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BULL-HANSEN

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Enslaved

I remember very little from the years before they took me away. But I recall that morning, walking among those ancient yew trees, inhaling that childhood scent of grass and warm marsh. I can just about make out the sun dappling through the crowns of the trees; its light tinged with green as it reaches me. And it is warm; I'm sensing the heat against my exposed skin as I make my way through the undergrowth. The ferns brush against my bare legs and I can feel the bow in my hand and the quiver slapping my hip. I enter a dense spinney where my feet sink into the sodden moss. Spring tides sometimes reach this high, depositing seaweed, shells and crabs that bury into the marshy waters to die. Finally, I am at the beach at the far end of the cove; I can see the waves lapping the shore and the seagulls soaring high in the sky as if nailed to the firmament above, before they flap their wings and dip towards the sea, or to the forest behind me.

Here to my right are the sandbanks where father and Ulfham are standing. Father's grey hair billows in the wind. As always, his sinewy torso is leaning to one side, broken, but he is still strong and it crosses my mind that nothing in this world can sway him. Ulfham barks, but stays at father's side as usual. Father nods imperceptibly before bending back down to pick up a shell. I continue down the path. It turns off here, and leads me over to the northern side of the cove, where I clamber up amongst the rocks. I'm still young, a mere child, but I am supple; my arms and legs are strong. My bow is over my shoulder now, and I climb quickly and fearlessly to the crest of the hill, because I know father is watching me from the sandbanks. He is worried I'll hurt myself. I'm all he has left now. But I need to show him that I am capable, that I am strong like him, because the landowner's sons will soon come to ask me to join them aboard a ship, and father has to know that I will be able to cope.

From the top of the hill, I can see far across the fjord. Up here there's a cairn, and during the first years after the war, it was father's job to light it every time he saw a longship. He would spend every night up here, awake.

I sit down beneath the old timber roof, leaning against the wall, and trying to rest my gaze on the sea for a while. I allow my eyes to wander along the line between the sea and the sky. Barely a hair's breadth wide, it is as straight as the blade of a sword. That's where I am heading, out there where sea and sky meet. Beyond the sea, far to the west, there is an island kingdom. Bjorn, my only brother, left the previous summer. This year it is my turn.

Then I'm back on my feet. I'm now running as the juniper bushes scratch my legs and stomach. I can't remember what I am wearing; maybe just a piece of material wrapped around my waist. Now I'm on the northern shore of the headland, and I unwrap the cord I've wound around the bow. At the end of the line is a hook fashioned from a thorn. I crush a snail and impale it on the hook.

For a long time, I lie there flat on my stomach on the smooth, sun-soaked rock. I can see myself reflected in the water, long, untidy hair hanging down around my face, which still has a round, childlike quality. However, this is soon to change. Hints of the adult man are appearing. My forehead and cheekbones are more angular than they used to be, and my eyes, a startling blue against my tanned skin, are set deeper in my face.

Every now and again, the fish glide past the hook. Some venture right to the surface, erasing my reflection with their tail fins. And then they return down towards the hook again, but they are small and not worth eating. I jerk the line to scare them off.

For many years, that was all I could remember from that place: a young boy meandering to a fishing spot, a father gathering mussels on the sandbank. For many years, this was my only memory from that time. Only several years later would I return to the peninsula which was the playground of my youth, where I would rediscover paths trampled clear by the hooves of the roe deer, and re-erect the timber roof my father had once constructed. And I would remember.

I must have fallen asleep there on the rock. If I had been awake, I would have heard them coming. I would have heard the clattering of their axes and swords, and I would have sprinted back. I would have fought, and I would have fallen. A short life, but a death worthy of the embrace of a Valkyrie. Sometimes I find myself thinking that it would have

been better that way.

But my life thread wasn't to be cut that short. When I awoke, everything was quiet. The sun was still high in the sky; I couldn't have slept for long. This silence... It's never as silent as this, I thought. I remember that I turned, and immediately saw a man standing at father's lookout post. He wears no clothes but for a pair of tattered leather trousers, and his torso is covered with blue stripes which snake and undulate as he turns and catches sight of me.

I remember running. I leap from rock to rock, I am down at the shoreline, I fall and cut my knee on the barnacles at the water's edge, but then get up again. Now there are three men after me, one of them has an ax. The other two are half-naked, they wear a slave's iron ring around the neck, their painted bodies bound from rock to rock; one is howling like a dog. Soon they are at my heels, so I throw myself into the water. I start swimming, but they soon catch me, grabbing me by the hair and pulling me under.

They must have held me underwater until I blacked out. And then I guess they carried me back, across the headland and down to the sandbanks where Ulfham lay with an arrow in his chest, soon to be carried off by the tide. They continued on the southern shore of the headland, the warrior with the ax at the front and the two slaves with me between them.

Father had built our house between the rocks, and at the time I thought it was every bit as grand as the landowner's longhouse. Any other man would maybe have raised his house on the lee side of the headland, but it was as if father never quite managed to shake off his duties. He always had an eye on the fjord, because a long life had taught him that enemies always came from that direction. But not this time. Sheltered by the trees, they had sneaked up on him. An old and ravaged warrior alone out here on the headland, he was barely worthy a thrust of the sword.

When I regained consciousness, I was lying on my side, my arms tied behind my back. I first saw the men strolling around. Some of them were tying up the stockfish that we had hung over the drying racks. Another was testing the tension on father's yew bow. Only when I turned around did I catch sight of father, leaning against the wall with an arrow in his chest, gasping for breath. A deep wound sliced his outer thigh, and another gashed his

upper arm. His hand, red with blood, was trembling in his lap.

As I got to my feet, the rope around my neck tightened.

“The people up at the farm said that you used to fight for the Earl of Lade,” a voice stated behind me. I understood they were addressing my father. “What are you doing here in Vingulmork?”

Father didn’t answer.

“This is your son?”

Father raised his head. “He’s only young. Let him live.”

The man behind me snarled some words in a language I didn’t recognize, to the slaves who came over and grabbed me by the arms. Again he snarled at his men, and two of them crouched over father and held him up against the wall. “Thorstein,” father said. “Turn away.”

I still hadn’t seen who was talking to my father, but now I felt a knife at my throat and one of the strangers stepped forward. He was a tall man with a long tunic woven from iron rings, and this iron shirt was spattered with blood. Without a word, he pulled a long, curved knife from his belt and thrust it into my father’s belly.

Father said nothing as he was cut up. His legs jerked, that was all. And then he was released, and now he was still again. His eyes sought me out, and he wept. I had never seen him weep before.

“Light a fire,” ordered the man in the iron shirt.

One of the slaves went into the cottage. I could hear him rummaging in the hearth where we always buried the embers in the sand so that they would last until the evening. At the same time, the slaves pulled father back to his feet. I could see that he wanted to say something to me, but all of a sudden the man in the iron shirt pushed his fingers into his stomach. Father groaned with pain, gasping for breath. The man in the iron shirt now stood with something resembling a bloody rope in his hand. He looked at it for a moment, before nailing it to the wall with his knife. “Walk!” he barked. “Walk!”

Father started walking. First one step, before stopping to catch his breath. Then another, and now he turned his head away from me, before doubling over and throwing up. But the man with the iron shirt shouted at him again, he had to keep going, he wasn’t allowed to stop, and father straightened up and continued walking as if he didn’t notice

that his bowels were unraveling from his belly, until a whole tangled mess fell out and landed right in front of his feet. Then father sank to one knee, and turned his eyes back to me, before toppling to one side where he remained.

The slaves dragged him into the cottage and left him there. The painted one talked to the one in the iron shirt in their strange tongue. The knife was removed from my throat and I rushed straight towards father, but the slaves grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back.

I remember turning as they dragged me over the rocks, and I saw the flames piercing the grass roof. I was then forced along with them through the forest, over the narrow land bridge and onto the mainland, and after that through the woodland south of the fields. At the stream we stopped, and I was offered a drink, but refused.

When we reached the farm, flames were still dancing from the longhouse. Dead farm workers were strewn everywhere. The landowner himself was hung by the throat from the yard tree. I didn't see his two daughters, but Hilda was sitting in the middle of the farmyard, arms tied behind her like me, and her shift rendered in two down her back.

They took me to the forge. Here an iron ring was placed around my neck, and the painted slave hammered a red-hot nail into the lock and bent it with some tongs. I can remember not daring to move in case the iron burnt me. So I stood there, now with a rope attached to the slave collar, whilst Hilda had to kneel just like I had done. She too became a slave on that day.

That same evening, I was chained to the thwart where the oarsmen sat. I had seen longships before, and father had often sent me to warn the people on the farm when we had spotted sails out on the fjord. On those occasions, I had stood on the beach with the other children, quivering with anticipation as barrels and furs were unloaded and carried ashore, and some merchant with a golden armring would take up position at the stempost to shout to us about the precious silk he'd brought, about wine and glass beads and iron forged from folded steel. And sometimes, there were slaves from the west, men and women with slave collars around their necks and with their backs crisscrossed with the marks of the whip or the branding iron.

Now I was one of them. When they chained me to the thwart, I looked up the mast and noticed three broken arrows. That's when I realized that this was not a normal longship, but a battleship. I'd never seen one before, but my brother and the landowner's sons had told me about them. I had thought that such vessels were so enormous that they could run down normal ships, but instead, this was much narrower, and it lay low in the water. Men with battleaxes tucked into their belts walked back and forth, one of them glanced down at me and smirked. By the mast a bald man in a tunic and cowl sat staring at me. Judging from the tiny wooden cross around his neck, I guessed he was a monk. The landowner had once let one of his kind dunk him in the stream, at which my father had just shaken his head.

In the longship, there were six other slaves, all young boys like me. I was now linked to a chain that went from neck ring to neck ring, so that no one could move much without pulling the others along too. Now Hilda was shoved aboard. She was left amongst some sacks and chests whilst the men prepared to set out to sea.

I remember thinking that this ship must have arrived under cover of darkness. Father would have seen it otherwise. In the grey light of dawn, these men had sneaked up to the farm, past the horses in the paddock and Loth's falcon cage. The morning dew had dampened the steel of their axes and helmets, before the men had spread out among the buildings. Then, like predators, they had entered and started killing. It must have happened quickly without much of a struggle, as sound carried well in the flat landscape surrounding the farm. We would have heard the clatter of swords and loud shouts.

Now the man in the iron shirt also came aboard. He was a young man in those days, tall and broad-shouldered, and he would have been an impressive man to look at, if it hadn't been for his eyes, which were strangely small and pig-like. From the prow he surveyed slaves, sacks of grain and other booty. He nodded to himself and seemed happy. The monk approached him and the two of them exchanged a few words that I didn't hear, before the one with the piggy eyes bowed his head and the monk put the cross to his forehead. "May Christ bless you and your sword."

That same evening, we rowed off. I was twelve years old.

The Kaupang

I was to sit at the oars throughout that summer. Later I would learn that young slaves were often put to such work, because in that way, it could be judged whether or not they were strong. There had probably been some doubt whether Ros and his men should have killed me straight away, as at the time I was gangly and thin. The landowner's sons used to like racing me as I always came last. They would ask me to jump over streams so they could watch me flop into the water, which always amused them. At such times, Bjorn would furiously set off to wrestle them to the ground. But they would run away from him too. In our family, we weren't born for running, as father put it. We carried our strength in our arms.

And it was the strength of my arms that saved me. When I put my back into the strokes, my rowing would practically equal any fully-grown man. I already knew that a slave could win back their freedom, because it was said that two of the landowner's men had done just that, and one of them had left with some Irish merchants to try to return to his family. The other, Thau, had once visited my father, and the two of them had sat down by the water that summer's evening and had a long chat, whilst Bjorn and I stayed up at the cottage, watching. Thau had scars around his neck, the marks of the slave iron.

Soon I too had such scars. The iron ring rubbed away my skin during the course of my first day at the oars, because I hadn't yet found my rhythm and the iron pulled and chafed at my neck and throat. In front of me sat a redheaded boy whose ear had been cut off. He didn't talk to anyone but himself and he did so in Danish. Behind me, there was a boy that was a little older than me. He used to spit at my back if I fell out of rhythm.

That summer, I rarely thought of revenge. I can remember that I always lowered my gaze when the one who had killed my father passed by. The others just called him Ros, and it was said that he had come from the rivers of Gardaland as a young boy. When, on the rare occasion, I dared look at him, I saw that there was something eastern about his

face. His cheekbones were more pronounced than those of us Norwegians and his small eyes were deep-set beneath his protruding forehead. I hated him for what he had done, but I feared him even more.

Ros raped Hilda the third night on board. First he punched her in the stomach so that she fell and couldn't get up again. Then he lay over her and his fur cloak covered both of them, only their bare feet stuck out. It happened not far from my thwart and when he was finished, Ros stood with his naked member in his hand and laughed to the other men. I remember trembling all over, and that my chest heaved rapidly as I breathed. Hilda lay as if dead between the ribs of the boat, but for her this was barely the beginning. During the days and nights that followed, the freemen on board took her whenever they so wished.

We first rowed south to Geatland, where we put ashore whilst Ros and his men ventured into the forest to hunt. After that we stopped at a farm a few days further south, where the landowner had some ten or twenty archers posted on the skerries as we rowed in. Here Ros greeted the landowner with an open hand, and the crew carried ashore a large chest. Trading took place on the beach, and we slaves watched with wonder at the treasures Ros took out and showed the landowner and his men. There were golden necklaces and bracelets, glass beads and colored wine glasses. The landowner paid for these with a broadsword, a yew bow and two coats of chainmail. He then pointed at us slaves on the ship. Hilda was led ashore. The landowner handed Ros some silver pieces, and Ros gave Hilda to the landowner.

I later learned that as Hilda was sold just a few days' sail from where she had clansmen and family, a terrible fate awaited her. Her tongue was cut out, so that she could tell no one where she came from. The same would have happened to me if I had been sold there.

Around the fifth full moon aboard, the red-haired Dane boy in front of me fell ill. First he started coughing, and then he sat shaking through the night and far into the morning, before one of Ros' men kicked him in the ribs. Ros, himself, had been ashore that morning, as he had a woman on a farm on the headland where we had moored. I heard the men mumbling that if the Dane boy didn't perk up when Ros returned, he'd be

dealt with. A slave oarsman with no strength was of little use to any man.

Surprisingly enough, Ros didn't notice the Dane boy when he came aboard. He threw himself down by the mast and sat there muttering with the monk, but since my thwart was little more than a man's length away, I caught some of what was said. On the farm, Ros had heard news about his brother. For a long time now, Ros had been asking around about his whereabouts and had feared that he was dead, but this landowner had said that he was 'close to the pretender to the throne'. This didn't make sense to me, for no king had ruled in Norway since long before I was born. Father had taught me this. His father had fought for the Earl of Lade in a great battle to the north, and had described how King Haakon had fallen to his knees and stretched his hands to the sky as he was pierced by a spear. After that, no king would ever dare to defy the earl and his kinsmen, father had told us. So who was this man that Ros was talking about? He let his hand wander towards the hilt of his sword and his gaze turned towards the open sea, and the monk took out his tiny wooden cross and placed it on his forehead, but Ros shoved him roughly away and went to the prow of the ship.

At that time, fast ships like the one that Ros and his men had, were called karvi. These were lighter than trading ships and had no deck under which the crew could find shelter. Along the railing, there were pegs where the warriors hung their shields if they were on the brink of a battle or a boarding. The mast wasn't the tallest I'd ever seen, but the boom that was hoisted up and lay across near the top of the mast, was wide and bore a sail woven from wool. Ros and his men watched over this sail at all times. They lowered it if the wind was blowing up and always had a man guarding it when we were docked. Soon I would learn that such a sail could be as precious as the ship itself together with the slaves on board, and if such a sail tore, a band of fighters like Ros and his men could easily be caught by pirates like themselves, or other enemies. Ros had been pillaging for a long time now, in Geatland, Skane, Zealand and further north in my home of Vingulmork. However, he made no attempt whatsoever to plunder on the other side of the fjord. Ros may well have been a villain, but he was no imbecile. On the western side of the fjord, he kept to legitimate trade, and even if people could probably work out where his goods had been acquired, they never asked him about it, because at that time, such

exploits were not that unusual. The earls' ships protected the route from Agder, around the southern tip of Norway and up to Trøndelag, but were rarely seen in Viken, the fjord where I grew up. Here Vestfold and Grenland lay to the west, and my home county of Vingulmork to the east. No king had managed to retain power for very long in this area, so it had remained a somewhat lawless tract of water where minor kings and chieftains each held as many warriors as they could support.

We were halfway across Skagerrak when the Dane boy dropped his oar. I jerked my neck hoping to wake him up, but all he did was hang from his chain. The weight of his body pulled at my neck ring, making it impossible for me to keep time.

Ros had sat up on the prow most of the day, with a wineskin on his lap and his brow furrowed in serious wrinkles. Now, the eyes of everyone were on the Dane boy, and Ros rose to his feet. First Ros gave the boy a cuff around the ear, which made me realize that at least there was some life still left in him, because he moaned and started crying. Ros fiddled with his neck ring, maybe trying to release the bolt. But the bolt had been hammered in and bent into position, and it was impossible to get it off without tools. Ros swore in his eastern tongue and snarled, before grabbing the boy by the hair and pushing his head over the ship's gunwale. He then pulled a knife from his belt and plunged it into the boy's throat. The Dane boy jerked and his legs squirmed while Ros cut with sawing movements. The blood spurted from the boy's throat and most of it ran into the sea, but some splashed down Ros' forearms onto the thwart and flowed between the ribs of the ship, where my bare feet lay. That's when I felt moisture in between my legs, and smelt my own urine mixed with the warm, nearly brackish smell of fresh blood. Ros waited until the boy hung lifeless before continuing his sawing movements. Now only the spine was left. It was more difficult to saw through this so the monk stepped forward and offered him his sword, but Ros snapped at him and renewed his efforts with the knife. The Dane boy's head came loose and fell into the water, where it remained, face down. Now Ros managed to loosen the neck ring. He threw it down between my feet, pointed at my crotch and grinned, before two of his men came and dumped the headless corpse overboard.

It wasn't just us slaves rowing. The karvi had ten oars on each side, so most of Ros' men

had to play their part. Now the wind was picking up, and the men stowed the sail and packed it away in a leather cover. We slaves were rowing hard now. We feared that we too would suffer the same fate as the Dane boy if we didn't prove that we were worthy of food and water. I remember rowing until my callouses burst open. The saltwater kept washing over us, removing the skin from my palms, but I rowed as if all of Hel's dead were on my tail that night. At dawn, my hands were like leather and numb, as if they were stuck to the oars with resin. But now the sun was rising over the horizon in the east, and we could see land ahead of the prow.

One of Ros' men stood at the rail, keeping an eye on the coast, and soon he pointed in towards some islands. Now we had to put all our strength back into our rowing, and soon the karvi was gliding in amongst rocks and reefs. We could make out a pair of fishing boats, and one of the men on board got up and held out his open hand. The monk returned the greeting, and Ros pulled his cloak over the hilt of his sword.

I had heard father talking about the *kaupang*, the market place in Skiringssal, but still didn't know that that was where we were heading. I saw the rocks rising from the glittering waters and the cairns where shredded pennants on long poles flapped in the wind. They marked the sea approach to what was once the northernmost town of the Dane King Gotfred, but which now came under the jurisdiction of Skiringssal itself.

We stood with the mainland to port and the islands to starboard. Soon we were sheltered and the wind died down. The landscape resembled that of my home, with rocky hills, wind-ravaged bushes and juniper scrubland. To port there lay a ridge covered with a pine forest, but further within the bay, I could now make out luscious broadleaved trees. We still had plenty of speed, because Ros liked to enter a quayside fearlessly and always waited until the last moment to bark orders for the oars to brake in the water. Now the first houses appeared. They were constructed in the shelter of the forest-clad ridges and followed the northwestern side of the bay inwards. These buildings were smaller than those at home, and their walls and roofs were of vertical planks, which I had never seen before.

There must have been nearly a hundred buildings at that time, but several of them had already been abandoned. Some of the plank roofs had collapsed beneath the weight

of snow, and several walls were being pulled down, because the planks could always be re-used. The Kaupang at that time was far beyond its glory days, but I still knew nothing of such things. The visions of powerful men could kill a place like that, and that was precisely what was happening. During the reign of Godfred, the Danes had raised the first buildings; the intention from the very beginning was that a kaupang, a trading post, was to be located here, so that an enterprising man could reach here from northern Jutland, carry out his business and return home with the offshore breeze the following day. Bog smelting furnaces and forges had been built. There was an amber workshop, and cottages where the wool spindles didn't stop from morning to night. But as the earls' power grew, the Danes had shown less interest in this outpost up in troublesome Viken. Granted, the earl's ships seldom passed this way, they tended to keep to the west, but nevertheless, the once so affluent trading post in Skiringssalen was now dying out. Of the nine blacksmiths in town, fires were only lit in one, and only one of the original twelve boatbuilders was left. Lack of trade wasn't the only difficulty faced by the boatbuilders. The bay had become shallower over the years, and at low tide, ships could easily run aground. It was said that the elves in the mounds were to blame; making the land rise and the water flow out of the bay, so that all that was left was stinking sludge.

Father had often sailed here with the landowner before Bjorn was born, and he had told me of all the strange objects to be found here: there were glass beads polished spherical and shiny in the workshops along the streets, amber from Jutland, silver necklaces and gold, and silk all the way from Miklagard, and here father had once seen a slave whose skin was nearly black. His hair had been like sheep's wool to the touch, father had said, and his chest and his cheeks had been patterned with a myriad of tiny scars.

Ros and his men had moored at one of the log jetties protruding into the bay and leading us ashore. A white-beard in the knee-length, blue tunic of a wealthy man, stood there and welcomed Ros and his crew. He said nothing, he just pointed his arm down the jetty and cleared his throat, before sticking his hands behind his wide, beaded belt. Some children had also arrived, they were standing at the end of the jetty. Among them was a small, ragged dog walking on three legs, since one of its back legs was shriveled and dragged loosely along.

The white-beard led us up the wide plank road, which at that time stretched from the inner part of the bay to the edge of the forest. There was no breeze here and the smell of filth and urine hit us. The children were now hushed indoors by their mothers. Instead, several men approached. Among them was a man with a large, bushy beard and a ragged leather apron. He was a cooper there at the time. Also, there was the old ambersmith; there was a stocky, fork-bearded man with arms like logs and there were some Icelanders who had run aground one stormy night earlier on in the year, and were now building a new longship. These and several others accompanied us in silence, until we reached a plank floor erected in the middle of the market square. Here us slaves were chained to some bolts, before Ros and his men disappeared into one of the houses with the white-beard and the others.

The plank road we had taken up from the jetty was relatively straight, and as we were now sitting higher than most of the settlement, we had a good overview of our surroundings. The houses were packed quite closely together, which seemed to prevent the stench from dissipating. I could hear a pig screaming, before suddenly falling silent, and I could see horses running in a fenced paddock. The old white-beard, who had stood watching as we were led ashore was now sitting on a bench a mere stone's throw beneath us. He had moved his handiwork into the street. Amber sparkled between his hands, and I noticed him glancing up at us. He then suddenly held the piece of amber up to let us boys see, and it was as if the sun was captured in the golden rock for a moment. He smiled to us, before closing his fist and returning the stone to his workbench and starting to file it.

None of us boys said anything as we sat there. We were scared, as none of us knew what was going to happen to us now, but we had lived with fear for so long. In a way, we had become used to it, like men wounded in battle become used to all kinds of pain and stop talking about it.

It soon transpired that the Icelanders had finished their ship. They just had a few ropes left to coil and a couple of oars to carve before they would be ready to leave, but there weren't enough of them to cross the ocean. Half of them had been lost when they had run aground and now resided in Rán's banqueting halls, so they could probably do with some slaves for the oars. They met up in force at the plank floor, all nine of them, and one man

with an ax hanging from his belt, knelt and laid out six pieces of silver, a bracelet of poorly forged gold and some glass beads. Ros barked at them that this was far from enough, but the Icelander answered that that was all they had, and for that, they wanted all the slaves. He must have sensed that Ros and his men were in a hurry.

Ros turned down the offer and placed two men to guard us through the night. Autumn was drawing in, and as night fell, a cool wind blew over the bay. From some of the longhouses, the golden glimmer of hearths shone out into the night, but most of the buildings were dark, having been abandoned over recent years. A few more families had left that spring. A raven appeared in front of the half-moon, just for a moment, and screeched twice.

At dawn, the Icelanders arrived, carrying a drunk Ros between them. Ros slurred away to the men that had been guarding us. I realized that he had sold the slaves, but that the Icelanders were miserly and negotiations had been difficult; he emphasized this by spitting on the ground, before adding that they were going to have all but one, and that they could choose which one that was to be. He didn't care. As far as he was concerned, Hel could take both them and the slaves. At that point, the Icelanders released Ros, and he fell to the ground where he remained. The Icelanders immediately got us slaves to our feet. They ran their eyes over us and exchanged a few words, before one of them approached me with a hammer and chisel. I had to kneel as they chiseled through the chain and broke it a foot in front of my neck ring. After that, they led all the slaves apart from me down the plank road and over to their ship, which was still lying on the beach between the plank jetties.

I remained seated there throughout the morning. No one was guarding me now. My chain was still attached to the ring in the plank floor, but I don't think I would have fled even if it hadn't been there. A kind of numbness had engulfed me, and I sat with my chin on my chest, feeling neither alive nor dead. It was only when the three-legged dog came over to me that I was brought to my senses. It wasn't large; it would hardly have reached my knees if I'd been standing up. Its shriveled back leg caught my eye. The tendon behind its heel seemed to have been severed, as the dog bore a scar there. Now it was licking the

Dane boy's neck ring. I had never seen a dog in such a poor state before. Its ribs could be counted through its skin and fur, which was full of scabs. A man is duty bound to look after his animals. That's what my father had always said. And a dog is the finest and most loyal of all animals. The dogs that sometimes accompanied the merchants' ships and the hunting dogs belonging to the landowner were always well fed, with shiny coats. Not like this one.

Whilst sitting like this, I suddenly noticed Ros and his men out on the karvi. The men were at the rowing thwarts, and Ros was at the prow, and now they rowed out with the remnants of the high tide. Ros must have decided that he didn't need me any longer, so I'd been left here, discarded like superfluous luggage, which just took up space and was a nuisance.

Soon two men came to fetch me. One was the fork-bearded one who'd been standing by the jetty and the other man looked a lot like him. They seemed to be brothers. I ambled alongside them up amongst the houses, right to the end of the plank road. Here there was a cottage constructed from split planks, and outside stood an old man studying a debarked fir log despondently. The whole yard was covered in wood shavings. A firepit was alight, and in the fire lay an iron dish, the length of a man, full of steaming water.

"Halvdan," the fork-bearded one announced.

The old man turned to us. He looked at me, sighed heavily and approached with a rolling, bow-legged gait. "Turn him around, Ragnar."

They placed me with my back to him. I could feel his hard thumbs in the palms of my hand. "Hm," he muttered. "A young boy. But it'll have to do. How much did you give that scoundrel?"

"Six pieces of silver," the fork-bearded one replied.

The old man coughed and spat, before waddling back over to the cottage. "Get him inside!"

They led me over to the cottage. "What about this piece of chain?"

The old man shouted his answer from the cottage: "What do you think? Get it off him!"

They made me kneel by a chopping block as they loosened the chain from the neck ring with a hammer and chisel. Suddenly, I was free. First the men took a couple of

steps away from me, as if they were scared I'd go insane and hit out around me, but when I just stood there, they came over and took an arm each before leading me into the cottage. It was quite cramped within, nearly like the cottage at home. However, there, father had kept things tidy and every object had had its proper place. In here, there were broken bits of bows, cups, split oak bowls and bundles of sinew thread everywhere. The dirt floor was mostly covered in animal pelts where the fur had long since rubbed away. The table was spattered with soot and animal bones gnawed completely clean had been thrown into the corners. The old man was now standing by a barrel right at the back of the cottage, filling a drinking horn. The two brothers let go of me, and one of them pushed me in the back so roughly that I stumbled and fell by the firepit, where I remained as the old man turned around, his back to the barrel and the horn in his fist. Gulping at the horn, he scratched at his beard before taking time to stare at me silently. Now the sun slipped in through the door, and a stripe crossed the earth floor, dividing the room in two; one part was in semi-darkness whilst the other was well lit. He looked exhausted. All the strength of his youth had kind of drooped from his shoulders and upper arms and gathered in a large potbelly and powerful lower arms.

“I am Halvdan Knarresmed,” he said. “How old are you?”

“Twelve winters,” I answered.

Halvdan Knarresmed scratched his beard and pondered on this for a while.

“What's your name?”

“Thorstein.”

“And what is your father's name?”

“Einar.”

“But, he's not here.” The old man shook his head and seemed nearly sorrowful as he stated this.

“Father is dead,” I said. “That man in the ship, Ros, he killed him.” It took all my resolve to make this last statement without lowering my gaze from the old man.

He nodded to himself and took a stick from a shelf on the wall. I immediately noticed that it was yew, since it had two colors: a pale wood on the outside and darker at its heart.

He handed me the yew stick. “Have you made a bow before?”

“Yes, many.”

“Then come out with me, Thorstein Einarson. I will show you how to cut a bow so strong that it can send an arrow right through a man wearing chainmail.”

I had, as I'd told Halvdan, made many bows in the past, and several of them of yew, the wood of the gods which grew so plentifully on our peninsula at home. Father had taught me and Bjorn how. And that was why I wasn't too pleased that another man was going to show me how this was to be done. It was as if father was standing out there in the courtyard looking over my shoulder, shaking his grey-flecked head and not liking this at all. Halvdan Knarresmed was sitting on a stool, holding the end of the yew stick tightly between his feet. He didn't whittle it, as I would normally do. Instead he pushed his knife at a right angle towards the wood, so that only hair-thin shavings came off it. Whilst he worked, he explained to me that demand for planks for ships had dwindled to nearly nothing, so he'd started making bows. He could always manage to sell good bows.

After he'd been scraping off shavings for a while, it was my turn. I now remembered that father had once shown me this. He'd sat just like this, but I had forgotten, because this method took a long time, and I was always impatient and wanted the bow ready on the same day.

However, that wasn't the old boatbuilder's way of doing things. The stick that I was working on that morning had been drying out since the previous summer, and I would be working on it for three whole days before Halvdan would be happy with it. After that a cord of horsehair would be twisted and dipped in beeswax, and I would be sent into the woods to find the copse where straight branches could be found, because they were the only kind Halvdan Knarresmed used for his arrows. And then we had to attach the feathers and the iron point before the bow could finally be tested at its full tension. Only then would the old man nod and be happy.

During the evening, the two men who had fetched me from the market place returned. They had a basket of freshly caught cod, which they cooked over the fire in the yard. By now, I hadn't eaten for nearly two days, so the smell made my stomach rumble. The men cut up pieces of the fish and skewered them onto a stick, and old Halvdan pulled his chair over so he could sit by the fire.

“Don’t let the boy sit too long with that yew stick,” Ragnar said.

The old man mumbled back something about having ash too. There was no end to the number of types of wood he’d cut and dried, and then he spat into the sawdust again, before clearing his throat and coughing.

I was allowed to sit with the three men whilst we ate. Old Halvdan had a table out there in the yard, and as the sun sank over the treetops and the two men slurped down the pieces of fish, a melancholy descended over the old man. He gazed out to sea, raised his sunken shoulders a little and wiped beneath his nose. And then his gaze returned to the trees, and the offshore wind loosened some of the leaves. They whirled off above the rooftops. “Boy,” he said. “You mustn’t be bitter. All men have their destiny.”

“The Nornes,” Ragnar added.

“Yes,” nodded the old man. “Did your father tell you about the Nornes, boy?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“So you know that the Nornes spin a thread for every man.” Halvdan pinched his thumb and index finger together as if he was holding a thread between them. “Some are knotted, others are straight and smooth as if spun from the finest silk. But eventually...” He formed a pair of scissors from the fingers on his other hand. “...all life threads are cut.”

Even if I was only twelve years old, I understood what he was trying to tell me. I looked down at the piece of fish and didn’t want to hear. It was a threat. If I tried to escape, they would kill me.

“There are three types of people in this world, Thorstein. Noblemen, freemen and slaves. We are all descendants of Heimdal, the forefather of all families, clans and peoples in the world. What kind of man do you think you are, Thorstein?”

“He’s no man,” chuckled the other man, whose name I’d later learn was Steinar. “He’s nothing but a boy.”

“He’s man enough,” Halvdan countered.

That’s when I noticed the three-legged dog. It had limped up the plank street over to Halvdan’s yard whilst the men were talking, but didn’t dare come over to the table.

“There it is again,” Ragnar complained. “Don’t give it anything, and it’ll go away.”

That’s when I had a sudden idea, and for the first time since I’d been enslaved, the

ever-present fear dissipated. I had a steaming piece of fish in my hand and the men's gaze on me. Ragnar's eyes filled with fury, and his hands formed into fists. But I met his gaze, refusing to yield. And the piece of fish left my hand and landed in the sawdust on the ground, just in front of the little, three-legged dog, which quickly picked it up and limped off.

Ragnar leant across the table and grabbed my tunic, but the old man took his fist and snarled like an animal. So Ragnar released me, rose and walked away.

The two men left us just after the meal and Halvdan retreated to his cottage. Through the open door, I could see him at the table within, tankard in hand. For the first time since the slave collar was removed from my neck, I now had the chance to escape. No men were guarding me, and before the old man would manage to get out of the cottage to raise the alarm, I would be at least a few arrow-flights into the woods. I took a few steps towards the trees, and I knew that within the shadows in there, liberty awaited me. But I did not dare.

"A good choice," Halvdan announced from the cottage. "They would have found you before dawn."

I spent the night on an animal pelt by the hearth. I dreamt of my brother. He was standing at the prow of a longship, wearing chainmail that shone in the sun. His long brown hair hung down his back. His eyes were directed towards something ahead, and all of a sudden it was as if I was him, and I could see with his eyes. Now something dark started creeping over the horizon, it spread out and formed hundreds of longships.

When I awoke, it was dawn. I rose and went out into the courtyard, where I caught sight of a ship leaving the bay. It was the Icelanders. Aboard were the boys with whom I'd struggled over the oars. I would never see them again, and I never heard what happened to them.

The Prophecy

Father never told me much about the past, but my brother and I understood that he'd suffered pain. The landowner's sons told me he'd been a warrior and he had killed men for the earl in Trøndelag. That's what their father had told them, but he too was taciturn when the subject arose. I always thought that the two old men had travelled as Vikings together, because now and again father would go up to the farm, where he would sit with the landowner at the long table, and his sons and women and servants had to keep away whilst the two of them scowled into their tankards of mead and muttered about times gone by. I guessed the two of them had entered into some kind of pact; Bjorn and I were often sent to the farm to fetch a sack of oats, apples or even a pot of honey. The landowner ensured that we never went hungry. But I never got to the bottom of whether father in return was to keep an eye on the fjord, or if, in this way, the landowner was paying him to keep a certain distance from the farm. Rumors flew about both scenarios. Father was a man about whom there were many rumors, it was said, but he himself was always quiet on the subject. We had been told that mother had died when she gave birth to me. She had been a beautiful woman and grief nearly killed father. She'd been feverish for her last days, and the fever had nearly seen me off too. Father always took my arm when he told me this, looking me straight in the eye and assuring me that I must never think that it was my fault. The Nornes spun the life thread of every man and woman, and there was nothing we could do about it.

As I said, he didn't utter a word about the life he'd led before we boys were born. But of course, we saw the scar on his back, a stripe a hand's width across, just beneath his shoulder blade. The scar looked as if it had come from a Dane ax, according to my brother. It couldn't have been anything else, because he'd seen a man with such a scar once before, a warrior aboard one of the longships that had docked by the farm. That's what it looked like, Bjorn believed, where an ax had struck a man in chainmail with great

force. The ax head didn't always pierce the chainmail, but instead the iron weave would fold around the ax head and enter the body.

Father didn't like such talk, nor did he like our nagging about being allowed to practice how to use a dagger and an ax. "We have peace now," he used to say, but for his part, he couldn't break his habit of casting his alert eyes out across the fjord. Sometimes, I found myself thinking that it wasn't actually enemies he was looking out for, but friends. Deep down I held out a hope that mother didn't actually die when I was born as I'd been told, but for some reason that we didn't know, she had gone west, and that was why father kept a lookout.

Now I was the one keeping a lookout across the fjord. Even the first day after Halvdan Knarresmed bought me, he told me that it was unusual for slaves to be taken up here in Viken, and even more unusual that they were sold so close to where they had grown up, but I understood why. Father had no relations that I knew of, and apart from my brother, I was the last of my line. And since I had no relatives nearby, there was no one who would bother that I now was living as a slave just across the fjord. No one but Bjorn. Five years older than me, he was. I had worked out that as I turned a year older at the ninth moon, I had now turned thirteen. And Bjorn was eighteen. He must have grown tall and strong by now, and if only he could return, he would soon hear that the farm had been plundered and burnt down. He would sift through the ashes and find father's bones, but there'd be no trace of me. And then he would start searching. He would travel from farm to farm asking if anyone knew the whereabouts of those who had attacked the farm. And maybe in the end he would come sailing here to the kaupang in his longship. He would go ashore at one of the log jetties and look in amongst the houses along the plank streets. And then he would catch sight of me. His blue eyes sparkle, both joy and anger visible in them. Joy at having found me. Anger over seeing me with a slave's iron collar around my neck. With rapid steps, he walks towards me, his sword unsheathed, a shining broadsword. He snarls at the old man like one of Odin's wolves, before embracing me like only a big brother can, and now I know that I am safe. And then we go down the plank street. He has his arm across my shoulders. The ambersmith is sitting hunched over his workbench, he doesn't even dare look up. And we go aboard the longship and sail off.

That was a dream I often had. When I stood there working on the bows, I could

flee into that dream. I added words that he whispered in my ear as we went down the street. And I let the ship have colorful shields along the rail and twenty oars on each side. Aboard that ship there were no slaves, everyone was a freeman like my brother, and they smiled in their beards and resembled what my father must have looked like when he was young.

Halvdan Knarresmed shook his head at me when I stood like this daydreaming. “The world out there is a violent place,” he could announce. “It’s not like in the stories, boy. Not at all.”

By then I had started to understand that the population in the market town definitely didn’t regard the Earl of Lade as a wise and just ruler. I thought this strange, as father had always had a good word to say about him. He called him ‘Haakon’, as if they were actually on first name terms, and believed that it was down to him that there was peace in Norway. Truth to tell, Earl Haakon didn’t care much about what happened in Viken, because he kept his ships to the west of Norway, but he respected the decisions of the althings and didn’t tax us too hard. I didn’t understand much of such words in those days, but I understood that both the landowner and father believed that Earl Haakon was a good man.

That’s why it surprised me when Ragnar Forkbeard one day walked into the yard, his face as black as thunder and with clenched fists at his sides. Halvdan was sitting having a drink on a fir log we had felled the previous day. Ragnar dumped down heavily next to him and started muttering about a fishing boat that had moored that morning. The men aboard had been south and had news from Hålogaland. A landowner over there, by the name of Hárek, had refused to pay tax, and it was said that Earl Haakon had had his farm plundered as revenge. None of the men had been spared. The women had been raped in the blood of their husbands, after which they’d been enslaved and taken west across the sea.

Halvdan shook his head at this. To me he had said that there had always been rumors about the earl, about his greed for women and gold, and there was probably some truth in them, but such stories had a propensity to grow both in number and magnitude. Recently, however, these stories had become suspiciously numerous. If it really was so that the earl availed himself of the women of others, it wouldn’t be long before he’d

made enemies of powerful men.

That day, I was roughing out a plank, but now I had lowered my ax, so that I could hear what they were talking about. But then the three-legged dog limped into the courtyard, and instead I crouched down and beckoned it over to me. I had started giving it a little of my food every day, which was probably what kept it alive. From the ambersmith, I had been given herbs which I hid in a piece of bacon. These herbs made its tiny doggy tummy expel worms. I took a little too, but luckily found neither eggs nor worms in my own feces. Halvdan had them; I had seen them crawling around in the muckhole after he'd paid a visit there.

More stories of Earl Haakon would be told that fall. Whether they were true or not was something none of us in the kaupang knew. Nevertheless, the earl and his sons soon gained a bad reputation on both sides of Viken, which worried Harald the Red, who was the ruler and chieftain in Skiringssal. He had few resources at his disposal to match the powerful Earl of Lade and his sons, and if he no longer had the ability to protect his market town, the people would probably conclude that he no longer was a suitable guardian. After all, Harald the Red collected taxes from them in return for protection. Granted the taxes weren't that big, but people paid solely because he and his men should have swords and axes ready should plunderers or greedy strangers sail in.

I had now served Halvdan for three moon periods, and winter was drawing in. In the mornings, when the old man lay amongst his animal skins coughing, I normally wandered in amongst the trees, where I relieved myself before peering in amongst the tree trunks. Every morning I considered taking one of the bows I had made and some arrows and running off. But I knew that the men would follow me on horseback, and then I would either have to allow myself to be caught and marked with the branding iron, or I would have to fight. I was quite a good archer, but would I be able to kill a man? Father had told me it was not as easy as most people thought. So I would just stand there, looking in amongst the powerful oaks and ash trees, whilst the smell of my own urine dissipated and the morning mist lay like a blanket over ferns and moss and tree stumps.

Halvdan had started on a byrding, a narrow fishing boat with three pairs of oars

and room for four or five men, some barrels of water and other luggage. He was building the tiny ship in the courtyard outside his cottage. The stempost faced the bay and as yet the hull had no planks. Halvdan said that he was building it for his sons, and that it would be ready for them when they returned home. With this byrding waiting for them in the bay, they wouldn't even need to put down their backpacks when they came ashore. They could push it down to the water and set off again immediately, and this time old Halvdan would go with them.

I wasn't yet allowed to help on Halvdan's byrding. That was the domain of Ragnar Forkbeard and his brother Steinar. Instead I was sent to fell trees, rough out planks and also, I was sent to find sticks to make bows. Yew was to be found half a day's walk inland from the bay, and Halvdan often sent me there and didn't seem to worry that I might run away. I had no horse with me. Instead I had to carry the logs that I cut across my shoulders. The next day, I always took time splitting them, before placing them on the shelves in the cottage, where they could dry out until the following spring.

Halvdan had a rule that only every fourth bow should be made of yew, as he believed that yew dust could destroy a man's lungs. That's how he'd gotten his terrible cough. So I worked mostly with ash and elm. At the time I didn't guess that the craft I was now learning would help me later in life, but I realized already that fall that I liked working with wood. Even if I was a slave, and even if I constantly felt the weight of the slave collar around my neck, I could often lose track of both time and place when I was working. Making a good bow is all about following the natural curve of the wood. You have to see how the grain of the wood undulates around branches. You have to know which direction the wind has come from and where the wood is most flexible. The wood is stronger where the grain is hardest and the rings are closer together. More power is stored in that part of the wood. And if, in addition, the tree has stood on poor soil or grown in a crack in the rocks, you have in your hands an article worthy of great warriors. Such bows can pierce chainmail and shields and, if the owner has a good eye and a steady hand, can fell a king and lead to victory on the battlefield. However, no bow becomes strong without the bowyer feeling a love for his craft and for the piece of wood he is holding in his hand. Halvdan mumbled about this one of those first evenings, halfway down his third tankard of mead. I didn't realize what he was talking about that evening. It

would take a few weeks before I found myself gazing at my first fighting bow. Only then did I feel a tingle of that sensation that he was describing. This wasn't like the bows I'd whittled on the peninsular at home, like the ones my brother and I had played with. This bow was a weapon, and when I touched it and tentatively tested the string, it nearly felt as if it was a living creature. Soon it would be sold down on the quayside and join someone out to sea. Maybe it would accompany its owner to Skane or maybe to Jutland; I could envisage the warrior on sentry duty at Danevirke, the mighty palisade dissecting the territory down there, and aiming arrows at the wild Franks. Or it would go on raids, over to the forests of England. And I, the boatbuilder's slave here in Skiringssal, would in some way be a part of it all.

Even if I whittled many bows that fall, it was boatbuilding that was Halvdan's main employment. The old man didn't have much interest in anything other than the byrding that fall, so it was up to me to make items that could be sold. Apart from the bows and arrows, I made shields that Bjorn the Cooper edged in iron, because it was always easy to sell shields. I also carved out ribs and planks for the ships. At first, I made a kind of small boat which didn't even have to be waterproof at the seams. These were not meant for the sea, but were used for burials. There were two large graveyards just by the kaupang, and a third was growing on an old fallow field up by Harald the Red's farm. I could see for myself that among the craftsmen of the kaupang, there were many aging men, and Halvdan often complained about how terrible it was that his sons had abandoned him, so that he was alone in his old age. He asked me one evening, being drunk and stupid, whether I could imagine how it was to sit like this, with no family surrounding you. I didn't answer.

When the old man wasn't working on the byrding, he often spent time in the woods. He had built a shack in there. It consisted of nothing but a few wobbly walls and a turf roof above, but it contained several barrels where he was fermenting mead. Dotted around the woods he had something I had never seen before. He had fashioned some broken ship's boards into crates, and in some way or other, he had managed to get bees to build a hive in them. Halvdan had also discovered that the smoke from dried seaweed made the bees drowsy, and in this way, he could open the crates and scrape out the honey.

He put some of it in jars to sell to travellers, but most of it went into barrels, where he mixed it with water, sometimes with some sprigs of heather added, and left it to ferment. If it was left to brew for long enough like this, it would become mead.

I was in the middle of my fourth burial boat when Halvdan's health started to deteriorate. The first snow had fallen, and I remember that I had been given a leather tunic impregnated with beeswax, needle bound woolen socks and a pair of Halvdan's old shoes. I was up early that morning, because the days were short now and I wanted to finish the top boards before darkness fell again. But Halvdan didn't come out that morning. He stayed in his bunk and I could hear him coughing badly.

Soon Ragnar Forkbeard and Steinar came. They could hear the spluttering and exchanged worried glances before going in to Halvdan. They didn't stay long there. Despondently, the two men sloped over to the byrding, and Ragnar ran his hand along the stempost. Only the lower boards has so far been attached.

They didn't utter a single word to me that day. They carved the keel beam a little, before Ragnar went back in to the old man. Afterwards he came out and peered towards the bay, where the sun was starting to dip. Then he waved his brother over and they both headed off.

I remained in the courtyard that evening. The ice was starting to form across the bay, and most people had left already. There would be no more trading here until the spring; when the first ice settled, no one would dock at the quayside. Only the oldest craftsmen spent the winter here. Most of them could tell the same story as Halvdan; their sons had gone off travelling leaving their elders with nowhere else to go.

I had an uneasy feeling in my body all that evening, and stayed out in the courtyard right until the final remnants of the sun had sunk into the sea and darkness had fallen over the kaupang. When I went in, Halvdan was sitting at the table, coughing. In between each bout of coughing, his whole body shook. I had to take the fire rake and put it in his mead. He had an idea that this would ward off all kinds of illness, but it didn't seem to help.

The three-legged dog had already made itself comfortable on my sheepskin over by the fire. I had called it Fenrir, after the giant wolf that had accidentally bitten off the

hand of Ty the Brave. It was a story father had often told Bjorn and I when we were younger. Halvdan laughed at the name, and he thought it ridiculous that I gave some of my own food to a dog we should instead have killed out of compassion. But I had seen him patting Fenrir when he thought I wasn't looking, and now that it was cold outside, he let it sleep inside with us. Maybe the old man had a good heart after all.

I found myself thinking about this, that evening as I crept under the rugs. Fenrir was snuggled into my stomach. He was warm and kicked out every now and again in his sleep, and then his withered leg would jerk as well. Father had spoken to us about something called 'a warrior's heart'. Being brave wasn't enough. A warrior also had to have compassion in his heart. Without that he wasn't a warrior, but a monster, like the ones Odin's sons fought against. Father had pointed to heaven, one evening when the southerly wind had whistled through the trees, and the sea spray had splashed over the skerries. Dark clouds gathered over the fjord, and suddenly we saw the lightning, a jagged spear striking the sea. Father had said that it was Thor, out on yet another raid. He was looking for monsters, men lacking compassion. Nobleman, freeman or slave; it made no difference to him. Thor showed no mercy to men without compassion, no matter who they were. He smashed them all with Mjollnir, his mighty warhammer, and sent them to Hel's ice cold halls

I fell asleep by the fire, and my dreams took me to Asgard, where I walked with my father through a glade of spring green birch trees. Father was dressed in shiny chainmail and had a magnificent sword in his belt. At the end of the glade, the landscape opened up, a hillside lay before us, and when we reached it, Gladsheim, the castle of Odin himself, came into view. Only a valley separated us from the battlements and the golden spires. We could see the helmets and shields of the guards flashing in the sunlight. "This is my home now," father said. Then I turned as I heard a knocking just behind me, and I thought that it had to be enemies of Odin and his sons who had come to demolish the walls of Gladsheim.

I awoke with a start. The dream was still in me. Halvdan groaned from his bunk. "Go and see who it is, boy. I'm ill."

There was a crack in the door. I peeped through it first. A man was standing outside, holding the reins of a horse. I had seen him before. It was Sweyn, one of the sons

of the chieftain. I opened the door. Sweyn was a tall, well-built man, with a bushy, auburn beard and a broadsword tucked into his belt. I could see the tip of the sword's scabbard peeping out from under his blue woolen cape.

"Thorstein," he said. "That's what they call you, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Halvdan, is he at home?"

I nodded again. We could both hear the coughs from within the cottage.

"Come here, slave. Hold my horse."

I did as he said. Sweyn pushed back his hood and went in.

I remained in the courtyard. The two men spoke in low voices, but I could catch a few words. They were talking about the chieftain, something seemed to have happened. I didn't dare go closer. This was a conversation between adult freemen. Halvdan coughed every now and again. His cough was getting worse now, it kind of rattled around his chest.

After a while, Sweyn came out. It was nearly completely dark now. He shut the rickety wooden door behind him and let out a deep sigh. Then he came over to me and the horse, and from his saddlebag he pulled a stick, one end of which was wrapped in birch bark and impregnated with resin. He placed the stick on the ground, as he rummaged for a fire-steel, flint and tinder before creating a few sparks and lighting the torch. He then handed it over to me and clambered into his saddle. When I didn't move, he rode the horse over to me and kicked me in the shoulder. "Run, slave! Run in front of me to light my way!"

The snow was still no more than a hand deep, so I easily made my way across the frozen ground. I didn't dare stop, as I realized that time was of the essence. Sweyn was just behind me, and he shouted every now and again that I had to watch out, a branch was hanging low ahead, there was a dip here, or a hillock there, as if I couldn't see for myself. I knew these woods well now, and had taken the path up to the chieftain's farm on many an occasion. But still I didn't know what the hurry was in the middle of the night.

When we reached the crop fields, we were met by Sweyn's brothers. They were standing with torches, and showed us quickly past the stable and the pigsty and into the

courtyard in front of the longhouse which I knew to be the residence of Harald the Red. As we had made our way there, Sweyn had told his brothers that the boatbuilder was ill and had sent his slave instead.

The chieftain's longhouse stood in the middle of the courtyard, and two men were standing by the door with torches. I couldn't see much of the building in the dark, but I had been here a couple of times before, and at the time it had struck me that it was the largest hall I had ever seen. The roof looked like the hull of a mighty longship that had been turned upside down in the middle of this open space. It had thick walls of timber planks. In turn, the walls had been supported by several substantial logs, which in a way could resemble oars that had been pulled out of the sea and pushed deep into the ground.

I knew the men at the entrance. One was Kalv, another of the chieftain's sons. The other was a man who always spoke with a strange accent when he came to the kaupang to trade. He had been the chieftain's slave when they had both been young, but the chieftain had made him a freeman many years ago. For that reason, I always considered Harald the Red to be a good man.

The interior of the longhouse was dimly lit and smelled of smoke. The earthen floor was dry and had been stamped hard underfoot. A few torches were attached to the beams supporting the roof. Benches ran along the inside of the walls, wide enough for men to sleep there with their heads by the wall and their feet by the firepit: a rectangular pit of embers surrounded by a cooking pot and spit. Harald the Red sat on the throne on the far side of the firepit, clad in a blue cloak and a tunic with golden embroidery. He was staring into the embers and barely noticed us.

There weren't many people in the hall. Some men were sitting on the benches, staring ahead gloomily. Three women stood at the far end in the shadows, mumbling quietly to each other. The sons led me along the fireplace and left me to stand in front of the throne, and Harald the Red raised his head, looked at me and then at his sons. "Where's Halvdan?"

Sweyn stepped forward to the throne and put his hand on his father's arm. "He's ill, father, so he sent his slave instead."

Harald looked at me. He was an aging man with bags under his eyes and a gray, unruly beard. His shoulders and arms were still muscular. He pointed at me with a

scarred fist. “They call you Thorstein, don’t they?”

“Yes,” I said. “Thorstein.”

“Halvdan has spoken warmly of you.”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t used to hearing such words. Halvdan wasn’t generous with his praise, but I didn’t expect any either, as I wore a slave collar around my neck.

“Do you see that man?” Harald pointed into the semi-darkness, and a figure rose from the bench over by the wall and stepped into the light of a torch. He was thin and gangly, his face painted and he wore a wolfskin cloak. I recognized him immediately. He had arrived on a merchant’s ship a few weeks ago and had attracted a lot of attention in the kaupang. It was not only his painted face that made people run to see him. He carried a rune stick and claimed to be a rune master, a soothsayer. Halvdan had then shut himself away in his cottage, refusing to come out until the stranger had disappeared. And he hadn’t had to wait for long. The soothsayer didn’t want to tell the fortunes of ordinary people. He was interested in kings and heroes. At a pinch, he would settle for the chieftain of a market town. So he had gone up here to Harald the Red, and we hadn’t seen him since.

Harald waved the painted man over to him. In turn, he picked up the stick from the bench and approached. The sons stepped aside, as if they were scared.

“Rune master,” Harald beckoned. “Tell the boy about my dream.”

The rune master looked at me with his painted face. When he had come ashore, I hadn’t gotten close enough to see what the drawings on his skin depicted, but now the light of the torches and the fire lit up his thin face. He took a step towards me and stared with wide open eyes, and his lower lip dropped to show the front teeth of his lower jaw. He remained thus, completely silent, and I realized that it was probably true what Halvdan had said: When people said that he was painted, it wasn’t really so. Paint could be wiped off. This seemed to have been carved into him. And the lines decorating his face weren’t randomly placed. They were runes. Father had taught me about such things, but I had probably forgotten most of it, apart from the runes that formed my name. Now I could see the whole gamut of runes, all imprinted on the skin of the soothsayer before me.

“Harald the Red, chieftain of Skiringssal, fell asleep this evening, and he saw...”
The rune master half turned to the old chieftain, before returning his gaze to me. “A

dragon...” He stretched his hand towards the exit of the hall, which faced the bay. “It’s swimming in from the sea. From its mouth, spurts fire. Its claws crush building and halls. Harald the Red grabs his sword. He fights. And dies.”

“I asked this rune master here to cast some runes.” Harald settled his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I wanted to know whether I had foreseen the future.”

The soothsayer pushed his hand into the pouch hanging from his belt and pulled out a handful of small stones. He handed them over to me. Carved on each one of them was a rune.

“The runes are Odin’s gift to us humans,” Harald explained. “He saw them when he was hanging from Yggdrasil. The first thing he did when he clambered down, was to carve them and give their knowledge to the descendants of Heimdal.”

“The runes have told me that the dream is true.” The rune master replaced the small stones in his belt bag and dropped his gaze. “A dragon will come. Harald the Red will fight and fall.”

One of the women in the semi-darkness started to weep. Sweyn went over to her immediately and put his arms around her.

“I don’t understand,” I uttered. “Why are you telling this to me? I am just a ...” I was going to say ‘boy’, but Harald beat me to it:

“A slave? That’s true. That’s why I sent for your master. I wanted to tell him this myself, but as he is unable to come... Now, there’s no time to wait. This must be started immediately. The rune master says that the dragon is on its way.”

“But... What can I do? I am no warrior.”

As I said the word, the rune master raised his gaze. He stared at me so intently that his eyes could have fallen out of their sockets, before he jerked his neck and retreated back to the darkness.

“I am not out to get your sword arm, boy.” A smile played on Harald’s lips, and his sons chortled. “I want you to go home and tell Halvdan that he needs to complete the byrding he’s building. I know it’s small. I had hoped for something larger for this voyage. But I don’t think there’ll be time to start on another one now.”

“But... Where are you going?” I wondered.

“To Asgard. The byrding is going to be my burial ship.”

I lowered my gaze. Halvdan would not like to hear this. I knew very well that he had completely different plans for that boat.

“Go now, boy. And ask your master to go easy with the mead. I don’t want crooked boards on my ship.”

I turned and left. Behind me the chieftain’s sons settled by the fire. I guessed they were going to sit there and exchange their gloomy thoughts. But a dragon? What could this mean?

I shut the door behind me and stood alone in the wintry night. Thousands of stars shone above the chieftain’s farm. They were the fires lit by our dead, so that we wouldn’t forget them. Father had told me this. Now he too was up there. Did he light a fire every evening, so that Bjorn and I wouldn’t forget him? I would never forget father. He was with me every single day. I could imagine him standing next to me as I worked with my ax or shaped yet another bow. He didn’t say anything, but the fact that he stood by me, steadied my hand and gave strength to my ax blows. “You’re starting to get strong.” He would have said. “Soon you’ll be a man, just like your brother.”

It was as I stood there, that I became aware of someone in the courtyard. I recognized the thin, gangly man. The moon shone on his wolfskin cloak.

“Come here, boy.” He held out his arm towards me.

I hesitated. He frightened me.

“Come closer. I have something to say to you.”

I carefully approached him. He looked more like an animal now, or one of those shape shifters that I had heard about. The hood of the wolfskin cloak was made from the animal's head, with the ears and snout intact. He had pulled this over his head now, and was standing, hunched over as if he was about to drop to all fours and run off across the snow.

As I came within an arm’s length of him, he grabbed me suddenly by the sleeve of my tunic. He then fell to his knees, grabbing both my wrists hard and staring at my hands. A shudder went through him, his eyes rolled back in his head. “The blood of two kings... on your hands.”

The rune master released my hands, flopped to one side and remained thus in the snow.

Then a shout came from the longhouse. It was Sweyn. He pulled out his sword and came running towards us. “Slave! What have you done?”

I wanted to run away, but realized that that would make me look guilty. Instead I grabbed the rune master by the shoulders and tried to pull him to his feet. Now Sweyn had reached us. He pushed me down so I was lying on my back and held the blade of his sword to my throat. But now the rune master regained consciousness. “No,” he interjected, and staggered back to his feet. “The slave is innocent. Leave him be.”

Reluctantly, Sweyn let me go. He replaced the sword in its scabbard and put his arm around the rune master’s shoulders, before taking him back to the longhouse.