

Viking Gold

by

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*I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

Invictus, William Ernest Henley

Part I

Home

Chapter 1

If Redknee had known sword fighting was going to be so important, he would have listened to his uncle's instructions. As it was, the heat of the afternoon was getting to him. All he wanted was to escape the training yard and shelter in the cool of the forest.

He tugged at his wool tunic. His shield, big as a wagon wheel, weighed heavy on his arm. He rested it on the ground, lowered his wooden sword and wiped the sweat from his brow. What did it matter if he could fight? He was going to be a woodsman, a tracker. The village didn't need more warriors. His uncle had said it himself many times – the years of raiding were over. The world had changed. Monasteries were no longer the easy pickings they once were.

"Come on," Uncle Sven shouted across the yard. "You give up, you die."

The men watching from the shade of the village oak laughed. Redknee couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard one of them mutter, "Like father, like son."

He'd heard the slur often. Not right to his face, mind. No one would be so brave, with Jarl Sven as his uncle. But he heard the whispers all the same. Redknee did what he always did and turned away.

The skinny youth opposite had sixteen summers – same as Redknee. Harold the Thin was going to be the best warrior in the village. Or so he never tired of telling everyone.

Harold moved his wooden sword from hand to hand.

Taunting him.

Flies buzzed round Redknee's face. Sighing, he picked up his shield, raised his wooden sword and awaited the blow. Might as well get the farce over with.

"Stop there lad."

Redknee glanced up. Uncle Sven was marching across the yard. He pulled Redknee aside and spoke in a voice too low for the jeering onlookers to hear.

“Think of your shield like a jug of mead,” he said gently. “Keep it high. Don’t let your arm drop. If it does ...”

Sven stared at the disc of leather-covered yew. Redknee thought he saw sadness in the big man’s eyes. But when Sven looked up, he was smiling, the sadness gone. “Come on,” he said, slapping Redknee on the back. “Let’s try again.”

Dust sprayed the air as Harold lunged at Redknee’s chest. Redknee heeded his uncle’s words and Harold’s blow thudded uselessly off his shield. Harold’s eyes widened in surprise.

Having the advantage was new to Redknee. Pride flashed through him. *Maybe he could be a warrior.* Thinking quickly he thrust his sword at Harold’s belly. But Harold was already out of reach, leaving Redknee’s arm floundering at empty air.

Before Redknee could recover, Harold swung his sword low, beneath the protection of Redknee’s shield. Redknee fell to the ground, pain coursing through his ankles. Harold stood over him, the sun at his back casting him in silhouette, as if he were Hela, come to drag Redknee to the underworld.

“You’re dead,” he said, pressing the tip of his sword into Redknee’s throat.

“Stop it boys!” Redknee heard his mother call from the door of the longhouse. “That’s enough.”

Harold sniggered.

“Ach, he has to toughen up,” Uncle Sven shouted back. “You’d have him in a bloody dress.”

Harold sneered down at Redknee. “It’s called the snake-bite. Oldest move there is. But a sap like you wouldn’t know that.” He twisted the wooden blade into Redknee’s throat until he gagged. “Leif Redknee,” he said with disgust. “I claim victory over you - shame of the Viking, just like your father.”

The men’s laughter rang in Redknee’s ears as he stomped from the yard. He tossed his shield into the long grass. Worthless piece of rubbish – let the dogs sharpen their teeth on the rotten wood. He took the path that climbed the mountainside. He craved to be up in the forest, far above the village. Away from

lectures on war-craft and the mind-numbing repetition of military moves. Better to spend a sticky summer day running through the pine-scented darkness. Better to spend it alone.

Things would have been different if his father were still alive. No one would be calling him a coward for a start. He would be the son of the Jarl, a position demanding respect. Oh, Uncle Sven tried his best. But most of the time he was just too busy.

No, Uncle Sven wouldn't come after him. And Harold the Thin, despite his claims to martial greatness, was too afraid of wolves to venture up the mountain. The only person in the whole village who might care was his mother, but she only left the longhouse to work in the weaving hut or wash clothes in the stream.

No, Redknee was on his own, just the way he liked it.

Redknee stood on the edge of a bluff half way up the mountainside. He'd made good progress. Far below, the straw roofs of the longhouses glinted in the sun, as if on fire. Bounded on one side by the silvery-blue of Oster Fjord and on the other by a patchwork of brown fields, the village looked peaceful. Happy, even.

But the summer had been dry. The barley thirsted in the fields, and the mood in the village stank like dung cooking in the midday heat. Redknee turned his back on the view and scrambled on. There was nothing for him there.

After a short while, he heard a soft crunching noise behind him. He ignored it at first, quickening his pace until his deerskin boots skidded on the floury earth.

“You’re going too fast!”

He turned to see a hood of copper curls bobbing between the trees. He sighed. “Why are you following me, Sinead? You will be wanted back at the village.”

The girl shrugged. “You looked upset.”

“Slaves are not allowed to leave the village without permission. My uncle will have you whipped.”

Bristling, Sinead folded her arms across her chest. “Well I thought you might really be running away this time. Are you?”

“Don’t know.” He kicked a loose stone. It skimmed off a tree trunk.

“Can I come with you anyway?”

Redknee sighed. Sinead had asked him about the mountain before. About where the paths led, how far they were from the next village, the nearest big port. She seemed to think him as keen to escape the village as she was. “Look,” he said eventually, “even if I am running away, and I’m not saying I am, you couldn’t come with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll slow me down. And you don’t know the ways of the forest. You’d end up troll food in no time.”

“Do trolls really live up here?” she asked, her green eyes scanning the tangle of leaves above their heads.

Redknee reached out to a low hanging branch and swung himself up until he was sitting atop it, his legs dangling over the side. He needed to get rid of her to have any chance of tracking the wild deer that roamed the mountain. Her chattering would scare off even the dopiest fawn.

“These woods . . .,” he said, weaving between the lacework of branches “. . . are swarming with trolls.”

“No!” Her eyes widened.

He stood, balancing on a stout branch, stretching his arms towards the canopy. “They are as tall as an oak and as fierce as a bear, with sharp red teeth and fiery eyes.”

Sinead snorted.

“It’s true,” Redknee continued, pulling himself higher. “In fact, they live in tree-trunks, just like this one.” He rapped the coarse bark with his knuckles.

“Don’t!” Sinead gasped.

Redknee smiled. “Why ever not?”

“You’ll wake it—”

A sudden crackle of leaves startled Redknee and he lost his footing. He heard Sinead scream as he crashed to the ground like a sack of turnips. His head pounded and his left arm ached along its length.

“Don’t move.” Sinead’s firestorm hair drifted in and out of focus as she kneeled over him.

“Was it a troll?” he asked.

“Shh, don’t try to speak.”

Ignoring her, Redknee dragged himself up with his uninjured arm. The movement made him feel sick. He turned from her quickly, spewing vomit on his breeches.

She handed him her apron. As he took it, he saw her nose wrinkle at the stench and his cheeks burned with shame.

Suddenly her attention was distracted. Redknee stopped dabbing. His ears attuned to the distant *whoosh – whoosh* of someone, or something, charging through the undergrowth. He listened carefully. Too heavy to be a deer. A bear? No – too fast. Whatever it was, it was coming their way. He turned to Sinead as a spear flashed past her head. Her face went blank and she fell to the ground.

“Sinead!” He scrambled to where she lay. “Sinead, were you hit?”

No reply.

He turned her over. Blood trailed from her hairline and spread, like spindly fingers, over her closed lids.

Closer now, he recognised the rhythmic thud of hooves. Horses! Needing no further warning, he lifted Sinead using his good arm and dragged her beneath a big hawthorn bush. He stayed there, hunkered down in the mud for what seemed like ages, listening to the steady approach of the horses.

A hulking warrior with straggly, piss-coloured hair and a cross-shaped scar over his left eye urged a grey stallion into the clearing. The powerful horse rose onto its hind legs as three other riders joined him. The first warrior motioned the other men forward; Redknee took him to be the leader.

One of the men pulled the spear that had struck Sinead from a tree. Redknee glanced down at her; she was still breathing. It was just a graze.

“Come out, little mice,” the leader shouted in accented Norse. “Skoggcat wants to play ...” Redknee watched as a youth, painted head to toe in orange and black stripes, stepped forward brandishing a ball and chain.

Sinead stirred. Redknee held his hand lightly over her mouth. One false move and their hiding place would be revealed.

Skoggcat and the other four warriors circled the clearing, getting ever closer to the hawthorn bush.

Sinead was awake now, her eyes alert to the danger. Redknee cradled his bruised left arm against his body. There was no way the two of them would be a match for this lot. Redknee's heart thrummed so loud, he was sure they must be able to hear it.

Skoggcat stopped beside the hawthorn bush, about a man's length from Redknee, and sniffed the air. A smile spread across his face.

Redknee looked down at his breeches. Curdled lumps of sick still clung to the damp leather. *Damn.* He tried to scramble to his feet. But Skoggcat was already under the branches, his claw-like hands grabbing at Redknee's ankles, dragging him out. Redknee wriggled and kicked as hard as he could, aiming for Skoggcat's hard-set eyes and mouth. But it was no good, Skoggcat was too strong.

As soon as they were in the open Skoggcat swung his iron ball at Redknee's head. Redknee ducked, raised his arm and the chain twisted round his wrist. Ignoring the vice-like pain of the links biting into his flesh, he tugged hard, pulling an already over extended Skoggcat off his feet. Locked in battle, the pair tumbled down a fern covered slope.

They came to a stop with Redknee on his back. Skoggcat fought like the wildcat he mimicked, scratching at Redknee's face and baring sharpened teeth. Struggling to hold him off, Redknee tried to use the iron ball still attached to his wrist to smash Skoggcat's nose. But Skoggcat was as agile as he was strong, dodging every blow with a gleeful sneer.

Redknee changed tack. Rather than trying to fight him off, he seized Skoggcat's clawed hands and held them. Confusion showed in Skoggcat's eyes as he tried to twist free. But Redknee held tight, got his foot under Skoggcat's belly and pushed – sending the screaming youth flying over his head. Seizing the advantage, Redknee leapt to his feet and drew his eating knife.

“Redknee!”

He turned to see the first warrior hoisting Sinead onto his grey stallion.

Turning from Skoggcat, Redknee scrambled up the embankment and ran headlong at the big warrior. But the warrior just laughed as he turned his stallion and galloped into the forest. Skoggcat jumped up behind one of the other riders and stole a lift. The men were gone just as quickly as they had arrived.

Redknee kept up his pursuit until he could no longer make out the shadows of the trees. Exhausted, he slumped to the ground. Sinead was gone and he was lost.

Redknee forced himself on, crashing into outstretched branches, tripping on exposed roots. He strained to see in the shadowy, moonlit darkness of the night. There had been no sign of Sinead's abductors since they galloped off that afternoon. Face it, he thought, he was never going to catch them. And even if he did, what, exactly, was he going to do? Attack five warriors with his eating knife?

He rubbed his elbow. He was going to have a bruise the size of an apple. The villagers might as well call him Red-arm as Redknee, for all the difference it made. He was too clumsy to be a warrior. Too clumsy for anything but—

A cry pierced the night.

Redknee's hand shot to his knife. Wolves. He stopped and listened. The animal's mate would reply, betraying their location. He waited, but there was no response. Not wolves, he thought. One wolf. A lone hunter. He drew his knife. Wolves, even a lone one, demanded respect. Each step he took seemed to echo through the forest, so he moved forward on tiptoe, every muscle in his body taut as he eased, quiet as he could, through the maze of branches. The wolf was near, but how near?

He knew he should avoid the wolf – his eye was on bigger game tonight. But then, to be able to wear a wolf pelt – that would show Harold the bloody Thin. *Harold the Bleeding Scared*, more like.

Thorns tore at his arms; his legs ached from keeping on tiptoe. One wrong move would expose him. Eventually he slumped, exhausted, onto a fallen log. And that was when he heard it.

A soft mewling.

He peered through the undergrowth, but all he saw was a dark knot of leaves and twigs. He heard the mewling again; this time he crept towards its source. The earth became soft, like butter, and he trod carefully. There must be water nearby.

A fresh hoof print then another, glistened in the sludge. His first piece of luck! Heart racing, and forgetting his fear of the wolf, he followed the horse trail past a tightly packed copse of ash and elder. Suddenly, the ground slid away and he toppled backwards, arms flailing. He tumbled down a mossy slope, ripping his tunic and dropping his knife as he clutched uselessly at the slick earth.

Something large and hard stopped his fall. Unable to get up, he lay on the ground, blood trickling across his face. He grimaced as the metallic taste reached his mouth. He would probably die here, his broken body picked clean by scavengers. Was this how it had felt for his father? Death. Cold, lonely, slow...

They said his father had surrendered. A coward's death. Well, Redknee was not a coward. At least he had the satisfaction of knowing he had died trying to save his friend. Of running into battle, not away from it. Would that be enough to get him to Valhalla, he wondered, the final resting place of the great warriors?

A fine mist began to settle over him. He smiled. The village had been waiting for rain now for weeks. He inhaled the vapour and closed his eyes ...

The mewling was much closer now. Right beside him, in fact. Redknee opened his eyes. How long had he been asleep? He looked about. It was still dark. Pain shuddered through him. A welcome pain. He was alive.

As he groped for the rock that had broken his fall, his fingers curled round a sharp object. His eating knife. He slid the knife into his belt, and, summoning all his energy, pulled himself to his feet. He leaned on the stone for a long while, absorbing its strength.

Then Redknee saw him. Cowering in the hollow trunk of an old pine tree was a tiny wolf cub. Its white fur stuck out at odd angles and its nose bore a round grey mark the size of the Arab

coins his uncle kept locked in a chest. Redknee daren't move closer. The cub's mother would be nearby. A she-wolf never left her young for long.

Then he heard it. A ragged howl. Like the rush of wind through a cave.

He spun round, bracing himself for the attack. Long white teeth glimmered against black gums. Redknee spread his arms wide. He'd heard wolves could be scared off if you made yourself look bigger. But the she-wolf kept coming. She was almost on him now, growling and pawing the ground, a demon of spit and fangs and blood. A gash the length of a man's forearm cleaved her right haunch. Redknee winced. This was not her first fight of the day either. He edged backwards. She tried to leap at him, but her legs quivered and it was more of a shuffle. A moment later she collapsed to the ground.

The pup crawled from its lair and nudged its mother's nose with its head. A triangle of pink tongue darted over the pup's ears, but the she-wolf was beaten. Her eyes lolled with exhaustion and her head slumped onto her paws.

As the she-wolf took her last, rasping breath, she looked up at Redknee, with, he imagined, relief in her eyes. And he knew what he should do. He edged over to the pup, who was now trying to wake its mother by patting her face with its paw, and gently scooped it up. Pale amber eyes ringed with black stared warily at Redknee.

"Hey, little one," Redknee said, stroking the pup behind its ears. The pup tried to wriggle free. Redknee fished a scrap of bread from his belt-pouch and held it out. After a moment's pause, the pup gobbled it down greedily.

"You're all alone in the world now. I know what that feels like. But don't worry, I'll look after you. We can be a team."

The pup eyed Redknee for a moment then began licking his face. "Ergh," Redknee said, holding the pup at arm's length. "I'll have to teach you to stop that if you're ever going to make a fierce hunting dog."

He tucked the pup into his tunic and trudged through the wet mud until he came to a wide clearing. A torch flickered a short distance off. He ducked down. The fiery image danced across

the ground. He'd reached the banks of a mountain lake – one he didn't recognise. More lights joined the first – their reflections shimmering on the water.

He crept through the reeds until he was within hearing distance. Fifteen or so men lounged by a campfire, drinking and cutting strips off a deer carcass they'd suspended over the fire on a stout branch. Redknee's mouth watered. He hadn't eaten since breakfast. The men were loud and drunk. Two were arguing over a game of dice. A few took turns goading a brown bear they had tethered to a tree stump. The poor beast was so tired it hardly responded to their bullying.

Redknee crouched in the shadows and looked for Sinead. A group of horses stood to one side. Redknee recognised the grey stallion. Beside the horses was a wooden cage. Their leader, the big warrior with the bad eye, stalked over to the cage, pulled out a girl and dragged her towards the campfire. Redknee wasn't sure it was Sinead until he heard her squawking on in her usual way. Like a seagull arguing with an ox. Pointless and annoying.

"Let me go, you big oaf," she said.

"Wish granted," he said, pushing her in front of the fire.

The men looked up from their meal. A raven-haired youth in a fine chainmail coat addressed the big warrior. "Ragnar," he asked, "when do we attack Sven's village?"

Ragnar smirked. "First light, son. If we can get this girl to talk. She knows where it is. I know it. But she says nothing."

The youth jumped up, grabbed Sinead's hand and thrust it towards the flames. "Tell us the way to Sven Kodranson's village," he demanded.

Sinead jerked her head back and spat in his eye.

"You little—" The youth brought his palm across her face, knocking her to the ground.

At the sound of the slap, every muscle in Redknee's body tensed.

Ragnar sighed. "Calm down, Mord. You must never let a woman rile you. Besides, the point is to make her talk, not shut her up forever. Now put her back in the cage until she comes round."

Sulking, Mord lifted Sinead's limp body, dropped her inside the cage, bound the door shut and rejoined his father by the fire.

The rest of the men were happily engrossed in their food and in taunting the poor bear. None, it seemed, were brave enough to tease Mord over Sinead's outburst. There was no sign of Skoggcat. Staying low in the undergrowth, Redknee edged closer.

"Can't wait to see Sven again," Ragnar said as Mord sat beside him on an upturned log. "Bet he'll squeal like a pig when I run him through. Just like his brother did." Laughing, he drew his knife and jabbed the bear in the gut. The animal moaned. Ragnar's eyes lit up.

"My spies have confirmed Sven still has his brother's book," said Mord, ignoring his father's jest with the bear.

"What would I do without you, Mord? You know everyone's secrets."

A smile flashed across the young man's face, then vanished. "They also tell me Sven has finished his longship," he said.

"Then this is the perfect time to strike. Nothing like taking advantage of someone else's hard work, eh?" Ragnar said. "And it is high time I studied the book for myself – Sven has denied me it long enough. Now, have you seen your useless freak of a brother?"

Mord shook his head. "What about the boy? The one who was with the girl."

"What about him?" Ragnar frowned. "He's nothing. We lost him ages ago." Ragnar studied his son for a moment, then said, "You worry too much. Relax. We'll find Sven's village soon enough." Ragnar slapped Mord on the back and turned to talk with his men, who were rowdily debating whether Thor, the god of thunder, or Odin, the god of war, would win in a fight.

Mord moved to the edge of the camp, away from the men. He took a piece of ivory from his pocket and began working it with his knife.

The pup squirmed inside Redknee's tunic, Redknee pushed him down, out of sight, his mind spinning as he closed the distance to the cage. He forgot the pain in his arm, the pounding in his head. He'd heard of Ragnar. Uncle Sven had spoken of him. But always in hushed tones. For it was Ragnar who had killed Redknee's father. Murdered him.

The cage was near where Mord worked on his carving. But the night was dark and he didn't see Redknee crawl up behind Sinead, reach through the bars and tap her on the shoulder.

No movement. Nothing. He tried again, this time tugging the ends of her long hair. She opened her eyes slowly, saw him, and winked.

Redknee held his fingers to his lips. "Lie still. Don't draw attention." He used his knife to start sawing the rope holding the cage door closed. From the corner of his eye, he saw one of Ragnar's men approach carrying a bucket.

"Hurry!" Sinead whispered.

"I'm going as fast as I can." Ragnar had used heavy flax and Redknee felt his knife buckle.

Ragnar's man reached the far side of the cage. Redknee hid in the shadows as the man tossed a bucketful of lake water over Sinead and turned to go. Sinead let out a tiny gasp as the cold water hit her skin.

Ragnar's man stopped. He turned just as Redknee looked up and their eyes met through the bars of the cage. Sinead stood in an attempt to hide Redknee. But she was too late. Then, just as the warrior drew his sword and bellowed for help, the rope came away in Redknee's hand. Before Redknee could stand back, Sinead was out of the cage, fleeing for the trees. But Ragnar's man was quick to block her escape.

Redknee grabbed Sinead's hand and pulled her the other way. There was a clear route past the campfire and round the far side of the lake. But as they neared the campfire, Ragnar caught up with them, anger burning in his eyes.

"You again!" he said, drawing his sword and lunging forwards.

Redknee sprang back, just dodging the flames. His knife was no match for Ragnar's sword. Thinking quickly, he grabbed a branch from the fire and thrust it in Ragnar's face. The big man flinched, slipped on the ashes, and, twisting to miss the fire, landed at the bear's feet.

Sinead yanked the tether and a moment later the bear was free.

Redknee and Sinead made for the forest. As they wove through the trees, the pup still tucked safely into Redknee's tunic, they tried to close their ears to Ragnar's terrible screams.

They zigzagged through the forest, branches snatching at their faces and legs, the pounding of hooves only a few paces behind. Eventually the sound receded and Redknee felt certain they'd lost Ragnar's men. But like fleeing deer, the two of them tore blindly on. It was only after a long while that he felt Sinead ease her pace.

"Have we lost them?" she asked, gasping.

Redknee motioned for her to stop, as his own heart hammered in his chest. He listened to the darkness. To the sounds of his mountain. The shadows heightened every whisper. Sinead stood rigid beside him. He reached out and took her hand in his. Her skin felt hot despite her soaking.

"It's alright," he said. "I can't hear the horses." The fear in her muscles eased. "But we have to get back to the village. Ragnar and his men plan to attack at first light. And he'll want revenge after your trick."

Sinead snatched her hand away. "You mean untying the bear? What else was I to do? We were trapped."

"All I'm saying is, if Ragnar survived being mauled, he'll be looking for us."

"Oh," Sinead gulped. "We should hide, then. No point heading to the village when we know that's where Ragnar's going."

"What? And leave my mother and uncle to die? Ragnar said he wanted to kill Uncle Sven. Just like he killed my father."

"Well they're not my family. I'm just a slave. I don't owe my captors loyalty."

He grabbed her by the elbow. "You owe them your keep and protection—"

"Look, I held my tongue, didn't I? I didn't tell them the way to the village. That ought to buy your precious family some time."

"They'll find the place soon enough – they've got this far," Redknee said, letting her go. "But that *was* loyal of you."

“I was afraid,” she said, rubbing her elbow. “I thought Ragnar would kill me if I told him. Once he had no need of me.”

“Typical,” Redknee said. “A slave thinking of herself first. Especially a Christian one.” He sighed. “Look, we’re wasting time. You do what you like.” He stomped off but paused after a few strides. He had no idea where he was, or even if he was going the right way.

“You’ve no clue where you’re going. Do you?” Sinead called. “Ooh, the great Redknee – jarl of the mountain – totally lost.”

“Be quiet!” Redknee spun round. “You might not care about raising the alarm, but I do.” The night had already faded to a smoky grey and he could see the outline of individual trees. He ran his hand over the trunk of a tall pine. A fleece of moss shrouded its north side. He turned to Sinead.

“Oster-Fjord lies west; if we go,” he calculated west from the position of the moss, “... that way,” he said, pointing towards a bracken-covered escarpment, “we should reach its shores. We can follow the water to the village. Are you coming?”

The pup slid from Redknee’s tunic and stretched on the ground.

“What’s that?” Sinead asked.

“What does it look like?”

Sinead glowered. “A skinny little wolf cub.”

The pup yawned, baring every one of its sharp teeth and its long stretch of pink tongue. Then it sauntered over to Sinead and nuzzled the hem of her dress.

“Hey,” Redknee said. “Don’t be a traitor!”

“Aw, he likes me.” She scooped him up and the pup obliged by licking her chin. “Don’t be jealous. He just has good taste.” She set the pup on the ground. “Where did you get him?”

“Rescued him.”

“Really?” Her eyes widened. “Quite the hero tonight.”

“Yeah, well,” Redknee muttered. “No point wasting more time.”

“Does he have a name?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“What about Silver?”

“What about it?”

“Because of the mark on his forehead, and he might bring you luck.”

Redknee shrugged. Hunting dogs didn’t have names. “Come on,” he said, following the command with a low whistle. The pup trotted over. “Good boy,” he said, bundling it into his arms and starting to walk. He called over his shoulder to Sinead. “If we make good time, we can still reach the village before sunrise.”

“Wait, what am I to do?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to return to the village.”

“Why not? Isn’t my mother kind to you? You’re her favourite slave.”

“Yes … she *is* kind … for a pagan. But I … I don’t want to be a slave anymore. I thought we were running away. I want to go home.”

Had he been running away? He wasn’t even sure himself. He sighed. “Look, I *have* to go back. Besides, isn’t this your home now?”

“Wait!” Her voice sounded strangled.

He shook his head and kept walking. “I don’t have time to waste. It’s nearly light.”

She scuttled after him, falling into step at his side.

He grinned. “So, you decided to come with me after all?”

She glowered at him. “Not much choice.”

He stopped and looked her in the eye. She was still breathless from their run and her skin was flushed the pale pink of the river salmon. “You’re wrong, Sinead,” he said. “There’s always a choice.”

Redknee stood on the cliff and stared at the huddle of longhouses below. They’d reached the village at last. Purple light stretched across Oster Fjord, turning the beach a pale lilac. Dawn came early this time of year. *Wavedancer* stood, tall and proud against the gleaming water. A fine oak ship. A fine prize. Finished, save for the dragon figurehead Uncle Sven would

attach at the launch ceremony, her curved silhouette contrasted with the squat bulkiness of the longhouses.

Already, plumes of smoke twisted into the early morning sky. Redknee felt his stomach grumble. His mother would have her porridge pot over the fire. He could dry his wet feet. He started to run.

“Come on,” he called to Sinead.

She had taken the pup from him, and held it tight as she tried to keep up with his new, faster pace. He tore down the path, skidding on loose stones and half-tripping on exposed roots. But he didn’t care. He just wanted to get home. Trees sped past in a blur. Green, brown, orange.

Orange?

He was being followed, and one name flashed through his mind. Before he could do anything, Skoggcat ripped through the trees and knocked him flat. But he had misjudged the distance and kept going, past Redknee, until he dropped over the edge.

Redknee scrambled to his feet and ran to where Skoggcat had disappeared. Sinead was already peering over. About half a man’s length below where they stood, Skoggcat gripped a naked root with one hand, his feet dangling in the air. They were still far above the village. A fall from this height would kill a man instantly.

“He must have been following us all along,” Sinead said.

Redknee nodded. How could he have missed the signs? Ragnar’s threat – fear for his family – had distracted him. That was the only explanation. Even so, Skoggcat must have been quiet as the dead.

“What should we do?” Sinead asked.

Skoggcat stared up at them, terror pinching his tattooed face. He reached for the root with his free hand, but the movement loosened the earth and he slid lower. A tiny noise, barely a whisper, came from the back of his throat.

“He’s trying to speak,” Sinead said.

Redknee pulled her from the edge. “We should go. He’s seen the village. If we help him, he’ll only tell Ragnar the way.”

Sinead’s face turned white. “But—”

“Oh, so this is different to running off without telling my family about Ragnar’s attack?”

“No... I mean—”

“He was trying to kill me, Sinead. It’s not my fault he fell.”

“But it’s so cruel.”

“Life’s cruel,” he said, walking away.

Sinead caught up with him and placed her hand on his elbow. “Life might be cruel,” she said. “But you’re not.”

“Please help me ...,” came the disembodied plea.

“I’m going back,” she said, gathering her skirts and turning round.

He sighed. She might see rescuing Skoggcat as an act of mercy, but her charity would only bring death to those Redknee cared about. And yet ...

To slay a man in battle was honourable. To leave him to die slowly—

That wasn’t the Viking way.

He turned on his heels and went to where Sinead lay on the ground with her arms stretched over edge of the cliff. The pup sat beside her, watching her every move.

“I can’t reach,” she gasped.

He leaned over. Skoggcat’s hand strained to meet Sinead’s smaller one. “He’ll attack us as soon as he’s up,” Redknee said.

Skoggcat shook his head. “I promise I won’t.”

“How do we know you won’t lead Ragnar to our village?” he asked.

“My father thinks I’m useless. He’ll believe I didn’t find anything.”

The root Skoggcat clung to began to give way. Sinead screamed.

Reluctantly, Redknee lay on the ground and lowered himself, face first, until he was hanging down the rock face from his waist. He felt the blood rush to his head and closed his eyes while he regained his balance. When he opened them again, he immediately wished he hadn’t. The village looked nothing more than a tiny speck, hundreds of feet below. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to focus instead on Skoggcat.

The youth stretched for Redknee’s arm, but he was still too far away.

This was a bad idea. He couldn't help Skoggcat, and now he was going to die trying. He glanced over his shoulder at Sinead's expectant face and sighed.

"Grab my feet," he said. He felt her sit on his ankles. He wriggled further out, over the edge, until he felt his feet lifting off the ground. "Hold on!" he called over his shoulder.

"I am," she replied. "There's nothing else I can do. You're going to have to grab him quickly."

Redknee felt a tug at the hem of his trousers and realised the pup was holding on too. He grinned to himself.

Skoggcat was closer now. Redknee could just brush his fingertips. If he could only reach a bit—

The cliff splintered beneath Redknee's chest, spraying shingle over Skoggcat's head; plunging Redknee lower. Once Redknee steadied himself, he realised it was the boost they needed. He reached for Skoggcat; grasping his hand just as the root came apart and tumbled to the valley floor.

His arm creaked as Skoggcat's full weight swung from his wrist. The youth was heavier than he'd expected. He felt sharp rocks scour his chest. His heart raced; Skoggcat's weight was pulling him over the edge. Redknee tensed his stomach and arms.

"I can't pull you back up," he said to Skoggcat. "You're going to have to climb over me."

Skoggcat nodded and Redknee braced himself as he felt the youth's hands, knees, then feet, grind into his spine.

For a terrible moment, he thought Skoggcat would kill Sinead as soon as he was up then push him to his death. The moment he felt Skoggcat's weight go, he scrambled backwards and sat on the path, panting. He felt like he'd been torn apart on the rack.

Skoggcat stood a short distance away. Redknee eyed him warily. Sweat glistened on his painted skin. Up close, he was even stranger than Redknee had first thought. Naked, save for a pair of wool breeches and an amber necklace; black stripes criss-crossed his chest and arms.

"They make me strong ... like a big cat," Skoggcat said, following Redknee's gaze. "I got them in the east ... where they have cats the size of cows."

Redknee nodded. He wanted to be on his way – to warn the village of the impending attack. It didn't pay to talk to the enemy – he didn't want to know someone he might have to kill later.

"Is Ragnar your father?" Sinead asked.

Skoggcat nodded.

"Did the bear get him?"

"I ... don't know ... I was stalking you ..."

"Come on," Redknee said, scowling at Sinead. "We should go."

"Wait!" Skoggcat called after them. "My father is coming to your village to find a book. He says it has more value than anyone knows. Maybe if you give him the book, he won't destroy your village."

"Thank you," Sinead called over her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Redknee asked. "We've done enough damage. And he's probably feeding us lies."

As Redknee hurried home, people, little more than specks in the distance, were already outside feeding chickens and starting for the fields. Redknee's stomach did a somersault. When it came to it, Harold the Thin had been right. He *was* a coward. He hadn't believed Skoggcat's promises, yet he'd been too weak to let him die.

Now Ragnar was coming, and it was all his fault.

Chapter 2

Redknee burst into the longhouse as Uncle Sven spooned great lumps of broth into his mouth.

“We have to get ready!” He shouted, running past his startled mother and pulling his uncle’s bowl away. “We’re going to be attacked at first light!”

“What’s this?” Uncle Sven said, snatching his breakfast back. “Where have you been all night? Your mother was worried sick.”

The longhouse was empty apart from his mother and uncle. The big fire in the centre of the room crackled with newly chopped wood. His mother stood at her iron pot. She put down her ladle, wiped her hands on her linen apron and bustled over. The scent of fresh rosemary filled his nostrils as she enfolded him in her arms. “I was so worried,” she said, raining kisses on his forehead. “I thought I’d lost you, just like—”

“Quit your clucking, woman.” Uncle Sven stood. “You fuss too much over that boy. He’s nearly a man. A night in the woods will have done him good.” He slapped Redknee on the back so hard he almost fell. “Well then?” He looked at Redknee. “What do you say?”

“Sir, we need to—”

“Your night in the woods. Do you good? Toughen you up?”

“Er, yes Sir. But—”

Uncle Sven turned to Redknee’s mother who was filling another bowl from her pot. “See. Best thing for him.”

His mother rolled her eyes. “Oh yes - what doesn’t kill him makes him stronger,” she said wryly, handing Redknee the bowl of steaming porridge.

He inhaled deeply then remembered Sinead. He turned to see her hovering in the open doorway. He held out his bowl.

“What’s this?” Uncle Sven’s eyes narrowed. “The Irish slave girl!” He laughed. “I would never have—”

“Sinead.” Redknee’s mother spoke quickly. “You’re late for your duties. Take your porridge in the milking shed.”

Blushing, Sinead took the bowl Redknee offered and retreated hurriedly.

Redknee turned to his uncle. “Sir,” he said, more forcefully this time. “When I was in the forest, I came across Ragnar and his men. I overheard him say he was planning to attack us at first light. He intends to steal *Wavedancer*.”

Uncle Sven pushed aside his empty bowl. His grey eyes took on a faraway look and Redknee wondered if he was remembering something from long ago. Eventually he asked, “How do you know it was Ragnar?”

“I heard the men talking.”

“I see. How many men did he have?”

“About fifteen, Sir. All mounted and armed.”

Uncle Sven paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back. “And how do you know Ragnar means to attack us, and not some other village?”

“I heard him mention you by name, Sir ...” Redknee’s voice trailed off as his mother busied herself with pots and pans.

Uncle Sven ceased pacing. “Spit it out boy. What else did he say?”

“He said he wanted to ... to run you through, Sir, as he did my father.”

The clatter of pots falling to the earth floor filled the room. Redknee’s mother gripped a big cooking pan to her chest like a shield. “Oh Sven,” she said, her face tensed with fear, “it’s not happening again, is it?”

“Mind yourself, woman.” Sven leant on the table and his long hair fell across his face, hiding his expression.

Redknee hadn’t known his father, but he’d often wondered if he had looked like this man. Six and a half feet of tightly thatched muscle, with wide grey eyes carved in a face the colour of sandstone. Redknee reckoned most of the villagers would do anything for Sven. They would stand their ground and defend the village to the death, if that was what Sven asked of them. Redknee wondered if his father had mustered the same respect when he was jarl.

Sven straightened to his full height and turned to Redknee. “Did Ragnar mention anything else at all? Think Redknee, did he talk about hidden treasure?”

“Er … other than wanting to steal *Wavedancer*? ”

Sven nodded.

Redknee remembered Skoggcat’s words about the book. He should probably mention that, no matter how crazy it sounded. “Erm … I think he also said something about a book. But I’ve never seen a book in the—”

Sven slammed his hand on the table. “Damn it, Redknee!”

“Sorry,” he said, hanging his head. “Does that mean he really is coming to … to kill you?”

“I thought I’d seen the last of Ragnar sixteen years ago,” Sven said quietly. “I should have killed him when I had the chance.” He took his battleaxe from an iron hook on the wall, slung it over his shoulder and crossed to the doorway. He paused, his hand on the oak frame. “It seems I’ve failed.”

Uncle Sven stood beneath the village oak and bellowed orders. Everywhere Redknee looked, people were readying for the attack, their faces pinched with fear, their hands shaking. Two boys scurried past laden with scythes, axes and lumps of wood. Makeshift weapons.

Gudrid the Healer and Thora, the Smithy’s wife, women Redknee knew as his mother’s friends, were gathering rocks and piling them inside the door of the feast hall. Their faces shone with the effort and sweat darkened their coarse brown dresses.

Redknee recalled the fine tempered swords Ragnar and his men had carried and his heart sank. There were only five seasoned warriors in the village. The rest of the free men were just farmers, used only to the occasional summer raid. There were the slaves, too, of course. Wends from the Rhineland and Celts from Ireland. In total Redknee estimated there were maybe twelve male slaves. But they couldn’t be trusted. And Uncle Sven would never give them weapons.

Add to this the fact that Koll the Smithy had spent the spring helping build *Wavedancer* instead of making new weapons or fixing the old ones. True, the village would have the advantage

of numbers – it boasted the thirty free men needed to sail a longship. But everyone knew that, even under Uncle Sven's direction, farmers and part-time raiders, even ones strong and willing to defend their homes, were no match for Ragnar's warriors.

At the edge of the village, just short of the treeline, a group of men were digging knee-deep pits. Redknee watched as they filled them with wooden spikes and covered them with grass – a trap that would lame a horse or snap a man's leg like a twig.

Something soft pressed between Redknee's shins. He patted the pup on the head. "Hey, Silver," he said. The pup nuzzled his hand and he knew the name Sinead chose fit. "There's going to be a fight here this morning. I'll need you to help me defend the village."

Silver blinked and rubbed his cheek against Redknee's boot. "I'll take that as—"

The scrape of iron on granite made him look up. Harold the Thin sat on a big stone sharpening his dagger, his hard blue eyes trained on Redknee. Harold uncoiled and swaggered over. "Where'd you get him?" he asked, pointing at Silver with his dagger.

"The forest," Redknee said, pushing Silver behind him.

One of the younger boys came over too. "That's a wolf pup," he said, eyes widening in his round face. "Did you take it from its mother? Did you kill her?"

"Maybe." Redknee shrugged, his eyes focussed on Harold's dagger.

Harold sneered. "You didn't kill a wolf."

"Its mother's dead," Redknee said, challenging Harold to disagree.

Harold beckoned the pup over. "Let me see him."

Silver squashed between Redknee's legs and began licking Harold's fingers.

The younger boy laughed. "He's friendly," he said, and tried to pat Silver himself.

Harold pushed the younger boy away, grabbed Silver by the neck and squeezed. Silver whimpered and his big paws went floppy.

"Stop that!"

“Make me,” Harold said, grinning.

Redknee shoved Harold to the ground and grabbed Silver. The pup looked at Redknee with confusion in his amber eyes. He was too trusting by far.

Harold scrambled to his feet. “I’m watching you,” he said. “And your stupid mutt.”

The muscles in Redknee’s right hand clenched into a ball of anger. He knew he had to show Harold or the teasing would never end. But he couldn’t start a fight here, now ...

The younger boy hurtled down to the shore, to where the men were pulling a sheet over *Wavedancer*’s bow. “Redknee killed a wolf! Redknee killed a wolf!” He shouted, over and over, as he tore along the sand. Redknee cringed at the false credit.

“Stop fighting!”

Redknee turned to see Uncle Sven bearing down on them.

“We’ll see how you fare in a real battle,” Harold said. He tucked his dagger into his boot and scuttled off towards his father, who was overseeing the digging of the pits.

Redknee looked up to see Uncle Sven looming over him. “What am I going to do with you?” He folded his arms across his chest. “You warn me Ragnar is making an imminent attack, then I find you mucking around. Why aren’t you helping with the defences?”

“I, er ...”

“Look at Harold. He’s helping Olaf prepare the ditches.”

“I was—”

“You were just doing nothing, as usual. Go help Magnus ready *Wavedancer*.”

Redknee trudged down to the beach, Silver trailing at his heels. He didn’t notice Sinead walking towards him, a basket of arrows balanced on her hip, until she was right beside him.

“How’s your arm?” she asked.

Redknee moved his elbow to show he could still use it. “Not as bad as I thought. Gudrid gave me a paste. It stinks of mustard, but it seems to be working.”

She nodded then asked, “What did Harold want?”

She must have seen his telling off. “Nothing,” he replied, ashamed.

Sinead looked doubtful. “I think you’d better watch your back during the attack.”

Redknee glanced over to the pits. Harold was knee deep in mud, his skinny frame taut as he drove his spade into the earth.

“Don’t worry,” Redknee said. “I’ll be ready for him. Besides, this is all my fault.”

“With Harold?”

“No – Ragnar. If I … if *we*, hadn’t helped Skoggcat, none of this would be happening.”

She shielded her eyes from the rising sun. “You saved a life. No one can criticise you for that.”

Redknee shook his head. “Look, you won’t tell anyone about it … will you?”

“Who would I tell?”

He studied her for a moment, her face half-hidden by her hand, inscrutable. In truth, Ragnar would have found the village by himself eventually. Redknee nodded, dismissing her.

Redknee hurried down to the beach where he found Magnus pushing *Wavedancer* into the fjord. He already had a few slaves helping him. “We taking her out?” Redknee asked.

“We’ll leave her just past the headland,” Magnus said. “It’ll keep her safe from attack. Will you follow me in a rowboat?”

Redknee took one of the rowboats and followed Magnus to the centre of the fjord. Only a couple of years older than Redknee, Magnus already had the unblinking gaze of a steersman. He guided *Wavedancer* expertly to the calmest part of the fjord and dropped anchor. Redknee brought his rowboat portside and waited while Magnus unhooked the sail.

As he waited, he ran his hand along the overlapping strakes of *Wavedancer’s* hull. Sixteen on each side – one for each summer since his birth. It was only a coincidence, but he fancied it linked them. Her keel was made from an oak as tall as twelve men. It was the longest he’d seen. Tonight was to have been her launch ceremony. They had been saving their food for weeks. He doubted it, but maybe the village would be as proud of him one day.

“Come on, dreamer.”

Redknee jumped as Magnus chucked the rolled up sail into the rowboat and leapt in after it. The slaves followed, their arms

filled with oars. Once they were back on the beach, they dragged all the rowboats into the shallows and filled them with rocks. Better to scuttle them than let Ragnar destroy them.

They waited. Each man, woman and child prepared as best they could. Some hid, praying to Odin that hiding places would not become graves. Hunched and tensed, their hands clutching a jumble of farm tools, rusty axes and wooden clubs. Only a few lucky men owned swords.

As the sun marched across the sky, Uncle Sven kept his lookout through a flap in the side of his longhouse, his eyes scanning for the smallest movement in the trees, his muscles ever twitching.

Redknee watched as he ran a finger along the blade of his battleaxe. If Redknee didn't know him better, he would have thought his uncle was looking forward to settling the score with Ragnar once and for all.

By nightfall, Redknee's muscles ached. He'd been crouching at the far end of his uncle's longhouse all day. Huddled between the old women and the cows, he couldn't decide whether the stink came from the shaggy-coated longhorns or the old crone whose papery skin hopped with lice. He stretched his left leg and sighed with the relief, then repeated the exercise with the right one. The old crone flashed him a toothless smile. He quickly returned to peering through a crack in the wall.

He could see across the open ground to the mantraps and treeline beyond, his eyes trained on the dark spaces between the bushes. But nothing, nothing at all, had moved in the forest and he was beginning to doubt he'd heard Ragnar correctly. Then he remembered Skoggcat's words of warning and he knew, deep in his bones, the attack was coming.

People began moving about the main part of the longhouse. Redknee heard Harold's father, Olaf the Bear, challenge Uncle Sven.

"Come on Sven," Olaf said. "The boy was wrong. Ragnar isn't coming. Not tonight, not ever."

Redknee got to his feet and let himself through the wattle gate that separated the animal pens from the living quarters. The

room was full of angry freemen. Redknee quickly realised they were fed up waiting for an attack none believed would come.

"Ah, Redknee," Uncle Sven said. "You finished guarding those heifers?"

The men laughed.

"What a pong!" Harold gripped his nose between his thumb and forefinger and made a face.

Redknee ignored the taunts and faced Olaf. The big man carried one of the few swords in the village. "I know what I heard," Redknee said. "Ragnar *is* going to attack."

Olaf stroked his pale beard thoughtfully. He possessed the same hard blue eyes as his son. "Why are you so sure?"

Everyone was staring at Redknee now. "As I said . . ." His voice trembled, but he squared his shoulders and spoke up. "I *know* what I heard."

"But Ragnar doesn't know this part of the coast," Olaf said. "He'd need to be lucky to find us."

Redknee pushed the image of Skoggcat running into the woods to the back of his mind. He opened his mouth, a lie already formed, but Uncle Sven cut in.

"Come on, Olaf, Ragnar is no fool. If he looks, he'll find us."

"Maybe, but doesn't the boy have a vested interest in all this?"

"How so?" Sven asked.

"His father's death."

"That was a long time ago." Sven cast an awkward glance at Redknee. "Come, Olaf, we mustn't talk about such things in front of him." Sven clapped his palm on Olaf's shoulder and directed him towards the door.

Grudgingly, the villagers returned to their lookout posts. They were learning that waiting was hard.

As a second peaceful night gave way to a new day, Olaf continued to argue Ragnar wasn't coming. There was no need, he said, for the whole village to stay on alert. Eventually Sven agreed.

The village buzzed with relief as people crawled from their hiding places. Olaf said the launch ceremony for *Wavedancer*

should go ahead that night. The villagers cheered – their spirits needed lifting. Sven approved the feast but quietly placed six extra men on guard duty.

From the way they scowled at him as he made his way to the feast hall, Redknee assumed most of the villagers thought he'd made the whole story up. Inside, the longhouse heaved with big, sweaty bodies. It seemed everyone in the village was there. Uncle Sven sat at the top of a rectangular table loaded with plates of boar, venison and hare. The men tore pieces of meat with their teeth; tossing the bones to the floor. The women moved about the table, bringing more food; filling the men's drinking-horns with mead.

Redknee sat at the bottom of the table, beside Koll the Smithy. Silver sniffed Koll's boots then curled up at Redknee's feet and closed his eyes. Koll smiled at the pup and slipped him a slice of ham. "Hear you killed this one's mother, he said.

"She was injured."

Koll nodded and offered him a gull egg. Redknee shook his head, grabbing a chicken wing instead. As he ate, he noticed a white-haired woman slip into the hall. He recognised her as Brynhild the Old who lived in a mud hovel, a day's walk from the village. It was unusual to see her at a feast.

Beside him, Koll peeled the gull egg, swallowed it whole and washed it down with a long slug from his drinking horn. He grabbed a serving maid by the waist. "More mead, woman," he said, burping and wiping his greasy face with his hand. The slave rolled her eyes and left. He turned to Redknee.

"Bad business with that toad-licking coward. Would have liked to get my hands on his neck."

"You mean Ragnar?" Redknee asked.

Koll nodded and mimed a throttling action, his fleshy upper-lip curling with intent. "But no matter, for we put *Wavedancer* into action tomorrow. And about time too – my hands are raw with popping rivets. By Thor's hammer, the men could do with a bit of cheer."

No one had spoken to Redknee about setting sail. Had his uncle forgotten he was nearly of age?

His face must have betrayed surprise, for Koll laughed.
“You really are in a world of—”

A dagger split the table beside Redknee’s hand. Harold pressed his face up to Redknee’s cheek. His breath stank.

“Got your trunk packed for tomorrow?” he said.

“I’ve … still got that to do,” Redknee stammered.

“Mine is full of the best Frankish weapons.” He pulled his dagger from the table and waved it in front of Redknee’s nose. Redknee recognised it as the one he’d seen him sharpening the other day. It had a distinctive ivory handle carved with interwoven snakes.

“My father bought it for me when we were in Kaupangen with Sven,” Harold said. “Layered steel – heated ’til it’s hotter than the sun then cooled in Saxon blood.”

Redknee snorted. “Aye, pig’s blood, more like.”

Harold flicked the blade against Redknee’s throat, anger flashing in his eyes. “What was that?”

The sound of wood scraping against the floor echoed through the hall as Olaf rose to his feet. “My son,” Olaf boomed from Sven’s side at the top of the table. Everyone turned to watch. “Now is not the time. Save your energy for a worthy adversary.”

Harold grudgingly slid his dagger into its scabbard.

Olaf looked at Redknee. “I hope you will be on the beach tomorrow to wave us off.”

“With the girls,” Harold sniggered under his breath.

Redknee felt his cheeks redden and hung his head lest everyone should see. He would show Harold. Just give him time.

“Now Olaf,” Uncle Sven also stood. “It’s not been decided we sail tomorrow.”

The whole room watched Olaf’s face. As Sven’s right-hand-man, Olaf was usually the jarl’s strongest supporter.

“But there’s been no rain for weeks,” Olaf said. “The lands are dry. If the harvest fails we will have to find food elsewhere.”

A nod rippled through the hall.

Uncle Sven made his way down the table, placing his hand on the shoulder of each man in turn. When he reached the end,

he ruffled Redknee's hair and turned to face the room. He spoke loudly so all could hear.

"Olaf, you're right to fear for the crops. But it's too soon. Ragnar could still strike. And it's not certain the harvest will fail. Why, there was a little rain only a couple of nights ago."

"Nothing but a miserable dribble!" Olaf said. "Besides, we need gold. When we were in Kaupangen last month, the price of grain was low. Even if our harvest is good, it won't be enough. The abbey at Jarrow is rich in new coin from Rome. We should raid it now, before others hear of the consignment."

"And leave our women and children alone?" Sven asked.

Magnus piped up from the back of the room, "They could come too."

"There isn't space on *Wavedancer* for everybody," Sven replied.

Redknee saw his uncle's fingers twitch round the hilt of his dagger, wary of the unprecedented challenge to his authority as jarl.

All the boys longed to know whom, out of Olaf and Sven, would win in a fight. They didn't call Olaf *the Bear* for nothing. Rumour had it he once killed a full-grown brown bear with only his hands. But while Sven was a celebrated warrior, he was an even greater tactician. He'd often used his fox-like cunning to outwit his enemies. The village boys loved to hear the story where he gained access to a walled Christian town while hidden in a coffin.

"You want to go a-Viking," Sven continued. "But the days of raiding are over for us Northmen. The soldiers of the White Christ are everywhere now. The abbeys and monasteries are not left unprotected as they once were. The King demands taxes from honest farmers. Things are not as they were when we were young. We must look to our future, to the future of our children."

"You've led many a raid before," Olaf said. "Would you deny these men the chance to find riches?"

A murmur went round the room. Redknee suspected the villagers were fed up with the hard toil of farmers – the idea of easy wealth appealed.

Uncle Sven nodded. “In my younger days, no. But look how that ended.”

“It’s not my fault,” Olaf lowered his voice. “Nor the fault of these good men, that you lost your brother fighting Ragnar. That was a long time ago. You … we all … must move on.”

Olaf addressed the gathered men. “Who will sail with me on the morrow?”

The sound of chewing stopped. Silver looked to Redknee, confused. Redknee pushed the pup back under the table.

“There is no one willing to risk their life for your folly,” Sven said, turning back to take his seat at the head of the table.

“I will come with you!” Everyone in the hall turned to see Karl the Woodcutter raise his axe in the air. Short and stout, like a boar, and with a quiet manner, he looked surprised at his own outburst.

“I will come too!”

“Aye!”

A string of voices echoed Karl’s. Soon half the men were standing, excitement gleaming in their eyes at the promise of adventure.

“So, we have some takers after all,” Olaf said.

“You’re making a mistake,” Sven replied in a low voice. “Wavedancer was built for a greater purpose than stealing coin from helpless nuns.”

Olaf laughed. “A great ship, for a great voyage. Is that it? Well, the Jarrow monastery is ripe for the plucking – but if you have proof of a better target, you should share it.”

“I’ve only rumours to go on.”

“We risk our lives for rumours now?”

“You must trust me—”

“Why, when your judgement at home is so flawed? If you think that boy of yours will lead us when you’re gone—”

“You’re hasty in expecting the worst, dear friend. My body is strong and my heart will beat for many years yet. As for the boy, I wish only to say that my brother’s son is *my* son. And, with Odin’s guidance, I have raised him as my own. But fear not. Before a boy can voyage with me he must be master of the oar, the sword, and himself.”

A murmur rose from the room. Many of the assembled feared they would only pass this test on a good day.

“Too true,” Olaf said laughing. “As you say, the boy is not suited to being a Viking. By the gods, we have all seen that he cannot wield a sword. Why, my own pup took him for a fool but the other day.” He pointed to Harold, who grinned and nodded like a pampered cat.

Redknee shrank behind Koll’s deerskin-covered shoulders. He wished Thor would strike a hole in the ground to swallow him.

A growing murmur rose from the tables. One drunk shouted, “To Olaf the Bear and his son!” A few of the men drank to this toast.

Redknee wished he hadn’t come to the feast.

Uncle Sven looked shaken, but he spoke again, “It takes more than a strong forearm to be a leader of men.”

“But it helps!” Someone shouted from the far end of the table.

“Let us ask the rune-reader,” Thora, Koll’s wife said. She put down her jug of mead and pulled Brynhild the Old forward. Brynhild’s half-blind eyes blinked in the firelight. She tapped her walking stick on the floor three times. Silence fell over the room. The reading of the runes was a serious business. “Show me the boy,” she said.

Thora grabbed Redknee, pulled him in front of Brynhild and stood back. The old hag sniffed the air round Redknee’s face. Then she circled slowly, closed her eyes and began chanting.

“What is she doing?” Thora asked. “I thought she was going to read the runes.”

Brynhild’s watery eyes flew open. “This is no good.”

“She said the boy is no good!” Thora shouted.

“No, I did not say that. This place – it’s no good, there are too many people—”

“Just read the runes,” Thora said.

“Very well.” Brynhild held a dirty leather pouch in front of Redknee. “Pick three stones.”

Redknee nodded. He didn’t believe any of this. Life held so many things even the gods couldn’t explain. But then, he was interested to hear what she had to say. He felt inside the pouch,

picked three smooth stones and placed them in Brynhild's gnarled hand.

She squinted at them. "For those of you who know your *futhark*," she began, "the first is raidō, the rune of travel. The boy will journey far." Everyone nodded solemnly, for what Viking did not travel far ... eventually?

She grasped the second stone and held it to her face. "This is fehu, the stone of wealth. The boy will have riches one day." There was a murmur of discontent, for who likes to hear of another being rich when you work the fields for twelve hours a day just to stay alive?

Olaf stood. "This is rubbish. The hag can tell us nothing. I tell you – the boy is no leader."

"Be quiet," Thora said. "The rest of us want to hear this."

Brynhild hovered over the last stone then snapped it up between her fingers. "I think you will be pleased," she said. "This is othala – the leader of men."

A cheer went up round the room and Redknee felt his heart beat in his chest like a caged bird.

"Shh," Brynhild said. "I have not finished. This stone has two sides. It can mean leader, or ... slave."

After the standoff between Sven and Olaf, the feast spluttered out like a campfire in the rain. The men who had chosen to sail with Olaf withdrew to his longhouse at the far end of the village. Those who elected to stay with Sven trudged to his longhouse for a night of fitful sleep, for Sven still insisted on keeping a lookout.

Redknee slumped on a bench outside the feast hall while the womenfolk cleared the remains of the meal. It was a good spot to keep watch. The night was chilly, and he was glad of Silver's warmth curled at his feet.

"Psst. Redknee."

He turned to see Sinead poking her head round the door, an old broom in her hand. Her soft features sagged with exhaustion and her apron was splattered with drops of fat.

"What is it? Want me to lift something for you?"

"No." Sinead glanced nervously over her shoulder, then crept outside and joined him on the bench. "Look, I think I

know why Ragnar really wants to attack the village. When I was kidnapped, Mord, Ragnar's eldest son – the one with the chainmail tunic—”

“I remember him.”

“Well, I heard him discuss a book with Ragnar – it must be the same one Skoggcat told us about.”

“I heard him mention a book too, said my uncle had it, but ... I thought he was crazy. There are no books in the village—”

“Oh, sometimes I can't believe I'm *your* slave. I've seen so many books. When I worked in the apothecary at the monastery I used medical texts all the time.”

Redknee was silent. Sinead had a way of making him feel stupid. After a bit, he asked, “Do you know if it's a book of healing they're looking for?”

Sinead shook her head. “The book Mord discussed with Ragnar is about a voyage by an Irish monk to an island many days sail to the West. You know, the Irish are just as good at sailing as you Northmen.”

“I doubt it.”

“Ragnar wants to follow the monk's voyage.”

“Why?”

“The island it talks of, the one the monk sails to, the book calls it the Promised Land.”

Redknee had heard of Iceland, a rocky island recently settled by outlaws and thieves seeking to escape King Hakon's new laws. He didn't think any true Northman would need a book to find it. Just sail west for several days and—

“I think we should look for it.”

“*What?*” Redknee said, his voice rising. “Go find Iceland?” Silver glanced up startled. Redknee patted him on the head and he went back to sleep.

“*Iceland?*” Sinead looked confused. “No, the book, you fool – Iceland has nothing to do with it.”

Redknee shook his head. “Assuming this book really is in the village, searching for it could be dangerous”

“But if we found it, we could give it to Ragnar, stop any bloodshed.”

“Oh, so *now* you care about my family.”

“That's unfair. I'm sorry I ever suggested running away.”

Redknee shrugged. What did it matter now?

Besides, his mind kept slipping back to his uncle. Sven had been reluctant to believe him about Ragnar. Reluctant, that was, until he'd mentioned the book.

"Does the Promised Land have treasure?" he asked.

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"It's just something my uncle said when I told him about Ragnar."

"What was that?"

"He asked if Ragnar had spoken of hidden treasure."

"Do you think that's what Skoggcat meant when he said '*The book has more value than you know?*'"

"Maybe."

"It sounds like your uncle knows more than he's telling."

Redknee shrugged. His uncle had known Ragnar for a long time – even before he'd killed his father. Did Sven know why Ragnar wanted the book? If he did, he wasn't telling anyone.

And if Sven did have the book, he was keeping it well hidden. Redknee sighed and ran his hand through his hair. None of this made sense. His uncle couldn't even read.

"Sinead! Get back to work. There are still three boar carcasses to clear away, and ten times as many chicken bones." Redknee's mother loomed in the doorway. Despite the late hour, her corn-coloured hair was tucked neatly under a white linen cap, but her rosy skin shone with exertion.

Sinead rolled her eyes and ducked back inside the feast hall.

"Leif, why aren't you asleep?" his mother asked, taking Sinead's place beside him on the bench.

Redknee shrugged.

"You're not still worried about Ragnar?"

"I know he's coming."

"But it's been so long," his mother said gently. "They are old, forgotten scores."

"But that's just it, I don't think it has anything to do with the past. I think Ragnar wants something he knows we've got."

At the sight of the conviction on Redknee's face, she sighed and stared at the night sky. After a long silence, she smoothed her apron over her dress and turned to him. "I see I can't convince you. But please, if Ragnar does come, I forbid you to

allow the rot of an old blood feud to infect your young life. I forbid you to seek vengeance for what happened to your father.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t know what happened to my father, other than it was Ragnar who killed him. But why? I’m nearly sixteen, I’ve a right to know. You can’t make me promise if I don’t know.”

“But Leif, darling, it’s pointless to relive the past,” she said, shaking her head as if to dispel the pain that burned in her eyes. “Besides, you know what happened. There was a fight over plunder. Erik ran away, and Ragnar threw his axe, which struck him in the back. It was dreadful.”

“Were you there? Did you see this happen?”

She shook her head. “I was sleeping.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why.”

“I think you’re looking for reasons where there are none.”

Redknee sighed. Maybe she was right. Maybe Harold and the other boys were right too when they called him son of a coward. “How could you do it?” he asked.

“Do what?” she said.

“Give me a father like that – a coward?”

“Oh Leif, I’m so sorry. I do hear the snide remarks. But you’re nothing like Erik. He thought the world owed him something – why, he could start a fight in an empty longhouse! And he had strange ideas. Such strange ideas. Whereas you ...” She studied him for a moment and he shuffled awkwardly under her gaze. “Brynhild is right,” she said, nodding. “You’re not meant for this place. I think that’s why you’re friends with the girl.”

“With Sinead?”

“Oh, maybe this is just a mother talking ... all mothers think their children are special, you know.”

Redknee wondered if the lateness of the hour had affected her mind. “Is it Sven?” he asked.

“Is what Sven?”

“Is it because of Sven that you can’t tell me what happened to my father?”

She looked shocked. “I’ve told you everything I know. Your uncle has been a good father to you. You must always

remember that. It's not every man who will take in his brother's son and raise him as his own."

"Yes, I'm very grateful," he said stiffly. "It's just ... well, I just wondered, that's all. I think Uncle Sven knows why Ragnar is coming. Has he ever shown you a book?"

"A book! Goodness me, why do you ask such a thing?"

"I think that's what Ragnar wants – a book that belongs to Uncle Sven."

"Oh dear, I think you've been spending too much time with that Irish imp. It doesn't do any good to talk about these things, you know. Bringing up the past – it can only cause harm. But I do wonder if it was the right thing to keep it."

"Keep what – a book?"

His mother fidgeted with the cord of her apron and looked away, as if she was about to return inside. Instead, she lowered her voice. "I have to finish cleaning the hall. But after that, come and find me. I have a gift ... it might go some way toward helping you."