



THE RULE

JACK
COLMAN

Jack Colman

The Rule

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In Helvik, a single rule governs the people: ‘No person of Helvik may kill another person of Helvik. Any person who breaks this rule is no longer a person of Helvik.’ Gunnarr remembers a time before the rule, when blood feuds and petty rivalries led to endless death. In the days since, an uneasy peace has fallen over the town, and Gunnarr has made himself the man to enforce it. When an innocent friend suffers from a breach of the rule, Gunnarr rushes to deal retribution. Too late, he discovers that what appeared a mindless act was actually something far more sinister. And now he has left his unborn child and family unprotected, just when they need him most. A vast host of warriors is at the gates of Helvik, and with Gunnarr gone, nothing and no one stands against them...

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JACK COLMAN



Harper *Voyager*

An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd

1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF

www.harpervoyagerbooks.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by Harper *Voyager* 2015

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Digital eFirst: Automatically produced by Atomik ePublisher from EasyPress.

Ebook Edition © March 2015 ISBN: 9780007593057

Version: 2015-03-05

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Dedication

For my wonderful mum, Mary, who never once doubted this would happen.

Prologue

I

In the midst of the darkness, Gunnarr's eyes snapped open.

The hairs along his forearms stood raised like the hackles of a snarling wolf. Muffled voices were hissing at each other from somewhere across the room. Quietly, Gunnarr reached a hand out from the covers and felt the warm absence that his parents had left in the furs at his side. The air felt chilled, and thick with disquiet. Something had happened. He could sense it.

Closing his eyes, he lay very still and tried to listen to his parents' words, but their voices were low and rushed, and he could follow only snatches.

'... now they've decided they ...'

'... and you think death will solve ...'

Gunnarr jolted as if shaken awake from a dream. Death, he thought, and a gleam of a smile spread across his lips. Gunnarr Folkvarrsson and his warrior father were no strangers to death.

The first time he had still been a boy, not yet five. He'd stumbled across a nameless corpse floating in a swell by the shoreline, staring up at the clouds. Of that he remembered mostly the queerness of the dead man's face, all swollen like a sow, front lip eaten away up to the nose.

A year later, on a spring day with a biting breeze, he met death for a second time. Again he'd been down by the near-black sea, the freezing-cold surf roaring with anger at his feet. His grandmother was leading him across the coastal rocks, looking for shellfish, when she made a strange sound and collapsed. Gunnarr had waited patiently for her until the tide was almost in before someone came and carried him away.

His parents had quietened their voices to breathy whispers, perhaps fearing they might wake him. For a moment, Gunnarr contemplated going to his father's side and declaring that he could soon find the old kindling axe and be ready for whatever might be needed of him. But his father, he had learnt, was quick to temper whenever he addressed the topic directly. He would call Gunnarr a child and tell him he knew nothing, but he was wrong. True, those encounters from his early childhood had been tame affairs; the first he had come upon too late, long after death had done its work, and the second was but the quiet expiry of life from an old and wasted body. The third, though, had burnt its way deep into his mind. For that was when he had seen the strike of death's hand; the vicious snatch that rips a life away with the eyelids still blinking.

It was the first time he had been taken on a hunt with his father and uncle. Winter had come early that year, bitter and fierce. The grass had turned brown, and his mother had wrapped him in thick furs to guard against the searching wind. A group of seals they had stalked for most of the morning had become spooked and scattered into the waves when just yards out of range, so the group was returning to town unsuccessful, and in a black mood because of it, when they heard shouts from over by the smoke house.

Gunnarr did not see what had caused it, but he had never forgotten what followed. His father and the rest broke immediately into a run, sweeping Gunnarr along with them. He remembered his uncle screaming curses in a voice louder than thunder, and glancing up into the distance to see a man some twenty yards away hacking his sword double-handed into the half-turned neck of Agni Alvisson. Gasps went up like startled birds, and a crowd of onlookers swamped in and smothered Gunnarr's view.

The rest was a mess of trampling feet and women's screams. There had been one deafening clang of metal, which Gunnarr remembered well, and a rush of grunting movement almost bundled him over. When he recovered his balance, he found his father, uncle, and their friends facing down a group of frozen-eyed men who were cautiously backing away, leaving one of their number spluttering on the floor at his uncle's feet, while a silenced crowd looked on.

That had been a real death. Almost too real, for the man had had time to say a lot of strange things before his wounds drained him, and his blood had smelt sickly as it steamed amidst the mud and rotting oak leaves. Agni Alvisson's head, grinning up at the sky, lay a few feet to one side. Gunnarr's friends told him it had continued to scream in agony even as it landed on the ground, some three yards away from its body.

There were other memories of death besides those, of course. The wails of his aunt and the silence of his father on the day that his uncle had died. The time he caught his father rinsing his sword in the stream, and the way Folkvarr had turned around and placed a sly finger to his lips and patted Gunnarr on the head as he walked inside. Countless other times where the only detail Gunnarr could recall was the billowing heat of the funeral pyre on his cheeks as he pushed and pointed with the other excitable children. Nothing that compared to those first three, though. Perhaps tonight, he thought eagerly, he would finally find something that could challenge them.

He might have lain there for longer in the dark, enjoying the mischievous sensation of hearing what he was not supposed to hear, of knowing about his father things he wasn't supposed to know, but Gunnarr's eyes jumped open again when he heard a new sound amid the rustles and the whispers: a sob from his mother, fearful and desperate.

A protective impulse drove a shiver across his shoulders, and his grin vanished. Casting his furs aside, he stared into the black until he found his parents standing beside the far wall. The wicker door of their single-roomed hut stood an arm's width ajar, with a dull sheen of moonlight drawing a pale line across the floor. He thought he heard voices outside.

'Father?' he called into the gloom, and his parents' conversation immediately hushed. As they looked across to face him, Gunnarr noticed that his mother was clinging very tightly to his father. Had it been lighter, he would have seen tears in her eyes.

'Go back to sleep, Son,' his father said, after a brief pause.

Gunnarr ignored him and rolled up onto his knees. 'It's almost dawn already,' he said with enthusiasm. 'I can get the fishing things ready.'

For some reason the words caused another sob to escape his mother's lips, which she tried to suppress by clamping both hands over her mouth. Confused, Gunnarr saw her give his father a gentle push, and with a sigh the older man moved across the room to his son. As he stepped through the shard of light, Gunnarr noticed that his sword was at his waist.

'Is there a battle?' he gasped excitedly.

'Go back to sleep,' his father said again. 'I'm only going out to check the traps.'

'Let me come!' Gunnarr urged, but his father shushed him and pushed him firmly back down into the furs. Gunnarr tensed against him, giggling playfully.

'Do as I say, please,' his father said gently. More gentle than he would normally have been. His eyes looked very big in the darkness. Then there came a booming voice from outside the walls.

'Do it now or we fire the house. The choice is yours.'

It cut through the still night air, very close by. Gunnarr jumped, and his mother scurried across the room and dropped down beside them, again pressing herself against his father's chest.

'Who is that at this time?' Gunnarr asked, scowling with mature disapproval.

'Just drunken idiots on their way home,' his father replied dismissively, and his mother did her best to nod with reassurance, but even her young son could see that her usually bright features were strained.

'You're a good boy, Son,' his father added suddenly, and he brushed his lips across Gunnarr's forehead, before standing to resume his rapid conversation with his wife.

That uncharacteristic show of affection numbed Gunnarr like a blow to the head. He looked up at his parents, and for the first time noticed the glimmer of moisture on his mother's cheeks.

'I'm going out there with you,' she was saying passionately.

'No my love, what about the boy?' he heard his father reply.

Again Gunnarr found his eyes drawn to the crack of moonlight in the doorway. Rolling silently out of the covers, he crept his way towards it, leaving his parents in their oblivious embrace behind him. He inched the door further from its frame and peered into the shadowed clearing, feeling the night breeze tighten the pores across his face. Leaves whispered ominously in the trees swaying over his head.

‘Go back inside, lad,’ a voice called from the blackness, and Gunnarr could just make out their half-hidden forms, cloaked in shadow. Five of them.

‘Is it not a little late to be calling on my father?’ he asked tentatively, moving forward out of the doorway. ‘We’re to be fishing at dawn.’

One or two of the men laughed callously, and Gunnarr turned to them in confusion.

‘What do you want?’ he challenged.

‘Enough of this,’ an angrier voice growled from the right, and Gunnarr shuddered as one of the shapes moved briskly towards him. ‘I say we take the boy as well.’

‘No!’ shouted another, and rushed forward to intercept, restraining the aggressor with an arm across the chest. ‘That is not what is called for.’

Through a mist of uncertainty, Gunnarr realised that he recognised the voice. ‘Egil?’ he asked hesitantly.

‘Yes,’ Egil answered, with heavy reluctance. ‘Greetings, Gunnarr.’

‘Egil,’ Gunnarr began, ‘I’m sure if you wait until tomorrow we’ll be calling on you. I can play with Hákon and the boys—’ He stopped abruptly as he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, and turned to find his father standing calmly behind him.

Egil hurried forward and spoke with hushed urgency. ‘This time I cannot help you, old friend. It’s my own cousin’s name at stake.’

‘I know that,’ Gunnarr’s father replied, with a voice of indifference. ‘But you can protect my wife, and my son.’

‘Father, what is happening?’

‘Yes Folkvarr, I can,’ Egil responded, ignoring Gunnarr, ‘but there is a sword at your side. For every number of them you take, they will take one back from you.’

Again Folkvarr sighed heavily, and then he placed a hand on Egil’s shoulder. ‘Please, a moment with my boy?’

Egil’s face became regretful. ‘Of course.’ He retreated back into the gloom, deliberately avoiding Gunnarr’s searching gaze.

Folkvarr turned and dropped to a knee, so that he and his son’s eyes were level. Gunnarr was whimpering, his expression distraught.

‘Fight them, Father, don’t let them hurt you!’

‘Gunnarr—’

‘Or run, into the forest, please!’

‘Gunnarr, enough!’ his father said sternly, and he shook the little boy’s shoulders until he was silent. ‘I want you to take my sword inside, and go and hug your mother until she tells you to stop. Remember, she brought you into this world and protected you when you were weak. Now you are strong, it is your turn to protect her.’

Gunnarr’s mouth shot open, but then he felt the weight of his father’s instructing eyes and dropped it closed again. With practised, unquestioning obedience, he scrunched up his face and nodded silently.

There was a moment of still as the two of them looked at each other for a final time. Folkvarr’s eyes were wide, almost apologetic. Gunnarr bit his jaw closed and determinedly returned the gaze long enough for one stray tear to roll down to his chin. Then he turned dutifully and carried the heavy sword in both hands towards the house, feeling the snatched brush of his father’s fingertips across the back of his head before he stepped out of their longing reach.

Once inside, he located his mother's whimpers in the darkness and, rather than crawling onto her lap and sinking into her breast, he sat upright beside her on the floor, placing an arm across her shoulders and letting her fall gratefully against his tiny frame. Together they flinched as they heard a brief flurry of sound, like stones being hurled against sand, and then a ruffled silence returned almost as soon as it had faltered.

After some moments, Gunnarr gently dislodged himself from his mother's now feeble grip and crawled hesitantly over to the doorway. Egil was there still, standing patiently over a motionless shape on the floor.

'Come here and help me carry him, Gunnarr. One day you will understand.'

II

She would always follow too closely, so eager was she not to be left behind. Perhaps in later years Gunnarr would recall that about her with a faint smile, but as a boy of twelve he was conscious of it only as the snatch of her fingers on his feet and the tickle of her breath against his calves as they crawled through the dew-laden grass.

It was a clouded spring morning, with still a touch of winter in the air. Together they worked their way along a tufted ridge that bordered a red-brown stream, following the rushing water up a gentle gradient inland. Gunnarr led, as he always did, eyes forward and alert, barely feeling the thistles that scratched across his knees as he went. Kelda followed gamely. She was weaker than the boys, and he could hear the determined little grunts that she let out as she struggled to keep pace. There were times when she would rise up onto her knees and peer back at the town walls as they receded further into the distance, but she would never voice the uncertainty that Gunnarr saw growing on her face.

After a short time of slithering down and scrabbling up the rises and falls of the riverbank, they reached the shelter of a thicket tangled with brambles, and lost sight of the stream. Gunnarr drew to an abrupt halt and cocked his ear skywards, feeling Kelda's chin thump softly off the sole of his foot as he did so. She exclaimed aloud, but must have sensed his scowl even with his head turned, for she quickly fell silent again. Gunnarr listened to the wind once more and heard the voices clearly above the rush of the stream, one gruff and sounding in short, sharp bursts, the other quieter and less frequent.

He broke off and turned back to Kelda. She was watching him with her mouth ajar, brown eyes gleaming with excitement. Her teeth looked very small, and Gunnarr was reminded that she was much younger than he was. A 'little girl' the boys called her, and would name Gunnarr the same whenever they caught the two of them together. But the boys had wanted to stay in town and watch the dog fight, and Gunnarr was not the type to waste a day standing in one place. Whatever the others might say about her, Kelda would never let him down when there was adventure to be had.

'Stay quiet,' he warned her under his breath. 'It will mean death if they find us.'

She smothered her smile instantly and locked her lips closed.

Gunnarr studied her with a stern expression. Her plait had come half undone and her hair was wisping around her head. It had been raining only a short time before dawn, and her woollen clothes were plastered with mud. 'Your mum is going to be angry again.'

Kelda rolled her shoulders and smiled once more. 'I don't care.'

Gunnarr did not return her grin. 'You remember the signal?'

She nodded quickly and rolled into a sitting position. Casting about briefly, she plucked up a blade of grass, stuffed it between two grubby thumbs, held it to her lips and blew. It made a blunt, hissing sound.

'You can't do it,' Gunnarr complained.

'I can,' she insisted, and continued to blow into her hands, until Gunnarr reached out and snatched the grass away.

'Just follow me and stay quiet.'

Through tunnels in the long grass he led her, weaving through the roots of the bushes on trails made by foxes and river rats. A few days past, Eiric had come home boasting of seeing a mother

wolf and six cubs lying at the water's edge. Gunnarr had left town that morning looking for burrows in the river bank, his aim being to take the pups and skin them so that his mother could make them all hats. He'd brought Kelda with him because he needed someone to snatch up the babes while he threw stones at the mother. But that plan had vanished when they'd heard people talking by the river, somewhere just upstream.

The low voice sounded once more, louder this time, and Gunnarr realised that they must be close. He turned and wriggled back to Kelda.

'Who is it?' she whispered. He could hear the breath rushing in and out of her chest.

'A thieving band from the uplands, most like,' he replied grimly. 'Could be as many as twenty of them, waiting until nightfall to snatch any beast we don't bring inside the walls.'

Kelda drew a sharp intake of breath. 'What should we do?'

Gunnarr gave her a reckless look and patted the short skinning knife that hung at his waist. 'If I have to fight them, their numbers will tell eventually. They'll be starving, just like everyone else, so if I'm caught they'll likely roast me over their fire. You they'll carry off to bear their children.'

Kelda caught his hand. 'Let's go back.'

Gunnarr shook his head.

'What then?'

'Egil would want us to ambush them and drive them off.' He reached across into the nearest bush and handed Kelda a stick about the length of her arm. 'When I give the signal, you come out waving your sword and screaming as loud as you can. They'll think us an army, and flee.'

Taking the stick, Kelda looked down at it in her hand and nodded hesitantly. Her eyes flashed a sparkle of enjoyment. Gunnarr smiled at her and fell forward onto his front to crawl off again.

Within a few yards he heard the low voice talking once more, and this time he could make out words.

'Stupid, stupid ...' the voice was saying, over and over again. The words were punctuated by the sound of splashing footsteps as the man stamped about in the water somewhere below Gunnarr's line of sight.

Gunnarr slowed his pace, his heart beating solidly against the ground beneath him. The undergrowth was thinning, but the sound of his limbs as he dragged them through the foliage seemed to be louder than ever. He realised that he could not hear Kelda. For once she had stayed back, watching as he pressed forward.

Within two more yards he breached the cover of the last bush. Once he did the long grass died away into tough, cropped shoots. His head and shoulders had emerged on an elevated ridge that overlooked the water, although from how high up he could not say. The men were still hidden from view somewhere beneath him, but the low voice continued to talk, almost incessantly.

'Look at this, stupid, stupid ...'

It was only when his face was barely inches from the edge of the bank that Gunnarr for the first time felt a stab of unease. He glanced backwards. Kelda was watching him from the bushes, her face frozen with anticipation. He shook away his thoughts and went on. Pushing with his toes, he eased himself forward until the grass parted from his vision and the bright water flashed up at him from below. His eyes swallowed in the scene, and his breath died upon his lips.

A man was standing below him at the edge of the water. He was facing the opposite direction, hands on his hips, as if deep in thought. Gunnarr was so close that he could see grains of dirt in the man's scalp where his hair thinned at the back of his head. Though he was clad in a brown woollen tunic, the man's shoulders were shaking as if through cold, and at intervals he would place his hands into his hair and clutch at it as if intending to pull it free.

It was not to him that Gunnarr's eyes were drawn, though. Instead, he found himself looking in the same direction that the man was staring. There his gaze fell upon the second man, the high-voiced one, and the sight caused Gunnarr's hands to clench involuntarily around fistfuls of grass.

The second man was nearer to being a boy. He could not have been much older than Gunnarr. He was lying on his back in a shallow point in the middle of the stream, naked, his pale skin very bright amidst the greyness of the river rocks. He could almost have been bathing, but the rushing water was surging against the crown of his head and pouring over into his open eyes and mouth, and the boy was not in the least bit conscious of it.

A splash of movement sounded from below, and Gunnarr almost jolted with shock as the man began to stride across to where the boy lay. For once the man's lips had fallen silent, and the sound of the water sloshing around his feet was the only noise to mask that of Gunnarr's heartbeat. The man came to stand over the boy's body and stooped to peer down at it, like a hunter studying a paw print. He gazed at the corpse for a long while, his lips pursed questioningly, and then Gunnarr realised that a knife was in the man's hand. With a sudden movement, he dropped to a knee in the water and began jerking his arm back and forth in a swift cutting motion.

The sight caused Gunnarr to lock rigid with shock. He clamped shut his jaw and tried to avert his eyes. And as soon as he did, he knew immediately that he had been found.

He must have made a sound. Some rustle of grass, or snap of a twig. With dread, he rolled his eyes back towards the scene, and found the man crouched frozen over the body, his head up and alert and his eyes roving slowly across the river bank directly below where Gunnarr lay. Gunnarr could see the man's face for the first time. It was not one he recognised. It was the kind of drained, hollow face that displayed every bone, every muscle that moved beneath the skin. His complexion was the colour of week-old bruises, and his thin brown hair hung so closely to his face that his ears protruded through it. His eyes were creeping steadily upwards, seeking someone out. For a heartbeat Gunnarr was trapped with indecision. Then his muscles twitched and came alive again, and with a burst of sound he found himself bolting from his hiding place and scrambling back towards the bushes.

He found Kelda blocking his path, waiting for him, her face barely inches from his own.

'Kelda, go back,' he urged.

For a moment he saw a flicker of confusion pass across her face, the shadow of an uncertain smile giving way to a crease of concern.

Footsteps started splashing through the water down below.

'Run back!' he told her again, his voice almost a shout this time, and finally her eyes flicked past him and back again and she seemed to understand.

She clasped his hand. 'Come on!'

But Gunnarr hesitated. The ground around them shook as a weight leapt against the bank beneath their feet. Kelda screamed and skittered backwards. She grabbed for Gunnarr's arm again, but he shook free of her grasp and fixed his eyes on the edge of the bank.

With a thud, a hand snapped up over the side and clutched hold of the grass. It was trembling with effort, the nails clawing down into the soft earth. With a crack of broken branches, Kelda was gone, vanished into the undergrowth, but Gunnarr realised that he was not going to follow. Thoughts, or memories, were racing through his mind so fast that he did not know what they were, but he knew that he had to stay. He rose to his feet and stepped forward towards the river.

The man was halfway through hauling himself up over the bank, the top of his head cresting the side, but he must have heard Gunnarr's movement and feared an attack raining down from above while he was helpless, for his hands pushed free of the bank and he crashed back down into the water.

Slowly, Gunnarr continued forward. As he leaned out cautiously over the side he found the man staring up at him from below, his body tensed, ready to spring forward or dart backwards at the slightest flinch. They studied each other's eyes for a moment, and then the man's features stretched into a twitching grin.

'Greetings, little friend. What are you doing up there?' His voice was speaking different words to his eyes.

Gunnarr placed a hand on the ground and came warily down the slope to the stream floor. The man watched every step, twisting his neck to follow the movement. Behind him, the body still lay in the water like a log. Gunnarr's eyes must have flicked towards it, for the man also glanced quickly around at the sight, and then turned back to Gunnarr with a short awkward laugh.

'I know you, I think,' the man said, as Gunnarr reached the fine shale gravel that bordered the stream. 'You're an Egilsson.'

'Folkvarr was my father,' Gunnarr corrected instinctively, with such conviction that the man shrank his chin into his neck and gave a smirk.

'That's right, Folkvarr's lad. Too fair to be Egil's own. What are you doing up here, boy?'

Gunnarr glanced again at the pale figure lying in the water. Blood was bubbling out of a dark vent in his chest and rinsing down his thighs in long brown streaks. Gunnarr gathered his breath. 'You should not have done that.'

The man glanced around at the body again and then eyed Gunnarr with a sideways look. 'How long were you up there?'

Gunnarr offered no reply, so the man continued.

'He's my son, of sorts. I've fostered him as Egil has you, kept him fed when I've had scarcely enough for my own. He liked coming up here with me.' He stopped there, as if that were explanation enough, and pressed a positive smile through closed lips.

'You should not have done it,' Gunnarr repeated.

Like water, the smile drained from the man's face. His eyes hardened. 'And who says so?'

Gunnarr answered without hesitation. 'The rule.'

The man spat. 'Egil's rule.' He seemed to be finished, and then the next words erupted as a shout. 'And what's that got to do with me? I never supported his claim. He was a man just like me once.'

Gunnarr shifted his weight. The temper had revealed itself, and now the man seemed to loom over Gunnarr, darkening like gathering storm clouds. The bloodied knife had appeared in his hand, apparently plucked from the air.

'What were you doing to him?' Gunnarr asked.

The man stared at Gunnarr for a moment and then turned over the knife in his hand, speaking more softly. 'Opening his chest to the sky so that his spirit might escape, like the old ways for the dead. The old ways that all men of Helvik used to follow,' he added in a louder voice. 'Your father's rule is taking that away from us as well.'

'He's not my fa—' Gunnarr began, but that was all that he had time to say.

In a flash of movement the man sprang forward and snatched hold of Gunnarr's arm. Gunnarr heard himself yelp and flailed out with his free fist, battering muscle, but the man dropped the knife and latched onto that arm as well. The wiry strength of his grip lifted Gunnarr from his feet, sapping his power away. The man's face was ablaze with madness. His fingers drove so deep into Gunnarr's arms that it felt like they were bending his bones. Agonised, Gunnarr twisted violently in the air, wriggling half loose, and from the side of his vision saw the stream rushing up to meet him. He hit the icy water with a clunk, and pain jarred through his bones as his hip came down upon a jutting rock.

The pain caused him to croak and convulse. His body sought to double over into a ball, but the man was kneeling on top of him, snarling in the thrashing spray as he sought to lock Gunnarr's arms down against his sides. Gunnarr screamed and kicked out at the man's groin, but he could generate no force. His strength was leaving him, his heart hammering against his ribs. He rolled onto his side, turbid water sloshing up to rush down his throat, and there on the river bank he saw the dead boy's clothes lying in a ragged heap across the stones. A cry came unbidden to his lips.

'Help!'

A hand clubbed down against his nose and mouth, trying to smother his cries, but Gunnarr twisted his neck free again.

'Help me!' His words came out high-pitched and shrieking, crying out to anyone that could hear. His throat felt like it was tearing. With a shout of his own, the man kicked Gunnarr hard in the ribs. The last of his air was driven from his lungs, and his cries turned into an empty gasp.

From somewhere far off behind him, there came a ringing shout. Someone was roaring at the top of their lungs. Gunnarr grunted with hope, and the man's head jolted upwards at the sound. And yet it was a shrill, thin voice. A girl's voice trying to sound fearsome. A little girl. Kelda, Gunnarr thought. She had come back for him.

A hidden energy flared in his chest, and he fought with renewed vigour to break free. The man was distracted, his grasp relaxed only slightly, but it was enough for Gunnarr to squirm loose. Still doubled over with pain, he tripped onto the river bank and dragged himself clear of the water.

Kelda was scrambling down the bank and arriving at the water's edge, her delicate features scrunched with aggression, seemingly unafraid. She looked pathetically small, a child playing a game, as he had been only moments before. Gunnarr's heart went out to her as he watched her play her role so dutifully, waving her stick left and right as she roared, just as he had told her to.

'Run!' he tried to call to her, to beg of her, but his voice was an airless whisper. He could only look at her, and before his eyes he saw the change that came across her face as she took in the scene properly for the first time. In the space of a heartbeat he saw the game become reality, her bravery turn to foolishness, and her innocence revealed as weakness.

Her cry fell silent when she saw the intent in the eyes of the man who still knelt in the middle of the stream, glaring at her. The stick fell forgotten from her hand when she turned her head to the boy in the water, whose mouth was gaping further and further apart with the weight of the liquid filling it, as if he was screaming in silent anguish. But it was when she turned to look at Gunnarr that the last of her resolve finally snapped, for there she must have seen something that she never had before: fear in his eyes.

Her face and body seemed to go limp. The focus drained from her eyes and they glazed over with terror. Gunnarr tried to drag himself towards her, but he was not half as quick as the man, who saw the girl's senses leave her and surged eagerly from the water to take advantage. Kelda did not so much as react to his movement, like a hare transfixed by a stoat, and the man caught hold of her easily, a hand on each of her shoulders. For an instant he paused, thrown by her lack of resistance. Then he released an awful sound, like a beast about to gorge away a yearning hunger, and dropped to his knees at her feet.

'Gunnarr,' Kelda murmured quietly, as the man started tearing at her clothes, but otherwise she stood as still as a carving.

Gunnarr had plenty of time to choose his spot. The man was engrossed, intoxicated, his head bowed and hands shaking as he fumbled with the ties on Kelda's smock. His ears were deaf to footsteps. The knife that he'd discarded as he wrestled Gunnarr to the ground was forgotten, or at least it had been until Gunnarr had retrieved it from the shallows. Even Kelda did not give Gunnarr away, so numb with fear that she barely seemed to notice his creeping approach even when he stood barely a yard from her face. As he stood looking down at the man's shoulders, Gunnarr could hear his ragged breathing, coarse and urgent. He raised the knife two-handed over his head, and dragged it downwards with all of the strength he could muster.

The man erupted upwards with such force that Gunnarr was hurled backwards into the stream once again. Only a quiet groan escaped the man's lips, but his neck arched as if he was being pulled by the hair, and his mouth opened so wide that the skin on his face might have ripped.

Gunnarr stared up at his work with morbid fascination. The knife had entered just beside the right shoulder blade and there it remained, almost hilt deep. He was certain that that would be enough, that the man would soon sink to his knees, but he did not. Instead he whirled in fury, and his eyes found Gunnarr lying in the water at his feet. A crazed expression burned on the man's face. He began to lumber forward. Gunnarr scrambled to his feet and drew the curved skinning knife from his belt.

‘Kelda, go back,’ he said, his eyes never leaving the man that stood poised in front of him. And this time she listened.

When they eventually found him, as the evening shadows began to fall, he was still standing exactly as he had been when Kelda left him, ankle deep in the water, knife in hand. But this time his tunic was ripped open from neck to navel. His skin was as pale as salt. Drops of blood dripped from his white-blond hair and daubed his trembling hands. And his eyes were staring only at the corpse that lay face down at his feet, half in and half out of the water.

Expecting to find two dead boys and a killer to trail, the search party had set three hounds upon the scent. The first that Gunnarr knew of their arrival was the slate-grey bitch that came sniffing around the corpses and licking at his fingers. He looked up and found Egil striding hurriedly towards him through the water, his black cloak streaming from his shoulders.

Ten or so other men had come with him. One of them carried Kelda on his back. She was shouting and pointing needlessly, for they had all seen him by now. The boys had been allowed to come as well, it seemed. Hákon, Fafrir, Bjørn and Eiric were all there, running to keep up with the others. All of this Gunnarr witnessed only fleetingly, and then inevitably his eyes would return to the bloody pile at his feet.

Egil hugged him when he reached him, but Gunnarr barely noticed. Breathless and excited, the boys clamoured around him, all speaking at once, but he heard only some of their words. Someone gently eased the knife from his grip. He did not feel it go.

Hákon, the oldest of the boys at fifteen, stepped across Gunnarr’s vision and dropped to his knees beside the corpse, leaning very close so as to demonstrate that death and gore could draw no fear from him. He studied the body with a stern face, crinkling his nose slightly.

‘Gods, Gunnarr,’ he exclaimed, peering upwards, ‘you’ve made a right old mess of him!’

Gunnarr stared down at the corpse, the countless stab wounds that had left the man’s back a mire of red and pink. ‘He would not die,’ he said quietly.

Egil placed an arm across Gunnarr’s shoulders. ‘Sometimes a man will move even when the life is gone from him. But you are too young to be learning that.’

‘You were that busy stabbing him that you didn’t give him chance to die!’ Hákon jibed. The other boys started to giggle.

Egil’s stiff voice broke in and cut off their titters. ‘Do not tease your brother.’

‘I didn’t,’ Hákon protested, with a rebellious smirk. ‘I teased Gunnarr.’ He sauntered off to study the other body. The rest of Egil’s sons followed him, gawping and exclaiming.

An old lame horse had been towed up the trail with the men. When the time came to leave, darkness gathering, they wrapped Gunnarr in a blanket and lifted him onto its back, seating Kelda up in front of him and Bjørn behind to keep him warm. Egil himself led the beast by the mane, the hounds padding along just in front, while Eiric scurried along at his father’s side and asked questions about death and dying, which Egil answered with brusque, direct replies. Fafrir and Hákon marched along some twenty yards in front of everyone else, half-jogging to make sure that it was so, two silhouettes shrinking into the sunset.

For much of the journey Gunnarr leaned back against Bjørn’s chest and dozed, his chin resting on top of Kelda’s head as she did the same against him. When at one point a misplaced step from the horse jolted him half awake, he heard his name being spoken, and realised that Egil was in conversation with one of the other men. He kept his eyes closed and listened.

‘We are all happy to find him alive, Egil, but we cannot ignore the fact that we also found two that were not.’

‘Aye, and one of them the killer of the other,’ Egil replied dismissively.

‘Are we sure of that?’

Egil huffed with annoyance. ‘Of course we bloody are. Thorngen’s relationship with that boy was well known. Just ask his poor wife.’

‘Hákon says that Thorgen was using Rolf as a woman, and that Gunnarr was watching them so that he could learn what to do with Kelda.’ It was Eiric’s young voice. Both men ignored the comment, and Egil went on.

‘We have Kelda’s account to vouch for Gunnarr. He’s a boy of twelve, not some blood-hungry cur. Today is the first time he’s killed anyone, and the poor lad has scared himself half to death in doing so.’

‘I didn’t know that your rule made exceptions for youths.’

Egil’s voice quickened. ‘Randulf, our kingdom has only one rule, and I was the one that devised it. Do you think I’m likely to have forgotten what it says? When Thorgen killed Rolf, it was him that broke the rule. Gunnar witnessed it, and he punished the culprit. He has upheld the rule, not broken it.’

The man named Randulf persisted. ‘I still don’t think you can just ignore that this happened. People will ask questions.’

‘What do you want me to say, Randulf, that I will put my own son to death? Our people have barely made it through winter without starving. They have more pressing concerns.’

Randulf sighed. ‘You might at least punish him of sorts. To teach him, and the townsfolk, that his actions were at best reckless.’

‘I’ll do no such thing,’ Gunnarr heard Egil reply firmly. ‘Life has never been easy for Gunnarr. He lost Folkvarr in the time before there was a rule, and so he understands why we have need of one. Brave is what his actions were. And our town needs men brave enough to do what is right.’

They reached the town after darkness fell. A crowd had gathered just inside the gates to wait for their return. Night torches had been lit around the walls. By the glow of their orange light Gunnarr found his mother standing beside Kelda’s. She smiled cheerfully and raised her hand in a wave. Though she loved him more than any other, she had a trust in him that meant she was always the last to worry about his safety. The expression on Kelda’s mother’s face, though, could not have been greater in contrast. The sight of it cleared the sleepiness from Gunnarr’s head, and filled him with a sudden urgency.

Egil came to a halt with the horse and the mothers started to make their way over. Hands reached up and guided Gunnarr down from his seat, and as soon as his feet touched the ground he turned around to face Kelda. She was still half asleep, her eyes wrinkled against the glare of the torches, but she pushed her lips into a conspirator’s smile when she looked at him.

‘I’m sorry that you’ll get in trouble now,’ he told her.

Kelda made a face, and was about to reply when her mother arrived and took her sharply by the arm.

‘Just look at the state of them,’ she exclaimed, standing back to gaze in horror at the two children. ‘I’m sorry Frejya, this is no reflection on you, but I will not have the two of them playing together any more, I just won’t.’ She jerked Kelda by the arm and started dragging her forcefully away, continuing to scold her as they went.

‘Goodnight, Kelda,’ Gunnarr stepped forward and called after her.

Kelda looked back over her shoulder and darted free of her mother’s grasp. Reaching quickly inside her smock, she produced something from her pocket and placed it between her hands. Just before her mother wrenched her away again, she snatched her thumbs up to her lips and blew. A whistle pierced out into the night’s sky, as clear and pure as any birdsong.

Chapter One

The outrider approached at a gallop, hair billowing, and reined to a skidding halt at Egil's right hand. His horse's mouth and nostrils were covered in strings of white mucus. Blood ran down its pasterns from kicking up the sharp mountain stones.

'How many?' Egil asked gravely, reaching up to take hold of the bridle.

The scout's name was Torleik, a son of Egil's cousin. He slid down from the steaming mount with a thud. 'Enough for me to see that there was little use in counting them all.' His mouth twitched briefly into a quivering smile, but he swallowed with uncertainty halfway through, and it did not return.

Egil tugged at the horse's noseband as it snorted and threw its head. 'Do they march?'

'They make camp, just beyond the ridge. The rearguard is still arriving.'

Egil nodded brusquely, and turned away. Slowly, he let his eyes wander up the beaten highland path that wound into the mountains until it was lost, trying to take it all in. The horse shied again and he lost patience with it, thrusting control of it back to its rider with a growl of annoyance.

'Father. Steingarth?' he heard his second son, Fafrir, venture from behind him, and other voices murmured in concurrence.

'Aye,' Egil sighed, turning back to Torleik, 'what of Steingarth and the other hill settlements?'

'Fallen, I suppose,' Torleik answered, still breathless from the ride. 'Of prisoners I saw no sign, but there is smoke to the north-east, and I think I saw some to the west as well, where Blendal sits.'

Egil sucked on his lip and spat on the ground. Only a fool could have expected different. That black part of the night before dawn had brought wails and clangs and rumbling footsteps tumbling down off the slopes, as if all the barrows had opened and the ghouls were running riot in the darkness. Now he knew that something far more threatening awaited them beyond the horizon.

It was approaching mid-morning already, the sunlight still pale with immaturity. Egil stood just below the summit of the first of the foothills, at the elbow of a sharp twist in the road where a weary old hawthorn tree grew so stooped that the children would run up and down its trunk in summer. At his back were his most trusted men. They had dug out their shields and tough leather armour, the swords and spears of their fathers, and now they were waiting, tense and restless. In number, they were no more than ten: his sons, old friends, wise heads. As he turned around to face them they pressed inwards with anticipation, but Egil looked off beyond their eager eyes and instead gazed down at the paltry town some five hundred yards in the distance below.

Helvik. His town. He'd become an old man quickly during the years of his rule, and his sons were pushing for him to name a successor and step aside, but Helvik was still his town. She sat miserably on a scrap of bleak coastline, hunched around a wind-battered bay that bordered the green seas of the north. From a distance, her surrounding pasture looked bleached and poxed, her wooden stockade all sunken and damp and mouldy. So few buildings sat within her walls that outsiders might call her a village or an outpost rather than a town. To Egil, she resembled a tired old grandmother clutching a gaggle of children within her feeble arms. And as he looked down upon her, it was as if he could see her dying quietly before his eyes.

'Father, we cannot just stand here. We must act!'

It was Hákon, eldest of Egil's sons and growing more assertive by the day. He wore the rusted coat of ringmail that had belonged to Egil's own father, though it looked to be too broad for his shoulders. The other men, Egil could see, were becoming just as restive, but he was now sufficiently old that his silence ought to have been able to hold an audience as well as his words could. He rolled an admonishing look in Hákon's direction, and resumed his contemplation.

For years his town had been dogged by sickness. It was mid-autumn. The women should have been in the barn winnowing the barley, the boys and girls out in the fields pulling turnips amid the gentle warmth of a benevolent sun. Instead, the sky was choked with rain clouds, as it had been

for the past three harvest seasons. Any crops that had scavenged enough sunlight to grow now lay rotting in the fields. Once, Egil's people might have relied on the fruits of the sea to sustain them, but the fish that once had teemed in the cold clean waters were gone, hunted to exhaustion or tempted away by some enticing current, so that the longboat beached on their shore might as well have been driftwood. The scrawny beasts that sniffed around the fields did not have the meat on their bones to make them worth killing, though killed they would have to be once winter came, or else lost to the cold or starved out on the frozen grass. It was set to be the worst famine of all those that Egil could remember. And now this.

'They could be here at any moment,' Hákon pressed. 'We must at least tell the men to arm themselves.'

Egil gave a weary smile. 'Hákon, if they heard the sounds that you and I did last night and they still haven't thought to arm themselves, then they're not the sort of men we need.' He sighed, and his feet crunched in the gravel as he turned once again to gaze up into the barren hills. 'Björn,' he said, without turning around. 'Go down and fetch Meili.'

Wordlessly, his youngest son detached himself from the group and started back down the rutted road towards town. Egil could hear the other men muttering under their breaths, and waited for Hákon to speak. In fact, it was Fafrir who responded.

'Father,' he queried gently, 'one man against what some say is the largest army ever to have marched?'

Egil crunched around to face them, and opened his hands. 'One man against thousands is a poor contest,' he agreed. 'But sending a hundred against the same number would gain us little, and lose us much.'

While they waited, Egil studied their faces. Uncertainty lingered in some of their eyes, but they were all loyal men who trusted his experience and remembered how he'd served them in the past. Yet in truth, he thought, what do I know? This was as new to him as to any of them. No invading force ever bothered with Helvik, even if they did find a waystone that acknowledged it. Theirs was a realm that had not needed to raise an army in living memory. And yet Helvik had seen no shortage of blood.

Egil ran his eyes along the group standing before him, remembering then that most of the good men, the truly good men who he would want by his side at a time such as this, were already dead. They may not have had food for their children, but the soldiers of Helvik had always had their pride. A history of feuding clans had savaged the population, until it became ingrained within the culture of the town. Year upon year, the slightest of insults against family honour were ruthlessly punished. Blood paid for blood. Brother avenged brother, cousin avenged cousin. There was always someone owed vengeance. Helvik had seemed intent on becoming a town of widows.

Thoughts of those days, of the decimation of his generation, brought the same memory they always did to Egil's mind. He glanced to his right and found where Gunnarr Folkvarrsson stood nearby, keeping a respectful silence. So tall he was now, white-blond hair and a broad face of wind-weathered skin. Folkvarr's sword was under his arm, and Egil looked at it and remembered the night when blood ties had forced him to watch his truest friend slain before the eyes of his wife and only son. It had been the last that Egil could tolerate; as soon as he was named ruler of Helvik, he made one desperate bid to preserve his people.

As an isolated realm, raging sea on one side and towering mountains the other, Helvik had developed a society far different from the other kingdoms occupying the same sprawling continent. Its inhabitants had always been free to live as they chose. If they wanted to steal from each other, they could steal. If they wanted to fight each other, they could fight. Men chose their own culprits and their own punishments, and any attempts by the people to live in harmony had no other basis than the unfortunate need for coexistence. Rulers like Egil were followed purely because they had proven themselves most fit to lead. There were no noblemen, no peasants, no slaves. No restraining

principles determined by any power that claimed to have greater authority than that of the ordinary autonomous man. No rules. That was, until Egil imposed one upon them.

It was a single rule, known by the townsfolk simply as ‘the rule’, and every inhabitant had agreed to either leave or submit to its governance. It was simple, self-implementing, requiring no detail, no interpretation, no single enforcer. Its wording was plain: ‘No person of Helvik may kill another person of Helvik. Any person who breaks this rule is no longer a person of Helvik.’

From that day forward, a line was drawn under the events of the past. When old grievances surfaced and the call of the sword was too strong, the rule stopped the blight of vengeance from spreading. Those who broke the rule lost their place in society, and so became liable to be struck down in retribution by any person wishing to claim it; for the rule said nothing against taking the lives of those who were not persons of Helvik. Thus, such punishers were protected from recrimination, for in the eyes of the rule they had done nothing wrong, and any who wished to retaliate against them would have to break the rule themselves in order to do so.

It was Egil’s proudest achievement. The years that had passed since that day had not been enough to rebuild a broken population, especially when that time had seen only a handful of decent harvests, but nevertheless Egil had felt that, since the inception of the rule, Helvik had finally begun to pull together. It had started to fight back against the curse that had gripped it for so long.

Yet now it was faced with complete extinction.

The rumours had existed for many moons. Any tradesman who still saw reason to battle his way over the mountains to Helvik carried tales of vast armies sweeping across the northern lands. They were the soldiers of Hálfðanr Svarti, branded ‘the Black’ by virtue of a mane of hair so dark amongst the fair heads of the north that he resembled a rook among doves, though others claimed his name befit the colour of his heart. Ruler of the neighbouring kingdom of Agóir, he had set about growing his holdings to north and east, and his armies had sacked every stronghold they had come across in a relentless surge of slaughter. Those that resisted were butchered and thrown onto bonfires, their women wrenched to their feet and shackled into slavery. Already the kingdoms of Vestfold and Raumariki, along with great swathes of Vingulmörk and vast Heiómörk, had been added to his dominion. Now his nose had sniffed something in the air to the west, and one of his armies had arrived at the doors of Helvik.

A familiar voice dragged Egil from his thoughts.

‘I say we strike at them now. They’re unprepared, weary from the march.’

Eiric. Egil’s second youngest, wilful as ever. Egil looked back down the slope to the gates of the town, and saw Björn re-emerge with the tall figure of Meili at his side, donning his armour as he walked.

‘No,’ he murmured. ‘First let us see if words can do what iron cannot.’

When Meili arrived, Egil took him aside and held a brief whispered conference, before sending him alone into the hills on Torleik’s stumbling horse. Though he was old now, and had to drink more than was good for him to keep the chill from his bones, Meili was still the town’s most famous sword. As a youth, he had left Helvik to fight as a mercenary in all the greatest battles of the age, and soon word of his exploits had spread from the sea in the south to the ice-lands in the north. That he had managed to survive was a surprise; even more so was that, once it was over, he had chosen to return to his damp and miserable home, when all the world knew songs that mentioned his name. Whoever the invaders might be, they would surely have heard of Meili. And when faced with him, Egil was certain, they would either feel fear or respect.

He was out of sight beyond the ridge for only a short time. Then the horse carried him back down again with his throat hanging open and his blood drained over his chest. Sheep shit had been forced down his ears. His eyes they had cut out and stuffed into his cheeks like plums.

Egil’s arms were shaking as he lifted the old man’s body from the saddle. ‘To the walls,’ he ordered grimly, and his men rushed to obey.

As night fell, all the men of Helvik stood lined along the town's spiked parapet, wrapped in thick felts, watching the northern horizon glow orange with the camp fires of the enemy. They had made a fire of their own too, on which they settled the body of Meili to sizzle and hiss by the water's edge. Not one of them expected to see dawn. Yet the sun rose the following morning and the mountain road lay empty as the mist cleared. Egil sent some boys out to bring the rest of the livestock inside the walls, and then the gates were barred and bolstered.

They came that same morning, though not in the manner that Egil expected. One of the younger men gave a shout, and as Egil craned against the parapet he picked out a solitary figure ambling down the mountain track. The stranger took his time, stopping often as if to take in the sea view, until he came down off the heights and made his way right up to the gates. He drew to a halt well within the range of a spear, and called up at the walls, barely bothering to raise his voice.

'I'll see the leader of this place, please.' Then he settled down on the damp earth to wait.

Many of Helvik's men offered to gut the stranger and take his eyes, but Egil came down off the walltop and ordered the gates unbolstered. The man who paced easily through the entrance had the look of no stranger to battle. He had a barrel chest and sturdy gut, scarred forearms naked to the wind, a wild beard that almost buried his mouth. The only armour that he wore was a faded leather kirtle, but he must have had wealth, for it reached almost down to his knees.

Helvik's soldiers gathered menacingly about him, but the man didn't so much as glance at them. He nodded a greeting to Egil, thanked him for granting an audience, and then spoke plainly to all that could hear.

'My name is Olaf Gudrødsson, ruler of that portion of Vestfold that men now call Geirstad. I share the same blood as Hálfðanr Svarti, and that is my army on your hilltop. Your settlement is the smallest I have faced on my journey, and I've enough men at my back to sack a place ten times the size. We are footsore from days of marching, but if you insist we will attack with all haste, and be clearing away your bodies before the tides change. Should you wish to avoid that fate, have every single thing of value, every scrap of precious stone or metal in this village, loaded up and delivered to me before midday tomorrow.'

Finished, he did not wait for a reply. He turned and walked himself out of the gates again, whistling a tune through his teeth.

Chapter Two

On the bench in the master's chamber of the longhall of Helvik, the oil lamp began to flicker.

Sitting alone on his wooden sleeping berth, Egil lifted his eyes from the packed-earth floor and stared across at the flame. It was dying, spluttering weakly for breath, and the wash of orange light that it cast out into the gloom was slowly shrinking inwards. Egil glanced up through the smoke-hole in the roof, and saw a lighter shade of black. Beyond the walls he could hear the waves falling back out to sea. Dawn, he thought. He put on his cloak, and ducked through the partition door.

On quiet feet, he passed through the dim main hall, listening to the gentle sounds of the sleepers on his right. The logs in the central fire pit were charred black bones with red bellies, as grey on the tops as the heads of old men. He stooped to pick up a fresh piece of wood and dropped it onto the ashes. His two wolfhounds lay on their sides in the glow of the flames. They were motionless apart from their uppermost ears, which lifted to follow his progress.

Night had rolled in beneath an empty sky, the stars twinkling with cold. As Egil slipped out through the doorway, the last of them were fading and the black horizon was faltering to the east. He hitched his cloak closer about his shoulders, and headed towards the light.

His men had not trusted the word of Olaf Gudrødsson, and for the second night in succession they had slept out upon the walls, but Egil had elected not to join them, and sequestered himself in the longhall instead. It sat upon a thin strip of land that reached out into the seawater to form the western arm of the bay, secluded from the rest of the town. Egil wandered down the narrow causeway and turned left along the stony beach, until he reached the place where the town walls met the shore.

Up on the battlements, the air was brisk, a breeze coming in off the sea. Only the sentries were awake, roving their heads back and forth through the blackness. The rest of the men lay doubled up beneath layers of blankets at their feet, steaming like piles of old leaves. Silence hung in the air like a low fog. Only the waves made a sound.

Egil found Eiric and Bjørn within the first fifty yards. He might have been able to locate them by the sound of their snoring alone, for they drowned out any man nearby. They were lying beneath the same few sheepskins, sprawled out carelessly like drunkards. Crouching, Egil shook them with increasing vigour until they came awake squint-eyed and confused. He mumbled something in their ears, and they dragged themselves up and made for the nearest steps. Egil straightened, and continued on his way.

He went slowly, studying the sleeping faces of those that he passed by the weak light of the torches that blazed at distant intervals. Each man he recognised. The sentries muttered simple greetings as he passed, keeping their eyes forward, and he stopped to share hushed conversations with some. They all professed a yearning to put their spears to use. Egil wondered if they could still say the same with the light of day upon their features.

As he crossed over the footbridge that ran along the top of the main gates, he noticed someone stir in the shadows at his feet. By the light of the torches he saw that it was Gunnarr. He was staring up at Egil, eyes wide and alert, a questioning look upon his face. Egil smiled as he made out another form huddled beneath Gunnarr's cloak and realised that Kelda had come up onto the walls to spend the night out in the cold beside her husband. She was sleeping with her head against his chest, her hair covering most of her face. The bump in her belly was so large that he could see its smooth contours even through the thick rolls of bedding. Egil remembered when he married them in his hall, on a night in midsummer when they were barely more than children, and felt all the more glad that he hadn't denied them.

Gunnarr drew his arms out from the covers and made as if to rise, but Egil quickly shook his head to stay the movement. He smiled at the pair again as Gunnarr dug himself back down into the blankets and closed his eyes, and passed on into the dark.

Fafrir was the last to be found. Together he and Egil walked back towards the longhall beneath the greying sky, and by the time that they arrived the other three were already waiting, huddled inside the small antechamber beyond the outer door.

‘Why can’t we go inside?’ Eiric asked irritably.

‘I didn’t think you’d want to wake your wives,’ his father replied.

‘Nonsense!’ Eiric declared. ‘It’s about time they were up. These women will sleep all day if you let them.’

He pushed his way through the inner door, and led the rest of them into the hall. The log that Egil had tossed on the fire was bathed in bright new flame, and the room seemed to sway in the vague and murky light. Two identical sets of benches ran parallel to the walls on either side, with raised berths behind them, upon the west of which the women were huddled in slumber. Eiric and Bjørn set about lifting the trestles and table top down from the cross-beams overhead, making little effort to dampen their noise. Hákon lounged in the chair at the head of the table, the flames dancing behind his back.

‘Isn’t that my seat?’ Egil reminded him, and Hákon smiled and slid onto the bench beside his brothers.

‘Since we’re here together, how about some ale?’ Eiric suggested, flashing his teeth with a grin.

Egil came around the table to his chair. ‘I’m told there’s one cask of ale left for the whole town.’

‘And judging by your face, this might be our final chance to drink it.’

Egil smiled wearily at his young son’s bravado. ‘Save it,’ he said, ‘for when we have something to celebrate. What I have to say now won’t keep you long.’ He draped his cloak over the back of his chair and then, rather than bothering to sit, rested against the shoulder of it as he made to begin. Before he could start, Bjørn spoke up from his left.

‘Shouldn’t we wait until Gunnarr arrives?’

Hákon huffed. ‘I’m certain we’ll manage without him.’

Egil flashed his son a disappointed look. ‘I didn’t ask Gunnarr to join us. At this moment, his wife has far more need of him than I do.’

Eiric ruffled with mock offence. ‘Well, you could say the same thing about mine.’

‘Except Brynja, unlike Kelda, isn’t fit to burst with child.’

‘About bloody time too,’ Eiric muttered, and he and Bjørn sniggered together. They were boys still in Egil’s eyes, but each had already succeeded in adding to his bloodline. Their children lay beside their mothers in the shadows to Egil’s right. Gunnarr and Kelda had been hoping for some time, Egil knew, but Kelda was a slight thing, and the lack of food went harder on her than most.

Without speaking, Egil walked a few paces to the gloom near the back of the room and bent down to lift something with a heave of exertion. When he returned to the light, he was carrying a large trunk made from pine wood and leather. He held it for a moment before the eyes of his sons, and then dropped it onto the table top with a bang.

‘There you have it,’ he said.

All of his sons came to their feet at once, and stared at the trunk as if they’d never before seen such an object. One of the women tossed in the bedding and muttered some complaint about the noise, but none of the men seemed to hear it. Their silence drew out for a few waiting breaths, and then Fafrir voiced what they all must have been thinking.

‘That’s it?’

Egil nodded. ‘I gathered it myself.’

Fafrir was shaking his head. ‘They will say it’s not enough.’

‘They can say what they like, that’s all that there is,’ Egil growled, his voice rising in volume. Helvik had never been a place of any magnitude. Its wealth was its freedom, nothing more. What meagre treasures it did possess were scattered around the dusty alcoves of the longhall, odd trinkets

and relics from days gone by. Egil had spent the evening going around with the lamp and sweeping up every last one.

With a dubious expression, Hákon lifted the lid of the trunk and stared down at the shadows inside. 'We should ask the men,' he said after a moment. 'Get them each to contribute whatever they have.'

Egil was shaking his head before his son had even finished the suggestion. 'Life here for them is miserable enough. I won't have them give up what small sources of joy they might have, only to buy more of the same.'

'They wouldn't agree to it anyway,' Björn stated, slinging himself back down onto the bench with a thump. 'It's a glorious fight they want. This paying off our enemies doesn't sit well with them.'

'Nor I,' Egil responded, 'but we have no need for such fancies. If all these invaders want is plunder, they are welcome to it. I will not seek out bloodshed for the sake of a few bits of metal.'

He sat back down heavily and glowered at the trunk as if it were the cause of his problems. One after the other, his sons did the same, apart from Hákon, who remained on his feet. He stared down at the contents for a moment longer, and then dropped the lid closed.

'I will fetch someone to carry it to them,' he said, and set off towards the door.

Egil let him go a few steps before he stopped him. 'Hákon,' he called reluctantly, and his son must have sensed something in his tone, for he drew up just as sharply as if he'd reached the end of a tether. He turned back around, his lips apart with query. Egil sighed, and leaned forward in his seat. 'I have found someone to carry it,' he said.

Hákon hesitated for a moment, and looked to his brothers. They were all watching their father, brows wrinkled with concern. In the gloom of the sleeping berths someone shifted beneath the blankets, as if rolling over so as to hear better. The hounds by the fire had lifted their heads, ears pricked in anticipation.

'Father,' Hákon sighed, coming back towards the table, 'you cannot. If they capture you—'

'I wasn't speaking about myself, Hákon,' Egil said, with heaviness. 'I want you to be the one to take it to them.'

Hákon stopped in his tracks once again. 'Me?' He glanced towards his brothers, and released a breath of hesitant laughter. 'And what might I have done to deserve such an honour above all others?'

Egil felt the familiar tug of sympathy, and did his utmost to suppress it. 'Sometimes as a ruler,' he explained, 'you must demonstrate to your people that you serve them more than they serve you. I will not have any more mutterings that I stood back and sent Meili to his death. But, as you say, if I ride up there myself there is a risk that I may be offering our enemies a gift that they cannot resist. That is why I wish for you to go in my stead.'

Hákon was leaning one hand on the table, his face becoming slowly more drawn. 'And is the risk not nearly as great if I go? I am your eldest son, the next in line to be ruler—'

'I do not recall having named my favoured successor yet,' Egil cut in, and his voice had an edge of reproach to it.

'But still,' Hákon spluttered, 'surely someone else, like Gunnarr perhaps—'

'For the love of the Gods,' Eiric groaned, standing up from the bench, 'I'll bloody take it if you're so scared of losing your eyeballs.'

'No,' Egil said firmly. 'The rest of you have families. I won't put your wives and children through that kind of torment. But that is not why I chose you, Hákon,' he added quickly, seeing his son's face become hurt. 'As you say, you are my oldest son. You are an important figure in this town, and I know that I can trust you as much as any other person in it. Let our adversaries see that we are taking them seriously, but let them also see that no Egilsson is afraid to look his enemies in the eye. You are always asking me for greater responsibilities. Let this be your first of many.'

Hákon shifted his feet on the earth-and-ash floor, and fell silent. His face was downturned, but he was nodding very faintly, so that his tawny hair trembled about his ears. The other boys were

watching their brother awkwardly. Behind their exteriors, Egil could see their worry, and as he ran his eyes across them he felt the creep of guilt returning. Their mother would have killed him if she'd seen what he'd just done. But she was long dead, taken by a sickness one morning when the boys were still children, without showing the slightest sign of ill-health. Before her there'd been another one, more children, but they were all gone too, and it seemed like more than a lifetime ago now. His sons were all that Egil had left. And now he was sending one of them into the very heart of danger.

'Come,' he said quietly, climbing to his feet. 'Let us not keep them waiting.'

There were only a handful of horses in Helvik, most of which belonged to Egil's household. They strapped the wooden trunk onto the old bay pony that the boys had learnt to ride on, and gave Hákon a separate mount to lead it up the hill. The sun had risen from behind the headland, and the higher it rose the quieter Hákon seemed to become, but he managed some swagger as he bade farewell to his brothers. As he came finally to his father, Egil slapped him on the back and boosted him up into the saddle.

'Make sure that they know this is everything we have. Tell them that we require nothing in return other than that they move on from this place. And if they don't appear willing to do that, then you remain calm but firm. Say that we have no wish for bloodshed, but at the same time, these are our lands and always have been. We will not sit idle while they're taken from us.'

Hákon gathered his reins, and gave a stern nod from the saddle. 'I'll make you proud, Father,' he promised.

'You did that long ago,' Egil told him. 'Now off you go, and we'll speak when you're back.'

By the time he rode out from the town, all the men were awake and watching Hákon from the walls. Egil climbed up to the battlements to join them, and stood above the gates until his son had meandered up into the cloud and disappeared from sight.

When he returned to the longhall, the women were up and squatting around the fire, frying flat barley bread on battered old pans. Egil took his with one of his grandchildren on his lap, but he found he had scant appetite, and the child devoured most of it. Bjørn was snoozing on one of the cots, sitting up against the wicker wall with his mouth hanging open. Egil thought to pass the time by doing the same, and retired to the walled-off section at the south end of the hut that was reserved for him and his woman, should he ever find another. It had its own fire pit, but it wasn't yet cold enough to light it. For a time, Egil thrashed about upon the sheepskins in his berth, but the waves outside sounded almost deafening, and there was too much light coming in through the smoke-hole for him to properly close his eyes.

Midday came, and Hákon did not return. The women were busying themselves on the work benches that ran along the east wall of the room, rolling wicks for the lamps from cottongrass gathered earlier in the year. Fafir, Eiric and Bjørn sat murmuring in low voices around the table. Egil tried to join them, but their conversation felt trivial and forced. He went outside again and spent a while watching Fafir's son leading Eiric's son and Bjørn's daughter, both still young enough to be tottering on their feet, from rock pool to rock pool. He hoped they were as oblivious as they looked.

For the second half of the afternoon, he returned to the wall above the gates and stood staring up into the hills. Come evening, he was still there. The wind had forced a chill into his bones. The wild sky was orange in the west and darkening to soot in the east, like iron lifted out from the coals, and still Hákon didn't come home. Egil's men seemed to sense his emotion, and left him to himself. Before long, he was standing alone in the dark.

He returned to the longhall, and found his sons standing anxiously by the doorway inside. Gunnarr had joined them. The women were sitting very still and quiet, and when the children spoke too loudly they shushed them.

'Will you come with me?' Egil asked.

'Yes,' Gunnarr answered for his brothers. 'But Egil, fighting in this dark ...'

‘I do not go to fight today,’ Egil said quietly. ‘I fear that the horse may have wandered off the path.’

They took no light, in case it was seen. Egil led them, almost running in his haste and intent on maintaining that pace all the way up the slope. But as soon as they pushed through the gates, Eiric gave a shout. Egil looked up, and saw a flame floating down the mountain in the blackness.

‘Hákon,’ he gasped.

Gunnarr clutched his arm. ‘We cannot know that,’ he warned, but Egil shook himself free and hastened up the road.

The going was difficult. He had to rely on his feet to distinguish between the hard stone of the path and the soft grass when he strayed. Unseen rocks rolled beneath his feet, and his old legs stumbled many times. He could hear his sons following behind, labouring to keep up.

When he was twenty yards away, he looked up and found that the flame had halted. It glowed from a ridge above his eye line, spitting sparks into the air. A horse gave a whicker, and shifted its feet nervously in the gravel. Egil squatted down and placed a hand over his mouth, his ragged breath racing through his fingers.

‘Who’s there?’ a halting voice called.

‘Hákon!’ Egil cried.

‘Father!’

They came together in the darkness, and Egil dragged Hákon from the saddle and wrapped him into an embrace. The other boys raced up to be alongside. Egil squeezed his son fiercely with relief, and then thrust him back to study him in the torchlight.

‘I did it, Father,’ Hákon said, and there was a glimmer of pride on his face. ‘I won us more time.’

Egil was so overjoyed that he hugged his son again before he really heard the words. He drew back suddenly. ‘More time? What do you mean, more time?’

Hákon’s cheeks fell slowly. He worked his throat as if swallowing a mouthful. ‘They want more payment, Father.’

‘More? Well they can go and find their own. They’ve had all that they’re getting.’

Hákon clutched his father’s hands. ‘You haven’t seen their army. Or heard the things they’ve done to other towns, and will do to us too. We cannot hope to withstand them.’

The joy was gone from Egil’s face. ‘But that was all there was. We have nothing left to give.’

‘Then we must find someone who does,’ Hákon said, and his eyes were wide with fear.

Chapter Three

Björn Egilsson came awake gradually, and for a moment didn't remember where he was.

A cool drizzle finer than sand grains was tickling his cheeks. The sky he saw above him was a shroud of grey vapour, so dense that it swirled and mingled before his eyes like smoke drifting from a damp log smouldering on a low fire. His back ached. His left leg felt like it was lying in something wet, and the woollen cloak that covered him was heavy on the same side with damp. He sighed as his senses returned to him, and then freed an arm to elbow his brother.

Eiric was the deepest of the sleepers. It took three attempts to draw a response, and even then he did no more than throw an elbow back. Björn rolled over and pressed a finger into his eye.

'Wake up.'

Eiric grunted and slapped the hand away. 'Not until there's someone to kill.'

'I heard a gull.'

'Then tell it to bloody be quiet.'

Björn shook his head with a helpless smile and clambered to his feet, twisting his cloak back behind his shoulders. He stumbled over to the prow of the ship and leaned against it for balance as he looked around. The great serpent carved into the stempost was glaring off into the distance, head erect, long tongue tasting the air, but at that moment there was nothing for it to see but fog. It had closed in on them from all sides during the black night, so that no more than a yard of ocean was visible in any direction. The water looked choppy and restless. It slapped against the hull, shunting the boat from side to side.

Björn turned and waded towards the stern, stepping carefully through the clutter of stowed oars and sea-trunks and blanketed men in various states of repose. The mast and sail were down and packed away, but even if they hadn't been Björn might not have been able to see them through the brume. The men he skirted around were huddled together as closely as whelps piled against the teat. All of them were slumbering, apart from one. The man emerged last through the folds of vapour, seated by the steering-board at the rear, where Björn had placed him with the task of keeping them on a straight course while the others stole some sleep.

'Well?' Björn asked quietly, as he gained the man's side. Toki was his name. He was a full-faced, hulking farm lad, too young to have ever been a sea-farer, but he'd been the loudest voice prattling away for most of the voyage, and Björn had wanted to see whether weariness might finally shut him up.

Toki slapped the tiller. 'I haven't let this thing so much as twitch. Wind stayed down so we shouldn't have done much drifting. Waves have only started getting up since first light.'

'And did you hear that gull?'

'Now and then since the dark started thinning. Can't tell if there's lots of them or the same one circling.'

Björn cast a speculative glance up at the hidden sky above. 'A gull is supposed to be a sign that there's land, isn't it?'

Toki shrugged. He knew as little about sailing, especially the long-distance kind, as Björn did. The glory days of sea-raiding had missed them by a generation or more, Helvik's sense of adventure having diminished along with her strength. Only a few men aboard the ship were old enough to remember how to read the signs out on the open water, how to chart a course through cloud, and they needed their rest more than most. Björn decided he would probably have to wait until they roused themselves.

He returned to the bow of the ship, and found Eiric snoring gently with his mouth agape like a day-old corpse. A thin swill of water was running up and down the planks, and his brother had somehow managed to sleep through the night with his head in it, the slop lapping up around his ear

every time the boat tipped to the steering-board side. If there was that much leakage up by the prow, then Bjørn dreaded to think what it was like beneath the bodies in the low belly of the ship. Once, the vessel had been the pride of Helvik, but in recent years it had become more a resented reminder of better times passed. For almost as long as Bjørn could remember it had lain up on the beach on wooden stilts, played on by the children like an old horse, and when the stilts had rotted away no one had bothered to replace them. Moss and slime had caked its hull when, in the half-light just before dawn, Bjørn and his men came to drag it free from its berth. But it had floated, and there was no time to require anything more. Bjørn just hoped that it continued to do so.

With the sole of his boot, he pressed down gently on Eiric's throat until his brother's mouth started working like that of a landed fish and he burst awake flailing his arms. 'Get up,' Bjørn said. 'I need your help.'

Eiric scowled and lay there rubbing his neck. 'What do I know? Just keep going straight and try not to sail up Rán's arse.'

Bjørn sighed and kicked his brother in the shoulder. The plan had sounded like such a simple one when they'd volunteered to carry it out. Their father needed riches with which to mollify the invaders, but Helvik had none left, some would say none to begin with, and so it had been decided that a group of Egil's soldiers would take their old boat and sail along the coast until they found somewhere that did have the wealth to spare, and take it from them instead. But by now, the start of the third day of their voyage, they had lost the coast, and a measure of their resolve. Bjørn needed his father there, or Hákon at least. It had been his idea, after all. But Egil would not be seen to desert the town at such a time. And Hákon claimed that he had to stay where the invaders could find him, for he was the only one they trusted.

Eiric groaned and got up, wringing the seawater from his hair. 'What happened to your gull?' he asked.

Bjørn rested his weary head against the serpent's neck. 'Gone. But Toki heard it too. I've heard it said that you can follow them to land.'

Eiric rubbed at his beard and nodded past his brother's shoulder. 'Why don't we just follow that light?'

Bjørn whipped his head around and glared into the fog. There was nothing there, only the cloud dancing slowly before his eyes, opening and closing like drapes in a breeze. He spun back around and aimed a punch at his brother's head, but Eiric caught his fist, and pointed.

This time he saw it. He'd been looking too low before, scanning the tops of the waves, but now he realised with shock that the light was in fact high above him, shining bluntly through the haze like a star on a winter's night. It could have been a great bonfire blazing a mile in the distance, or a tiny lantern hanging there just out of reach. But it was certainly land.

Bjørn clamped a hand on his brother's shoulder. 'What make you of that, then?'

'Settlement. Must be,' Eiric replied, crowding closer to the rail. 'A beacon to welcome lost travellers.'

Bjørn sucked on his teeth for a moment. 'We need to get out of this fog to see what defends it.'

'Drift in at this speed and they'll have the whole army roused before we're even landed. Even a lonely crofter would turn us back.'

'Aye, but if we rush in then there's no rushing out again.'

Eiric shrugged, and his face came alive with excitement. Bjørn studied the eager eyes of his brother and gnawed on his lip, hesitating. He glanced around at his men, still slumbering obliviously beneath their cloaks, and then back out at the light, twinkling there like a prize waiting to be snatched. 'What would our illustrious brothers do at a time like this?' he pondered.

Eiric grinned. 'Hákon would be too busy throwing his guts up over the rail to do anything. Fafir would doubtless propose we turn for home. And Gunnarr would probably suggest something sensible like mooring up the coast until the fog lifts. But we're not as soft or as clever as them, are we Brother?'

Bjorn smiled, but his lower lip was still clamped between his teeth, and his face made an expression like a cat baring its fangs. 'I don't particularly want to lose our father's ship. Especially when we're the only hope he has of saving our home.'

'Courage, little brother,' Eiric urged, slipping an arm around Bjorn's shoulders and worrying his cloak. 'Let us take this chance to remind the old man that his young sons are worth every bit what his older ones are. Let us make a friend out of this fog.'

Still Bjorn delayed. He gazed again at the light. It seemed to be growing clearer, as somewhere the morning sun rose ever further and burned away the vapour. High above them, a gull released a keening cry. Bjorn looked across at his brother, and slapped him heartily between the shoulders. 'Wake the men,' he said, and Eiric whooped and ran to obey.

The raiders were up and seated on their trunks in the work of a moment. Those few that owned mail threw it on and then hurried to get their oars in the water with the others. Bjorn bellowed at Toki to steer them straight at the beacon, and then found his sword and slung it over his shoulder and took up his shield from the rail. The men at the oars grunted in unison with each stroke, driving the sleep from their limbs. The head of the vessel lifted, as if the serpent was preparing to strike, and they flew over the water like an eagle skimming for fish.

As sudden as a ram splintering through a gateway, they burst out from the fog and found the whole landscape waiting before them. Two hundred yards ahead, great cliffs the colour of bonemeal reared up into the air. An empty beach, open and flat, lay at their feet. And at the top, framed against the streaked dawn sky, stood a solitary building, the largest and grandest that Bjorn Egilsson had ever seen. The treacherous beacon burned in a stand at one end of it, twinkling innocently, guiding the raiders to their prize.

Eiric came to join his brother at the prow, and Bjorn roared his rowers to even greater speed. A hundred yards out, as their keel began to smash through the rollers, he noticed a single figure scrambling down a cut in the cliffs towards the shore. The man's feet reached the sand, and he began to labour along the beach to intercept the ship. Bjorn gave a grunt of admiration, and drew his sword.

The figure was stumbling the last few paces as the ship ploughed its belly into the ash-grey sand. Bjorn stood high against the masthead and looked down at him. He was some kind of old and wretched man, clothed in only a coarse brown robe with an old length of rope about his waist. The top of his head was as bald as a skull, but so symmetrically so that Bjorn was tempted to think he had shaved it that way deliberately. He went without boots on his skinny grey legs. He was not even armed.

The man peered up at them and opened a nervous mouth as if to speak, but then he seemed to see something that made his neck gulp and the words crumble on his lips. Too late, he realised he had made a grave mistake. He babbled something in a tongue that Bjorn did not understand, a beseeching look upon his face, and then turned and stumbled into a run. Before he had made it two paces, Eiric jumped down into the shallows, caught him by the robe, and hacked him into the sand.

'See?' Eiric roared, turning back to the ship. 'Easy!'

Bjorn and the others leapt down into the surf behind him, and he led them towards the cliffs at a run.

Chapter Four

On the eighth day following Olaf Gudrødsson's arrival as a noose around Helvik's throat, Gunnarr Folkvarrsson rose at first light. He dressed in hurried silence so as not to wake his wife and mother, before ducking out into the freshness of dawn to check his traps.

It was a routine that, by now, he could probably have conducted before waking. He let himself out through the bolted east side-gate and stalked through familiar parts of the lowland woods, carefully inspecting each snare. Unfortunately, the outcome of his forages had become all too repetitive as well. The land was parched of wildlife, and all his traps were empty. He wandered weary-eyed down to the shore, hoping to have had better luck with the sea.

By the time that the sun was fully risen, Gunnarr was stooped waist-deep in the ocean shallows. He wore an old pair of sealskin trousers to keep some of the water off, and stepped across the smooth ocean rocks barefooted. His hands moved in brisk, familiar patterns, working across the stiff twine of his nets. After a short while longer he sighed and straightened, smearing a dash of seawater across his furrowed forehead as he flicked a strand of hair away with the back of his palm.

His nets were empty, as usual. Once he would have undergone the laborious process of drawing them in to the shore first, and replanting them elsewhere if unsuccessful, but he had long since learnt that that was wasted effort. The disappointment had been too much to bear. He snatched a section of netting up to his chest and began trying to knot together an area where the salt had corroded through the joints. At another point further along he noticed a darker piece of material from where Kelda had repaired it previously, and he smiled sadly to himself. The poor girl had spent days trying to mend the nets at one time or another, using anything she could find that would tie, even lengths of her own hair when there was nothing else. With so few fish to be had it seemed there was little point to the exercise, but Gunnarr knew that it wouldn't be long before she insisted on taking another look at them to see what could be done. He often wondered whether she had been born with that positivity, or if it had been beaten into her through Helvik's hard schooling.

A movement inland caught his eye, and he raised a forearm across his brow to watch a rider climbing slowly up the hillside leading out of town. It could only be Hákon Egilsson. As the oldest son of the ruler of Helvik he had been riding the mountain path regularly to 'negotiate' with the invaders. Gunnarr felt that was a generous term for such one-sided bargaining, but this appeared to be one matter in which his opinion mattered little. So many days of ceaseless waiting had allowed the townsfolk time to scare themselves half to death. Many now saw Hákon as their only hope.

Pointing, he called across to the two friends who were also checking their catches at either side of him, prompting them to straighten their backs and wade over to his position. Ári and Hilario were their names. Like most of those in Gunnarr's life, Ári had been with him for as long as he could remember. Hilario was one of the rare few who had come in from the outside, arriving as a boy with a sprawling family of travellers and finding as a man that he did not want to leave, even as the rest of his kin were disappearing over the hills.

'Mine are empty,' Hilario stated as he drew up beside Gunnarr. He was a short, curly-haired man with a face full of expressions. 'Someone's been at the nets,' he concluded. He often chose being robbed over being unsuccessful.

Ári had caught something, albeit small, and he took a knife and skilfully emptied the fish's innards into the water, using his thumb to hold back some of the dark waste flesh. The good meat would be saved for his wife and son, and the innards would make oil for his lamps. He would have whatever there was left.

'How long do you reckon he'll be up there this time?' Ári asked, giving his blade a quick rinse in the water.

‘Not long,’ Gunnarr replied, still watching Hákon on his ascent. ‘I doubt they’re as welcoming when he comes empty-handed.’

Hilario ignored Hákon, instead running an inspecting eye along the lie of Gunnarr’s nets. ‘I suppose we’ll be some of the first to know whether he’s persuaded them to be patient,’ he said eventually. ‘He’ll be coming down that hill pretty quickly if not.’

Ári sheathed his knife with a click. ‘Or not at all.’

The others murmured in agreement. Together they started to wade back to shore, the splashing of water between their limbs steadily increasing in pitch as the depth shallowed off.

‘When will you next speak to Egil, Gunnarr?’ Hilario asked.

‘There’s to be a meeting when Eiric and Bjørn return from their raid, to discuss a more permanent solution.’

Hilario smirked with light-hearted affront. ‘In the old days they’d hold great big gatherings for the whole town to attend. Is everyone invited to this one?’

‘I think Egil worries that might become unruly.’

‘Well,’ Hilario said, as they reached the stony beach, ‘if he does happen to ask for my considered opinion, tell him that if we’re going to end up fighting, I’d rather it was sooner than later. Anything is more fun than a famine.’

Gunnarr sat, and began to sweep the dirt from the soles of his feet. He could manage a smile at the words, but he wasn’t surprised when Ári did not do the same. His friend had been a stern adolescent when Gunnarr was a child, son to a proud old metal worker who had liked nothing better than to spend the day working himself into the ground whilst complaining about the damage that it did to him and the laziness of those that did not do the same. As a boy, Ári had had a man’s concerns. Now a man, he showed no sign of taking the opposite approach. Not that he had any choice.

‘You have only yourself to worry about,’ Ári said dismally, and his face appeared drawn with the strain of the last few days. ‘My Tyr is too young to fight, and before long he’ll have a little brother to protect as well as his mother.’

Hilario scoffed, striving, as always, to keep the mood light. ‘Well, it seems I’m the only one with a bit of sense in this town. There’s little enough food and few enough breasts to suckle on around here without having to share it all with some squalling child.’ He looked down at Gunnarr, smiling. ‘How long for Kelda now? I saw her yesterday; she looked as if she’s carrying an army of her own in that belly.’

Gunnarr’s bleak expression made way for a brief smile with the thought of Kelda waddling around beneath the weight of the first child she was carrying. ‘Before the close of the moon, they say. Poor lad couldn’t be born into a worse situation. He’ll probably try and climb back inside once he gets out.’

The three men produced a muted bout of laughter, and Gunnarr began to pull on his boots. At dawn it had looked like the day might stay clear, but already the clouds were rolling in, the same colour as the wet stones on the beach.

‘Another day for inside work,’ Ári said, glancing up at the sky.

Gunnarr sprang to his feet and brushed off his legs. ‘I have two tups turned out on the hillside. I may go and bring them in, before they find themselves roasting over an army’s camp fire. But that depends on Eiric and Bjørn.’

He went over to stand beside Hilario, who was gazing out to sea.

‘They’re out there somewhere,’ Hilario said. ‘But I don’t see any sign of them coming back today.’

The others agreed. For a few moments they stood and stared out beyond the waves. Of raids they knew nothing, for Egil had put an end to what had been a dying occurrence. Enough lives had been lost on home soil without going looking for fighting overseas as well, and in some cases it had been asking for bloodshed even to put certain men in the same boat together. There had still been

deep-water fishing trips though, sometimes even whale hunts, and as sharp-eyed young lads Gunnarr and the others had been stationed around the prow and told to bellow when they saw something. Gunnarr remembered crowding along the rail with the other sighters, waiting for a glistening back to crest the surface with a hiss from its blow-hole and present them with a target they could drive in to shallow waters and strand on the beaches for killing. But that he had seen once, maybe twice. As with everything else, the people of Helvik had soon learnt to give it up.

‘Gunnarr?’ From behind them, the sound of a female voice interrupted their viewing.

‘Fun’s over,’ Hilario sighed, without turning around. ‘Is that wife or mother?’

Gunnarr swivelled and located the source of the sound. A dainty figure waited politely for him at the edge of the beach.

‘Looks to be neither,’ he replied, with an air of intrigue.

‘Aren’t you the lucky the one?’ Hilario grinned, suddenly keen to take a look for himself. Gunnarr ignored the comment and left them, walking steadily across the shore to meet the woman.

‘Forgive my interruption,’ she called in a quick, nervous voice as he approached, and Gunnarr smiled away the apology as he made a short study of her appearance. She wore grubby woollen skirts, tattered and muddied around the bottom and flecked with stains across the front. Her limbs were slim, too slim, and though she attempted to hold herself presentably, her posture was slumped with a look of perennial exhaustion. She smiled self-consciously, and Gunnarr realised that she could be very pretty to some, but for the gauntness of her face, the skin around her eyes being dark and sunken from lack of food and sleep, and the element of worry in her expression.

‘What can I do for you?’ he asked, his voice soft with immediate concern.

‘My name is Tyra,’ she began, with an effort. ‘Do you know me?’

Gunnarr saw her on her knees in a mess of trampled snow, her face wailing with anguish, blood and tears running down her cheeks. ‘Yes,’ he answered, stirring with recognition. ‘You sometimes speak with my wife. I knew your husband,’ he added warily, and her eyes flicked immediately to the ground.

‘Perhaps you’d like to sit?’ Gunnarr suggested, attempting to smother a moment of awkwardness, but she smiled and shook her head.

‘I will not keep you long. I wouldn’t have come to you if I were not desperate.’

Her hands were shaking, Gunnarr noticed. The nails on her fingers looked torn and brittle, many of them gone completely. He said nothing, waiting for her to gather the momentum to speak, and she did, with sudden emotion.

‘It’s my neighbour, Brökk; a brute of a man, just like them all.’ She faltered. ‘Forgive me,’ and Gunnarr shook his head and motioned for her to continue. ‘He’s been taking the vegetables from my land. I dug some drainage for them last year, and they’ve come on better than most. It would not be so bad, but I have no animals of my own, and no husband to hunt. They are all I have to feed my boy on.’ She hesitated, as if suddenly worried that she was wasting her time. ‘I was told—well, I know—that you are the man to help me with such things.’

Gunnarr’s features had been set since the first of her words. The familiar flush of anger tightened his jaw.

‘I know the kind of man that Brökk is,’ he said plainly. ‘Leave it with me.’

Tyra relaxed visibly, and a proper smile flashed across her features for the first time. ‘Thank you so much, Gunnarr,’ she exhaled. ‘I didn’t know what else to do.’

Gunnarr waved away her thanks, feeling his anger doused slightly by the relief that he saw on her face.

‘Please, my son would like to meet you,’ she continued, and held out her arm, prompting a grubby little boy to dash out from where he had been stationed among the trees at the edge of the shoreline and career boisterously into her hip, almost knocking her sideways.

Gunnarr smiled through the twinge of guilt he felt upon seeing the child, and bent down to bow his head in greeting. The boy briefly reciprocated the gesture, as he had been taught, before being overcome with a sudden bout of shyness and retreating behind his mother's skirts. It was clear where most of his mother's share of food went, but even the child was scrawny and awkward.

'He's not usually this timid,' Tyra said with embarrassment, trying to pull him gently out from behind her, but the boy gave a squeal and fought back gamely.

'Please,' Gunnarr said, 'you must come and eat with us this morning. Kelda has been preparing a lovely stew.'

As he'd expected, Tyra refused with proud determination. 'That is very kind of you, Gunnarr, but we have already eaten this morning. We won't bother you any longer.' She took her son's hand, and started to draw away.

'Me and Kelda will visit you tomorrow,' Gunnarr told her, and Tyra thanked him again. The little boy shouted a brief goodbye, and scurried away into the trees.

'Where are my two favourite women then?' Gunnarr asked loudly as he stepped through the doorway of his house. It was the same home built by his grandfather many winters ago, with various patches of repair and slight modifications. It sat inland to the north-east, nestled on the fringes of the settlement beneath the sheltered canopy of a small group of rowan trees.

He found them kneeling together on the floor in the middle of the room. 'There's one,' he said, grabbing his mother with one hand and pulling her playfully into his shoulder. 'And there's another!' he exclaimed, reaching down to use his other hand to tug his wife gently upwards and kissing her lovingly on the lips.

Both women laughed happily as he held them in the double embrace. They appeared to have been carding odd scraps of wool and arranging the fibres on top of each other for felting. The square shape laid out on the floor looked to be the perfect size for wrapping an infant in.

'Well that's not going to fit me,' Gunnarr commented, and his mother Frejya thumped him in the stomach. She was shorter now in her old age, and these days to hug her was more like hugging a younger sister than a parent. Strands of grey were beginning to highlight her dull blonde hair and faint webs of blue capillaries had crept across her weathered red cheeks. Yet her eyes were as quick and mischievous as ever, with deep laughter lines extending from the corner of each.

Kelda, to Gunnarr, looked just like she always had. In his eyes she would always be a girl of barely ten winters, with mud in her hair and bruises on her shins. She was almost as short as Frejya, with hair the colour of wet sand, and smooth, pale skin. She had crawled into Gunnarr's heart as a child, without him even noticing, and though she was very much a woman now, more likely to chide his immature behaviour than join in with it, the memory of adventure had never left her face.

'What a lucky man I am to have not one, but two wonderful women to return home to,' he sighed cheerfully.

His mother leant out from his embrace to speak directly to Kelda. 'Such charming words. Do you think there's a chance he didn't catch anything?'

Kelda laughed, and Gunnarr raised both arms above his head and released the pair of them with mock indignation. 'How's my big strong boy?' he asked, stooping down to cup an ear against Kelda's swollen belly, and then, after a brief moment, coming back up again to answer his own question. 'Sleeping, as usual, lazy git.'

'Gunnarr!' both women scolded.

'He can't hear anything,' Gunnarr protested. 'How else would he put up with your nattering?' He smiled away their reproachful faces and took a seat on the floor beside the felting. 'What's been the topic this morning?'

Before the words had even finished leaving his mouth, he regretted the question. The women looked at one another, and then Kelda replied glumly, leaning heavily on her husband's shoulder as she lowered herself back down into a kneeling position.

‘Same as every morning, Gunnarr.’ She did not say any more. There was no need to. Silence followed her words. Gunnarr exhaled stiffly through his nose and hung his chin a little, as if unable or unwilling to give a reply. Frejya moved closer and placed an arm on the back of his head.

‘My son will protect us, Kelda,’ she said, with the unwavering confidence that a mother has in her child. ‘He has never once let me down, not even when he was a boy.’

Gunnarr’s cheeks flushed with affection and embarrassment. ‘I have to go out,’ he announced, rising and kissing his mother and then his wife firmly on their foreheads, before going to the back of the hut to change his trousers.

‘Where to?’ Kelda asked casually, returning her eyes to her work.

‘Brökk Haldensson has been stealing food from the widow Tyra and her boy,’ he replied, hopping briefly as he dislodged the clinging trousers from each leg and searching momentarily for the second pair before snatching them up. ‘I told her I’d go and speak to him.’

‘As in speak to him with words, or speak to him with a sword?’ Kelda enquired with familiarity.

‘Sword,’ and she heard him fitting it under his arm.

She dropped the wool back down into the basket. ‘Brökk Haldensson is one of Hákon’s closest allies, Gunnarr. You’re not going to have a friend left in this town.’ She sought out Frejya’s eyes, trying to encourage her to offer some support.

‘You can’t change him, dear,’ Frejya said with resignation. ‘He’s always hated bullies.’

‘Brökk has never been my friend, and Hákon and I have not seen eye to eye since we were children,’ Gunnarr said as he appeared at Kelda’s side once more. He fastened the drawstring of his trousers and took a drink of water from his mother. ‘Besides, women like Tyra have no one else to protect them.’

‘You do know who her husband was, don’t you?’ Kelda reminded him, peering upwards so that she could study his reaction.

Gunnarr faltered for a moment, and then focussed his attention on retying his waistband, as if the comment mattered little. ‘He was a bad man, who deserved more than what he got, and she of all people should have the scars to remind her of that.’

‘But does she know that it was you?’

Of course, Gunnarr thought. How could she forget?

The quiet woman named Tyra had barely been known to anyone in the town. Her husband had made sure of that. He’d kept her like a beast, by all accounts, broken and obedient, penned up for any time of the day and night that she was not working, mastered by him and him alone.

As it was for most of the townsfolk, she had first come to Gunnarr’s attention on the day that a man, a boy in fact, barely fifteen, had made the mistake of offering to help her carry whatever it was that her husband had sent her out to fetch. It was said that she had hurriedly refused, but thanked him politely. Too politely for her husband’s liking. He had beaten the pair of them to within a yard of death’s door.

Tyra had barely been seen again afterwards, and from that moment there was growing disquiet about her treatment. But it was not for men of Helvik to tell others how to treat their wives. The father of the boy, whose right eye had turned white and gone blind after the attack, had made noises about claiming one back from the husband, but he was an old man, and he never fulfilled his promises.

It was Tyra’s brother who eventually decided he could stand it no longer, and he lost his life for it. The husband had gutted him in front of his sister, kept his body in their single-roomed hut for three days so that word would not get out. Yet, as always, word did get out, and it was then that Gunnarr had come to be involved.

He remembered being awoken from his bed on a freezing winter’s morning. Egil himself stood grave-faced at the door, the air still midnight black beyond his head. ‘I wanted to be here to restrain you when you found out,’ he said. ‘So I decided I would bring the word myself.’

As the sky began to grey, they had trudged through the crunching snow in silence. Egil had insisted that it be he that did the act. 'A leader must be seen to enforce the rules that he creates.' But in the chaos that followed, it was Gunnarr that struck.

The husband had heard them coming. His chosen first weapon had been the scream from Tyra's mouth as he cut into her skin with every step the two men took towards him. Fortunately for them, he'd been the type of man that soon grew tired of a stand-off.

Gunnarr could still remember it all if he let himself. The clattering sound as he battered the husband's sword away and sent it spinning from his grip. Hot breath freezing in the air. In the madness of love, or duty, Tyra had rushed forward to protect her man at the last, her babe in her arms. Gunnarr recalled knocking her to the ground. Her cries of pain and sadness and relief. A frightened look in a cruel man's eye. Blood, almost brown in the pure white snow.

He knelt down and kissed his wife gently on the lips. 'I won't be long,' he said. He went to get up and leave, but she kept a tight hold of his arm.

'Please don't go and get yourself killed, Gunnarr. Brökk is a big man. You've gained enemies all through the town by involving yourself in other people's affairs like this.'

He remembered her saying almost the exact same words the last time, clutching at his hand in the doorway as the snow melted on her cheeks. He'd been able to withstand her then, and this time was no different.

He smiled and kissed her again on the upper lip, one hand placed protectively across her pregnant tummy. 'Better to be yourself and have enemies, than to be someone else and have friends.'

There was a sound to the left. Frejya was smiling fondly, her features almost cracking into laughter. 'How long have you been thinking up that one?' she asked.

Gunnarr felt the haze of memory melt away and a grin return to his face. 'Nearly three days,' he said, and poked her in the stomach so that she doubled over laughing. He stretched up to his feet. 'I'll be back soon.'

He patted his mother affectionately on the shoulder and strode out through the doorway, just as the rain started to fall.

Chapter Five

Olaf Gudrødsson stood framed against the rumbling sky, watching the horse pick its way over the final few yards to the summit and clack across the stones towards him.

‘Greetings, Hákon,’ he called, stepping out onto the track.

His visitor plodded a few steps closer, and then stopped and gave a nervous nod. He was dressed in the same ancient ringmail he’d be wearing the first time, though he appeared to have left the sword behind. He stayed on his horse, and his eyes darted around the deserted hilltop. ‘Do you have somewhere we can speak?’ he asked.

Olaf smiled, and swept an arm out to his side. ‘This sodden earth is my bed, the leaky sky my blanket, and what little we have to discuss we can do on this very spot. The wind is strong today, but even a voice as treacherous as yours will not carry as far as your father’s town.’

Hákon scowled, but made no reply. He glanced around behind his shoulder, and then slid from the saddle with a splash. Short, Olaf remembered, narrow-shouldered. And yet strangely arrogant.

The visitor did not appear willing to speak, so Olaf made a show of leaning out to one side and studying the rear of Hákon’s horse. ‘You didn’t bring your little pack pony with you,’ he observed.

‘I need some more time,’ Hákon replied. ‘My brothers are yet to return.’ He was staring away at the ground to his left, barely parting his lips. Some men might have pleaded the words, but this one looked like he was sulking.

‘I had noticed,’ Olaf confirmed. He paused, and ran a thoughtful tongue along his teeth. ‘You said five days.’

‘They must have been delayed. They’re not used to being at sea.’

‘They’re not delayed,’ Olaf told him. ‘They’re gone. They’ll have fled while they had the chance.’

‘You don’t know them,’ Hákon responded, somewhat haughtily. ‘They will come back.’

A single cloth bag was tied to the horse’s saddle. Olaf pointed at it. ‘What’s that?’

Hákon gave a moody shrug, embarrassed. ‘A small offering, to make amends for the delay.’

‘Fetch it here.’

While Hákon untied the bag, Olaf glanced up at the huddling clouds. He wore loose brown trousers, grubbied up to the knees with mud, and a coal-black cloak that billowed around him in the wind. Both garments were heavy with damp, and his boots were so sodden that they wheezed like old men every time he placed his feet. On their first night in the hills, he and his men had sat around laughing beside blazing fires. But the rain had fallen near enough constantly ever since, and the thin mountain soil was too rocky and windswept to host any natural shelter.

Hákon crunched across the gravel and held the bag at arm’s length. Olaf took it and rifled through. It contained one roll of cloth, two of unspun wool, and a small wooden casket not much bigger than his fist.

‘What’s in the container?’

Hákon cleared his throat. ‘Salt.’

‘Salt,’ Olaf repeated. He stared down into the bag, the cold wind flapping his wet cloak against his face, and if he’d been alone he might even have chuckled at the lunacy concocted when pride and growing age were thrown together.

After thirty-eight long winters, Olaf Gudrødsson ought to have been sat in his longhall in Geirstad, listening to the crackle of a brawling fire and gazing into a good cup of ale. His battles were fought, his name well known; except here, it would seem. Yet the boy had stirred something within him, he was big enough to admit that. Was it jealousy? A desire to show the upstart how a real man did a job? Or even fear? When a man wakes up content, without ambition, he sometimes fears that the Gods will deem his life has run its course, especially when confronted with one so young and full of vigour. In truth, Olaf sensed that he might never really know the reason why. Why, when his

young half-brother Hálfdanr had ridden through his gates and said that he was looking for an ally to help extend his kingdom of Agóir westwards, Olaf had risen from the comfort of his chair and, a few days later, found himself marching through the drizzle at the head of the army.

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