smile that had been hiding behind her eyes as they spoke suddenly broke forth – she had a scintillating smile, luminous as a ptarmigan's winter plumage. She tilted her head slightly, as if waiting for a moment to see if he would say more. When he remained silent, she shook her head.

'You'd do better to hunt a nice animal next time,' she said in a condescending tone. 'Not an ugly, stinking sea creature like this one.'

She pursed her lips, as if grimacing at the smell of the as yet unbutchered walrus. Then she grabbed her friend by the hand, and off they ran.

He stood there for a while, watching them as they disappeared among the crowds along the beach. Then he squatted back down and took hold of the walrus's tusks, one in each hand. They were solid, cold to the touch. As he tugged on them he might have imagined the power they once held, but his thoughts consisted only of the green, mysteriously glittering eyes of the girl who had stood before him.

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Summer came, then autumn. There were debts to be settled; assurances for the coming year to be made.

The seven lambs lay side by side in the yard, their feet bound. The rain falling from the evening sky was so heavy that the raindrops battered their slender bodies, the gravel spraying up around them. A ring of men, women and children stood around these lambs. Silent, wearing clothes of leather and dark wadmal.

Torches of tight bundles of willow bound with rags dipped in seal oil were held up towards the sky, but the rain that poured down on them sucked the heat from their flames and embers, dimming them, one by one.

This was an evening on which dried peat from the bogs should have been laid on the glowing embers of the fires, and in the golden-red light of the seal oil torches the women should have repaired over-socks or sewn winter coats. The men should have twisted withies into snowshoes for their horses, or carved spoons and knives from ox horn.

But instead they stood here at Himin-Gorm's farmstead, these men and women born of the mountains. Who smiled when the days were good to them, and who grieved silently and greatly when misfortune befell them.

One of the lambs bleated; for a moment the wind subsided, and the battering of the raindrops against cloth and earth could be heard as a tumbling echo in the brief silence. Arnar glanced up at the sizzling, anguished, blue-orange flames of his torch, and saw that they would not last much longer.

At the centre of the circle lay a shining slab of stone, over a fathom wide and one and a half fathoms long. Ancient runes were carved in a long strip along its edges. Some of them were still readable, but most were half erased, like wounds healed long ago.

Himin-Gorm nodded to one of the shadows in the circle and Vermund stepped forward, took hold of the first lamb and placed it on the stone slab. A smallholder at one of the smaller farms under Åsastad, he had lost an eye in battle many years ago. He was the kind of man who seldom gave his opinion, and had therefore become one of Himin-Gorm's most highly valued men.

Himin-Gorm drew a knife from his belt and placed a rough hand on the lamb's frail chest. The tip of his knife found the indentation between two ribs; the blade was driven in, and the lamb began to buck. It moaned and thrashed about convulsively, but Vermund held its jaws closed, and it didn't bleat.

As the blood coloured the stone red and black, Himin-Gorm lifted his face, and with the rain running in rivulets and streams down his cheeks and trickling from his brows and beard, he offered the sacrifice to Odin.

Vermund pulled the dead lamb from the slab; another was brought forth, and one of the men from one of the other farms stepped forward and was given the knife.

As a child, Arnar had been overcome with fear and deep respect for these mighty and demanding gods who walked among them; at the great seriousness of the men and the words that were uttered. During *Haustblót*, the Autumn Sacrifice, he had seen cows, goats and even horses laid on the sacrificial stone.

The second lamb was held up to the heavens by outstretched arms and shaken, blood and rainwater spraying, as it was offered to Freyr. But Arnar felt that if Freyr – in all matters except his last great battle – had honoured life, would he not have chosen that the lamb should live, rather than be sacrificed?

When the ancient ceremony had run its course and the remaining lambs bestowed to Njord, Thor, Ullr and Freyja, Himin-Gorm's voice was heard once more:

'Arnar and Tinforne! Fetch the horses and carry the lambs to Åsajuv. Hang them over the crossbeams for the Æsir and Vanir to find!'

Tinforne was Himin-Gorm's son, the third of seven siblings. He had killed a wolf in the mountains to the east the year before; he would now be honoured for his role in the hunt,

Arnar for the walrus he had slain. To come as close to the gods as was possible on this night at Åsajuv brought fortune later in life; wove strong threads into fate's web.

Four soaking wet horses were fetched from a group that stood with their tails to the wind; two were saddled for riding and two to carry the offerings. As the lambs were secured for the journey the horses sensed the blood in the air and whinnied and shook their manes, but their experienced handlers spoke soothingly to them, and they soon calmed.

Then they rode through the dark, these two young men of equal age.

The rain that hammered against their backs and necks and hoods had already breached the seams of their leather outerwear, and soon their shirts and trousers and finally their woollen undergarments were also soaked through.

But sheltered from the rain beneath the eaves of the great stable, Vermund and his wife watched the young men ride off.

'So this is how it turned out – the night on which you should have ridden with the sacrifice,' Vermund's wife said, her voice a mocking whisper.

Vermund didn't respond. He had never told his wife that he had recoiled in fear at the walrus's approach, nor that after the episode Himin-Gorm had never mentioned the Autumn Sacrifice to him again. But his wife refused to let it go.

'Was that not what he said?' she asked. 'That it would be you who would ride with the sacrificed beasts tonight?'

'Yes, he said as much. Or at least, that's what he told me last spring.'

'And did he not say the same last year?'

'Oh, just let them ride – it means nothing.'

Vermund's wife was quiet for a moment, as if trying to contain herself. So many times she had derided her husband – countless times – but it had never helped matters in the slightest. He was, and always had been, a pathetic, miserable wretch. Yet still she couldn't let it go. She shook her head.

'*Just let them ride,*' she mocked. 'How would you propose I try to stop them?'

With the horses bearing the slaughtered lambs attached to lengths of rope behind them, Arnar and Tinforne took turns leading the way. They rode down the length of the Njardarfljót valley, and as they caught a glimpse of the hissing, singing river, like a broad, green-black serpent or the offspring of the underworld's river Gjöll, Arnar's thoughts turned once again to the gods. Were they still to be found here in the west, or were they gone? Had they withered and died, never to be found again?

Then Tinforne came riding up alongside him, and his thoughts of the gods were washed away.

'It was a pitiful boat,' Arnar called to his companion. 'The one you rowed during the walrus hunt this summer.

'Indeed. It was a wreck,' answered Tinforne. 'Leaky as a snowshoe. The wooden pins were rotten through – the strakes just as bad, and the floorboards tramped to pieces. We spent more time bailing her out than rowing.'

'I wish I had a ship I could make the voyage west in. To Markland and Vinland.'

'You want to go west?'

'Well I certainly don't want to go east, I know that much.'

And as the winds raged and the rain poured down onto the black bog soil to form puddles and streams, and as their voices were occasionally carried off by the wind, they related to one another the stories they had heard told of Vinland. Of bears and Skraelings; the Vinland gods and the hunts for enormous musk oxen.

'But did you know there's a land *behind* Vinland?' Arnar shouted. 'Fifteen days' march west through Vinland's forests. Supposedly without end and so rich in game and pastures that all other lands seem as barren as Niflheim in comparison.'

‘They say it’s a myth. That there’s nothing but underbrush and Skraelings there out west.’

‘Who says?’

‘Plenty of people. My father, too.’

‘Has he ever been there?’

‘Have you?’

‘My great-grandfather made the voyage twice.’

‘To *Vide Vinland*? To the land behind Vinland?’

‘He spoke with people who had followed the Ring Brothers and Ragnvald Saudungsson, and who had been in Vide Vinland. You’ve heard of the Ring Brothers?

‘I heard they disappeared.’

‘They settled out there.’

Tinforne didn’t answer, but he thought that when it came to the most remote reaches of the world, one could never know. The tales of such places sometimes sounded like feverish dreams, and so one could never know the truth unless one travelled there oneself. But what was fifteen days’ walk? Or just a few days on horseback, if one managed to take horses along?

But Arnar wasn’t done. His thoughts and imagination forged ahead, unrelenting, recalling words he had heard told of his great-grandfather’s voyages. He wiped the spray from his face.

‘But it doesn’t end there, Tinforne,’ he spat into the rain. ‘You don’t need to believe it ends there. For three summers the Ring Brothers hunted musk oxen on Vide Vinland with the Skraelings of the plains – the animals they killed were heavy as walrus. And when they learned the Skraeling language, they were told of another country, a kingdom so far south of Vide Vinland that the land experiences no winter, and the sun shines as high in the sky as in Great Blueland, where Ulfr Hrafnsson voyaged to avenge his son. And in this land – the *Land of the Spotted Lion* – live a people who build stone stairways to the skies, and on these steps they make sacrifices to gods ever thirsty for human blood. Their wealth is inconceivable – entire buildings filled with gold, silver and blood-red rubies. Just as we would fill a barn with hay.’

Tinforne saw all this in his mind’s eye.

‘Perhaps that should be the destination of our voyage?’

‘All I know is that great men – men like Harald Hardrada and Ulfr Hrafnsson – they would have gone.’

‘One day, Arnar…’

‘Yes. One day…’

They rode in silence for a while, deep in thought. And although Tinforne was still but young, he already possessed the knowledge that the world’s furthest shores could only be reached by men with great dreams, and after listening to the words and visions of his companion with the prominent brow and clear grey gaze, he understood that these dreams stirred in Arnar’s mind.

But Tinforne himself was only the third sibling of four brothers and three sisters. He could never expect to assume control of Åsastad. Himin-Gorm had once said that when he was old enough, Tinforne would be given a farm to the east by Hliðarvatn, but Tinforne didn’t like Hliðarvatn – nor the grey, mosquito-infested swampland that surrounded the lake. He could never reconcile himself to the thought of having to incessantly struggle and slave away on such a farm – or on any farm for that matter – in an attempt to salvage a livelihood from this confounded, cursed land.

‘If you ever decide to make the voyage west, Arnar, so give me blood, I’ll go with you.’

Arnar smiled.

'I'll send for you. We'll sail together.'

Tinforne stretched out his hand, and with a long shake of their cold, wet fists, their pact was sealed.

They heard the sound of horseshoes hitting bare rock, signalling where they were. They turned from the valley onto a trail that began to ascend the steep mountainside; the horses, having been here before, remembered the way.

When they had climbed so high that the river far below them had stilled, they caught sight of the rock projecting over the abyss alongside them, and turned their horses in and dismounted. They knew the great, perpendicular precipice that fell away below them, the deep containing a gorge so narrow and black that it was hardly visible, even in daylight. The chasm pulled at them, and they remained still for a time, holding their horses by the reins until the rock beneath their feet seemed firm once more.

The rain continued to hammer down; the wind blowing ever wilder up among the peaks.

The pillars came towards them, out of the night. Five bare columns set in a circle with crossbeams lying atop them. A *blótgrind* – a sacrificial enclosure. They stood below it, and as they continued to gasp for breath and the horses lifted their heads, as if sensing the dangers that awaited them out here on this dark plateau, they tied the reins around the pillars and fumbled for the straps that held the lambs.

They should count themselves lucky, Arnar thought, that there was no sign of thunder or flashes of lightning tonight. Otherwise the horses would have pulled loose and risked falling over the cliff edge to be crushed in the chasms below.

'We have to throw the rope over, to hoist up the lambs,' Arnar called out.

'What?'

'Do you have the ropes?'

They managed to sling the ropes over and haul the lambs into the air by their haunches, the animals swinging there like wind-ravaged shadows against the sky. As drops of blood from the lambs' heads were gripped by the wind and cast down along the cliff face, and as the old bones of creatures long since sacrificed up here – whether animal or human – crunched under their feet, they untied the horses, left the sacrificial offerings, and surrendered themselves to the darkness and their journey back to Åsastad.

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The reindeer stepped across the whitest lichen in a valley so remote that sometimes, when all was still, it was possible to feel the glacier's very heartbeat. He stopped, and the thickness of his neck and the strength evident in his movements as he turned his head to sniff the wind testified that the summer had been good to him.

The hills and furrows of his wide antlers were still furred with velvet. He was deep-chested, the shaggy fur at his breast moving in the wind, and when the time came to use his antlers the velvet would be shed among the willow thickets and heather, leaving the bone shining brown and strong.

Two other bulls had been grazing beside him. They too now stood on tense hooves, sniffing at the wind and the hint of unfamiliarity it had contained as it came streaking past. They stood this way for a time, senses straining, but the smell was no longer there. They bent their heads once again, tugging probingly at the heather, but were unable to find ease. They made a brief turn across the plateau, stopped for a moment, and then bolted – their motion so light, so quiet and quick, that their cloven hooves never seemed to touch the ground across which their shadows ran.

Arnar had ridden east, rambling through this scarred and untamed land. He had ridden east for two days, but now he could go no further. The valley that surrounded him was immensely wide, but ahead of him, crossing the valley at its widest point, was the glacier – a great barrier of ice.

He could raise his bow to shoot an arrow from his sealskin quiver; let it fly up there. Perhaps it would pierce the blue ice and remain stuck there, or it might fly all the way across the glacier's edge into the white expanse behind. But he did not raise his bow. He simply allowed his gaze to follow the glittering white line of the glacier's uppermost edge.

Three winters had passed since the walrus hunt in Botnsvik, and they had been three hard winters for both the farms of Odin and those by the fjords. The snow and frost had come early each autumn; the springs had drawn out before the meadows finally turned green and the animals could be put out to pasture. On several of the farms, livestock had died when the winter stores ran out.

But everything has its end, and after the third winter an early spring had come, followed by a good summer and an imminent autumn that also looked promising, the mountain grasses greener than usual for the season, and with fat lambs and fine calves. All the animals had been brought down from the mountain pastures in good health, and after the rams had been separated from the ewes and the fattest lambs slaughtered, and the wool had been shorn from the very last of the sheep, Arnar had announced:

'Tomorrow I ride east, into the eastern mountains.'

He was now the tallest of the three men, and broader in the shoulders than both his father and Sel-Floke. During the shearing he had handled the sheep as if they were no more than lambs in his hands.

Vilhjalm had nodded – he understood the lure of the mountains as well as his son. He was satisfied with the work they had done, the day they had spent together, and the favourable late summer bestowed on them.

'Fimbul's shoe is probably still out there, somewhere below Øytind peak. You could ride an unshod horse this time.'

Indeed, he could – Arnar had taken Fjallasmyril and spent the first half of the day riding through outfields and mountains where the paths made by riders and livestock were clear and numerous. Then they had passed into an unmarked landscape and on into the vast, outer hunting grounds where humans rarely roamed. Into the outlands of freedom.

In the wide valley known as Jøkuldal, where even reindeer hunters seldom roved, Arnar now heard the cold winds whispering that this was one of the land's final outposts.

A grey-green river ran out from below the glittering blue ice of the mighty glacial wall that blocked the valley. It flowed in long, wide curves over shallow banks and rolling rocks; over bright beds of pebbles and sand and out into the valley, towards the west.

He released the glacier from his gaze, and with the wind in his hair and his thoughts driven across open skies, he turned Fjallasmyril and let the horse pick out her own path. A mound of bare rock, a couple of feet or so high, rose out of the heather before them; the horse stepped past it, pulling on the reins and bending her head to graze. Beside the rock, surrounded by green heather and white reindeer moss, was a circular patch of shifting sands. Many of these could be found dotted here and there throughout the valley, shaped and left behind by the winds. But across this one ran sharply silhouetted tracks.

Arnar straightened in his saddle and stood up in the stirrups, his mind cleared of its preoccupations. He steered the horse towards the tracks, his eyes fixed upon them.

Like a hardly discernible vibration in the ground; an echo of thunder beneath the far off mountains.

Each of the footprints was formed from two crescents, and together these two half-moons formed an ancient symbol so complete, so filled with the promise of the northern lights, that ever since the first fur-clad hunters bearing their flint arrowheads had entered the land of the tundra, it had made their hearts beat, as if with lust.

The tracks of the full moon across the land.

Three bulls had been there. They had emerged from the willow thicket and wandered past this modest mound of rock before making their way out into the valley.

Arnar guided Fjallasmyril along the tracks, pressed into the earth and sand in beautiful, undulating ribbons, like runes across a sacrificial stone, and in his mind's eye Arnar could see the animals as they had bounded away. Three fully grown bulls. First, they had simply trotted calmly across the plain, before lifting their heads and setting off at an increased pace; the mountains that encircled the valley and enclosed him reflected in their blue-black eyes. He saw their shadows floating across the valley; their muzzles raised, nostrils open to the wind. Their coats grey as the mountains, shimmering, unblemished; antlers high, hovering poised above their summer-strengthened backs. The only sounds the clicking of the sinews in their heels, the rush of the wind as they ran.

Arnar stopped his horse, lifted his gaze and looked about him, at the heaths that covered the vast valley floor, red as if already coloured by autumn. He saw willow thickets and underbrush, clusters of defiant dwarf birch and the blazing purple of the heather. The yellow and red marshes and fields covered by moss and grass.

But did he not also see something else, something more? And was it not from these sights that the vibrations that surrounded him came? Did he not also see people with fire, who burned the heather from the valleys, who cleared the thickets and drained the marshes by digging ditches where the cotton grass grew? And did he not see them cutting down the grass with their long-handled scythes? Horses and cows gnawing the willow and dwarf birch to stumps, tramping the heather beneath their feet so that the grass could sprout, growing green and fragrant from hillside to hillside. And did he not see the hayfields stretching out, so far down this valley, that even Sandnes and Suðrdalsbol seemed but tiny by comparison?

The roughly hewn mountain range watched over everything below it – the river in its winding course, like the tentacles of some fabulous sea monster; the small lakes blinking blue down on the valley floor. Was it not all too ornately embellished, too finely made – simply waiting for the farm that should be cleared here, by the tracks of the full moon?

A hint of spring passed across the grey in Arnar's eyes. How many animals would be able to be fed here during the winters, once the plains were cultivated? Hundreds – many hundreds. Cattle, sheep and horses. He sat on his shaggy black horse with his dreams beneath the sky and saw the herds moving. And although he was no more than a wisp of hair, a tiny creature here among the great glacier and vast mountains and the furthest reaches of the valley, his dreams were free and fearless, and he was a man of these dreams, and he knew that wherever his dreams wandered, it was there he must go.

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Vilhjalm Rågsson's farmstead was situated so far from other farms that it seemed like some small, far-off forgotten place in Utgard. A bad year on such a farm was seldom about the lack of hay to bring into the barn, or sheep and lambs failing to return from the mountain pastures at the end of summer. Most often, it was the hunt that saved the lives of the people who lived on these farms – it was when the hunt failed to provide for them that the ill fates came down from the hillsides to scratch at the door, begging to be let in.

There were only four residents here at Dyradal – Vilhjalm, Arnar, and the two servants, Astrid and Sel-Floke. Vilhjalm's wife had died while still young, and so Arnar had been their only son.

Upon hearing the pounding of Fjallasmyril's hooves, Vilhjalm, who was sitting on his haunches repairing a saddle, had lifted his head to see his son riding into the yard. He had smiled his genuine smile – so genial that this alone made people enjoy his conversation – and placed his chisel on the frost in the patch of flattened grass alongside his tongs and hammer and carved planks of timber. Under the clear autumn sky he had got up and walked down the path, past the piles of dried fuel peat stacked tall as a man; past the heaps of cleared stones before the sheep barn and the boulder he had once, when young and lean, been able to climb.

Behind him, the warmth of his hand remained in the chisel on the grass, and the hoar frost on the straw closest to the metal began to melt from the heat. White crystals silently dissipating, dissolving into themselves to become water. And then, when the warmth was gone and only the still cold of the air remained, they turned to frost once more, this time in the form of minute pearls of shining ice.

Vilhjalm rounded the corner of the barn and saw Fjallasmyril standing there, still short of breath, the saddle still on her back. Arnar emerged from the building.

'So you found your way home, then?' Vilhjalm asked.

'I did, father.'

'Or perhaps it was Fjallasmyril who was keen to return to the farm?'

Arnar walked across to the horse, taking long strides. He loosened the girth to release the saddle, lifted it from the animal's back and sent the horse out into the field.

'Well, she set her best pace during the last leg of our journey today.'

Sel-Floke came around the corner with a mare they had named Urd. Arnar took Fjallasmyril's saddle blanket and set it over Urd's back, then lifted the worn old saddle into place and began to secure it. Vilhjalm stared at him, surprised, as Astrid, the farm's other servant, came out from the main farmhouse. She made her way over to Arnar, carrying a half filled knapsack.

'Everything you asked for is here, Arnar,' she said. 'Dried meat, dried fish, whey, cheese, an extra blanket, an extra shirt and over-socks. Everything you wanted.'

'Thank you.'

Vilhjalm raised his eyebrows.

'Are you leaving us, again?'

'Yes.'

'By darkest Niflheim! Today?'

'Yes – I'm heading east again.'

'Back east? Is that not where you've just come from?'

Arnar had finally secured the saddle. He placed the bit between Urd's working lips and fastened the bridle behind her ears and at her throat.

'Yes.'

'By Muspelheim and vicious serpents, Arnar – you're going back there again? Have you killed game there, out east?'

'No. But I found tracks.'

'Tracks? Of reindeer?'

'Yes.'

'Well then take Sel-Floke with you! And the best bow!'

Arnar was already halfway across the yard. He disappeared into the stable, then came out bearing a trowel and a spade. He slung the two saddlebags onto the horse's back behind the saddle, and tied them down before securing the tools on top of them.

Astrid had gone straight back to the house but she returned now, offering Arnar a sheepskin blanket.

'I know you're an idiot, Arnar,' she said. 'But you don't need to be such an idiot that you forget to keep warm at night.'

'Thank you.'

'But the trowel? And the spade? What are they for?' Vilhjalm asked.

'I want to watch over the tracks.'

'Watch over the tracks? What do you mean?'

But Arnar had already mounted his horse. As he rode away, the imprint of Urd's unshod hooves remained sharp and shining in the frost behind them.

Arnar and the horse travelled without stopping for the rest of the day and half the next. As he again crossed the great plain beneath the glacier, Arnar saw that the tracks were still there in the sand.

He built his camp by a soft mound of heather-covered sand that rose tall as a man from the valley floor, stacking walls of stone and digging up peat and shovelling it beside them. He was unable to build anything of any great size – the towering buildings of his imagination could come later. But by evening the next day, Arnar had erected a shack with a solid, turf roof and a floor of sand. In one corner of the single room were the buck's footprints. Around them, Arnar constructed a small chest out of stones, laying a flat stone across the top. He slept there in the shack that night.

Two days later he returned home to Dyradal.

'Did you find your tracks, out there in the east?' Vilhjalm asked when they met.

'Yes.'

'And they were still there, just as before?'

'Just as before.'

'And were you able to watch over them, as you planned to?'

'I protected them well. They'll remain there for a long time now. At the innermost end of Jøkuldal.'

'The innermost end of the valley? By the glacier?'

'Yes.'

'The tracks of how many animals?'

'Three reindeer bulls.'

'On their way south?'

'Yes.'

'That's the direction they favour at this time of year.'

'You'll see them, one day.'

'The tracks?'

'Yes.'

Vilhjalm raised his eyebrows.

'They'll be swept away by wind and rain long before I ever make it to Jøkuldal.'

'I doubt that.'

Vilhjalm raised his brows again – he no longer followed his son's words.

'They mark the place where I'm going to build my farm,' Arnar said.

Vilhjalm still didn't answer. He simply shook his head and rubbed his chin as he sometimes did. Arnar saw the good humour in his father's eyes wither away to be replaced by sorrow or unease, but he continued:

'There are vast plains to be cultivated there. Below the icefall.'

'No, Arnar, Jøkuldal is no place to settle a farm.'

'If Jøkuldal is no place to settle, then I don't know where is – the valley has the greatest plains in all the mountains of the Western Settlement.'

‘It’s too close to the shadow of the glacier. It isn’t safe.’

‘It’s just as safe as anywhere else. And the tracks were there.’

‘You can find reindeer tracks and old antlers in all mountains and all valleys.’

‘Not tracks like these.’

‘Listen to me, Arnar. Nothing good ever came out of Utgard – and our Utgard is the glacier. The winters are much harder there. And the Skraeling raiders? That’s where they came from. You’ll be too far from others. You won’t be able to defend yourself.’

‘One day, it’ll be home to the greatest farm in all the Western Settlement.’

Vilhjalm shook his head. It was futile to argue. He had issued warnings to Arnar many times before – told him of the importance of thought before action – but he knew he could no longer influence his son’s choices. In some ways, he had never been able to.

‘I’ll head to Åsastad tomorrow,’ said Arnar. ‘To ask Himin-Gorm for permission to clear the fields, start to build.’

Because in the end, it was all up to Himin-Gorm – the eastern mountains came under his chiefdom. But they were on good terms, Arnar and Himin-Gorm, and granting Arnar permission should pose no difficulty. Would not the chieftain, more than anyone, appreciate the outermost reaches of the kingdom also being taken into use, and settled?

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One autumn, on the coast the Greenlanders had named Greipir, where five fjords cut into the land in the shape of slim fingers, a whale had come ashore. He had been dead for some time, the stench of ruin spreading about him.

On the third day after the beaching, a bear stood upon this mountain of rotting flesh. He found the smell hugely inviting, and after much time and effort managed to claw and gnaw a gash in the whale’s thick, leathery hide. There, he ate from the blubber and black meat, until the gash was large enough for him to stick his head and forepaws inside and gulp down the soft, gurgling entrails. Then he jumped down from the carcass, swayed across to a bed of heather in his rolling gait, and lay down with his head on his paws. His body was flecked with black and stank of liver, blood and blubber; of whale oil and decay. His eyes were tired, and as they rolled back in his head he tipped over onto his side and slept.

At dusk, snowflakes began to float down from the half-dark of the sky. They melted as soon as they landed at first, but the rocks and islets on which they fell became colder with each descending flake, and after a time the snowflakes’ melting ceased. They soon covered everything but the sea and steepest cliffs. Then the polar darkness fell over the entire landscape, until nothing could be seen.

As the morning dawned, a far more infrequent guest came hobbling and sniffing along these same shores – a wolverine. When he caught sight of the carcass he froze, still for a time, his body arched and small eyes riveted to the whale, now covered in snow. He caught the scent of the bear who had been here before him, but the odour was faint, and so he was unable to tell whether the bear was still around or had wandered on his way. No matter – towards polar bears he felt neither hostility nor fear. On the contrary – he sometimes followed their scent and found morsels of leftover food where they had fed. No other outcome than that he, too, should eat from the wale – whether the polar bear was still here or not – ever occurred to him.

He trudged over to the colossal body, scrambled up onto it and lumbered across to the hole the bear had made in the hide, which gaped black and red before him. Once there, he pulled loose his first mouthfuls.

Then the bear got up from just beyond the ridge of the whale’s body, raising himself slowly, the snow sliding off him in large, soft sheets. The wolverine lifted his head and

stared, curious, at this being that had just risen, but did not drop the shreds of whale meat held between his jaws.

The bear shook his head and shoulders; stood staring at the wolverine. He could not remember ever having seen such a creature before. He continued to stand there, listening to the audacious vagrant, then walked around the whale and into the path of the wind, catching a whiff of the stranger's scent. He paused there a moment, shifting his weight between his great paws, and saw that this animal was slower, less watchful than the Arctic foxes who so often insisted on keeping him company. The bear knew that if he only managed to get hold of him, the rightful owner of the whale would be quickly decided.

Just as the wolverine had stood before the whale that morning, so Arnar had stood before Himin-Gorm's farmhouse at Åsastad.

The buildings here were larger, more sturdily built, than on other farms – the great weight of the stone walls seemed to chain them to the very bedrock itself. All of them were black, as if they had once been set alight but not even the fire had been able to shake them. The turf had grown over the edges of the roofs, the grass hanging in tufts towards the ground.

No sound could be heard indoors, and there was no sign of the building's inhabitants – only a few livestock grazing on the hills, and half a dozen horses, the leather straps attached to their bridles fastened to a horizontal crossbeam in one of the long walls.

The sacrificial stone at the centre of the yard no longer shone with the blood of the lambs but was rubbed bright and smooth, the ribbon of ancient runes still running around its circumference.

Arnar walked up to the door of the house and knocked. Its hinges were made of wrought iron, its heavy wood dark with the oils of sea creatures. He was about to knock again when the door opened a crack to reveal a little girl, around six or seven years old, just inside. Before he could say anything the girl lifted a finger to her lips and made a shushing sound, her expression simultaneously curious and stern. Then she turned and was gone. From deep within the house, Arnar heard the reverberations of a voice. The words were distorted, muffled by the doors and stone walls, but the voice's owner was unmistakable – it was the voice of Åsastad itself.

The face of an old woman appeared then. She was frail and short, wearing a green shawl over her grey hair. She asked if he had come to speak with Himin-Gorm, and Arnar answered yes, and gave his name. The woman gestured for him to enter and led him through dark passageways, with doors to either side. The air smelled of dried and salted meat, of wet clothes and sour milk; of dogs and of burning peat. A bench covered in sheepskins stood in a room where two seal oil lamps were lit. The old woman turned to Arnar and told him that Himin-Gorm was speaking with the men in the great hall. She waved him on in, opening another heavy door, and they stepped into the hearth-room. A fire was burning in the room's low fireplace; together with the long rows of seal oil lamps its flames cast a reddish light over the room's inhabitants. Himin-Gorm stood behind the chair at the head of the huge, long table, twelve or fifteen men seated before him. They all turned to look at Arnar as he stepped inside.

'Arnar of Dyradal has come, and wishes to speak with you,' the old woman said to Himin-Gorm.

A broad smile broke through Himin-Gorm's beard.

'Arnar! Of course it's you!' he said in a rough gust of good humour. 'But his name is more than that, Frið – his name is Arnar *Walrusbane*, isn't that right Arnar? Arnar of Dyradal.'

Arnar nodded, replying that indeed, it was true, and they both smiled.

Frið disappeared from the room and Arnar sat down, the men turning their attention back to Himin-Gorm. The chieftain stood there, broad and dark, as he warned them that the old pits in the east needed tending; dictated where he wanted new defensive walls constructed and how long and how high they should be. He divided them into hunting parties; told them which hunting huts they would sleep in, and who would drive the animals and who would shoot. No questions were asked, and when he was done Himin-Gorm nodded, and the men got up and left. One of them stopped before Arnar and held out his hand.

'Arnar,' he said. 'It's good to see you again.'

'Tinforne!'

There wasn't time for them to exchange many words, but they each gripped the other's hand as they spoke, and without either of them being able to express or explain it, it was as if they sensed, through the few words and questions and pleasantries they shared, that something existed between them. A likeness, or a destiny, or a dream. Their faces were open and near to one another, and although they had scarcely met since the night of the sacrifice, they noticed that the friendship between them was easy and strong – exactly as a friendship should be. Then they parted once more.

Himin-Gorm gestured for Arnar to join him at the table, and they both sat down.

'And all is well with your father?'

'All is well.'

'And the sheep returned safely this year, as last?'

'Yes – we're missing a ewe, but she'll probably turn up.'

'I'd think so. And on what errand are you here today, Arnar of Dyradal?'

'Around a week ago I rode east, into the mountains. Found tracks out there.'

'The tracks of reindeer?'

'Yes, bulls.'

'I see.'

'And the farm at Dyradal is rather on the small side. Arable land is scarce back in Dyradal.'

Himin-Gorm nodded.

'I see,' he repeated.

'But out where I found the tracks, there's no end to the fields that could be cultivated.'

'Oh really? And where were these tracks?'

'On the plains below the glacier, in Jøkuldal.'

'Ah.'

The chieftain smiled slightly, but said nothing further.

'So I'd like to ask your permission to settle a farm out there.'

Himin-Gorm remained seated for a while, as if occupied by something that amused him. Then he shook his head.

'I remember our walrus hunt in Botnsvik, three years ago,' he said. 'When we crushed that boat full of fjord trolls beneath us. Do you remember, Arnar? Hafgrim, his boat and his crew? That's a hunt that won't be forgotten any time soon. And that blow you struck, when you killed the walrus. Have you swung your axe like that again since, Arnar of Dyradal?'

Arnar smiled.

'No, I can't say I have. I haven't been on a walrus hunt since then.'

They sat and spoke of the walrus's whims, about whether there was any chance that the beast might be seen again. They might be mistaken for old friends as they laughed, mimicking the cries of Sel-Floke and Hafgrim, but when silence had fallen between them, and Arnar again asked about Jøkuldal, Himin-Gorm lowered his head slightly, his gaze cool. The geniality that had been briefly evident in his features was gone.

'What do you think, Arnar?'

‘What do I think?’

The change was sudden, and for a moment Arnar was confused.

‘There’s so much land that could be cleared there,’ he answered.

‘Oh really? So much land?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you haven’t answered my question. What do you think?’

‘I thought it wouldn’t pose a problem.’

‘Then you thought wrong.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes.’

‘I… I find that strange.’

‘You find my decision strange?’ Himin-Gorm’s voice was satisfied, curious.

‘I would have thought it would be to everyone’s benefit,’ Arnar said. ‘If there were more farms in the mountains.’

‘Oh? No, Arnar, I’ve ridden into the mountains out there, to Jøkuldal and the mountains to the north of the glacier and over Steinhei and to the very ridges of Utgard. Should I let a half-grown boy from Dyradal start farming out in my hunting grounds? Should I let him play havoc out there, digging and causing such destruction that I can no longer ride through my own valley unimpeded?’

Arnar didn’t respond, only stared uncomprehendingly at the man in front of him. Himin-Gorm shook his head with its broad nose and jaw, its eyes so far apart from one another, and continued:

‘No, Arnar, you will not start farming out there – or anywhere else, for that matter. You’re going to go home, and you’re going to grow up, and perhaps, *if* you grow into something useful, we can speak again. There are plenty of outlying farms on the moors that stand empty, and I own them all. Occasionally I might give a man a farm – if I have good faith in him, if I think he might prove useful to me one day. But I might also decide not to give him a farm. Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?’

Arnar, lost for words, stared at Himin-Gorm. He had often heard it said that Himin-Gorm possessed a violent temper, but that this would obstruct the path he wished to take had never occurred to him. In the world he had inhabited, and in the dreams he had spun, his future was wide open. He had not yet understood that dreams may be made of air, while men may be made of mountains.

‘Did you have any other business?’

‘No.’

‘Then please give my best to your father when you return home.’

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Vilhjalm and Arnar spoke little of Himin-Gorm’s decision – they both understood there was little to say on the matter. But the next day, as they were turning over a patch of earth behind the house, Vilhjalm noticed that his son remained taciturn and in a bad mood, and it pained him to see him so.

‘Himin-Gorm is who he is, Arnar,’ he said. ‘You couldn’t expect him to grant you permission, not out of the blue like that. Nobody should expect permission to do anything from Himin-Gorm.’

Arnar looked at his father. His thoughts had long been making their way along these new walls that had so suddenly sprung up, shutting out all sight of the open horizon. He had so far been unable to find a crack in them, or a place at which he could climb over, but he would get there. He would keep looking until he got there.

‘Ramnkveld! Wasn’t that his name? The man who built the bridge over the Ramnkveldsåa river?’

Vilhjalm saw then that it was no longer childish disobedience that occupied his son – it was the defiance of a grown man. He had thought little enough of the many daydreams that his son had woven around himself – but he liked this defiance even less.

‘Yes, but Ramnkveld had only had the one river to fight – not his chieftain,’ Vilhjalm said. *Nor his own father*, he thought wistfully, but stopped himself from speaking the words aloud. Ultimately, he was a gentle man.

When the winter came, it came late, first with a heavy and silent frost that turned the blue ice black as night and two feet thick across the surfaces of the mountain lakes. Then it snowed, night after night, and then came the wind, blowing the snow into great drifts and filling every hollow in the terrain; packing it tightly enough to permit skis to glide across it but still loosely enough that paws and cloven hooves sank through.

It was a winter to remember. They ranged on, hunting through the mountains as they had never done before, sometimes all three men together, sometimes alone. Down unfamiliar valleys that silently watched them come and go, into to the winter’s far-off blue; along rock faces and towards peaks where high ridges sparkled in the rays of the low winter sun. The shushing of their skis always running with them, the tracks of their quarry sometimes ahead of them, luring them forth and ever onwards, onwards.

For in such a winter this land was made for nothing but hunting.

They had an open loft in the house, where the hides were put once scraped and dried, and the stack of Arctic fox and wolf skins consisted of thirty-four hides by the time spring arrived. During a hunt to the northwest of Jøkuldal they brought down five musk oxen and two reindeer, and carried meat and hides and musk ox horn for six days straight. After the last load had been brought in they rested, their shoulders and feet so stiff and sore that none of them left the house again that day.

After the spring had come, and after they had shorn the sheep and the lambing was almost done, they rode down to Suðrdalsbol by the Lysefjord. There, they traded half the skins, vast quantities of smoked meat, four sacks of wool and four of the musk ox horns for the seal oil they would need for their lamps next year, in addition to five horse loads of timber, two blankets, a scythe and five iron arrowheads. They could also have taken the carcasses of two bearded seals that had been caught down in the fjord, but Vilhjalm refused the meat and blubber in favour of the skins, saying that he refused to eat such poor meat again until forced to.

The season’s work on the farm was also done. They sat outdoors one evening, the approaching summer in the air, drinking *myrkald* and soured milk.

‘I’ve been thinking I’d like to row along the coast, to the north,’ said Arnar.

‘Row along the coast? To the north?’ Vilhjalm stared mistrustfully at his son. ‘Where in the north? You know you’ll never be able to row all the way to Norðsetr alone.’

‘Just to Myrkfjord and Rønnaugsfjord, to see whether the winter storms have brought any timber. From Markland.’

‘You do realise that we don’t own a boat? Neither you nor me?’

‘I’ll be able to get hold of one.’

Two days later, Arnar rode out of the mountains at Gripnes. There, at the outermost farm, he asked whether he could borrow a rowing boat for a time; when the man asked what he wanted with a boat, Arnar said he wished to row north to Myrkfjord and Rønnaugsfjord in search of drift timber.

‘Alone?’

Arnar smiled, his eyes as grey as the wadmal coat he was wearing.

'Preferably.'

He rowed westwards, down familiar fjords, until he rounded the Hamraskjer reef and rowed directly north, the polar sun tracing its slow circles around him.

For three days he rowed beside unbroken coastline. Then the cliffs began to crack and part, and fjords opened within them, which he followed. He rowed alongside smooth slopes of rock, flocks of seabirds flying up around him; below cliffs from which streams cast themselves out to hang in the void as ribbons of smoke. He rowed across a mirror of sky blue and sunshine, for the days were without wind, and the image of the heavens and mountains breathed below his boat in slow swells. He listened to the mild creaking of the thole pins and to the ripple of the fjord's skin cleaving beneath the prow.

He rowed through light, heath-coloured nights and through days that glittered like the water droplets that fell from the blades of his oars. One night he slept in the boat, waking to find ringed seals swimming alongside him in the morning, and he felt like the first human ever to enter this land. Like a settler discovering a world where no one had been before him.

Whales blew out their breaths at the fjord's centre; great auks swam along its shores. And one night a curious Arctic fox held his gaze from among the green moorland and blue-black rock.

What a blessed land this was.

He could have left the fjords behind him and rambled like a mountain dweller through this landscape of musk oxen and reindeer – he could have walked through unfamiliar valleys and climbed up onto a peak to let his gaze glide across these far-flung hunting grounds. But he rowed on, for it was as if something in him told him that nothing is without end, and even the good days are meted out, and will not last forever.

Down arm after arm of the fjord he sought the trees that once, in an unknown wilderness far to the east of Bjarmeland, had lost their grasp on the earth and fallen. Washed out to sea by cold rivers, they had been driven across the open water throughout the subsequent months and years until they reached the Greenland coast and ran aground.

So it was that one night Arnar was rowing along the head of a fjord, beside a rocky beach, and above the high water mark, just a stone's throw beyond it, he saw a dry twig sticking up. A grey, spindly little twig, not unlike a dead willow. He could so easily have rowed past, turned out into the fjord again, and when the night fell he might have dragged his boat ashore and rolled out his reindeer skin and pulled his broad blanket and sheepskin over him, and fallen asleep without once remembering the twig he had seen. Without knowing that, had he gone ashore, his life would have taken a different direction than that which it was meant to take.

But his gaze caught on the twig, for there was something strange about it nonetheless. And he turned his boat in, pulling it just half a fathom up the beach, and walked up the rocks to stand there, spellbound. A Eurasian oystercatcher took wing and flew away, but he didn't look after the bird. He stood with the blood hammering in his hands and temples.

Before him was an expanse of stone, black as iron pots. Dried out kelp and seagrass lay in tendrils around it – the sea would soak them once again when it flooded the shore. But lying directly across this was a tremendous tree trunk – he had never known such enormous timber existed. A tree so mighty it must have grown for hundreds of years. He went across to the tree – a pine – and placed his hands on the ancient, grey wood. It had been washed by waves, been worn against stones and rock for so long that most of its bark had been rubbed away. He would need another man to simply grip the giant around its girth – the log was dragon-sized. He measured his steps from root to top – over 90 feet. A giant that would provide timber for longships or banqueting halls. He fetched his axe, and as the smell of resin

filled the air and a sense of awe spread through his body, he began to delimb the trunk. The blows of his axe revealed the glow of hard, healthy wood.

He wanted to take one or two of the branches with him; the rest he set in a pile above the tidemark. The day may come when he could return for them.

His axe was slightly too light for the heaviest branches, but the effort they required was nothing compared to that needed to chop off the roots. But they too must be removed – otherwise it would be impossible to haul the giant home.

He hacked at the log until late in the evening, then returned to the boat to retrieve his packed lunch. Then he sat down on a patch of heather to eat slivers of dried meat and hard, dried cheese with rancid butter. A stoat kept him company that night – a lightning-fast little fellow with curious, coal-black eyes. Before he slept, he threw a piece of mutton to this hunter with his black-tipped tail.

'Don't forget to help me, tomorrow,' Arnar said. 'Getting this log into the water.'

But it was the sea that helped him the next day, rising and flooding the shore until it had lifted the giant tree trunk enough for Arnar to wedge one of the smaller branches under it – using the branch as a lever, he managed to transport the log across the rocks; once it was floating in the water, he saw that it was four times as long as his boat. Arnar attached one rope down at the root end and another towards the top, before tying the ends of both ropes to the stern of the boat. Should the giant start to sink during the journey, he should still be able to row it home.

The boat lay deep in the water, the huge log hanging astern like a Midgard serpent, dead and stiff and striving against Arnar's every stroke. The journey home would be a long one, but as his father had once said: 'No burden is easier to carry than a heavy load of reindeer meat' – and after iron and walrus there were no greater riches than good timber.

As he rowed, Arnar thought of the girl who had stood before him on the beach beside the walrus, of her eyes and brows and her words that had come so easily. She had been scarcely more than a little girl, and yet the image of her remained vivid in his mind.

Five days later, the callouses on his hands now hard like leather, he rowed into Agnafjord. There were farmsteads situated far out along the fjords here, too – Kjarvalstad, Hrossanes and others. He rowed past all of them, continuing his journey inland.

Under the Þórsmørksfell mountain, a couple of arrow shots up from the fjord, was a small lake, a tarn from which no stream ran out nor in. It was tremendously deep, its banks furred with moss. For eight generations, the people of Odin had sunk timber in this tarn. Logs of drift timber, or those cut down in Markland and Vinland the Good. All weighted with jagged stones and sunk into the darkness. In the depths, the wood could remain healthy for all eternity. Until the day it was needed.

'What if the lake is bottomless, or a path to the underworld?' it was once asked. 'Then our descendants will know where to go to demand the timber's return,' came the reply.

Arnar borrowed eight horses and long lengths of *svarðreip* from one of the nearby farms, and it took him around a day to saddle the horses and attach the hames, and tow the dragon-sized log to the tarn, a rift running through the soil behind it. At the water's edge, Arnar carved his mark – an eagle in flight – into the wood. He attached a rope from the log to a stake in the mud, weighted the root end of the log with stones before freeing the front end from the horses on the opposite side, and allowed the water to take it. Thin streams of bubbles rose up through the water where the timber sank.

A number of people had ridden up to see the log, and one of them was named Logi. His hair and beard were grey; his old face burned reddish brown by the snow and the wind.

'Did you give the land something in exchange for the log?' he asked Arnar afterwards.

Arnar looked at Logi to see if he was being mocked, but there was no sign of ridicule in Logi's pale eyes.

'No.'

'You should have.'

'Oh really? You think so?'

'It's what's known as fairness – or what others would call atonement, to free yourself from misfortune. To your ancestors in the mountain valleys it might have been known under the name of sacrifice. Call it what you will, but if you take something from the land, you should give the land something in return. Because this land gives nothing without recompense.'

'I gave it nothing,' Arnar said. 'The land will have to make do as best it can.'

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Arnar straightened his back from the stone. Where the long, winding path from the west wove around the moorland below the Akslarfjell mountain, before the scree below Nipatind where boulders lay strewn across the landscape like grey, fossilised corpses, three men came riding, their pale horses walking at a casual pace. Arnar stood there for a while, then took hold of the burlap sack and whistled to the pups before walking towards the trail down which the men would pass.

Another winter had passed in Dyradal, and a new spring had come.

The three puppies trotted at Arnar's heels – at two and a half months old they were always eager for new games. Three well-bred, bright youngsters, two males and a bitch – all three of whom would become hunting companions, sheep dogs and guardians. Their tails moved in small circles, their ears yet with soft, bobbing flaps. Arnar always found himself smiling whenever he watched them, rolling over one another or sprinting on their short legs across the heather, for there are many living creatures that may bring a person joy, but none more so than puppies.

When the dogs reached the horses they stormed ahead, yapping and wagging their tails. Arnar let them run – he knew calling out to them would be of little use, and he saw that the horses were used to dogs and paid little attention to the puppies' ill behaviour. The first rider pulled on his horse's bridle and called out in greeting.

'What say you, Arnar?'

'All well. And you, Bergfinn?'

'All well, indeed. This is no bad day to be out in the mountains.'

Farmers from the farmsteads of the White Christ, down by the fjords. They had not met often, but Arnar recognised them from the seal hunts at which many men had gathered, and from occasional encounters along the Western Settlement's paths and trails. The first rider was named Bergfinn Gudmundsson, a thin, ugly man from a farm known as Auðvinstad at the innermost end of the Agnafjord, not far from the Þórsmørkstjørna lake that now contained Arnar's log. Bergfinn's tangled hair hung to his narrow, stooped shoulders, but his eyes had a friendly and almost slow appearance, as if he was patiently waiting for something, and wished everyone well. The two other men remained silent astride their horses, their heads bowed, their clothes old and threadbare.

'Would you like to accompany me to greet the others? Or are you out on another errand?'

'We're on our way to Åsastad, but these two here…' he nodded behind him, 'they'd never seen Dyradal before, so we agreed to ride this way and find out whether we could stay the night here, then make our way over the mountains to Åsastad and Himin-Gorm tomorrow.'

Arnar signalled for them to join him, and side by side they made their way up towards the house. Bergfinn saw that Arnar's hands were blackened with earth, and asked whether they had interrupted his work.

'I'm trying to cultivate a strip of land in the hills up here.'

'There must be quite a few stones to be cleared, as elsewhere?'

Arnar dashed the dried dirt from his fingers.

'There are, but it's useless whining about such things. And once they're gone this green strip of land will be here for good – for all eternity.'

For how could he know that in less than a generation after the land was cultivated and the cleared stones stacked in a nearby heap – that in less than the time it takes a man to be born and grow up and have children of his own – the first crowberries and willow would return to the field? How could he know that by the time the next generation had been and gone, the land would be so overgrown that no one would ever know that it had once been cleared?

The three men received a warm welcome at Dyradal that evening. Astrid served them soured milk and *skyr*; cheese and smoked mutton and horse meat. Both parties let the ancient enmity that existed between them lie there, unspoken, and the conversation flowed easily and enthusiastically around the fire in the open hearth.

Because four summers earlier, a ship from the Kingdom of Norway had come to the Eastern Settlement. As yet, little of the knowledge of the wider world to the east possessed by the ship's crew had reached the mountain farms, and Vilhjalm was eager to hear more. Bergfinn had a good memory, and told countless tales. Of Queen Margaret of Scotland, who had died on the Orkney Islands; of the King of England who had then taken control of Scotland; of great wars in the lands around Constantinople.

'More than ten thousand riders? asked Vilhjalm.

'A hundred thousand. In endless hoards, riding into Vendland and the kingdom to the west of Constantinople. It's said that they never once dismounted their horses.'

'And nobody knows from whence they came?'

'They're said to have come from a land so far east…' Bergfinn was about to say *that only Godless heathens have seen them*, but stopped himself.

'…that their skin burns with every rising of the sun.'

'And have they taken Constantinople?'

'No, they rode around it. Constantinople's armies and walls continue to stand firm.'

'Might they be thinking of ravaging Norway and Sweden?'

'It's said that they can't sail – that they can't stand water, neither them nor their bows.'

They talked of the new, young king of Sweden and about the fortress being constructed at Viken in Norway. Then the conversation rambled through old times, and they spoke of the ships loaded with walrus tusks, which almost two generations earlier had been sent from Greenland to Norway and then on to Rome as part of the church tithes.

As the evening neared its end, Bergfinn had still not explained why he wished to visit Himin-Gorm at Åsastad, but when Vilhjalm asked him how many livestock he would need to feed over the next winter, he answered:

'None, most likely. We're planning to leave the Western Settlement before the winter comes.'

For a moment, silence descended on the hearth-room.

'For good?' asked Vilhjalm.

'Yes, for good. We've had enough of this cursed land.'

'I've heard talk of this "cursed land",' said Arnar. 'Although I've yet to see it myself.'

‘Well, I’ve certainly seen it,’ said Bergfinn. ‘Two winters ago, everyone on Einar Thorlaksson’s farm perished. Some of them froze to death; others starved. And last winter, four people and many livestock died on the farms to the south, in Kvitfjord. Every year, the land claims more lives. I lost my brother at sea last year. Those of us who are left are taking our families elsewhere while we’re still alive.’

Vilhjalm nodded. His family and the surrounding farms had fared better against the fates. To be sure, hunger had banged upon plenty of doors in the mountains, too, but had so far been unable to break those doors down. But they had also noticed that decay and disintegration was closing in. With the exception of the past year, which had truly been a good one, Vilhjalm had also noticed that the hunts were becoming increasingly demanding, and there had been a greater number of accidents during their hunting and fishing expeditions. Some also believed that the Skraelings were becoming more numerous in the lands around Norðsetr year upon year, and that their raids would intensify in the times ahead. But to leave everything behind? Was there not something pathetic, something pitiable in that? Shouldn’t one fight for all that one cherished, all that one held dear?

‘We plan to head south, to the Eastern Settlement,’ said Bergfinn. ‘We’re trying to get our ship into passable condition to make the crossing. From there, we hope to get places aboard a bigger, seagoing ship, to Norway or Iceland.’

‘It’s said that it’s four years since the last ship from Iceland reached the Eastern Settlement.’

Bergfinn didn’t answer. Had he not heard that it was almost 400 years since vacant land had been found on Iceland, and that Norway had been fully settled since Odin himself cleared land there at the dawn of time? Arnar was about to ask, but then saw the deep lines in Bergfinn’s face, and understood that the decision must have been a heavy one. He bit his tongue.

‘But what does Himin-Gorm have to do with any of this?’

‘We need timber to repair the ship, to ready it for crossing the open sea. Some tall trunks. The timber in my house is too old and short to be of use. I want to ask for Himin-Gorm’s help – to offer him my farm in exchange for his timber.’

Vilhjalm held Bergfinn’s gaze for a while then, thinking that these were men who would end up sitting in the hearth-room at Åsastad humiliating themselves – and that it would not make the slightest difference. He felt little pleasure at seeing them this way, but knew of no comfort he could offer.

‘He can be difficult to deal with, Himin-Gorm of Åsastad,’ said Vilhjalm. ‘Just know that he can be difficult to deal with.’

It was at this moment that Arnar glimpsed the first crack in the wall that had obstructed his view for so long. He scrutinised it from every angle, already sure that he could see rays of light streaming through.

‘If you have no objection, Bergfinn,’ he said, ‘I will ride with you to Åsastad tomorrow.’

‘Of course. It would be our pleasure. Do you have business at Åsastad, also?’

‘Yes, I believe I do.’

Arnar’s father cast him a sharp glance.

‘What kind of business do you have up there?’

‘A minor matter – just something left unfinished when I was there last.’

‘You finished everything last time, Arnar. Be wise. Let it lie.’

‘Don’t worry, father. It has nothing to do with Jøkuldal.’

‘What, then?’

‘Just a few things that should have already been done.’

Once again, Vilhjalm tried to extract his son's thoughts from him, but Arnar gave no answer. He simply smiled and stood up.

'I must see to the horses before I turn in, but sleep well, all of you. We'll speak tomorrow.'

Arnar disappeared into the hall, the sound of his steps on the stone floor receding as he went. Bergfinn had understood little of the exchange, but saw that Vilhjalm was shaking his head, apparently unhappy with what had passed between them.

'Perhaps I shouldn't have accepted his request to ride with us?' Bergfinn asked.

'He's a grown man,' answered Vilhjalm. 'I'm sure it's as little in your power to influence where he goes as it is in mine. It's just that, as a father, it's not always easy to watch one's children grow up.'

That night, before Arnar slept, he thought of the chieftain back at Åsastad; remembered the words spoken at their last meeting. But there were now other words in Arnar, too. Words that, so far, had remained unsaid. They entered his thoughts, vows borne within them. He saw that the barriers raised in Himin-Gorm's hearth-room had begun to crumble; for a moment he heard the indistinct echo of the walls as they fell. Everything that had once been obscured was now opened anew, and he could again wander through open landscapes filled with light. He was still roaming these landscapes when sleep finally came.

He floated through the dark on long, silent breaths, and when his dreams captured him and took him beyond, to a place where neither he nor his thoughts could be bound, he saw a girl. She came and stood before him, her neck long and straight, and met his gaze, and it struck him that it should have occurred to him before – that she was here. That this was where he would find her. He waited for her to ask him something, but she said nothing. Again, she turned and ran from him.

They rode out from Dyradal early the next day, not dismounting until they reached Åsastad. Arnar sat in Himin-Gorm's hearth-room once again. In the half-dark and smoke he sat there, under the roughly hewn ceiling beams and black stone walls adorned with broad antlers and the heavy horns of musk oxen, all dusted with the soot of the oil lamps and generations of burned peat and log fires. This time, in addition to Arnar and Himin-Gorm, four other men were also present: the three fjord dwellers and Himin-Gorm's cottar and servant, Vermund.

Between them burned a lamp of the finest seal oil. Himin-Gorm's face was a blank, the sockets of his eyes sunken in darkness. There was no movement, no expression to be read in his face. As if he was without feeling, without life – as if the weak lamplight had transformed him into a statue of stone and condemned him to eternal melancholy and silence. His beard lay over his chest like the hair of an old ram; his rough hands, scarred and callused, were set one atop the other.

He had sat this way as Bergfinn related his message. Bergfinn cleared his throat to repeat himself:

'You'll receive all the livestock we'll leave behind in exchange for the timber. There'll be many remaining sheep and horses, and the entire farm besides. I'll have no further use for it – I will not be returning to Greenland.'

This time, Himin-Gorm's silence was not quite so long. He lowered his head and turned his gaze on Bergfinn.

'As far as I'm aware, my good Bergfinn, we do not make sacrifices to the same gods, you and I.'

Bergfinn saw that Himin-Gorm's eyes were hard and cold. He knew he'd already received his answer, but he had children at home, and a wife growing more apprehensive by the day. He had already humiliated himself by coming here. He had nothing more to lose.

‘I thought we no longer need quarrel over our faith. For me, this is about saving lives.’

‘So you thought you’d give your farm for my timber. Did you not consider that I might already have a farm that feeds me?’

‘The pastures at Auðvinstad grow early in the spring. They face the sun.’

‘If I wanted your farm I could take it the day you sail out of the fjord. Abandoned farms aren’t difficult to take over, here in the Western Settlement.’

‘If a farm stands empty and without heirs, the law says it goes to the Church.’

‘The time of the Church is past. The priests up here have died; their families and the power they once had long gone. This land was too hard for them.’

‘They say that one day… the Church will return…’

Bergfinn’s voice grew weaker before it trailed off altogether. But Himin-Gorm’s rage was becoming stronger with each word spoken.

‘Eight generations have passed since the first of my ancestors sank the first logs in the water of Þórsmørkstjørna. And you come here offering me leftover lambs and lame horses for my timber?’

Bergfinn fell silent. It was if he had shrunk, become smaller; as if he was sinking. One of his two companions got up, about to say that they should take their leave, be on their way.

But Arnar leaned forward slightly. He was sitting at the foot of the huge table, directly opposite Himin-Gorm.

‘A farm seems reasonable payment for a few logs of timber,’ he said.

Himin-Gorm turned to look at Arnar, his hoarse voice reverberating between the stone walls.

‘Unless I’m gravely mistaken, Arnar of Dyradal, your opinion is of little consequence in this matter.’

‘Perhaps. But even I understand that a farm makes good payment for timber.’

A muscle below one of Himin-Gorm’s eyebrows twitched. His unnerving gaze and the rage etched in his face silenced all sound, the very walls themselves retreating into the dark in deference to his fury. But Arnar turned away from Himin-Gorm to face Bergfinn instead.

‘I have a log,’ said Arnar. ‘Around 16 fathoms long – the greatest piece of drift timber ever to have run ashore on the beaches of our land.’

No answer came. It was as if the other man simply did not understand the words being spoken.

‘How much timber do you need to repair the ship?’ Arnar asked.

And with Himin-Gorm’s silhouette growing ever larger and ever weightier at his end of the table, Arnar continued:

‘The log is yours, Bergfinn. And I’ll help you work on the ship and get it into a fit state. If you give me Auðvinstad.’

‘I’d heard about the log,’ Bergfinn said then, ‘although I didn’t know it was you who had brought it. But as true as I sit here before you now – the farm is yours, in exchange for the log.’

Himin-Gorm got up from the end of the table.

‘So, Arnar of Dyradal,’ he said. ‘You plan to be a man of the fjords? A pathetic fjord dweller?’

‘The last time I sat here,’ said Arnar, ‘you managed to prevent me from running my own farm. But I find it hard to see how you’ll stop me this time.’

Himin-Gorm leaned forward to set the knuckles of his fists against the tabletop, his voice full of a rasping, shackled rage that threatened to burst free of its bonds at any moment.

‘You better leave here, Arnar!’ he yelled, ‘And fast! You better ride like the wind!’

Arnar nodded and got up, and as Bergfinn and the other two men got to their feet, said farewell and accompanied Arnar out of the house, through dim corridors and out into the daylight, Arnar heard life itself thrumming within him. Just as he had heard it when he found the log – and just as he had heard it upon meeting the walrus's pale, blue gaze.

Part 2

EIR OF VASSFELLDRAGSSTAD

Five days later they met as agreed on the shores of the Þórsmørkstjørna lake. Arnar had ridden from Dyradal, while Bergfinn, two of his servants and one of his brothers-in-law had made the journey by boat. A third serving boy had arrived with eight horses the previous evening.

They stood by the tarn, their feet ankle deep in moss, feeling something staring back into them from deep below the surface.

Decaying wooden stakes had been driven into the ground where ropes had once been fed down to the logs on the lake bottom. But they had been ropes of undressed bearded seal and walrus hide, perishable as life itself. Most of them had long since rotted away, and how on earth the timber should be hauled up, if the tarn could not be drained, nobody knew. Perhaps someone would have to dive down and fasten new ropes to the logs? The thought alone was enough to make a brave man shudder.

The horses pulled Arnar's log to the surface and half way up one of the banks. The men released the stones that had been attached to the log to sink it, then drove the horses on once again, and the log was towed across the moss and peat down the slopes to the beach. The wood was now darker in colour, its surface slick with green algae. The smell of damp, freshly disturbed earth and the horses' sweat hung in the air.

They rowed down the fjord then, five men at the oars fighting the strong headwind, and with the log so deep in the water that it could be glimpsed only as a dark shadow among the waves. They had a long journey ahead of them.

As they approached the innermost end of the Agnafjord, just a few rests away from Bergfinn's farm, they saw a rider approaching from the south, heading down towards the beach at a trot. Bergfinn followed the rider with his gaze for a while, then turned halfway around on his thwart to face Arnar.

'She who rides there – that's the daughter of Hastein, who died of consumption almost three years ago. She lives up at Vassfelldragsstad, beside the Vassfelldragsåa river. She and her mother, two brothers and their servants.'

Arnar followed the woman with his eyes. A young woman. And how she could ride! When she reached the beach, she pulled her horse into such a sharp turn that pebbles and sand flew out from beneath its hooves with a flourish. They charged through the surf at a gallop.

'Let's turn in!' Bergfinn called out to the others.

The girl's horse was chestnut-coated and nimble, its mane plaited into a dozen or so short ropes. A well-kept, hearty horse bearing a girl who rode like a Valkyrie. She herself was wearing a long, grey outfit in the form of a skirt or dress featuring golden patterns; a red shirt that came to below her waist. Her hair was gathered into a thick braid at her neck.

The distance between them was still such that they were unable to hear the sound of the horse's galloping hooves. The girl swept up onto a ridge and turned back towards the beach, and when she turned towards them, Arnar realised who she was. There was no mistaking her glittering eyes.

Bergfinn had asked him some question or other, but he hadn't heard. Bergfinn bumped Arnar's knee.

'What are you staring at, Arnar?' he asked again. The two servants on the front thwarts chuckled good-naturedly.

'He's been given the best farm on the Agnafjord, just a stone's throw from the finest girl in the Western Settlement – and all for a single log of drift timber.'

Arnar watched the girl's every movement. Her fingers at the reins; her feet moving so prettily at the horse's sides. Her head and neck; her body twisting and turning so softly as she guided the horse back and forth across the beach in time with the waves.

They stopped no more than ten fathoms away, and he heard her voice as she exchanged greetings with Bergfinn. She had stopped the horse in the surf and was hugging herself, as if to prevent the wind from tearing at her clothes. Her gaze settled on Arnar.

'This is Arnar Vilhjalmsson of Dyradal,' said Bergfinn. 'The man who has bought Auðvinstad.' He turned to Arnar. 'And this is Eir, daughter of Hastein.'

Eir. The long-haired Valkyrie. Was it not as if he had always known that this must be her name? Arnar nodded.

'Yes, we have met before, Eir and I.'

Eir looked at him, surprised.

'We've met before?'

'Indeed we have. But perhaps you have forgotten it?'

'Yes, I think I must have done. When was it?'

He held her dumbfounded gaze, and it was already as if he felt – as if he knew – that she was the only one. For although there had been other women whom he had undoubtedly lost himself in – a mysterious serving girl who had been so strangely intoxicating one summer; the daughter on a farm in Austmannadal, who he had fallen for and so ridden to two spring feasts and one during the summer in order to see her, and for whom he had grieved upon learning she was promised to someone else – he knew in this instant that with *this* girl, everything was different. The waves were about to cease their motion, the wind could no longer be heard, and with the sense of a spring through which everything has wholeheartedly lived, Arnar said:

'It was a long time ago. But I still remember it well.'

Eir was unsure whether to take him seriously.

'I remember you were rather uncouth. That we spoke for a while, and that you made fun of me.'

Eir laughed.

'I think you must be misremembering.'

'No, I'm certain that I'm not.'

'Could it be that you're mistaking me for someone else?'

'Impossible. You're quite unmistakable.'

Arnar saw that she was embarrassed; her cheeks had reddened. It was as if their roles had reversed; as if the audaciousness from Botnsvik no longer existed within her – had inhabited her only in her childhood and then left her. But still, two heartbeats passed before her gaze broke away from his, and for these two heartbeats the waves of the fjord were silenced and the wind ceased to blow, and nothing stirred in the land around them.

Then Bergfinn's voice could be heard once more, and Eir's horse moved sideways before performing a quick little pirouette beneath her. The forces of the sea and the wind returned, and Arnar took to his oars, attempting to move the boat slightly closer to land. But Bergfinn had said all he wished to say, asked all the questions he meant to ask. He took his leave, calling that Eir must convey his best wishes to her mother, and that they must come wish them farewell on the day of their departure.

Arnar lifted his face to Eir, and their eyes met once more. Then she rode from the beach, across round stones and onto the peat and grass, taking her horse from walking pace to a gallop with an invisible sign, and they raced up the hills and away from the beach as if made of the wind. Arnar watched her until the path led her behind a hillcrest and out of sight.

'Well, well,' said Bergfinn. He shook his head, looking inquisitively at Arnar. 'So you've met her before?'

‘In a way. Some years ago.’

‘Down here by the fjords?’

But Arnar didn’t answer – he had caught a last glimpse of Eir as she disappeared into the valley. Then he set to his oars again, pulling hard.

A short while later, Bergfinn pointed towards the shore.

‘There, Arnar,’ he said. ‘That’s Auðvinstad.’

Arnar pulled in his oars and turned into the wind. Towards the end of the fjord an old ship and a rowing boat had been hauled ashore. The hills rose from the beach towards the horizon, and among the slopes lay Auðvinstad. Seven buildings, five of them clustered together and two around 20-30 fathoms behind. Walls of stone and peat. Green turf roofs; the grass stirring in the wind. Whole forests of drift timber or logs brought here by ship must have been required to build them all. Vast pastures and good arable land – as indicated by the presence of ‘*vin*’ in the farm’s name. A gravel path led from the farmstead to the beach, and from there bridle paths to Ulvstillsfjella Raude in the north and Blåhamrane in the south. The farm was isolated, with a magnificent view. It was beautiful, and most of the structures looked to be in good, usable condition.

‘The longhouse is hardly the largest of the buildings,’ Bergfinn called into the wind, ‘but it holds the heat well, and has stalls for eight cows and enough space for seventy sheep.’

Arnar nodded.

‘You won’t be able to hunt reindeer or musk oxen as you do in Dyradal,’ Bergfinn continued, ‘but you’ll have sealing, both down here within the fjords and out at the fjord’s mouth in the spring, and you’ll see the grass comes earlier here than in Dyradal.’

And Bergfinn continued to tell Arnar about the buildings and the bordering mountains and all the tools that accompanied the farm, but Arnar’s thoughts were already elsewhere. They floated along invisible paths where the beat of a horse’s hooves had been heard, and the face of a girl could be found in the wind.

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They hauled the log from the water. They measured it with rope, chopped it in two and marked the wood. Then they rolled the root end up against two crosswise logs and cut two narrow grooves, three inches wide and four inches deep, on each side, down the log’s entire length. Their axe heads cut into these grooves as deep as they could go. It was hard work, and sweat soon dripped and ran from necks and red faces.

Long wooden splitter wedges were then carved and set into the grooves. Bergfinn thumped them into place with a hammer, a couple of feet apart. Then two men went down each side of the log, swinging hammers and the butts of axes to drive the splitters in, but the wood was ancient and hard as horn, the splitters riven asunder by their blows. But they chopped new wedges of old oak and hammered these in alongside the first, and under the relentless blows and the building force the splitters were forced hair’s breadth by hair’s breadth into the timber until finally there was no way out, and with a shriek the wood cracked open. They set to cutting the fibres that still bound the two halves of the log together, until they finally tipped heavily from one another, the smell of resin and pinewood filling the air. Arnar inhaled the scents as if they came to him from foreign lands.

‘Yes, now *that*,’ said Bergfinn, ‘is the smell of the forests of Markland.’

Late in the day, an old woman emerged from one of the long buildings. She was thin and short, wearing a skirt and an old shirt so tenaciously mended that hardly a thread of its original wool could be seen. She was carrying a lapful of some kind of rubbish, which she cast in a pile outside. Then she caught sight of Arnar working and walked over to him, smiling. Her gait was limping and bent, but she was quick on her feet nonetheless.

‘Now then, you must be Arnar? I heard you were coming – the new owner of the farm. And from all the way up in Dyradal no less. I just wanted to introduce myself.’

She stood there before him, offering her hand, her face just below his, and he knew immediately – because sometimes what lies within a person is evident from their outer appearance – that everything expressed in her face was genuine. A warmth that had faded, but not been extinguished; a strength that could still be called upon when needed.

‘My name is Margret,’ she said. ‘The daughter of Torfinn, who was the son of Eirik, who was the son of Skaga-Rim Thorsson. I grew up at Skagastad in Lysefjord.’

Her hand seemed so fragile that Arnar took it extremely carefully, for fear that he might crush it. He knew Skagastad lay on the northern side of Lysefjord, where the farms were steep and barren and small. All the prosperous farms were situated along the southern shores.

‘Bergfinn has told me about you. I’m Arnar, son of Vilhjalm. I come from Dyradal, north of Austmannadal.’

‘Bergfinn said you wish to continue the running of the farm here.’

‘I do. Auðvinstad is a fine farm.’

‘That’s very brave of you, Arnar. And it was a courageous act, to offer Bergfinn the log.’

‘Thank you. Bergfinn says you plan to stay?’

She smiled, her face narrow and covered with wrinkles, yet there was still something pretty in it.

‘I’d like to choose for myself where I will die. My life has been here, in the Western Settlement, and here it will end. Preferably at Auðvinstad, if you’ll permit me. If you wouldn’t mind?’

‘Did Bergfinn not give you my message?’

‘Yes, he did.’

‘I’m happy that you plan to stay. We’re going to need more people here on the farm.’

‘Thank you. And I’ve said it before, but I’ll say it again,’ – she nodded towards the log beside them – ‘to row to the northern fjords alone, and return with a log like that. There’s not many men who could have done such a thing. I’ve never heard the like of it, and nor has anyone else, I suspect.’

He stood there and watched her as she left, remembering what Bergfinn had told him.

Margret had married quite young, and she and her husband had cleared themselves a farm on the northern slopes of the Lysefjord. They had three healthy children, and the days were good to them. Their work was meaningful, and stone by stone, child by child, and harvest by harvest, their dreams and daily lives had walked hand in hand.

But one spring day, Margret’s husband had fallen through the ice and vanished. He was never seen again, but she longed for him to be found, for she knew that if she could tend a grave in which he lay, the Lord would permit her husband to hear her words, and she would have been able to tell him how they all were, how they were doing, and she could have whispered to him all the things they had never managed to say in life.

That same year, the two youngest children became ill and died. Two candles, a pair of bright lights, both extinguished. Only Margret and her oldest son remained. He was ten years old at the time, and she forced herself to be strong for him.

On Sundays they rode to Sandnes to hear the priest’s mass and tend the two small graves. Both lay to the north of the church, as Margret had not been able to afford to have her children buried on the south side.

But when the next summer came, when the boy was bringing the cows home from the pastures one evening, he discovered a ewe and a lamb stuck on a ledge among the rocks up on the mountainside. The boy climbed out onto a rocky outcrop and down to where the

animals stood, but as he was about to pull them out the ewe panicked and cast itself out from the cliffside, and there was nothing for him to hold onto, and so the boy fell.

She found him warm and soft, almost as if he was sleeping; the only wounds visible on his body were minor ones. But she knew as she carried him home that everything was over now; that all her dreams were gone. She laid him on the bed by the hearth and let the flames illuminate him. And all that night she hugged him close and tried to keep him warm, for she could not bear the thought that he too would soon turn cold.

She wished to stay there on the farm they had cleared until the end of her days – she'd been sure of that after the funeral. But she found she could no longer live among the memories that filled the house and fields; in that hollow-cheeked and silent dark.

Her mother was still alive, and so Margret moved home to where she had grown up. Her heart continued to beat, and as time passed, she found it was stronger than she had hoped.

One evening, her mother came in and spread a blanket over her, rubbing her shoulders, and Margret realised that her mother's hands were soft again now. When Margret was a child, work had made her mother's hands hard and coarse as dried leather. And when after their evening prayers her mother had so gently stroked her cheek, she had felt that those hands were too strong and hard to belong a woman. But they were soft again now. Soft with age, like the unused hands of an infant child.

'You must watch yourself, my Margret,' her mother had whispered. 'You mustn't let yourself be hardened.'

'It's just that He could have been gentler with me. That's all…'

Over the years that followed, Margret had found comfort in the Blessed Mother. For if the Lord had taken Mary's son and she had never mistrusted him – had known that she would see her son again – then Margret must know this, too. Her period of waiting began to be filled with good, rather than pain.

When her mother also died and others took over the running of the farm, Margret moved north to Agnafjord to become a servant at Auðvinstad, which at this time belonged to Bergfinn's father.

She was tenacious in her work, her hands life-giving. If a calving went wrong because the calf was in the wrong position, or a lamb was sick, it was Margret who knew how to save them.

Riders from other farms would also be sent for her, so that she might try to cure an illness or heal injuries to help a new life enter the world. And even on the occasions that nothing could be done, there was always someone who stood by and who needed Margret's comfort.

This was how she came to live for life again, she who had thought she lived only for death.

By the time evening fell the first strakes had been cleft from the two halves of the log – good, wide planks, but still too thick and uneven as yet. Using hand planes and axes, they started the work of thinning the strakes.

'I was thinking of riding into the mountains with you,' Bergfinn sighed to Arnar. 'To show you the border markers in the outlands. But if you plan to return to Dyradal tomorrow to fetch your livestock, I'm afraid we'll be short of time. I think you'd better ask Eir – she's ridden in the mountains often enough. She'll know where to find the boundary stones out there.'

Arnar looked up towards the clouds then, his hand plane still, his thoughts wandering. He had seen her ride once, and now saw her again. Riding alongside him, onto an outstretched ridge with nothing but sky above them. High in the mountains, he saw that the crest across which they were riding was without end, and he smiled.

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‘He’s done well for himself, young Arnar. Four harsh winters have been and gone – but he’s done well for himself! Don’t you think, Vilhjalm? Your Arnar? Has he not done well?’

They sat in the semi-dark of the hearth-room at Dyradal, Vilhjalm and Arnar on the worn wooden bench against the wall, Sel-Floke and Astrid on stools made from whale vertebrae.

Arnar had ridden from Auðvinstad the day before, travelling south of the Vassfelldragsdalen valley and below the Salberget mountain. The rushing of unseen streams below the peat and stones had accompanied him, and from the Arctic birch and willow shrubs, which had grown across the path here and there, stroking his feet and his horse’s flanks, small clouds of pollen had been released, hanging in the air behind them like floating, golden memories.

In the evening he had unrolled two sheepskins on a patch of dry marshland in Storsteinsheimen and pulled an old, woven blanket over his body. The mosquitoes had harassed him, so he had ducked his head beneath the blanket and slept that way for a while. He had come to fetch his livestock from Dyradal. The horses, sheep and cows he regarded as his own – and the dogs.

Sel-Floke gestured with his spoon as he asked Vilhjalm his question. Vilhjalm blew on the soup on his own spoon before answering.

‘Certainly, he’s done well.’

The meat soup was red hot, the steam from the soapstone pot rising to melt into the smoke from the fire in the hearth. Outside, evening was falling.

‘He’s done far better than either you or I, Vilhjalm,’ said Sel-Floke. ‘We who are slaves to these outlands. Admit it, Vilhjalm. Hell and Fimbulwinters may come, but he’s done far better than you and me.’

Vilhjalm nodded as he scraped the last of the soup from his plate and placed his spoon on the table. He had listened to Arnar describe Auðvinstad and could see the farm in his mind’s eye – the hearth-rooms with timber floors and wooden interior walls; the horse stables, hay barns and storehouses for food and furs. The view of the Agnafjord to the west, where salmon and seals and seabirds swam. The view of the Vassfelldragsåa river to the south and on into the Vassfelldragsdalen valley. He had heard Arnar say it was possible to ride over the highest ridge below Ulvstillstinden Raude and see Blåhamrane turning blue in the south; the Rangafjord green as a glacial river in the east.

He had also heard about all that filled the property – about the sleigh, the wagon and the two rowing boats; the livestock, the longboats and small outhouses; the two sheep barns and the other buildings; the high regions in both Blåfjell and the mountains to the west.

It was more than he could have dreamed of for his son, and yet he couldn’t quite break free of the unease that had gnawed at him since he had learned of the meeting at Åsastad.

‘Just remember what I told you, Arnar…’

‘I’d give a hand and one of my balls for a farm like that,’ Sel-Floke continued.

‘… and tread carefully for a while,’ Vilhjalm said.

‘If he’d worried about treading carefully,’ said Sel-Floke, ‘he wouldn’t own the farm right now.’

‘That’s true. But he made himself an enemy that day.’

‘Those who want to achieve something, to stand for something, can’t help but make enemies,’ said Sel-Floke.

Vilhjalm continued to hold Arnar’s gaze.

‘Tread carefully for a while,’ he said.

‘But tonight we honour all that the whelp’s accomplished,’ said Sel-Floke. ‘We’ll drink mead and beer and eat pork; compose a poem and call it “The song of Arnar of Dyradal, who despite all the Fimbulwinters did well.”’

Astrid laughed and shook her head. It was seventy years since the last pig had been slaughtered here in the Western Settlement, and none of them had ever seen one. The honey for the brewing of the mead and the corn needed to brew beer was also long since gone.

‘You should come down some time, Sel-Floke,’ said Arnar. ‘Make yourself useful. The biggest rowing boat is in good condition – we could look for drift timber, hunt seal.’

Sel-Floke nodded. They would miss one another – the weapons practice they had undertaken together, the games they played with their heavy wooden swords; the archery and the friendship and the working side by side. Sel-Floke took a deep breath and turned to Vilhjalm.

‘Listen, Vilhjalm. There’s something that occurred to me… something I wanted to ask you.’

‘So ask,’ said Vilhjalm. ‘Thank you, Astrid.’

Astrid had set out cups for them; filled them with hot water in which she had soaked crowberries and fireweed root.

Sel-Floke seemed to have lost some of his usual self-assuredness.

‘It’s this farm of Arnar’s, down by the fjord,’ he said. ‘This poor coastal smallholding that he’s acquired so cheaply. I’ve been wondering whether I should travel down there and keep an eye on him for a while. He might find it difficult to manage on his own…’

Arnar looked from Sel-Floke to his father. There was nobody he would rather accompany him than Sel-Floke, but if they both went away, his father and Astrid would be left alone in Dyradal. But Vilhjalm nodded.

‘You are debtless and free, Sel-Floke, and there are others who ask me about obtaining work here on the farm from time to time. You may ride with Arnar when he leaves tomorrow.’

They sat there and talked a brief while longer, debating the seasons and hunts and harvests they would turn their hands to, the tone between them easy, the words that fell between them those between good friends.

But later the same evening, so late that even the light polar night was about to darken, a man rode into the yard outside. They heard the dogs barking and went out to see what had disturbed them.

He sat there up high, the gelding beneath him stocky, motionless and threatening, like a strange bawling beast from the iron forests of the future.

It was Vermund who sat there on horseback, the servant from Åsastad – but this evening he looked anything but. A contemptuous sneer played around the corners of his mouth. He leaned back in his saddle, cocksure and surly as they had never seen him before.

‘Well, Arnar. So you’ve returned home to the mountains?’

‘I have. I arrived earlier today.’

‘So I heard. And have you found out where you feel most at home? Down by the fjord or up here with your father?’

‘Both are fine places. What business brings you here, Vermund?’

Vermund grinned, gesturing behind him with a nod of his head. Towards the north.

‘Himin-Gorm wants to speak with you. You are to come to Åsastad tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow I ride back to Agnafjord. If he wants to speak to me, let him ride down to me there.’

‘Oh, really?’

Vermund was still smiling.

‘Was there anything else you wished to say, Vermund?’ asked Vilhjalm.

‘I wanted to say that the farm you’ve got yourself down by the fjord, Arnar, will turn out to be a costly farm for you – a very costly farm. Himin-Gorm asked me to tell you that should you refuse to come to Åsastad tomorrow, you better stay out of his lands. And that you shall not hunt nor gather sheep nor roam around his mountains on any business whatsoever.’

‘I see.’

‘Nor will he wish to see your livestock on his mountain pastures.’

The terms were tough, and unexpected. Arnar stared defiantly at the man on horseback in silence. When Vermund spoke again, his words were filled with malice:

‘But this shouldn’t cause you any great difficulty, Arnar – not now that you’ve become a fjord dweller. There must be plenty of seal down there in the fjords – you no longer have any need of mutton or reindeer meat, do you?’

Arnar felt the repugnance wash over him like nausea. But he would not give this man the pleasure of seeing him angry. He shut the rage and repugnance inside him, fettering it to keep it silent.

‘It’s getting dark, Vermund,’ he said in a low voice. ‘You should start making your way home.’

‘Yes, it is getting dark,’ said Vermund. ‘For you, Arnar. Things are darkening for you.’

And Vermund turned his horse around and rode back to the north.

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The whale had revealed itself to the young man that morning. The man, whose name was Amartiuk, had seen the curve of its black back and known instantly what it was – for of all the world’s creatures, none was held in greater esteem nor hunted with greater respect.

The sea had been calm, and the sun, moving in long, sweeping arcs, had circled without setting above the animals and people who lived here by the great bay.

Amartiuk had stood at the point where the Sermeq Kujalleq fjord enters the Kanga bay. The green fjord was full of colossal icebergs that had run aground at its shallow mouth, shutting off the sea like a row of giant teeth.

But the sea beyond lay bare before him, and it was there that the hump of the humpback whale had so suddenly shown itself. *Qipoqqaq*. Of all the whales of the deep, none was mightier than he. His white flippers were big as rowing boats, and as he moved through the depths in his solitude he swung them slowly up and down, like a mighty eagle floating through its own sky.

Amartiuk had stood there for a moment, spellbound, as the broad back had rolled before his eyes, but when the whale blew he shook himself and ran back to the tent behind him, casting the sealskin flaps aside and half-whispering, half-shouting into the half-dark:

‘*Qipoqqaq*!’

Sermermiut was situated southwest of the fjord the Norse people called Krokfjord, on the part of Greenland’s coasts to which they had given the name Norðsetr. Since the Western Settlement’s earliest beginnings, they had journeyed here to hunt the walrus, which had disappeared from their own districts all too quickly. But the walrus had always been numerous here in the north, and the hunting grounds had provided huge quantities of tusks and hides. From the Western Settlement it was five days’ sail to reach these regions in the north, in a good boat in good wind.

But the people here this summer, in their wide tents of seal and walrus skin, were not of Norse blood. Their garments were not made of wadmal or wool, but from the hides of the

sea and land mammals they hunted. They measured the length of their voyages not in the number of days it took to sail to a given place, but by how many days it would take them to paddle the coasts in narrow vessels made of hide, or the number of days that passed as they crossed wastelands of ice standing at the rear of slender sledges pulled by wolf-like dogs.

To reach the settlements of the tall, white people, the *Kavdlunaks*, they estimated fifteen days' paddling to the south, or nine to ten days by dogsled if they took the inland ice and travelled south across the featureless cape.

Amartiuk ran to the next tent and then up the hill to the last. There were between fifteen and twenty people in each tent, all ready to get to their feet in an instant should he come to warn them of fire or enemies. The sight of the whale was still burned into his retinas – the black back of *qipoqqaq* rising from the green sea; the waves folding over him as he vanished.

There was something of the supernatural in the way the whale had risen, and nine days later they would speak of this – pondering why he had shown himself the way he did – for no humpback whale came to the human settlements unless bearing a message. Sometimes the message would be indecipherable; at other times it was clear as day – so clear that even a child would understand.

There was no hesitation here, and no words were exchanged. The first hunters burst from their tents wearing nothing but sealskin trousers, grabbing their equipment as they ran: harpoons and spears, floats and coils of sealskin rope. They ran towards the *umiak*, the large boat of sealskin and walrus hide pulled over a frame of drift timber and reindeer horn.

And still the morning was almost silent.

The boat lay overturned on the beach – they lifted it, carried it to the water and set it on the waves, but when the hunters leapt into it a minor drama ensued between two of them. A drama played out in almost complete silence. Other than Irsissuaq and Amartiuk, nobody even noticed that it had happened.

Irsissuaq had not inherited his position, and he bore no title, but for the past thirty years it was he who had been the *issumatak* – the leader of the tribe. He was a thin, sinewy man with eyes that seldom blinked. Even in his youth he had killed a man who had stood in his way, and later, as he became older, his resentment of those who refused to bend to his will became a kind of hate, and he would go dole out severe punishments for such folly. Most of the men and women of his tribe never questioned his decisions. When food was sparse and hunger prowled just beyond their tent flaps, they had enough to deal with in simply trying to survive – and during times of excess, when all was abundant and the hunt was good, they wanted no more than that everyone should reconcile and sit around the fire as friends. They preferred to avoid arguments and violence, and so for an entire generation not one of them had challenged Irsissuaq as the leader of the group. Consequently, Irsissuaq had become an autocrat. He was also the only one among them who could interpret signs from the spirits – the only one who remembered how to contact the spirits in the afterlife.

Amartiuk was still just a young hunter – still just a young boy without the protection of the spirits. But nobody could thrust a harpoon into a ringed seal as he did, and his gaze was sharp. Sometimes his eyes saw events and beings that no one else could see – it was as if he sensed something there within him, something that made him more than himself, something greater. As his body became ever stronger, and as his hunts yielded greater bounties, he had begun to suspect that Irsissuaq was no longer the spirits' chosen one – that soon the time would come for another man to become the *issumatak*. And when that day dawned, he would be ready.

They had stepped into the boat simultaneously, these two men, both making their way towards the bow where the head of the hunt would stand – he who would be first to throw the harpoon after the whale. When they bumped shoulders, Irsissuaq immediately understood

what was at stake, and gestured with a nod behind him, to indicate that Amartiuk should take one of the oars. But Amartiuk ignored Irsissuaq's instruction, because it was he who had spotted the whale. And was it therefore not his right, during this hunt, to stand at the front of the boat like the rising sun itself?

'It was not *you* who spotted the whale this day,' Amartiuk said in a low voice. He quickly stepped forward to take his place at the prow, his stance so wide that there was no space for anyone to stand beside him.

Irsissuaq stood with his harpoon in his fist – he could have stuck the weapon's dirty yellow tip into the young man, straight into his broad back. He could have happily watched him die. But the murder would be a cowardly act – present him in a poor light and weaken his position as leader. And besides, he could no longer compete with a man like Amartiuk when it came to pure brawn, and he knew that if he tried to overthrow him using only his fists, his defeat would be quick and humiliating. His gaze filled with hate, he turned and walked astern to set the *umiak*'s course during the hunt.

By the time the whale blew for the third time they were already a spear's throw from the beach, and with fierce strokes they sent the *umiak* into a sudden curve that crossed the whale's path. Another hunter had taken up a position at the prow, two steps behind Amartiuk. Both men clasped the long wooden shafts of their harpoons and tips of walrus bone in their fists; long, braided ropes of sealskin and floats made of seal stomachs trailed behind them.

A feverish excitement pounded at their temples – *they were made for this*. For the meaning of life can be found in many things, but is never felt as strongly as when hunting the master of the sea.

They were the eternal wanderers of the polar coasts, these hunters who called themselves the *Inuit* or *Kalaalit* people. Their forefathers had come to this land just two centuries ago, brought here by their dogsleds and sealskin vessels, and they had made these coasts their own, dispersing across the country's most remote and solitary regions. And they had hunted everything that lived and breathed along these coasts of ice. For here there was no creature that could not be slain; no animal that should not fear them. Not even the whale.

Here by the Kanga bay, not far from Sermermiut, they had met the bearded men for the first time. It was around five or six generations ago now, and the encounter with the pale-eyed people with their weapons that flashed in the light had been so unexpected, so strange, that its events were continually recounted. Of course, ancient legends of large, red-white men had also been told in their former homeland to the west, but no one had known whether the legends were composed by humans or the spirits, and nobody had known whether they were of this world.

That first meeting had been expectant and without bloodshed. They had come so close to one another that they could have stretched forth their hands and touched – but they did not. For as they stood there, on the cold rocks, it was as if icy water suddenly ran through their veins, and they had sensed that they should step back. And the others must have sensed the very same, and so they had separated. And like the germ of a conflict from the earliest times that has lain dormant between nomads and settlers, between hunters and farmers, so too had this conflict existed in the meeting of these two peoples, the *Kavdlunaks* and the *Skraelings*. Like a curse. For they were as different as the sun and moon, and they had come here to hunt the same quarry.

As the years had passed, it had become increasingly clear that the walrus could no longer be hunted by both the *Inuit* themselves and these light-haired men. Then incidents that had bred only hate and mistrust had taken place, and so the raids had begun.

As the *umiak* scored the water's glossy surface, like a sled crossing virgin snow, girls and boys ran towards the ridges of the mountains to watch the hunt and try to see where the

whale swam. From there up above, they would be able to point in his direction and help the hunters in the boat.

Three of the women already stood among the dogs with whips in their hands, for the dogs stood stiff-legged, staring after the *umiak* with the understanding that something was afoot. A suppressed whistling whine could be heard from their throats – one bark and the howling and pulling at the ropes would start. For why shouldn't they partake? Was it possible that a hunt should set forth without them leading the way? But the tentative flick of a whip whispered through the air, and they knew that the first dog to bark would be hit by its stinging crack, and so they remained quiet, only unable to control their imploring whining.

Behind the *umiak*, kayaks also pushed off from the beach, first one, then many, until a large flock of the slim vessels was being paddled out to sea using thin oars; harpoons, spears and floats laid out in preparation on their decks.

And still the whale had not blown for the third time. Somewhere in the depths he was still searching for the shoals of krill he gulped down at the foot of the icebergs. *Qipoqqaq* himself. Only the *tunnulik*, the blue whale, and the *kigutilissuaq*, the sperm whale, were larger – yet none was mightier.

The spirits of the land must surely be pleased? A whale enormous as this would be able to feed them long after the dark and hungry months had passed.

Irsissuaq's broad face was weather-beaten, his eyes glowing watchfully. His clenched jaw was pulled into a fierce sneer. He stared at the water's surface, then at the back of the man at the prow.

He twisted his oar sideways, adjusting their course ever so slightly. *A young whelp who had so audaciously taken up the position of lead dog; who believed his jaws already strong enough to bite off the best meat. Was such an insolent whelp to be left alive?*

Then Irsissuaq's thoughts returned to the whale, and he tried to imagine the mighty giant's movements through the water; imagined that he swam beside *qipoqqaq* and that their minds were as one. Only this way could he know where their journey would lead.

He changed the boat's course. First in towards the icebergs and then moving more closely along the front edge of the colossal structures. The manoeuvre was not without risk – sometimes an iceberg could overturn after the gnawing of the waves had changed its centre of gravity, and boats that found themselves too near could be crushed, or the waves topple the boat, casting those aboard into the ice-cold water.

Amartiuk saw the oily, white film that remained on the surface after the humpback's second blow, etched there on the ice-blue water like a painted flower. As they cut past it, their nostrils were filled with the whale's odour, sickening yet seductive.

Then he appeared – for the third time since Amartiuk had first laid eyes on him. With a silent ripple he breached the water, fifty fathoms ahead. His tail fin, with its two white flecks, swung up in his wake, one pectoral fin slowly carving the water to rise and fall majestically through the air until he began to descend once again. They were way too far from him, but they saw that he remained untroubled, that he was going nowhere. As he disappeared, they saw his tail fin tilt to one side, as if he planned to be closer to land by his next breath.

How mighty he was. How the sound of his rasping breath caused the air to shudder.

They hacked at the water with their paddles, for their hunger for the hunt was greater than their fear. They changed course in order to meet him, knowing that these next few moments might be the most important of the entire pursuit. For if they could come in from behind and glide in alongside the hump of his back the next time he breached the surface, just far enough to one side to stay clear of his tail fin and close enough that the distance for the harpoons was no greater than the height of four men, the chances of success would be good. Then, so many harpoons would be driven into his massive body before he once again drew

breath and dived that the streams of blood would follow him down in lurid ribbons of dark crimson, like the northern lights in black and red – for a whale can bleed as no other animal, perhaps as much as a hundred seals – and from then on each time he rose in an attempt to escape them the myriad floats would suck his strength. And then as long as no other forces or evil spirits intervened, and as long as no ill fortune befell them, all his haste would finally prove meaningless.

Irsissuaq changed course again, his mind's eye returning to the depths to swim with *qipoqqaq* once more.

They paddled expectantly now, taking slow strokes and pausing briefly before their oars again clutched at the water.

But when the moment came and Amartiuk saw the sea begin to rise – as he had known it would – his heart sank. Again, he knew, the distance would be too great. Twenty fathoms from the side of the boat, the whale rose through the crystal clear water. He was powerful, dark, like the seabed itself, the surface rising above him. Every man in the *umiak* saw him rise, and the boat turned straight towards him, strength coursing through the oars once more; as if they were dogs unleashed to join the final phase of the hunt.

Amartiuk felt his hope waning – perhaps he was still too far away. Perhaps now was the time to throw his harpoon – for what if the whale saw them and fled? This may be their last chance. He cast a glance behind him and met Irsissuaq's keen gaze. The man's sneer was bitter as an *uluk*, a flaying knife with the point turned down. It seemed Irsissuaq was mocking him for not daring to throw.

Then *qipoqqaq* breached the surface, the water rushing off his broad back in fast-flowing streams, and when he blew, it was like the breath of the sea itself. His flippers did not lift from the sea this time, but Amartiuk could see the nearest of them cutting knife-sharp through the sea, there, just below the surface.

The foremost part of his back began to arch for the coming dive; Amartiuk's strong arm was drawn back to throw. He was still unsure whether he would manage to drive the harpoon long and deep enough, but he heard his own voice, whispering: *'He is yours, Amartiuk. It is you who shall set the first line.'*

The shaft of the harpoon was longer than a grown man is tall. Bound at its front end was a piece from the centre of a walrus tusk, and it was to this that the harpoon head was attached, sharp as a knife at both ends and with a hole in its back edge through which the rope attached to the floats was threaded.

Amartiuk put all his strength into the throw, and with the braided sealskin rope rippling behind it flung the harpoon in a low arch towards the whale's back.

The man who stood beside Amartiuk was an old hunter. Exactly how old he was he no longer knew, as he was not born in an important year for his people, nor during a summer or winter remembered for its events or special signs. Even as a child, he had already lost count of the number of years through which he had lived.

Back then, forty winters ago, or perhaps it was closer to forty-five, they had lived so far north that he had never seen the place again since.

But when he saw the harpoon fly, the old hunter knew that the hunt had started poorly – that in fact it could not have started much worse. He also knew that the damage was irreparable, and that he now had no other choice but to throw himself. For a brief moment, the two harpoons flew simultaneously through the air. Both men had aimed slightly behind the centre of the whale's back, but both harpoons hit around a distance equivalent to the height of two men to the rear of their target. Then *qipoqqaq* was under again. The two hits were poor, both far to the rear of the whale's body and sitting shallowly in his flesh. And no more throws would reach him now.

The old hunter shook his head, remembering that of the terms set by a whale before he floats to the surface and allows death to overcome him, thereby providing the people with a food supply greater than they can possibly consume, the most important is that in hunting him, everything must be done right.

Amartiuk knew he had failed. He turned to face the men, but nobody met his gaze – nobody, that is, except Irsissuaq. The look on his face was unmistakable. It was filled with hate and anticipation.

The harpoons were never intended to kill the whale whose body they pierced; the toughness of his hide and blubber was such that it would prevent the harpoons from penetrating his internal organs. But like inextricable spikes, the harpoon heads must bite into his flesh, and while both the shaft and front end of the harpoon are supposed to loosen and float away so as not to be destroyed in the ensuing struggle, the harpoon head, under the tension of the rope, should twist itself inside the whale's tissue so that it can no longer wear its way out through the entry hole.

At the other end of the long rope, the floats work to slow the fleeing creature, indicating the direction the whale has taken long after he has dived below; shooting to the surface to expose his location well before he comes up for air. And all the while, the *umiak* and many kayaks must follow, indefatigable, and as the hunt unfolds more and more harpoons will be thrust into the whale, forcing him to drag more and more floats, and finally, whether on the same day or the next, he will die, and those who have killed him begin the hard yet joyous work of hauling him towards land.

The two floats tore across the surface of the water, shuddering across the waves in the whale's wake. Then the sea swallowed them down, and silence suddenly surrounded the men in the *umiak*. But for Amartiuk the silence was unbearable, and when he again turned to the others and saw them all staring expressionlessly ahead, towards where the whale may or may not show himself – not that it was of any consequence of either way now – he said:

'He has two spears in him…'

Irsissuaq answered slowly:

'Yes, he has two spears in him, and the first of them was yours, Amartiuk, and *that* is what has ruined our hunt.'

Meanwhile, down in that other world, in the deep silence into which secrets sink, never to return, the two harpoon shafts and central pieces of tusk had worked loose and started to ascend to the surface. For a short time the harpoon tips held on, but they had barely penetrated deeper than a hand's breadth into the whale's blubber, and as they started to rotate there in the wounds they had made, seeking their intended positions and twisting like barbs as the whale's tail fin worked the sea in mighty strokes and the hide ropes pulled and tugged at them, their grip was too weak, and the skin of the whale gave way. The harpoon tips came free and were quickly dragged towards the surface by the floats that rose high above them.

For the men, the hunt was over. For there is no creature that can gain on a threatened *qipoqqaq* with no harpoons in him. Even had they all been *ardlusak* – killer whales – they still would have stood no chance against a fully grown and uninjured humpback.

Amartiuk bowed his head and let his fists sink to his sides, wishing he had never laid eyes on the whale that blew its breath so beautifully over Kanga's icy waters.

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The next day, Arnar sat in a saddle of reindeer skin and wood with stirrups of twisted leather, and set off from Dyradal riding Fjallasmyril, who he regarded as his best horse. Ahead of him walked three packhorses, two cows, a young heifer and a calf.

Sel-Floke rode alongside him, swinging a switch of willow half a fathom in length, and together they guided the little flock down the valley.

The four dogs ran with them, sometimes up ahead and sometimes bringing up the rear, the puppies eager as fox cubs as they crossed the tussocks, heather and marshland. Occasionally they tried to nip at the cows' hocks, but Sel-Floke swore and swung his switch and they scampered off ahead again, even more good-tempered, as if they relished the chance to tease Sel-Floke.

'Timber,' sighed Arnar, 'timber's the only thing. If we had timber, we'd have it all.'

'And iron and corn,' answered Sel-Floke. 'Isn't that how the saying goes?' He lifted his arms to the sky and spoke as if to address a higher power:

'"Had we but timber, iron and corn."'

Arnar shook his head.

'The timber is the most important thing. Had we logs, we could build whatever houses and outbuildings we wanted, keep more animals, build the ships needed to sail to Markland and Norðsetr. Like in the old days. We could obtain iron from the swamps of Vinland; walrus tusks and *svarðreip* from Norðsetr. With timber, wealth would return to Greenland.'

'Your father would not have agreed.'

'Why not?'

'He said there was no timber to be found here at the time of the first settlers, either – but the trading ships used to come here back then. Plenty of ships from the east filled with timber and iron and corn and everything else we needed. Because they sought *our* riches, as we sought theirs. Now there's hardly a ship to be seen, but it isn't that there's anything wrong with Greenland – it's the rest of the world that's gone under. The rest of the world that's cursed by war and plague and poverty. That's why the ships no longer come.'

'It's nothing to do with the rest of the world. Had we enough timber, everything else would fall into place.'

'Well then let's ask the Skraelings to ship us some timber next time they come, shall we? Didn't the Skraelings first come from Markland?'

'Nobody knows where they first came from.'

'Yes they do – they came from Markland, sometime after the colonisation. Or so say the elders.'

'As little is known of where the Skraelings came from as is known of what happened to the people who lived here before us.'

They remained on horseback for a time, discussing old grave sites, the ruins of settlements and circles made of stones. The remnants of the people who had been here long before the settlements or the Skraelings. Then their thoughts skipped off in another direction, and they spoke of other matters.

Earlier that morning, Arnar had carried all his possessions out from the house in Dyradal. It took him only a few trips – most of his items were in an old wooden chest he had inherited from his grandfather; his clothing and blankets he had packed in sacks that he tied onto the saddle of one of the packhorses. With the exception of the sheep and lambs, which would need to be fetched in the autumn, he carried all his earthly goods with him in this small company. He had smiled as he rode off from his former home, feeling as if he was embarking on a long voyage. As if all was made ready and a strong wind had filled his sails.

Around noon they stopped for a while to let the animals graze, laying in the grass to watch the drifting clouds as they listened to the horses and cows nibbling at the grass and underbrush. Arnar closed his eyes and felt himself fortunate.

Beyond these animals, and the sheep he would fetch in the autumn, he also owned all the livestock Bergfinn had not managed to take with him on the ship. Around fifty sheep, most of them with lambs, four cows, two calves and four horses. He would keep the calves

and a fair number of the lambs. There would be many animals on the farm by the fjord in the long term, he thought. Even more than Himin-Gorm owned at Åsastad.

Then they continued on their journey north, over cliffs and heather and lichen. At times the animals' hooves kicked up a dry dust from the path. It was driven across the land by the easterly wind, seeking the fjord and the sea, yet it was only a very fine dust, and so soon swept away by the air into nothingness.

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The mast fish of the ship that would take Bergfinn and his kin away from the life they had lived in the Western Settlement was carved from a tree felled in Markland over two hundred years earlier. The tree had grown out of earth that had been warm in the summers and hardened with frost through the winters. Year upon year, it had grown. It had seen other trees fall around it; some due to storms, others due to age. But the tree itself had remained standing.

Then two men had stood there, down on the forest floor. They had stared at the tree, walked in circles around it, seen that it was rugged and tall. One of them had said that this must be it – the mast they needed. But the other had taken another turn about the tree, his eyes those of an experienced shipbuilder. He had seen that the huge circumference of the rootstock was almost too rough to provide good material for a mast; nor had the almost imperceptible curve to the trunk at around four fathoms high escaped his notice.

'No, this is no mast,' he had said, shaking his head. 'But it will feel our axes, you can be certain of that.'

So they had each taken up their position on either side of the tree and let their axes be heard, after a time unconsciously falling into a regular, united rhythm, their blows sometimes striking the tree at the exact same instant. It seemed their axes bit into the hard, yellow-white wood a little better at these moments.

They had stopped their work only twice – the first time to take off their shirts, the second to drink and sharpen their axe blades. The odours of the tree were fresh in the air they breathed.

Then it had fallen.

The next summer, the tree had been carved into shape. Still exuding the smell of resin and forest, it had been towed by many men and two horses into the ship they were building, here on the shores of Markland. And the men had been satisfied. One of them said that no ship could have been given a better mast fish.

It had lain there, as if in a giant crib, as the rest of the ship was completed around it. During the days, the axe blows and human voices and the pounding and hacking of their restless tools of iron and wood were like the incessant sounding of an alarm. But during the nights, all was silent. And at the crack of dawn before the men awoke, white-tailed deer accompanied by their springtime fawns had slowly picked their way through the grass at the edge of the forest above the beach.

The mast they had found elsewhere, and it too had been debarked and dried since the previous summer. It should really have been dried for two years, but they had no time, and so they had raised the mast and fixed it in place so that they were as one, these two, the mast and the mast fish. So the force of the wind could be driven from the one down into the other and out into the hull, without any loss of power. So that the ship might fly.

This was why they had carved the tree two centuries ago, the blows of their axes so persistent through the silent forest. Those forgotten men.

And even if, when their time was past and the blows of their axes silenced, they had returned to the oblivion of the dark earth – and though their graves had grown over, never to

be seen again – were they not just as real as these men who now, on the shores of another country, stood inside their boat as they chopped and carved? Were they not once equally alive? For the future is already long since begotten, and these men too shall crumble like soil between fingers; they too will be gone. As if their feet had never trodden the earth. As if they were no more than the deeds of some forgotten god.

They had nailed the mast fish in place there in the bowels of the ship and laid the floorboards over it. Then stood on the deck and watched the new land drifting in the sea behind them.

But the wood had aged since that time, been cut smaller, and the mast fish in Bergfinn's ship no longer possessed the strength it once had. There had been masts that had stood in it which had cracked – twice it had gone under when the ship of which it was a part was wrecked. But the wrecks had been salvaged; the wooden pins and nails that bound the mast fish to the crushed timber pulled free. And so the mast fish had been used in a new ship and carved into shape once again, and once again a new mast had been set within it.

They braced this final mast with wedges of oak. They bored new holes in the old timber and hammered in new pins in an attempt to bind the whole together, make it strong. When the fresh timber ran out, there was still much that should have been replaced. But they had neither the time nor the materials to do more, and one night they set the ship out on the sea so it could swell, and began to load the ballast stones into the allocated spaces amidships. In two days' time, they would set sail.

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They backed their oars, and the ship, which lay heavy in the water, began to turn from land. Six pairs of oars toiled to find their rhythm. The people who had come to wish the emigrants well and see them off on their journey called out their final words of farewell, and slowly, so slowly, the ship sought its way out of the fjord.

Bergfinn stood astern at the tiller, his gaze sliding across mountaintops he had known the names of since childhood; over the paths and roads he had walked and ridden countless times. The lines etched in his face were as deep as the cracks in the grey rind of the ship's oldest timber.

At evening the next day, at Torsteinssteinen, where many years ago his father had drowned during the seal hunt, Bergfinn turned to look down the fjords of the Western Settlement one last time. He saw the black mountains, row upon row of them, towering sharp and steep against the sky. Then he pushed the tiller away from him; the sail they had hoisted when the wind no longer carried them along caught the breeze from the north. The rigging creaked, and the ship moved slightly to port as the rushing of the water alongside them increased. Bergfinn shook his head and turned his gaze southwards, towards a distant horizon where the surface of the sea and the sky seemed to have melted together to become one. Towards that hazy glimmering, shining like bronze and flames far to the south, he set his course. He could not know how over three centuries earlier, his forefather of eleven generations past had stood in a ship of his own, sailing in the opposite direction. How he had entered the fjords here by the very same Torsteinssteinen and said to the young wife at his side:

'This is where it will be. Where this fjord ends will be the land of the future.'

And she had nodded, and though she hadn't smiled joy had swelled within her, for it had been a long journey. And that summer day, too, had been filled with the sun and good winds.

In the ship he now steered, on the fifth day after St. Olaf's Mass in this the year of our Lord 1297, Bergfinn was accompanied by his wife and his two surviving grown children and

their spouses; his three grandchildren and fourteen people from other farms. Here, too, were twenty sheep and four cows, three dogs and a horse, and as much hay as they had been able to gather up and bind at the stern and prow. The hay weighed little, but it occupied valuable space. Otherwise the boat was crammed with such quantities of skins and food and clothing and farm tools and other items as they had dared to pack and bring with them. The ship lay heavy enough in the water, but the freeboard was still two feet at the very least, and should they encounter rough weather along their route they would be able to seek the protection of a fjord and harbour until it passed.

One of the smallest boys aboard looked out at the sea.

'If the waves get really big, will they fall into the ship?' he asked. One of the nearby men shook his head.

'There's no risk of anything like that. Remember that from now on, both you and I and everyone else on board will have to piss and shit in the sea. And that every time we do so the ship will get lighter, until in the end we'll have pissed and shitted so much that the ship will be so light we'll hardly notice the waves at all – we'll almost be flying like a bird.'

The man's wife shook her head at his language, but the children were delighted and laughed so loudly that a couple of the dogs started to bark, and the boys imagined how they would also be able to say such things when they too were grown up and beyond scolding.

They sailed this way – in expectation and delight. And with more of their earthly goods on board than they had ever expected the ship to hold.

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Iron horseshoes ringing against stone and rock – the sound had once been heard often along the settlement's roads and paths, when iron was still plentiful. Now most rode unshod horses, trying to avoid the rocky ground whenever they could.

Arnar rode wearing a shirt of black wadmal with three polished iron buttons at the neck. He was freshly shaved and red-cheeked. He turned to take the path to the farmstead at Vassfelldragsstad, passing stone pillars, piles of cleared stones and yellowish-green earth recently tilled; freshly turned hay that was now drying in the wind; posts around which the haystacks would be formed.

Everywhere in the fields around him and imprinted on the paths he followed were horses' hoofprints, and as he rode the final stretch up to the yard he was surrounded by the fireweed that grew here. An entire miniature world in the fireweed's radiant colours of pink and violet.

Of the farm's three buildings, two were constructed in the true Greenland style, their stone walls half hidden by mounds of earth that sloped up to almost level with their grass-covered roofs. As if the houses had grown from the earth itself; walls so thick they provided the best possible shelter against the wind and winter cold. The third building was a timber house of ancient, grey-white logs.

Arnar rounded a corner, and there she was. Standing there, just in front of him, below the eaves by one of the house walls. She looked up, and when she saw that it was him she smiled. The sleeves of her shirt were turned up almost to her shoulders; before her on a flat slab of stone was a four foot butter churn. She straightened and set the plunger aside.

As she did so, Arnar suddenly felt less confident than on the last occasion he had seen her. What if she had absolutely no desire to ride into the mountains with him? He should have thought of that earlier; should have prepared what he would say.

But she smiled, and again he felt dizzy, enraptured by it.

'Arnar?' she said. 'So it's you who has come.'

'Yes… I saw you out working in the hayfields from my farm.'

‘The others are still at it. I had to return home to finish this butter.’

He jumped down from his horse and stood there, just three steps from her.

‘Would you like me to help you?’

‘To churn the butter?’

The churn on the rough stone slab was made from finely carved, closely fitting planks held together by wide, tight-fitting withies of willow. Once, long ago, when they were still fresh and smelled sweetly of sap, they had been split lengthwise and wound in rings about the churn, their ends braided together in the patterns dictated by tradition. Then they had dried, and like everything else that has lived and then dries – and which loses the water that gives it life, such as sinews or ropes made of hide – the willow had pulled taut and hardened. And in this last embrace the withies had clasped the churn so tightly that it was as if its many pieces of wood had grown together to become one.

Arnar searched for something else to say, something that might make her laugh, but could come up with nothing. How beautiful her neck was. How slim and fresh she was. He stood there, the horse’s reins still in his fist. How he longed to look into this smile forever.

‘I often churned the butter, back home in Dyradal,’ he said.

‘It’s going slowly today – it’s still showing no signs of separating.’

Soured cream had run over the lip of the churn, a golden streak across the carved figures of animals that decorated the upper third of the vessel.

Eir went across to Arnar’s horse and stroked his muzzle. She spoke gently to him, and he snorted softly into her hands. She turned back to Arnar.

‘Did you meet the men out in the field?’

‘I met three of them, at least.’

‘One of my brothers and two of the servants. Then there’s only my mother and I, and my older brother, here on the farm.’

Arnar remembered how Bergfinn had told him that Eir’s father had contracted consumption and died three years ago.

‘There isn’t many of us over on my farm, either.’

He should have said more, but nothing seemed right.

‘I’ll find you something to drink,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’

Arnar tied the reins to a post by the wall, and as Eir disappeared into the house, he took a walk around the yard. The house was well kept and quiet, with stone walls at the front and back and earthen ones along the sides. He walked over to the butter churn. The smell of soured cream reminded him of the hearth-room back in Dyradal.

Eir came out again and offered him a wooden cup.

‘I found you a little *skyr*, but perhaps you’d prefer butter?’

Her gaze was playful. Arnar took the cup and drained it, then looked at Eir again. At her shoulders and throat and the two curves of her breasts beneath her shirt. Her tanned, graceful arms.

‘Perhaps. But you don’t have any butter to offer me yet.’

Arnar took the plunger and lifted it, then drove it into the cream. He lifted it again and again and again, the plunger whisking up and down through the foam. After a while he stopped and pulled off his shirt; stood there in only his thin, woollen undershirt. Then he went at it again.

As the cream slowly thickened, the work became harder, and he was soon breathing heavily.

‘Should I take over?’ Eir asked. Arnar shook his head.

‘It won’t be long now.’

But the cream continued to resist, only gradually becoming thicker, clinging more weightily to the plunger. It was said that if the inhabitants of the underworld had drunk from the soured milk, it could never be turned into butter.

But the underworld's inhabitants had clearly not been afoot this day. Soon the stickiness started to subside, and the plunger could be more easily pulled free. When Arnar heard the substance start to froth, he knew that they had separated, the butter and buttermilk. He kept going for a time, then lifted the plunger and peered down into the churn. The butter, translucent yellow and beautiful, bobbed there in the pale foam. Eir stood beside him, lifted her eyes to his, and said:

'But I still don't remember the last time we met.'

As the sun might glitter on a stream of meltwater in spring, so glittered her eyes, and as he looked into this glittering all the uncertainty in him was gone. But he didn't respond, and so she asked:

'So when was it? When did we meet?'

'Are you sure you don't remember?'

'Yes!' She put on a false fierceness. 'So then tell me when it was! And what I said!'

Arnar shook his head and smiled.

'Anyway,' said Eir. 'I don't believe you. I think you're spinning me a yarn.'

'When you've shown me the mountain boundary stones – then I'll tell you.'

'What mountain boundary stones?'

'Bergfinn said you ride through the mountains so often that the tracks of your horse can be seen all over them. He said you might be able to show me where the boundary stones between our farms have been raised.'

In the wind, locks of her hair blew loose around her face, and she smoothed them away. If only the wind would find them again, so she might smooth them away once more.

They stood there for a short while, the light and their young smiles between them. Then Eir took the plunger from Arnar's hands and set it back in the churn. She bent and picked the churn up, and as she walked towards the house with it, she half turned her head towards him and said she wouldn't mind, that she'd be happy to show him the stones. He asked whether she was free in a couple of days' time, on Sunday. She had reached the door, and she set down the churn for a moment and nodded her assent.

'If we both ride from home at noontide, we can meet on the path between the farms.'

He trotted away from the farmstead with his cloak and shirt in one hand, the horse's reins in the other. He rode away from Eir's world of flowers, and out along the shoreline at Barðastrand he kicked the horse into a gallop so fast that the grass and gravel and earth kicked up from its hooves flew a full fifteen feet into the air.

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For two days they were carried south by mild winds, the land on their port side sometimes close, sometimes further away. But was it not as if it had changed? Was it not as if the bitter memories were already laid to rest; as if the land watched them and let them go in peace?

Bergfinn stood astern, amidst the smell of the sea and the ship and livestock, one hand on the tiller and the other on the gunwale. He thought of Asmund Kastanrassi, the Greenlander who in 1189 had been the first to sail from Greenland to Iceland in a Greenland-built ship. Asmund had used whalebone and animal sinews to bind the ribs and planking, and the ship had held together long enough to reach Iceland's coasts. It was only later that it had sunk, on its way from Iceland to Norway. It was on this crossing that Asmund had drowned.

In the ship before Bergfinn was the entirety of the little world he had brought with him. The men and women, the children playing, the animals and provisions – even the

creaking of the rigging and strakes and the slapping of the waves against the hull. A ship filled with earthly goods, both above and below the boards of the deck. To twenty-three homeless individuals, this was now the whole world.

Much would be different when they arrived. He knew that Greenlanders before him had found work on the large farms on Iceland. Perhaps the same work could be found in Norway. They were regarded as hardy and industrious, these people from *the land with the cold fjords*. Eventually they would surely manage to find some land and build a house of their own.

If only all would be well.

One of the girls playing amidships was named Hild. A long braid danced over her narrow back as she gripped her best friend with her brown hands; they clung to each other, giggling, as they jumped round and round in a ring, until the leather ropes to which they were both attached were twisted so tightly around them that they could hardly move. Other children then ran over and pushed at them, and the pair toppled over, howling with delight.

A playful mound of small bodies clad in wadmal and leather.

Hild had nothing against travelling in this way. During the daytime the straps around her waist were bound by rope to both the mast and an iron ring at the centre of the ship. All children younger than thirteen or fourteen were secured to the ship in this way. But it was still entirely possible to play, despite being attached to the end of a rope, and the children were always together there in the middle of the ship.

Hild saw that the adults were happy now. She saw Bergfinn, mate and chieftain of the ship, smiling. His wrinkles like seams in walrus hide; his joy evident in each and every one of them.

Hild liked Bergfinn. As she and her best friend unwound themselves again, she whispered:

‘We should ask Bergfinn if we can steer the ship.’

‘You ask!’

‘I will.’ She turned back towards him. ‘Bergfinn!’ she called out.

‘Yes?’

‘May Guðrid and I stand with you and steer the ship?’

Bergfinn smiled and shook his head. If he said yes to these two, he’d have to say yes to the others. It would be too much hassle; too many straps to detach and refasten.

‘You’re too small. When you’re as big as me, then you can steer the ship. All the way from Greenland to Norway if you like.’

But Hild was a persistent child, and she didn’t give up so easily.

‘Just a bit.’

Bergfinn shook his head.

‘Just a teeny-tiny-teeny-weeny-ickle-little-bit?’

Again he was about to say no, but Hild was looking at him with a tilt of her head, and it suddenly struck Bergfinn that they were good kids. What they had asked for wasn’t much. If there was to be a day on which the kids could steer the boat, this was probably it.

‘Okay. But only a teeny-tiny-bit.’

And so the children steered in shifts. They stood there astern beside Bergfinn and held the tiller; sometimes staring behind them, into the ship’s wake, and sometimes staring ahead. The mighty, brownish-grey, rectangular sail waved and flapped above them. At the edge of the deck by the gunwale, like two walls built from living creatures, the animals stood bound by short hide ropes. Shaggy, brown-grey sheep with beautiful twisted horns; dogs rearing up to set their front paws against the gunwale and sniff the sea breeze. Cows and horses lying down, chewing the cud.

‘Look, mother,’ the children cried. ‘I’m steering the ship!’

‘Indeed, and you’re steering it very well. I think you’ll be queen of the high seas when you grow up.’

They were all allowed a turn, some of them several.

As evening neared, a calm descended over the ship. After supper the children were released from their reins and put down to sleep in sleeping bags of seal hide and sheepskin. Hild lay there in wrapped in her skins and wool blankets, and busied herself with silently braiding her hair for a time before she slept. Bergfinn stood at the stern, alone again. It had been a good day – perhaps one of the best he’d ever experienced. He did not notice the plummeting temperatures, nor the occasional gusts of wind that came rushing, so peculiarly sudden and cold, across the water. How the surface riffled at the coming of these winds. How it seemed as if the water was trembling.

***

Only one other person lived on Arnar’s farm. His name was Ramnbit, and he owned a house and livestock in the narrow Drangardal valley that cut its way northwards from the end of the fjord. Two days after Bergfinn had set sail, Arnar and Margret saddled up their horses and rode across the plains and into Drangardal, following the twisting and winding path that ran northwest along the valley floor.

Margret was still upset. Irritated, she repeated herself for the third time:

‘To live in solitude until he dies? What’s the use in that? Oh, Bergfinn, you were a wise man in many ways, but you were most certainly stupid in others.’

Three days earlier, Bergfinn had told Arnar about Ramnbit.

‘In his time, Ramnbit cleared himself a farm in Drangardal,’ Bergfinn had said. ‘He probably plans to manage by himself up there until the day he dies, but if you could give him permission to collect drift timber along the beaches, and if you could just check in on him every once in a while…’

Margret had heard what Bergfinn said, and had come over to where they stood, her expression stern.

‘Live down there until the day he dies? What meaning can there be in that? That isn’t what he needs. He won’t make it through another winter up there – he has neither enough wood nor food.’

‘We’ll take a trip to see him, you and I,’ Arnar had said, ‘and ask him whether he’d like to move out here.’

They rode until the valley broadened; until the mountain-sides were smooth and friendly and a solitary building came into view. It was built to house both people and livestock, but had been so weighed down by its ancient peat roof that it seemed about to sink flat against the ground; about to die and turn to meadow and grass.

Margret sighed and shook her head.

‘He’s stubborn, old Ramnbit – too stubborn for his own good.’

Around the house and yard ran a network of narrow, winding trails that spread out in all directions, to the stream and into the mountains, down the valley and out into the barren patches of earth surrounding the house. Piles of cleared stones and boulders lay around the small tilled strips of land further along the valley floor.

An old man wearing a grey shirt and wadmal trousers, along with cobbled shoes of worn-out leather, stood in the sunshine beside one of the stone walls. His head was bare; his hair soft, unkempt and grey as reindeer moss. Even as they approached he seemed not to hear them, still standing there half bent as he wound lengths of wicker around the crossbeam of a fence.

‘Good day, Ramnbit Gil-Raude,’ said Margret.

‘Good day, Margret.’

Ramnbit still didn’t straighten; he simply continued to twist the withies around and under each other, binding and tying them at great length to secure them. His voice had been strong, almost a growl; his hands were large but worked slowly, almost fumbling.

‘Bergfinn and his people left yesterday. Arnar is the new owner of Auðvinstad,’ said Margret.

‘So Bergfinn wasn’t the damned idiot I thought he was.’

Margret looked at Arnar and shook her head, as if to apologise for the old man.

‘He came here last year, said he wanted to leave,’ said Ramnbit. ‘People were dying here in the settlements, he said. Of hunger and the cold, of exhaustion and disease. I asked him whether there was anything new about people dying.’

Ramnbit straightened and looked at Margret. His face was tanned, scored by deep lines, scars and wrinkles; he had a broad, hooked nose. But his eyes were bright, almost like the eyes of a young boy, although oddly calm, as if they had never seen anything they were unable to understand.

He turned back to the wicker and his work.

‘But he was right,’ he said. ‘This land is a pack of wolves – a cursed land. In the end, it will murder us all.’

‘This is Arnar Vilhjalmsson,’ said Margret.

Arnar dismounted his horse and stood before Ramnbit. He was a head taller than the old man, who in his prime would have stood eye to eye with Arnar, before the years pressed down upon him, eroding the muscles from his bones and bending him under their weight. Ramnbit offered Arnar his hand in greeting – it was cold, and although it no longer possessed the strength it once had, Arnar could tell there was strength in the old man yet.

‘I see. A new owner, eh?’

‘Yes, a new owner. The old one has journeyed south.’

Ramnbit was missing a couple of his top teeth. He placed his other hand on top of Arnar’s.

‘There’s so many folk leaving here now. One minute they’re here, the next they’re gone. If you want to speak with them before they disappear, it’s best to keep ahold of them.’

He remained standing, still tightly squeezing Arnar’s hand. Arnar laughed.

‘I’ve only just arrived – I’m not going to disappear any time soon.’

‘You plan to stay? Have you not learned anything?’

They smiled at each other for a couple of moments, the old man and the young one. Then Ramnbit released his grip.

‘I heard you come from high up in the mountains. From the land of the giants and demons. Where sheep and horses and people are hung by ropes above deep gorges as sacrifices to the gods of the past. I’ve seen them hanging there myself. Skeletons swinging in the open air, attracting eagles and ravens that come to land on them and peck at them. I’ve seen it many times, for I’ve criss-crossed the mountains of this land since long before you learned to toddle about on your own two legs.’

Arnar was about to respond, but the old man continued:

‘But there was only *one* kind of creature that I never once saw slinking across those precipitous cliffs of yours – the gods the flesh was intended for. I never once saw them standing up there, gorging themselves on your offerings. And do you know why?’

The old man’s face was filled with the joy of narration. His hands swooped through the air, their backs red and brown with age spots and scars. He was beaming, illuminated by righteousness.

‘Because they’re dead. Stone dead, like bones for the wolves. You can make your sacrifices until Doomsday dawns, but they’ll never come back.’

‘And what of your own god? He whom the people down here by the fjords put their belief in?’

‘He’s known as the White Christ.’

‘And is he often to be seen, down here by the fjords?’

The old man raised his eyebrows – he heard the blasphemy in Arnar’s words.

‘So… I’m guessing the heathen didn’t come down from the mountains looking to rub shoulders with god-fearing folk.’

‘No. But I could use another man or two to help me run Auðvinstad.’

The sun glittered in the old man’s hair, and when he spoke there was mischief in his voice:

‘A heathen from the mountains who wants to run a farm by the fjord? A heathen in godless times!’

‘The way you’re speaking, Ramnbit’ Margret interrupted, ‘you should be on your guard.’

‘Oh should I now, venerable Margret?’

‘There’s no living being on this earth given to understand all truths. And that includes you.’

‘May I ask the venerable Margret to go inside and see if she can find us something to eat or drink?’

Margret shook her head.

‘You’ve always been obstinate, Ramnbit. But I’d hoped you might have softened with age.’

Margret, too, dismounted her horse and walked towards the house. The old man turned back to Arnar.

‘No, when it comes to the gods, Arnar, Margret will tell you that Christ is found in your every breath, your every thought. She may be right. But there is still one god you should heed and honour, as there’s great power in him.’

‘And who might that be?’

‘*Work* is his name. *He* is a god you’ll need. But he can be severe – so harsh in the autumns and springs that he’ll try to destroy you. But you’re strong, I can see that. You must sacrifice your strength to him. For this land… it won’t soften. And your gods and the king and the Church…’

He exhaled through a slow, derisive whistle.

‘They’ve been like a flock of ravens on an old cadaver. Pecking and clawing. Tenacious and wise birds, they are. You can see the sky flashing in their eyes. But they’re cowards – as soon as the wolves arrive, they take to their wings. And the wolves are coming, here in this land. And the birds… well, they’re already gone.’

He suddenly fell silent and stared into Arnar’s face, but to Arnar such prophecies of the end of days and how the powers of doom were at work were nothing new. Such words no longer had any impact on him. But Ramnbit’s little speech had been masterly, like that of a skald depicting a magnificent drama, or a priest at the pulpit preaching of doomsday. Arnar honoured Ramnbit’s words with the silence they demanded, letting them lie there between them for a time before he spoke.

‘There’s plenty of space in the house at Auðvinstad,’ he said. ‘There’s only myself and Sel-Floke, my servant, and Margret, living there.’

Margret came out of the house and called for them to come in and eat.

‘He wants me to come down to the fjord,’ Ramnbit called back. ‘Says he hasn’t a clue how to milk cows or slaughter lambs. I would have thought you could have helped him, Margret.’

Arnar smiled and shook his head, and said that there was also plenty of space for Ramnbit's livestock in Bergfinn's buildings.

Ramnbit was too proud to say 'yes' or 'thank you'. Margret, who had returned to them, took hold of Ramnbit's arm.

'You should do it, Ramnbit,' she said. 'You should come down to live with us before the winter comes.'

The old man looked at her, surprised, as if he had never seen her before; as if there was something about her that he had previously never understood. Then he recovered himself.

'Move down there? So this mountain dweller can take possession of my best livestock? So he can sacrifice them to Thor and Njord? So he can send my animals to Valhalla, too?'

'You mustn't speak ill of Arnar. He's a good man.'

'A good man?'

'Yes.'

'A good man? Now wouldn't that be something.'

'You should do it, Ramnbit. Come down to live with us.'

Margret regarded him wisely, as only she could. Ramnbit turned and walked towards the house, gesturing for them to follow him.

'We'll see when the autumn comes,' he said. 'We'll see, Margret. We'll see.'

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A wave was rising, somewhere out in the misty sea. Unlike any of the waves that had come before.

But long before the wave would be seen or heard – even long before they knew it was coming – a vision had revealed itself to Bergfinn. He had seen children swept away amidst a terrible maelstrom, and to rid himself of this image he had shaken his head so violently that droplets of water had flown from the strands of his hair like beating rain. He had gripped the tiller so hard that his knuckles had turned as white as skeletons, as ghosts.

There had been many other waves before this one. All of them had come out of the grey fog, each one hammering against the port side of the ship. Bergfinn had felt the crash of each and every one of them, and the women had held their children close as Halldor had come running to stand beside Bergfinn at the tiller. They had shouted at each other, making themselves heard above the howling wind, which seemed only to be gaining in strength.

'This will be ugly, Bergfinn!'

'What?'

'How far is it? To land?'

'The waves are coming straight at us. We must still be far out.'

'Can we sail closer to the wind?'

'What?'

'Can we sail closer to the wind?'

With the rain beating against his head and the raging, roiling waves breaking alongside them, Bergfinn yelled into Halldor's ear:

'She can't go any closer. If I steer her any closer we'll lose the wind and drift out to sea.'

Those on board held on to whatever they could as the deck rolled beneath them, aware that something uncontrollable was rising from below them now, hungry and sinister. Their eyes, once narrow as knife blades, were now wide-open as if in the darkest of nights; not the slightest chink could they find in the fog nor in the painful certainty within them. The fury of

the ocean could no longer be tamed, and the waves that came for them were her merciless messengers.

The boat's prow cut deeper and deeper through the valleys that opened before it; smashed into the walls of seawater that endlessly rose up.

Three men had run to the forehold and cast the two boards closest to the prow into the sea. Now they stood there, each with a wooden bucket, bailing out as much liquid as they could. Some of the seawater they threw over the gunwale was swallowed by the sea and sky; some was cast back into the ship.

The fog had descended on them during the night, carried by the strange winds that had blown so low across the waves. It was as if the ship had been imperceptibly swept up by the fog. Only when the winds abated once more did those aboard look about them and realise that the silence that now enveloped them was a thick, impenetrable one; that the coastline they had been following was gone – as were their bearings. All that remained was the fog.

Then the winds and the rain had come. The waves had started hammering against the hull, more and more violently, some of them breaking skyward as cloudbursts or wind-whipped foam, others breaking below to unleash their force beneath the rolling vessel.

But *this* wave was not like the others. It rose ahead of them as a towering, blue-black wall, the froth and foam trembling upon it testifying to its wild power. Even before it broke over the ship, shrill screams rose from those who saw it coming.

Bergfinn thrust the tiller away from him in an attempt to turn the ship into the wave, but it was no use. The wave struck them like a thunderclap, crashing down over them, splintering the gunwale and the top strake, sweeping and frothing over them in an attempt to drag man, woman and beast overboard. After it had passed, the ship was half-full of ice-cold seawater.

Fear returned to the eyes of the men and women; to the din of the animals as they howled in their struggle to break free. A gasping shock returned to the children's faces; the water continued to flow, washing back and forth across the deck before seeping down into the hull. It poured between the split boards of the leaky deck, the passengers starting to feel its tremendous weight rolling beneath them.

The ship now rolled slowly and heavily in the waves, like a dying sea creature. Bergfinn could feel it only vaguely obeyed the tiller.

'We must start bailing!' he roared. 'Bail her out! Bail her out!'

They ran for pails and shovels. Hay and various bundles and sacks of provisions were thrown overboard; yet more boards torn up and cast away. Those unable to find anything to bail with used their bare hands, thrusting the water skywards. Bergfinn turned the ship from the wind, so painfully slowly, taking her downwind and out to sea. He had no other option.

'Grab hold of those planks!' he shouted, pointing. 'Fix the gunwale!'

Odd and Halldor were already heaving crates and woven sacks aside so they could get to the spare planks kept in the prow, throwing things aside or overboard with wild abandon. Wide-eyed children watched as chests and animal hides took flight before they were plucked from the air by the waves and vanished into the depths.

But the waves continued to roll in, some so high as to wash between the people and animals on board. The enormous sail should have been lowered – drenched and heavy, it made the ship sway like a man drunk out of his mind. It should have been lowered into the waves and towed behind them as a sea anchor, but there was no time. Halldor and Odd ran to the port side carrying a long, eight-inch plank between them. Cattle and sheep blocked their path, so the men cut the ropes that held them and chased them away. One of the sheep hit the gunwale behind it and was unable to get a foothold – it tipped overboard, out into the waves, and in an instant the sea had the animal in its grasp. Its woolly body and head, with its dark,

coiled horns, danced on the crests of the waves before vanishing into the deep valleys and fog behind them.

They moved the plank into place to cover the hole in the top of the hull, the sound of hammers ringing out as the nails were driven in.

But then another huge wave came, this time from behind. Bergfinn sensed its presence, and when he turned, it was already towering far above him. The wave lifted the stern and the ship surged forwards, but the wave continued to roll past, from stern to bow, flushing vast volumes of icy water into the vessel from both sides. And then the wave had passed. The men in the forehold struggled with water up to their stomachs; the men and women who still clung to the deck understood. To their depthless horror, they realised what lay ahead of them.

The ship was now so low in the water that it hardly moved with the wind; every new wave that surged past spat its crest over the gunwale. Bergfinn let go of the tiller. He could hear the cries of women and children, saw mothers and fathers clinging to their offspring and each other as the foaming sea swept across the deck like drifting snow. He watched as Halldor and Odd cut the ropes that had bound the children to the ship as their parents took hold of them, clinging to the gunwale and rigging.

The hull rolled and rolled, the mast swinging back and forth against the sky, becoming lower and lower with each motion. Bergfinn knew the mast would soon swing too low; the ship's balance would be lost and the hull no longer able to lift the mast to the sky. He ran to the animals then – he could hear their cries. They were still tied to the ship, and he couldn't bear the thought of them being dragged under by those straining ropes to suffocate alone in the darkness below.

With a flash of his knife, he cut the rope that bound a dog to the side of the ship. On he went, cutting ropes of leather, hemp and sinew. A sheep leapt into the waves. Two cattle turned to head towards the centre of the ship.

Yet another crushing wave came forth and the ship, already sinking ever lower into the sea each time it listed and swayed, now shuddered and reeled, the mast swinging out towards the south. It hung there for a moment, as if awaiting its destiny, the sail and rigging flapping in the storm. Like the tail of some dying monster trying to get up one last time.

But now the green sea gushed over the side of the ship, the deck tilting ever steeper; animals, people and provisions starting to slide and fall towards the hungering water.

The mast hung there for another brief moment against the seething heavens as the wind twisted and whipped the long tatters of the ravaged sail one last time; as the roaring rain swirled against the driving skies around it, as if immense waterspouts were trying to suck the very marrow out of this icy sea.

But then, as the wind tore the sail from the yard, the moment was over. The portside gunwale went under; the deck rose up onto one edge and the mast fell into the water never to rise again. Everything began to sink, disappearing into the green maw of the monster below. Women and children screamed; animals howled as their ropes tightened and the water swallowed them. In that instant, Bergfinn realised that his vision had come true, and that of all those who had set sail with him, not a single being would live.

He clung to the gunwale above him, hanging down from it, but it was already sinking. He saw his shipmates disappearing around him; the small heads of people and animals trying in vain to keep their necks above the waves before they vanished into the abyss. The wild forces snatched them, one by one, deeming all of them worthless and yet still claiming more.

Some still managed to cling to the ropes and timber along the side of the ship, blowing like rags in the wind. The entire deck was underwater now, the people in the violent clutches of the all-powerful sea. An old woman. A child. A man. Arms flailing, trying to find something, anything, to hold on to, before the waves gripped them and tore them away.

Were it not for the children, it all might have been bearable.

The ship was no longer recognisable. All that remained was a sinking island of clinkered strakes at which the waves snapped and washed over. A few individuals still clinging on for dear life. Three children at its centre, and a ring of others around them, desperate to find something to hold on to.

Bergfinn caught hold of a long rope from the rigging, and as the sea shook him and tore at him, he threw one end of it towards the people in the waves. Their hands clutched at it, but the sea was cold as ice, their fingers numb and useless. He tried to pull himself along the side of the ship towards the others who still held on. Another wave rushed past, tearing more people loose; toying with them for a moment before releasing them to calmer waters. Down where so many others had gone before.

All of them, sinking. At first they struggled as they drowned, fear whirling like a maelstrom within them, but after they had fought for a while they grew still, drifting peacefully down into the silence. Cattle and sheep, a couple of horses, hung by their ropes in neat rows beneath the ship. Soon all of them ceased their writhing and kicking, the clamour of battle quieted within them.

And if Rán, sea goddess and ruler of these great depths, had been standing on the bottom of the sea that day, her long, black net trailing from one hand – if she had tilted her head back to stare up towards the surface, she would have seen the people and animals drifting down from above. Slowly, like dark snowflakes. And she would have been pleased, this beautiful yet merciless goddess. Perhaps she would even have smiled, the white of her teeth glimmering for just a moment in the darkness she haunts down below.

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Extract pp. 141–142

It was morning, and the wreck of Bergfinn's ship was illuminated by a still, golden light. The sea was deep shade of green. Three icebergs had drifted in from the north during the night, following the wreck slowly out to sea.

Bergfinn and the young man were no longer there. The lapping of the waves had gently worked them loose overnight; claimed them and delivered them to the ocean depths below. To the great darkness above which men so often sail, but where they seldom allow their thoughts to go.

The two little girls on the hull were motionless. Rays of sunlight stroked them, softly, as if to reawaken them – as if the morning sun had been puzzled to find its children lifeless and was trying to find signs of life in them yet. But their bodies and faces had stiffened. Never again would they feel the warmth of the sun or move of their own volition.

For here there was no more suffering. Only the quiet lapping of the water against a hull that had sailed its last voyage. The old mast fish, which had been attached to four different masts in three different ships, and which had now finished its work, was carried due south with the surrounding remains of the wreck. Further and further south it went. And over the months and years to come, and long after the two little girls had gone, it would drift peacefully in the wind and currents from cold to warmer waters. The dead animals beneath it, which had once fed on the grass of Greenland, would slowly be consumed by the creatures of the sea. Until only a few skeletons remained; until the ropes that held their horns, heads and legs finally gave way, allowing them to sink into the darkness.

But the mast fish would continue on its journey, travelling so far that strange fish, sea snakes, and turtles would swim beside it in the waters where it floated. The iron nails, once freshly-forged and shining in the hard timber, would rust as the years passed, turning a reddish brown before crumbling. Like the other parts of the ship that had been attached to the mast fish, the deck, ties, keel, strakes and mast would rot, work loose and float away.

Finally, all that accompanied the mast fish would be the sea plants growing on it, still keeping it afloat, and when the plants died and rotted somewhere far off in a distant sea, the mast fish itself would start to sink. But its descent would be so slow that it would hardly be a descent at all. At six fathoms deep, in dim, yellow-green light, it would be as if something still held it up, and as the shells that had affixed themselves to it shone a radiant white, the mast fish would drift there for a time, as if weightless. Then it would sink once again, until finally, long after the dark had completely enveloped it and all the shimmering light was gone, it too would come to rest in the kingdom of Rán.

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Extract pp. 441–451 (end of novel)

Rannveig's daughter was three years old, and her name was Tyra Gefn Rannveigsdotter. Walking alongside her mother, Eir and Yrnalind, she crossed the field where blue harebells had nodded on their soft stems, the wood anemones sparkling like stars in a sky of green. On the hillside above, the first leaves of the dwarf and grey willows were turning red.

They had picked bog bilberries and crowberries in one of the side valleys to the east of Jøkuldal for most of the day. As they wandered from bush to bush, the three young women talked about whatever crossed their minds. They laughed often, and Tyra Gefn was a good little girl, following them without complaint and occasionally finding a berry that she passed to her mother. At one point, around midday, she had begun to tire and wanted to go home, and there had been tears when the others refused to take her. But after she had been given some cheese and berries and eaten the *skyr* her mother had brought, and taken a nap in the heather, all was well. She had toddled off after the grown-ups once again, quite content.

That same day, Ramnbit and two of the servants had ridden west along the Jøkulsåa river, down to a lake they had named Sandvatn. They planned to catch Arctic char in the shallow pools and narrow creek where the fish could be trapped by nets and then speared or thrown ashore.

Only Arnar and Loðfinn had stayed behind at home, cutting and spreading out the grass on a dry patch of land just a stone's throw or two from Jøkulsbu. There wasn't much straw to be cut, but they knew that if they swept their scythes over the ground this summer, the crop would grow better next year.

The sound made by Arnar's scythe was more of a rasping than the soft shushing of thick grass being harvested, but the scythe cut well, and Arnar was already looking forward to using it next year. His ribs seemed to have healed; only his left arm continued to give him trouble. That morning, when he and Eir had walked side by side into the yard after breakfast, and she had leaned in to kissed him on the jaw, he had been moved to lift her in his arms as he had done at Blåhamrane, but was unable to do so. His left arm still lacked its former strength and grip – but he knew they would return. Over the past few days he had managed to close the fingers of his hand; all his former dexterity would be restored, given time.

As he straightened, turned the scythe, found the whetstone and spat on it, he noticed something moving on the western slopes of the valley – a rider approaching down the steep hillside. A stranger. The first visitor to come to the outlands. Arnar took his scythe and told Loðfinn they had better return to the house; meet the man and find out who he was.

It was Tinforne, Himin-Gorm's son. The last time they met was when they had spoken at Blodgrasvollen after the battle.

Tinforne appeared to be in a hurry. As soon as he reached the flat ground of the valley floor, he put his horse into a brisk trot. He came straight towards them, one arm hanging loose at his side, the other holding the reins. He turned his horse into an abrupt stop where they stood, jumped down and stood before them, his feet planted apart on the earth. The sleeves of his shirt and tunic were rolled up to reveal his forearms, tanned by the wind and summer sun. He offered Arnar his hand.

'I must speak with you, Arnar,' he said, 'but we don't have much time.'

If it hadn't been for the deeply serious tone in Tinforne's voice, Arnar would have laughed and asked what on earth he meant. But Tinforne made a gesture with his head, as if nodding behind him, and Arnar saw their outline cast against the sky. Riders. Eight to ten men. Coming over the same ridge Tinforne had crossed. They came over the crest and began to descend the same hillside.

'It's my father,' said Tinforne, 'with nine men. I said I would ride ahead and speak with you.'

‘What do they want?’

‘To burn your farmstead and banish you from the Jøkuldal valley.’

‘Burn my farm?’

Even as the meaning of the words was sinking in, as he echoed them in a stifled voice, he was already moving, running into the main house. There, in a dark corner, he found his axe, still featuring the new shaft fitted the day before they rode from Agnafjord. He snatched it up and ran back outside. Tinforne took hold of Arnar’s arm; their eyes met. His grip was strong, his voice low.

‘Arnar, this time… This time you must yield.’

‘Yield? And let him burn my farm? My home?’

‘Yes.’

‘No, Tinforne. I… I will not yield. I have the law and justice on my side. It’s been over sixty years since Jøkuldal belonged to Åsastad. This is church property – the churchmen can testify to it. And by next summer, I will own the land here in Jøkuldal. If Himin-Gorm refuses to accept this, he can meet me at the assembly next summer. Let the Althing be the judge.’

‘The Althing?’ snarled Tinforne in disbelief.

‘There’s a 179-year-old parchment at Garðar that proves the Church owns Jøkuldal.’

Tinforne shook Arnar by the arm.

‘Don’t you see, Arnar?’ he said. ‘This matter is never going to be brought before the Althing.’

Arnar’s expression remained stubborn, hardening into defiance.

‘I saved your life, once,’ said Tinforne. ‘For the sake of our friendship and the night of the sacrifice, and for the voyage we’ll make to Vinland… But it’s beyond my power to save you this time.’

Arnar seemed stunned by the words; Tinforne shook him again.

‘Just this once, Arnar,’ he said. ‘Just this once, you must yield.’

But Arnar shook his head.

‘If there is but one time I refuse to yield, it is now.’

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A covey of ptarmigans sat in the heather on a south-facing mountainside. They had detected a kind of disquiet in the valley below them, some unfamiliar sound that reached them through the rustling autumn breeze. When the mother suddenly shot up into the air, the rest of the group followed – the decision made from one heartbeat to the next, wings flapping ardently as they darted aslant through the low rays of sunlight falling along the hillside. Soon they no longer needed to beat their wings, instead simply steering their way out and down like falling crescent moons, past scree, rocks, boulders.

Eir had stopped her berry picking and stood up as she saw the birds approaching. One of that year’s broods, fleeing the valley in haste. They began to beat their wings once again and she watched them scale a low ridge, where for a fleeting moment they hung like inconstant, flickering specks against the sky. Then they vanished across the plateau, towards the west. She was pleased to have seen them, and continued to the next bush to resume her task.

Meanwhile, the seven birds flew on taut wings over a landscape of broad hills and bright reindeer moss. They cast themselves over a ridge and out into a long valley, where the moorland was a pale shade of red, like the flesh of Arctic char. Their wide-open eyes were black and the air around them quivered as their mottled, grey-brown bodies sped past. Immensely beautiful, formed by the mountains.

The strange, upright creatures that caused the din that had frightened them were already far behind, but the birds were not looking to land. They had sensed that they were no longer flying alone. Something had found them, and they were being pursued.

One of the young birds was lagging behind. Not by a great distance at first – perhaps no more than two or three wingbeats and she would have caught up to the others. But then the valley took a sudden turn, and all at once a barren mound of rock lay dead ahead of them, a weathered hillcrest rising sharply from the valley floor. The birds flying in front turned and vanished around the outside of the rock, but the last bird had been following the contours of the valley so closely that she came upon the rock more suddenly, and took it on the inside.

It was only a bare ridge of grey rock, but she was so alone now as she flew, and fear clutched at her with scratching claws. She yearned to catch up to the others, become a member of their flock once more.

At first, she had been puzzled as to why her mother hadn't landed once they had put the strange sounds so far behind them, but then she too had understood that now, nowhere was safe.

She would soon be past the rock and would see the others again.

But the great, pursuing threat had closed in, and she suddenly realised she could no longer follow where the others had gone. She threw herself out to the side, over another ridge, her wings beating in panic, but she was no longer able to move quickly enough. She flew out over a great precipice and an abyss opened up, the wide expanse of air above the Jøkuldal valley enveloping her.

A strange river lay beyond. A wide valley floor, haze-covered slopes on the other side so remote they would be almost impossible to reach. This great open space could offer her no protection, and in her solitude she was like a snowflake in the currents. She manoeuvred her wings, trying to turn, longing to fly back to the plateau and find the way to the willow thicket and her mother, her siblings, all that was familiar.

Then there was a flash in the sky above her. A staring eye, following her every movement.

She knew she must get away from this eye, but it followed her through the void. She could feel it bearing down on her, her flight so hopelessly slow – no matter how hard she struggled, she knew it was futile. In the instant before she was caught, that which was approaching was revealed to her. Its yellow eyes; its wings cast sharply back along its sides.

When the peregrine falcon was close enough he swung his feet forward, clenching the talons of one foot and pointing it ahead of him like a lance. The impact was so hard that the ptarmigan vanished in an explosion of the feathers and down thrown from her body.

The muffled echo of their collision rebounded from the nearest mountainside. The ptarmigan had begun her erratic, lifeless, spiralling descent. The falcon could have dived after her; taken hold to brake her fall and steered her to land wherever he wished – but he let her plummet to the ground. He followed her down until she crashed limply into a patch of scree and rolled across the rocks before coming to rest. He landed there beside her body, feathers still falling from the sky; her down, high above, carried away on the wind, never to be seen again. The falcon blinked. Then he bent over his prey.

At around the same time, a little further east in Jøkuldal, the ten riders reached Arnar. They turned in before him, and as their horses stamped their feet and circled on the spot, he stared from one man to the next, shaking his head. He had seen all of them before – some of them he knew well. Two or three of them had even fought alongside him last winter.

Vermund was among them, holding a freshly-lit, crackling torch in one hand. All the men were well-armed. A couple of them wore coats of mail; some carried bows. Each and every one of them carried a sword or an axe.

Arnar stood before them, one man and one axe against the many. A couple of the men dismounted. Some gave him a brief nod; others refused to meet his gaze. One fidgeted with his reins, looking only at the ground. None of them said a word.

But Himin-Gorm's horse stood steady. The chieftain kicked his horse's sides with his heels, guiding the animal forward a few steps. Then he spoke, as he had so many times before.

'Is there anything you wish to salvage from your buildings, Arnar of Agnafjord, before we burn them to the ground?'

'Nothing will be burned here. No home of mine, nor anything else.'

'These buildings do not belong to you. They're on my land, built from my stones and my turf. And they will be turned to charcoal and ashes.'

How Arnar longed to run forward, grab hold of the man and beat him, just as he'd beaten Vermund at Gråhei. But he forced himself to hold his ground.

'Nothing here is yours,' he said. 'Everything you see here belongs to the Church. There's a parchment at Garðar, signed by the Bishop and by Hrisi, your forefather. It's all there in writing – you own nothing here.'

But Himin-Gorm's smirking features remained unchanged, his face showing no sign of compromise or even of acknowledgement. His expression was immutable, towering above anything that might prove reconciliatory in mankind, in words – or in life itself.

Arnar heard the frightened voice of his servant, Loðfinn, from somewhere behind him, but remembered the vow he once made. He shook his head, and whispered 'no'. He watched as Himin-Gorm turned towards his men and roared:

'Burn the houses!'

And then, with Himin-Gorm's words still ringing in his ears, Arnar understood that there was only one path to take. He could see that Himin-Gorm's men were moving sluggishly – that their hearts were no longer in this – and in that moment the relief swam once more before his eyes: an image of the last battle. Its glowing outline was burned into his mind, and he knew what he had to do.

He saw Himin-Gorm towering there on his horse, scarcely more than three or four strides ahead of him – with his axe quivering in his hand, he forged ahead. It was as if the lives and fates that had followed him here had been cast recklessly onto the scales, tipping them perilously out of balance.

The borderland he now crossed was a lonely no-man's land, and it struck him in a brief, fleeting moment that if his arm – which now carried both his axe and his faith – was still not what it once had been, Eir would find him lying on the ground below a pillar of smoke, and they would never, ever meet again – save for in the afterlife.

But the battle in which he now found himself was a battle of destinies. Did he not already feel that his strength had returned; that the blow he was about to strike was sure to be a good one? And did he not already know that Eir would be here at his side after it was all over – that she would lift her face to his, her eyes sparkling?

They struck him down, killing him instantly. Then they entered each of the three houses, setting them alight. As they rode away, Loðfinn, sobbing, began to run through the smoke. He saved as much as he could before the flames and the blazing heat took all that remained.

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They soaked some rags in warm water to wash the blood from his body. They shut his eyes, and closed his wounds as best they could.

They pitched a tent, which Loðfinn had salvaged, and began to pack up the last of their remaining possessions in preparation for the journey to Agnafjord at dawn the next morning. And all the while, Eir sat in the grass, his head in her lap. She sat there until evening fell; as Yrnalind swept her own blanket around her against the cold.

She said she wished to stay with him that evening.

The frost came in secret once the sun had set, creeping unseen across the hills, gently blanketing the tiny, bell-shaped flowers of the heather, scrubbing out their brightness with its breath.

But Eir's fingers continued their soft stroking of Arnar's throat. She pulled the blanket tighter around them both, and in the mirror of her tears his face remained undarkened. The strength that had brought her to him, which had been there as she had dragged him across the stone floor and back to life, still burned within her. It could not be extinguished.

His face looked the same, a peaceful expression now settled across his mouth and brow. She could see the tiny lines at the corners of his mouth, the ones that had always formed crescent-shaped creases when he laughed. She retraced each and every line that had ever given him a look of freedom. But the way he looked now, lying there, was not how she would remember him; how she would carry him with her in the times to come.

His face blurred behind more tears, but she did not wipe them away. She saw him riding across a shining frost-hardened plain; leaving tracks in freshly fallen snow. The tableaux shifted, and she saw him wandering through unknown mountains; his face and hands in the flicker of flames and glowing embers. Standing in a boat with the wind in his hair. And then he was with her, right beside her, as their horses surged forward, keeping the same rhythm, and when his face came closer she saw it coloured first with rage, then with sorrow, and then with love. Again, she saw him deep in the silent mountains at sunset, running his hands along her body, holding her to him and whispering her name in wonder. And finally she saw the two of them standing on a beach. Staring into one another's eyes – they were so young. Barely more than children.

That was how he would remain for her – as he had been in life. For life had burned so intensely within him.

She sat there on that last evening in Jøkuldal as the warmth of life – within him from his very beginning – now left and abandoned him. The warmth that has always separated the living from the dead.

Then she leaned over him, pressed her cheek against his, and whispered to him; gave him the most tender and precious words of her heart.