Rise of the Volsung

Katherine Buel

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ABSTRACT

RISE OF THE VOLSUNG

By

Katherine Buel

This novel works with the legend of the Viking hero Sigurd, adapting material from the Norse eddas and sagas. These sources preserve one of the most complex and fascinating stories in the Norse heroic tradition. In Beowulf, Sigurd is lauded as a hero of old, and Beowulf himself is compared to him. For a modern reader, however, the material in the eddas and sagas is distant, even lifeless. In an age of novel writing and reading, readers do not easily perceive the essential humanness of the figures in epic poetry. The goal of Rise of the Volsung is to draw out that humanness, to make Sigurd real again.

In contrast to its source material, this novel examines Sigurd’s strengths and flaws. It questions the easy assumptions so prevalent in the original texts, assumptions about the infallibility of heroes, assumptions about the role of fate. This novel pivots around the characters, showing how events unfold through their actions and decisions.

In adapting the legend of Sigurd, this novel participates in a branch of literature with both a long history and a contemporary foothold. Authors such as Margaret Atwood and Jane Smiley, whose adaptation of King Lear won the Pulitzer-prize, have helped to establish the validity of working with source material in today’s literary field. Surprisingly few authors, however, have explored the rich Norse legends. This novel attempts to bring this complex mythology to light once more.
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INTRODUCTION

Set in the ancient and largely mythological Norse world, *Rise of the Volsung* will be the first of two books to tell the story of Sigurd by adapting material from the Norse eddas and sagas. These sources preserve one of the most complex and fascinating stories in the Norse heroic tradition. The importance of Sigurd in this tradition cannot be overemphasized. Even in *Beowulf*, Sigurd is lauded as a hero of old, and Beowulf himself is compared to him. Often unrecognized, the virtues and adventures of Sigurd have seeped into much western literature and culture. The saga echoes in such unlikely places as the tale of Sleeping Beauty, in which the enchanted sleep of Brynhild appears in a new context, and in the Arthurian legends, where the Volsung sword drawn from a mighty tree reappears as the sword in the stone. For a modern reader, however, the material contained in the Norse eddas and sagas is distant, even lifeless. In an age of novel writing and reading, readers do not easily perceive the essential humanness of the figures in epic poetry. The goal of my novel is to draw out that humanness, to make Sigurd real for a modern audience.

The challenges of adapting a legend are significant, especially the need, in the words of Ezra Pound, to “make it new.” My novel asks questions about what is not explored in the original texts, such as Sigurd's motives and the consequences of his choices. In contrast to Beowulf, who rules his land for fifty winters and is lauded as a “frōd cyning” (wise king), Sigurd abandons his people to pursue his own interests. He never returns them, never shows any desire to return to his throne at all. Other characters
that emerge as heroes within the legend make similarly shocking decisions by murdering their friends, husbands, and even their own children, and they do not lose their status as heroes. They also go willingly and unnecessarily to their deaths, seemingly unconcerned about what might become of their kingdoms or families as a result. To adapt such a legend into a cohesive novel, I had to begin with the question I found most compelling and most central to the logic of the Sigurd story: what defines the Norse hero?

* * *

The legend presents several heroes: Sigurd, Gunnar and Hogni (Sigurd’s betrayers and key figures in his murder), and Hagen (Sigurd’s murderer in *The Nibelungenlied*). Despite the wrongs done by each of these figures, each demonstrates similar heroic traits. Each one fights valiantly in the face of certain failure. It is this *effort* that seems to define the hero, and I will show, through examples from the legend, how effort is glorified. In a culture in which fatalism is so heavy and pervasive, only effort, a stubborn refusal to give up, can counterbalance doom, and the hero emerges as a figure able and willing to endure such hopeless struggle.

Several medieval texts preserve the legend, most notably *The Poetic Edda*, *The Volsunga Saga*, and *The Nibelungenlied*. Snorri Sturluson (b. 1179) includes the story in *The Prose Edda*, but his version is quite truncated. Each of the three major texts contains different details, and so it is difficult to summarize the legend. *The Poetic Edda* and *The Volsunga Saga* are quite close, as *The Volsunga Saga*, thought to have been written in the thirteenth century in Iceland, bases its story primarily on the poems of *The Poetic Edda*, compiled by an Icelander in probably the twelfth or thirteenth century. While many scholars, including J. R. R. Tolkien, have held *The Poetic Edda* to be of finer quality than
The Volsunga Saga, the latter is invaluable in filling in the many gaps in the much fragmented poems of The Poetic Edda (Tolkien 38-9). The Nibelungenlied, composed in Austria in the early thirteenth century, contains many of the same thematic elements as The Prose Edda and The Volsunga Saga, but details of the plot diverge significantly.

As The Poetic Edda and The Volsunga Saga tell it, Sigurd, a descendent of Odin, is fostered in his youth by the cunning and treacherous Regin. Regin wants Sigurd to kill a mighty dragon named Fafnir. Fafnir, who is Regin’s brother, is in possession of an immense, cursed hoard of treasure. After Sigurd performs this amazing feat, he learns that Regin intends to murder him for the treasure, and so he kills Regin preemptively. In his subsequent travels, Sigurd comes across Brynhild, whom Odin has cast into an enchanted sleep. Sigurd and Brynhild fall in love and pledge themselves to each other. Sigurd goes on his way and arrives at the court of Gunnar, with whom he becomes a fast friend. Gunnar’s sister, Gudrun, desires Sigurd for her husband, and so Gudrun’s mother concocts a magic potion to make Sigurd forget Brynhild. Sigurd then marries Gudrun and proceeds, in ignorance of his love for Brynhild, to win Brynhild for Gunnar as a wife (by disguising himself as Gunnar and proving his—Gunnar’s—prowess). Sigurd eventually recovers his memory, and the expected jealousies and tensions ensue. Ultimately, Brynhild demands Sigurd’s death. Gunnar and his brother Hogni arrange the murder of Sigurd and take the treasure after the dark deed is performed. The rest of the legend recounts the deaths of the remaining characters.

Sigurd, naturally, stands out as the greatest hero in this legend, and he establishes this status through his incredible deeds. In slaying the dragon Fafnir, he takes on a foe far beyond the ambition of the ordinary warrior. Notably, though Regin urges Sigurd to the
deed, Regin will not participate in it himself. According to *The Volsunga Saga*, whereas Sigurd “rides right over the heath,” approaching courageously, Regin “gets him gone, sore afeared” (58). Sigurd is undaunted by the impossibility of his task. Though *The Nibelungenlied* does not include the slaying of Fafnir, it does recount many battles. In the course of one battle, Sigurd rides out to reconnoiter the enemy. When he sees the size of the army he must face, which is a “seething horde” compared to his own force, we hear that “his spirits rose at the sight of them” (*The Nibelungenlied* 37). Despite the uneven odds, Sigurd’s army overwhelms the enemy, largely due to Sigurd’s fearsome fighting. Both these episodes demonstrate a key feature of the Norse hero: he must be undaunted. No matter the size of the task, no matter the odds, he must face danger and death without hesitation. While this quality may at once seem a simple call for bravery, it actually runs much deeper. The Norse hero does not strive for life or even, ultimately, for success; he strives only for greatness, which he finds primarily in great effort. Because of this drive, Sigurd rejoices at the sight of a huge, powerful enemy: such an opponent will give him the opportunity to prove not only his prowess but also his unshakable spirit.

The valuation of effort and determination—even in the face of defeat—is shown most clearly at Sigurd’s death. Though *The Poetic Edda* and *The Nibelungenlied* present different scenarios, both contain the same key elements. In *The Poetic Edda*, in “The Short Lay of Sigurth,” Sigurd is stabbed through the heart while asleep in bed. He awakens with his death wound but does not resign himself yet to death. Rather, he is angry and throws his sword at his murderer, Guthorm. The result: “Then fell to the floor his foe, sundered: / his head and hands did hasten on, / the nether half into hall fell back” (*The Poetic Edda* 256). Despite the fact that Sigurd’s death is imminent, he does not
succumb to pain or despair. He avenges himself, performing an act of incredible skill and strength by cleaving his murderer in half. Importantly, even in his last breath, Sigurd does not lament his fate, but instead speaks mainly to comfort his distraught wife. Though he does not die on the battlefield, as a Norse warrior would seem to want, Sigurd seems content. He has acquitted himself well by killing his murderer in turn, fighting to the last even though he is doomed. Though this struggle does not take place on the battlefield, it still reflects a battlefield spirit, and so Sigurd has no cause for regret.

_The Nibelungenlied_ makes a similar point, though the means of death differs.

Here, Sigurd is murdered while crouching to drink from a stream. The murderer now is Hagen, who throws a spear at Sigurd, stabbing him in the back. As in _The Poetic Edda_, Sigurd here is taken unawares. Whether asleep or stabbed from behind, Sigurd is clearly not given the chance of a fair fight. Such a great warrior as Sigurd cannot be killed face to face; he must be overcome by means of stealth and treachery. Again, as in _The Poetic Edda_, Sigurd responds to his imminent death “maddened with rage” and refuses to lie down and die (_The Nibelungenlied_ 130). With the spear still in his chest, Sigurd chases after Hagen. Unable to find his sword or bow, the mortally wounded Sigurd faces Hagen with only his shield. Even faced with these impossible odds, Sigurd presses Hagen hard: “Hagen fell reeling under the weight of the blow and the riverside echoed loudly” (131). Just before Sigurd dies of the initial spear wound, the narrator makes clear that “had Siegfried [Sigurd] had his sword in hand it would have been the end of Hagen” (131). In both _The Nibelungenlied_ and _The Poetic Edda_, Sigurd’s determination to fight in the face of certain death marks him as the ultimate hero. His fate is undeniable in each text—the
wound is fatal—and yet Sigurd faces that fate without fear or despair but with valor, fighting to the last breath.

If one considered only Sigurd, it would be easy to get a somewhat skewed view of Norse heroism. Sigurd, after all, is distinguished not only by his courage and persistence but also by his inhuman prowess. Descended from the god Odin, he possesses strength and endurance beyond that of mere mortals. However, while his prowess does help to make him great, the various versions of the legend still show that doggedness matters most. The fact that, in all versions of the story, Sigurd takes the stage only for a while suggests there are more heroes in the legend than just Sigurd. Indeed, a number of other characters display the kind of doggedness exemplified by Sigurd, and those characters take up the role of hero after Sigurd’s death.

After Hagen murders Sigurd in *The Nibelungenlied*, which occurs about halfway through the story, one might expect that Hagen would be described as vile and blameworthy. However, though the narrator declares that “no warrior will ever do a darker deed,” much of the story’s second half is devoted to the acclamation of Hagen and his great feats of arms (*The Nibelungenlied* 130). In spite of Hagen’s treachery, he takes up the role of hero where Sigurd leaves off. When Gunther (Gunnar) and his men, of which Hagen is one, travel to King Etzel’s court in Hungary, they find themselves under attack. Their situation is hopeless, and the story ends with a bloody battle in which the Burgundians (Gunther’s people) kill thousands of men before they themselves are all slain. This fierce but hopeless fighting leads A. T. Hatto, translator and commentator on *The Nibelungenlied*, to describe Hagen and the Burgundians’ final efforts as a “pervasive ‘will to death’” (Hatto 323). While Hatto’s comment contains obvious judgment, it shows
equal insight: the characters essentially want to die in this battle. Their only concern is that they do so gloriously. During this battle, Hagen proves himself to be a great warrior and is angered when asked to surrender (*The Nibelungenlied* 288). Hagen here shows the determination of the Norse hero: he is insulted by the notion that he might surrender, that he might give up. The point of the battle, for him, is to exert himself to the bitter end.

When he is finally captured and beheaded, King Etzel declares that Hagen was “the best knight who ever bore shield to battle” (*The Nibelungenlied* 290-291). This glorification of Hagen shows the supreme importance of valor in the legend. Because Hagen proves himself worthy of the title of hero, his earlier murder of Sigurd recedes, becoming more an element of plot than of theme. His deeds in battle and his tenacity secure his status as a hero.

A similar turn occurs in *The Poetic Edda* and *The Volsunga Saga*. Gunnar and Hogni, Sigurd’s friends and blood-brothers, plot his murder. Though it is their brother Guthorm who does the deed, Gunnar and Hogni are still responsible for it, and they know their plans of murder are wrong. Hogni counsels Gunnar in “The Short Lay of Sigurth”:

> “Twould ill beseem us, for the sake of gold / with swords to sever oaths which we swore— / our former oaths, the faith we plighted” (*The Poetic Edda* 255). Despite this acknowledgement of guilt, Hogni and Gunnar, like Hagen, continue the story after the death of Sigurd, asserting themselves as heroes. After Sigurd’s death, his wife (and Gunnar and Hogni’s sister) Guthrun is married to another king by the name of Atli. Atli covets the hoard of treasure held by Gunnar and Hogni, which they took after Sigurd’s death. Atli invites the brothers to visit him and his wife, planning to kill them for the treasure. Sadly, much of “The Lay of Atli,” which most fully recounts this episode, is
fragmented, but *The Volsunga Saga* offers a good deal of detail. When Gunnar and Hogni approach Atli’s court, they see “a mighty host of men” arrayed for battle (*The Volsunga Saga* 138-9). Though it is clear that Gunnar and Hogni will be killed if they do not turn back, they are undaunted and proceed to break open the gates and enter Atli’s hall. The reason for this action is made clear by Hogni when he speaks of Gunnar and himself: “little methinks have we shrunk aback whenas men fell to fight” (138). Gunnar and Hogni will not flee, despite the fact that they are grossly outnumbered, because it would shame them to run from a fight.

In another version, “The Greenlandish Lay of Atli,” Hogni and Gunnar actually omit to tie up their boat before approaching Atli’s hall: “their flood-horse they fastened not when from it then wended” (*The Poetic Edda* 300). They do not expect to make a return journey, and their abandonment of the boat sends a clear message of their acceptance—even their pursuit—of death. Like Sigurd, they show their doggedness and courage by facing doom without flinching.

When Hogni and Gunnar are at last overcome by Atli’s men, they show their courage in the face of death. Atli decides to cut out Hogni’s heart, and, hearing this, Hogni declares in *The Volsunga Saga*, “merrily will I abide whatsoever thou wilt do against me; and thou shalt see that my heart is not adrad [afraid]” (143). In *The Poetic Edda*, Hogni even laughs as his heart is cut from his chest (290). Gunnar shows similar courage when Atli has him thrown into a pit of vipers. Guthrun somehow gets a harp to him, and *The Poetic Edda* recounts his final struggle: “Gunnar, unyielding, grim in his mind, / with his hands did strike the harp, undaunted: / the strings rang out strongly. With stout heart thus / should highborn hero hold to his own” (291). The emphasis in this
passage is clear: “unyielding,” “undaunted.” Despite certain death, Gunnar continues to act boldly. He does not fight in hopes of preserving his own life; he fights because failure, for him, comes not from death or defeat but from giving up. As long as he fights to the end, he will not have failed. When the poem declares that Gunnar did what a hero should, it clearly tells us how Gunnar’s final struggle is to be understood: in terms of effort—with a “stout heart.” The Volsunga Saga includes an additional element. Here, Gunnar’s hands are bound and he plays the harp with his toes (The Volsunga Saga 144-5). This rather comedic situation only intensifies the theme of persistence. The seemingly helpless Gunnar fights, however futilely, in the only manner left to him.

In his collection of Norse mythology, Morgan J. Roberts observes that one of the distinctive characteristics of the Norse canon is its “inherent bleakness” (10). The harsh landscape of the north, especially Iceland, the mortal gods, the certainty of doom at Ragnarok, all these contribute to the “fatalistic mindset” of the Norse (Roberts 10). Indeed, one cannot help but be struck by the grimness of so much of the mythology. The first poem of The Poetic Edda, “The Prophecy of the Seeress,” establishes the fatalism of the Norse by forecasting the ending of the world and the deaths of the gods at Ragnarok. Though the speaker tells that life will come from the earth again, death and destruction stand before it: “’Neath the sea the land sinketh, the sun dimmeth / from the heavens fall the fair bright stars” (The Poetic Edda 11). In his notes on the Sigurd legend, Tolkien describes Old Norse verse, in its best moments, as embodying “demonic energy and force” (312). Indeed, there is an intensity inherent in the style and the stories. This intensity reflects how they embrace doom and all its grandeur.
With a sense of doom overshadowing the Norse canon, stories such as that of Sigurd contain a certain bleakness. All the main characters die, many of them horribly. Murder, betrayal, and suicide move the plot. In the face of such bleakness, the key quality of the hero is the will to fight, to make doom great. In the face of death, when defeat is certain, all that matters is the undaunted spirit. The hero fails only when he succumbs to pain or despair, when he stops fighting. As the legend of Sigurd shows, the Norse hero does not need to win; he needs only to fight.

My novel, *Rise of the Volsung*, handles the early years of Sigurd’s life and shows how a young boy develops into the kind of man who craves the challenges and glory of battle, the kind of man who abandons his other responsibilities for it. This development sets into motion the legend’s tragic events, which will be the focus of the second book.

* * *

This project has grown out of my life-long interest in mythology and my love of epic poetry. The fatalism and rough beauty of Northern mythology is immediate and thrilling. Interestingly, this material receives surprisingly little attention. Beyond the scholars of Norse mythology, it is largely fans of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels and of Marvel Comics’ *The Mighty Thor* who are familiar with these stories. In the preface to his translation of the *Volsunga Saga*, William Morris describes the legend of Sigurd and his kin as “the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks.” For Morris, this saga was part of the inheritance of Western Europe, one largely overlooked in favor of the more ‘sophisticated’ legacy of the Greeks and Romans. What is the reason for the relative obscurity of this saga? In part, I suspect the story seems primitive to modern sensibilities. Women murder their children for
revenge against their husbands, kings care more about their own honor than the lives of their subjects, and one death almost always begets another. The motives of the characters seem alien because the Norse concept of heroism is alien. As a novelist adapting this legend, I understand my task to be an effort to make the plot, themes, and, especially, the characters more accessible to modern readers.

In the oldest forms of the Sigurd story, Sigurd is admittedly a little flat. Not only is he a great warrior, but everyone knows it and admires him. He almost always knows what to say and do, and when he crosses boundaries—such as when he murders his foster-father, Regin—his transgressions are largely ignored. Drawing out his essential humanness has required me to break down some of his legendary perfection. However, I did not strip him of all his heroic qualities, for it is heroism that defines and drives the novel. In his brilliant novel, *Grendel*, a novel largely misunderstood by critics, John Gardner gives us a Beowulf of heroic proportions. He is a Beowulf who embodies what Gardner calls “noble ideals.” These ideals are part of what gives a heroic figure like Sigurd his grandeur. Rather than debunking Sigurd’s heroic nature, I have complicated him. Faithful to legend, my Sigurd shows the doggedness and courage of the Norse hero through his yearning for battle, especially with the dragon Fafnir. I introduce the dragon earlier in the story to give Sigurd a focus point for his heroism. Over the course of many years, Sigurd obsesses over the dragon, knowing that no greater challenge will ever present itself. By building up Sigurd’s desire to take on the dragon, I emphasize his one true interest: glorious battle. Through such yearning, I have tried to make sense of Norse heroism for the modern reader.
While maintaining this crucial element of heroism, my novel does break down some of the assumptions and removes some of the convenient oversights of the legend. When it comes to his decisions and his death, I do not let Sigurd off so easily. Sigurd’s fate must be, to some degree, self-created. His sense of superiority, born out of his pride in his lineage and his easy mastery of so much he attempts, inspires dangerous envy in others. In spite of this apparent self-assurance, he feels always dislocated, never quite at home with his stepfather, his foster-father, his lover, or even his wife. In this he is akin to Gardner’s Beowulf, whose mind, Grendel notices, “seemed far away, as if, though polite, he were indifferent to all this—an outsider not only among the Danes but everywhere.” These heroes are too great to be full participants in human life. For Sigurd, this separation is uncomfortable, for he is human and must live that way as best he can. Furthermore, my Sigurd (in the second book) will be haunted by his murder of Regin, and he will both enjoy and be disgusted by his own violence. In creating this more complex Sigurd, I hope to present to readers a character who is in some respects true to his original form, but who is sufficiently flawed to be sympathetic. It is my intention that these complications create a sort of bridge to the original texts, that they show how this universal, eternal story is not so distant after all.

In my effort to build the tragedy of this legend out of character conflict rather than mere circumstance, I have introduced characters such as Gunnar, who becomes a close friend and a brother through marriage, earlier in Sigurd’s life. In the Volsunga Saga, Sigurd meets Gunnar after already becoming a famous hero and warrior, but I make Gunnar Sigurd’s foster-brother. In doing so, I create a relationship of camaraderie and competition. The history of these characters as foster-brothers will make Gunnar’s
betrayal and murder of Sigurd simultaneously more disturbing and more understandable. Gunnar has many of Sigurd’s qualities but to a lesser degree, and he has been outshone by Sigurd since their youth.

My other focus with this project has been on the novel’s atmosphere, which is largely a matter of language. To the best of my ability, I have used a style that draws on some of the poetic qualities of the Northern epics, while modernizing to fit my own aesthetic. I make use of traditional kennings and contractions and fairly heavy use of alliteration. I have tried to create a certain degree of narrative distance by using a third person perspective that gives the voice an epic, storyteller quality. I want the language to give a sense of weight, of inevitability, to the story. On the other hand, the characters must be accessible, so my narrator is omniscient and therefore able to ‘zoom in’ on them. For example, when Odin first appears to Sigurd, there is an epic quality to the description: “His one eye, deep-set under the thick, white brow, was hidden in shadow. The other he had sold long ago. It lay still at the bottom of Mimir’s fountain. He had traded it for a drink from the cold, clear waters; he had traded it for wisdom, for the world’s memory.” And yet within two paragraphs, the narrative moves into Sigurd’s reaction to this grand figure: “Sigurd could not take his eyes from Odin’s face, where the moonlight lay almost tangible over the grim features, and it seemed there was something immeasurable, unreachable beneath. For a moment, it seemed to him that there was nothing else in the world.” Here we see Sigurd drawn to the power and otherworldliness that Odin embodies. This pull is part of what inspires Sigurd to greatness, but it is also part of what separates him from the human life around him.
In his book *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner asserts: “Great art celebrates life’s potential,” whereas “the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all.” This opinion is one with which I strongly agree. My novel, while dark and tragic in its plot, turns on the value and strength of Sigurd’s Norse ideals. If those did not compel me, I would not have chosen this project. Because they compel me, I will not destroy them.

* * *

My interest in storytelling and my concern with elemental human questions can be traced to the novels that have inspired me to write. *The Book of Atrix Wolfe*, by Patricia A. McKillip, begins with a question from the partly human daughter of a fairy queen. She wants to know the meaning of the human word sorrow. The queen says that sorrow is “a word that means nothing until it means everything.” This exchange foreshadows the arc of the book, for the queen’s daughter comes to understand all too well the meaning of that word. McKillip’s writing influences my own through its evocative language and these elemental questions.

There are many other writers on whose work I draw for guidance in my own writing. Those I most value take a traditional concept or story and tease out the human questions that lie within. In *How to Spin Gold*, an adaptation of the Rumplestitskin story, Elizabeth Cunnigham asks what it means to be without a name. In *Deerskin*, Robin McKinley retells the fairytale Donkeyskin, showing the transformation required for the protagonist to recover from the rape committed against her by her father. In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ursula K. Le Guin tackles the traditional good versus evil concept so prevalent in fantasy, but her novel challenges and stretches that concept. When the protagonist Ged looses the terrifying shadow, he releases evil into the world. More significantly, that evil
is an embodiment of Ged’s own dark nature. Consequently, in this romantic tale of good
versus evil, Ged is both hero and villain, and he must accept that before he can defeat it.

My novel explores the humanness behind the Norse hero. It challenges Sigurd in
ways that McKillip and Le Guin, Cunningham and McKinley, challenge their characters.
He struggles with his own heroism. He wants it, resents it, and is sometimes confused by
it. He will be aware, in the end, of what it costs him. In short, this adaptation strives to
find what is elemental, what is essentially human, within this legend and reawaken it.
Chapter 1

The king was dying. Even if Sigurd hadn’t seen the green, oozing wound on the long journey from the battlefield to the hall, he would have known it from the men’s faces. Death was easy to recognize here in the brutal north. Sigurd had grown up with it, known it before he was even born; and now, almost twelve winters old, he could not mistake it.

“Sigurd.”

The voice startled him, and he remembered suddenly the game piece, the carved horn worn smooth by so many hands, gripped in his good fist, the one with no broken fingers. He unclenched his fingers, frowned at the checkered board waiting on the table between him and Freod, the king’s closest friend. Sigurd looked for a strategic place to set his piece, but he couldn’t remember what his strategy had been, or whether he had even had one.
“You all right, lad?” asked Freod, his grey eyebrows coming together.

“Of course,” said Sigurd, looking away from Freod’s broad, weathered face. Too often Freod seemed to know what he was thinking. Sigurd did not like that. He wished Freod would not try to comfort him; no one else had, not even his mother, and besides, it wasn’t like King Hjalprek was his father. Sigurd set his game piece on the board, not caring that the move was stupid. He wasn’t any good at this game anyway. It was an indoor game, one to be played when the snow piled high against the hall, when the only dependable source of light was the huge open hearth in the hall’s center. With the autumn sun shining, Sigurd hated sitting in the hall, even if a man he loved was dying. But this was the last day. Hjalprek, King of Denmark, would be dead by nightfall.

Freod did not even look at the board, ignoring Sigurd’s poor move.

“What?” Sigurd challenged.

“Sometimes, boy, I swear you’re as cold and stubborn as your mother,” said Freod, then the frown eased from his face and he sighed. “Let’s get some fresh air.”

“But what if—” Sigurd gripped the table’s edge, felt the sharp pain lance up the broken fingers of his shield hand, the one he had used to protect himself.

“Don’t worry. King Hjalprek will—”

“Don’t you lie to me, Freod. I’m not a child. I know the truth as well as any man.”

Freod’s face was angry at first, but it softened as he said, “I was going to say that King Hjalprek will call for you. We won’t go far.”

“Oh. All right.”

As they passed through the hall, the king’s thanes, his handpicked guard of thirty, looked up from their own idle tasks at the long benches. Sigurd felt their eyes but stared
ahead to the door. He knew Freod would meet their eyes, share a look that said, yes, it’s bad, but what can you do? Sigurd did not know how to speak that way, with a look that others would understand.

Sigurd’s pace slowed somewhat when he saw Gar from the corner of his eye. Gar rose partway from his bench, the leather belt he had been mending still in his hand. Sigurd liked Gar, who was one of the youngest thanes. Gar laughed more than the others and made Sigurd laugh, too, which Sigurd rarely did. He picked up his pace again, looked past Gar to the edge of sunlight breaking through the cracked open doors. There was nothing he wanted to say or hear. He certainly did not want Gar to look at him with sympathy. He might cry then, and that was unthinkable.

Freod laid a hand on his shoulder as the guard swung the thick oak doors open for them. Sigurd breathed relief when he stepped onto the high stone porch, into the light and the cool autumn air. He stood at the top of the stone steps, which led down to the bare paved courtyard and the streets beyond.

From this high vantage point, Sigurd could see many roofs—of barracks, houses, stables, workshops—with their rounded wooden shingles, beautiful as dragon scales, crowning walls of simple staves. The king’s hall, of course, showed the most craftsmanship, with its carvings and stone steps and high, thin windows. Beyond the hall and the buildings stood the inner and outer ramparts, both built of dangerous pales, the outer one set atop a raised earthen base.

Sigurd loved this view of the stronghold, so orderly and exact. He had seen other fortifications, those of chieftains and petty kings, but nothing compared to Hjalprek’s. Hjalprek was such a king, so strong, so wise, with that deep laugh and the way he would
wink at Sigurd when they shared a private joke. Sigurd felt his hands clenching, felt the sharp pain in his bandaged left hand.

Freod squeezed Sigurd’s shoulder, drawing him back to the porch, and said, “When the last of my sons died, I thought Odin had cursed me. But in time I felt the truth: that they were young and strong and healthy in the halls of the dead, feasting in Valhalla with slain warriors like themselves. Hjalprek will soon be greeting my sons there in that bright place, feasting with them all night, fighting all day. Odin rewards us well for this cold, hard life. Don’t you think?”

Sigurd’s heart lifted at Odin’s name. The king of the gods. Sometimes, Sigurd thought he could almost see the white beard and ancient face, the one eye that shone like a blue jewel. His ancestor. Sometimes, Sigurd would recite that lineage to himself: Sigurd, son of Sigmund, son of Volsung, son of Rerir, son of Sigi, son of Odin. He had never known any in that line, not even his father who died before he was born, whose death had forced his mother to flee here to Denmark and to marry King Hjalprek’s son. Sometimes, though, when Hjalprek or the men would tell stories around the hearth at night, when the skalds would sing of the gods and the dead heroes, Sigurd would feel lifted out of himself, drawn into those stories. When they were over, they always left him feeling somehow empty, anxious, impatient.

“In any case,” said Freod when Sigurd did not answer, “we must trust Odin. What else can we do? He made the world. That’s how it is.”

Freod’s harsh tone caught Sigurd’s attention. He said, puzzled, “You’re angry.”

“No, no. It’s just hard sometimes, when your sons are dead.”
Freod never spoke of his sons, who had all been killed before Sigurd first held a wooden practice sword. Faced suddenly with Freod’s pain, Sigurd did not know what to say. He was grateful, then, when the footsteps sounded on the stone porch behind him. He turned to see who it was and fought hard to keep the frown from his face. Aelf. His stepfather, King Hjalprek’s only son. For a moment, Sigurd understood the edge of anger in Freod’s voice. How could this be Odin’s will? Sigurd’s own father, the great Sigmund, dead before he was born, and he, the only living descendant of Odin, tied to Aelf, a man too fine to be a true warrior, a man who always looked down at Sigurd with those cold, sharp eyes, the man who would now be King of Denmark.

“Well, Aelf?” said Freod.

“He would speak with you.”

Freod nodded and turned to the mouth of the hall. He looked over his shoulder once at Sigurd then disappeared inside.

“Do you know where your mother is?” Aelf’s white, even teeth flashed as he spoke.

“In her chamber, last I knew, sewing the funeral clothes.”

Aelf nodded. As they stood there, awkward and silent together, Sigurd swallowed hard against the questions that rose in him. He wanted to ask how long the king had, if he would call for him. But Aelf would look down his fine straight nose, look smug, make Sigurd feel like a child. So he said nothing, and Aelf turned at last to the hall. Unable to suppress his sigh of relief as the doors closed behind Aelf, Sigurd sank to the stone steps, the cold leaching through his linen trousers, and waited.
Freod drew the door closed behind him, cutting off the strong smell of burning herbs and the sharp tang of infection. He stood outside the door a moment, catching his breath. He would not see the king again.

They had argued often enough, but something always held them together: respect, love, time. And the boy, of course. That fierce, silent boy waiting out on the hall porch. That boy who never cried, not even when the physician had straightened his broken fingers. That boy who had just fought his first battle and killed his first man and not even hesitated. What would become of him now, with Aelf the new king? Freod set his jaw and forced the question from his mind before he entered the main hall; he could not let the men see him worried.

When Freod passed through the hall doors, the boy all but leaped to his feet. Not so cold, then. Not so unmoved as he seemed to others. Not that it surprised Freod. Most of the men liked Sigurd because the king favored him and because he showed such potential for strength and skill, but those same men sometimes found him too quiet. Except for Gar, who solved everything with a laugh, the men never knew what to say to Sigurd. Freod knew. Sigurd might be a descendant of Odin, but he was still just a boy. Scared, like any other boy would be, when someone he loved was dying.

“He’s asking for you,” said Freod.

Sigurd nodded, keeping his face still, hoping Freod couldn’t see how his hands trembled. He had thought himself ready for this moment, had thought he would not be
much touched by it. But now—he cut himself off. He was not a child, to be fretting and
whining. “I’ll go to him,” he said and turned to the hall.

When Sigurd reached the king’s chamber, he did not hesitate at the door; he was
done with that. He eased the door open, the heavy slab of wood groaning on its hinges.
The smell that met him bit the back of his throat. The room stank of corrupted flesh,
despite the herbs burning on the hearth.

The chamber was drenched yellow with the autumn light from the narrow window
and the glow of the hearth. It was almost silent: the only sound came from the bed, where
the king lay wheezing out the last of his life.

Sigurd walked to the bed, sat on the stool at the king’s side. Hjalprek’s face, once
so ruddy, was as grey as the streaks in his beard, and his eyes were dull. At first, he
seemed not even to see Sigurd.

Finally, Hjalprek’s head turned on the pillow. He squinted. “Boy.”

“I’m here.” Sigurd leaned closer to the bed.

“I wanted to tell you—I’ve been dreaming it today—did I ever tell you of your
naming?”

“I know that you named me, because my father was dead.”

“What a moment it was,” sighed Hjalprek, his foggy eyes in the past, his voice
weak. “I was sitting with the thanes, in my great chair by the hearth-fire. Your mother’s
maid brought you into the hall. You were so silent. I’m sure the maid thought I didn’t see
it, but she pinched your leg, and oh, how you wailed! I said, ‘Listen to that, Aelf. Lungs
like a smith’s bellows.’”
Hjalprek lay wheezing for a time, building up the breath to finish his story. At last he said, "When the maid handed you to me, I thought, I knew, you were my own son. Not really, of course, but, oh, how it seemed so. You gripped my finger, and I thought, ‘Almost ready for a sword.’ When your name came into my mind, I knew it was Odin’s will in me, and I called out, ‘He’ll be Sigurd, warder of victory.’ You will be, you know,” gasped Hjalprek, his dull eyes searching for Sigurd’s face. “And I was supposed to see it, you. And now, here I am, an invalid on my pallet, about to die in bed, and you not yet a man. I was supposed to see it.”

Sigurd swallowed hard, not knowing what to say. He rose abruptly from his stool and turned to the hearth. He threw more wood on the fire, making the flames burst. He said, “Odin will know your death is a battle-death. He will not fault you for dying in bed.”

Hjalprek lay helpless on his pallet, straining toward Sigurd, wanting him to come back, wanting to see his face once more. He knew that face so well: the eyes as dark and deep, as bottomless, as the sea. The handsome lines of his jaw and cheek, already taking shape through the roundness of youth. Those images, though, came more from memory than sight, for his eyes were not good now. He could just make out Sigurd standing at the hearth, his arms crossed, shoulders square. He caught the pale glint of Sigurd’s hair. It was not right, he knew, to love Sigurd more than his own son, but it couldn’t be helped.

As the fog before him thickened to a grey veil, he could barely make out Sigurd’s form by the fire. Fear rose through his pain, through the haze of his mind. He could no longer protect Sigurd. He had no more power in this world. Aelf would soon be king. That was fine for the kingdom—Aelf was competent—but Aelf was jealous of Sigurd.
Hjalprek reached out through the veil, his breath rasping, rattling in his throat. Then Sigurd was there, his hands in Hjalprek’s, his face almost close enough to see.

Sigurd gripped the cold, knotted fingers, leaned through the stink of death toward the king. He thought Hjalprek would not speak again, thought he would rattle and shudder into stillness, but Hjalprek strained up from death’s grip for a moment, threw a few last words into the world: “Be wary, boy, my arm is no longer around you.”

* * *

Sigurd rode out on his horse while the women tended the king’s body, while Aelf and the king’s thanes hauled his ship onto the riverbank and propped it up on timbers. Sigurd knew what they would do: a tent would be raised on the deck, a bed placed inside, and all things would be made ready for the king’s journey. His mother and her women were busy sewing the new clothes for the king, and two feasts were being prepared in the kitchens—one for the living, one for the dead. Sigurd tried not to think about Greta, the concubine who had shared Hjalprek’s bed since his wife’s death. He had seen her weeping, face red and puffy, eyes wild, by the holding grave near the river. She would travel with the king in the burning ship.

During these days of preparation, many men were coming to Hjalprek’s stronghold. Sigurd, who kept to the woods with his horse rather than sitting idle in the hall, sometimes watched them from under the trees as they rode to the gates in their finest. He recognized some: a chieftain from the west coast who often brought news of
ships coming onto the sea from the hard-flowing Rhine, a cousin of Aelf’s who held land
to the south.

At night, Sigurd joined the men for the meal and the music. Several traveling
skalds had come for the funeral, telling stories for the price of a meal, hoping to gain a
permanent place in the hall. Many sang of Sigmund, and Sigurd got to hear again the
story of his father drawing the sword Gram from the Branstock. Odin, disguised as an old
man in a floppy-brimmed hat, had brought the sword to the Volsung hall, the hall of
Sigurd’s ancestors, which Odin’s son Sigi had built. Odin struck the sword into the great
tree that grew in the hall’s center. Whoever drew it from the Branstock’s trunk, he said,
would be the warrior of Odin.

All day in the woods Sigurd would retell this story to himself, trying to remember
all the words, trying to see it again. He would not come in until dark, not wanting to sit
too long with the men, especially Aelf, who sat each night in the king’s chair.

On the eve of the burning, the last day of waiting, Sigurd walked through the dark
from the stable, his stomach growling for supper. He was at the bottom of the stone steps,
the light from the torches blinding him to the dark streets beyond, when he heard some
commotion at the gates. The voices were dimmed by the distance, almost below hearing,
but his ears were keen. He slipped away from the light of the hall torches. He knew the
door-guards would have seen him, but it didn’t matter; they were used to him coming and
going like a cat.

Some instinct made him cautious, and he moved along the main road under the
buildings’ shadows. When he was about halfway between the king’s hall and the rampart,
the gates creaked open and hooves sounded faintly on the wooden planks of the road.
Sigurd waited the long minute under the dark eave of a roof, listening to the approaching horse and the guard on foot, watching the flare of a torch grow larger and brighter. He began to feel childish hiding there, but with the men so near now, with the shape of a horse and rider emerging beside the torch’s bloom, he would feel doubly stupid making himself known.

The dark horse was plain and unremarkable; no silver flashed along his bridle in the torchlight. The rider, in his dark trousers and black cloak, seemed to blend with him, nothing to notice. But then the torchlight splashed across the rider’s face, and Sigurd felt his scalp prickle. He registered vaguely that the man looked about forty, handsome, but what he really saw was eyes glinting pale, staring ahead to the hall like he would take it. The man’s mouth was set in a tight, unforgiving line.

Then the torch bobbed away, the light licking elsewhere as the guard shifted his grip. The guard’s eyes were alert, flicking to the rider, and his shoulders were too tense for the escort to be convincing as simple courtesy. Sigurd puzzled over that as they drew away from him, as he followed.

In the courtyard, the guard called for a horse-boy. A boy Sigurd’s age came trotting from the dimly lit stable as the rider dismounted. In the greater light of the hall torches, Sigurd could see the man was not as tall as he had looked on the horse. And yet, though his form was obscured by the dark cloak hanging behind him, Sigurd could still recognize something subtle and dangerous in the firm, quiet movements of his body.

When the man and guard had passed through the heavy doors of the hall, Sigurd hurried up the steps, startling the guards who halted the doors’ closing to let him through. He slipped among the benches where the men were feasting. Few noticed him in the
crowded hall, partly because the mead had been hard flowing, partly because Sigurd moved so light and quick.

He reached the outer fringes of the central hearth, where Aelf sat with some of the thanes and the most prestigious guests, just as the man and guard came to a stop on the other side. The stranger wore his plain clothes with the same casual confidence that Hjalprek had worn his fur-trimmed wools. His hair was dark, making his eyes, pale as ice in shadow, eerie and unnatural. His high, handsome cheeks bones caught the fire’s glow.

When the guard announced, “Regin, son of Hreidmar,” Sigurd sensed the men around him stiffening, saw them glance at one another. He heard someone mutter “Master of Masters.” The skald’s song of Odin and his brothers drifted to silence.

Aelf, despite the way his pale skin was flushed with drink, stood from the king’s chair looking suddenly quite sober. His face showed surprise, though he tried to conceal it behind his usual arrogant smile.

“Well met, Regin,” he said, putting more courtesy into his voice than Sigurd usually heard. “I didn’t expect you for another week at least. You must have killed three horses to get here.”

Regin half-smiled and his eyes seemed to hide themselves. “How could I miss your father’s funeral, when he was a son to me?”

Aelf frowned. “A foster-son, yes. He always respected your skill and your…wisdom.”

Regin’s half-smile made his face wolfish, and Sigurd could see Aelf shifting away from him, trying to look untroubled. Regin, though, had little attention on Aelf. Sigurd followed the predatory sweep of Regin’s pale eyes as they roved over the seated men, but
only half his mind was on the scene before him. Why did Regin’s name sound familiar? And why did Aelf call him Hjalprek’s foster-father? That was impossible; this man was too young.

Caught up in his questions, Sigurd was startled to find those too-pale eyes trained on him. Wary but unflinching, he met the stare, all his questions gone, all his instincts telling him to observe and be still, to be ready.

Regin cast his eyes back to Aelf. “The Volsung boy?”

Aelf impatiently motioned Sigurd to come forward. “Sigurd, son of Sigmund.”

Sigurd forced the tension from his body, making himself loose but primed as Freod always instructed in the practice yard. He made his way past the seated men, past Gar’s open curiosity and Freod’s almost concealed anger, to where Regin stood before Aelf as though he, the guest, were the one in command here.

Sigurd stopped two paces from Regin and said, making his voice strong and clear, “I am Sigurd.”

Regin drew in his chin, looked at Sigurd’s bruised shield-hand with its bandaged fingers. “What happened to your hand?”

Before Sigurd could answer, Aelf broke in, his tone dismissive, “Just some fingers broken in a skirmish.”

Sigurd shot him a look of annoyance. Aelf always did this.

Regin said, “He’s bold enough to speak for himself, I think. Come, boy, did you kill the man who trod on your fingers?”

“No,” said Sigurd sharply. “Someone put a spear in his back before I had the chance. But he didn’t trod on my fingers. He broke my shield.”
“Broke your shield,” echoed Regin.

Sigurd heard mockery in Regin’s voice, and a pressure tightened his chest, a subtle, unknown anger that had lain within him since the battle. It was an anger of embarrassment, not because the men had teased him about his narrow escape, but because, in that moment when his shield was shattered, he had been afraid. The memory of that fear shamed him like nothing he had yet known. He said, “It won’t happen again.”

“And why is that?”

“Because the only thing between me and my enemies will be my sword, not my shield.”

Regin seemed to weigh this answer, his pale eyes narrowing. Then he laughed. “He is a Volsung, isn’t he? Impractical to the last breath. Whatever will you do with him, Aelf?”

Aelf smiled uncomfortably and said with a tone of finality, “Well, he’s a child still. There’s time to decide. Now. You must be hungry, Regin.” Aelf motioned the men on the bench to make room. “Have some meat and tell us the news from the south.”

Sigurd felt the heat in his face, the shame in his chest burning him. Someday, Aelf would not be able to say such things. But there was nothing he could do now except protest, like a child. When he felt a tug at his sleeve, he obeyed stiffly and sat beside Freod while the men all but cleared the bench for Regin.

As more meat was eaten and more mead drunk, the conversation turned to battles, treaties, the harvest, and Regin spoke little, holding back. No one pressed him. Sigurd listened for some time, but the talk was familiar, and it was late. Quietly, without asking leave, he turned from the hearth, wound his way through the hall, around the tables and
the men making their rough beds on the floor. As he reached the passageway to the private chambers, he felt the prickle along the back of his neck. He looked back to the hearth. Regin was watching him, his pale eyes cutting across the hall like a knife’s point. Sigurd was used to curiosity; guests often wanted to see the son of Sigmund. Usually, once they realized he would not chatter with them, he was forgotten. But Regin. What was he looking at? What did he want?

* * *

Sigurd found his mother with her women, finishing the embroidery on the king’s tunic by the light of her small hearth and several smoking candles. She was a fine, pale beauty among her sturdy women. Her slender neck was bowed over the tunic, her long hair falling to her hands. He stood in the doorway until she raised her dark blue eyes to his. Hands still busy, she sent her women from the room. When they were gone, he sat in the rushes at her feet.

Very few could be as silent as she. She never asked him the silly questions her women did. She never treated him like a child. Many called her cold, but Sigurd knew Hjalprek had understood her better. Hjalprek had always said her heart was a warrior’s, that she was proud and strong. He had even said once that she might have been more content, had she been born a man.

Sigurd watched her work. With the funeral shirt a puddle on her lap, her quick hands sent the needle dipping in and out of the blue-dyed linen, appearing and
disappearing like a ship in a swell. He had never seen her tear out her stitches; everything
she made was perfect.

He said, “There’s a man here, a strange man. He came for the funeral.”

Hiordis set another stitch. “Does this man have a name?”

“Aelf called him Regin.”

Hiordis paused, her thread pulled halfway through the blue cloth. “You’re
certain?”

“Of course. Who is he? Why’s everyone afraid of him?”

“He was King Hjalprek’s foster-father.”

Sigurd drew up his knees, frowning at this. “That’s what Aelf said, but it doesn’t
make sense. This man’s younger than Hjalprek.”

“No. He’s not. Regin is old, old, who knows how old.” Her hands dropped into
the puddle of cloth. “But there’s something more. They say he lived here once,
generations ago, that he was the king’s smith. They say his skill is beyond compare, even
unnatural.”

Sigurd’s heart skipped a beat. Somehow, he had expected this. “Unnatural how?”

Hiordis shrugged, as though it were unimportant. When she spoke again, her
voice was stiffer. “It’s just gossip, from those with nothing better to think about. But.
They say he’s a wizard. That he has a heart of iron and a mind as ruthless as a forge-fire.”
She picked up her embroidery again, began to put sails on a ship. “Did you speak with
him?”

“Yes. I was not afraid.”
Hiordis glanced at him, her lips pursing briefly, then she turned back to the funeral shirt.

Sigurd searched for his mother’s eyes behind her veil of hair. “Do you think it’s true? That he’s a wizard?”

Hiordis shrugged again. “It’s possible. Why are you interested?”

“She looked at me like he knew me. He knew who I was before anyone said my name.”

Hiordis smiled a little. “Many people know who you are. They guess by your age and by the way the men respect you. And by your handsome face, of course. You look so like your father.”

Sigurd stilled, torn between pursuing his questions of Regin and sensing a chance to hear of his father. So rarely did Hiordis even mention him. “What did he look like?”

At first it seemed she would not answer, that she had lost herself in her embroidery. Then she said, “He had the deepest laugh, so low it was like the earth rumbling.” Hiordis trailed off, her hands going still. She saw Sigmund’s weathered face, his smile folding the skin deep around his eyes when he looked at her, pregnant with Sigurd. She remembered how he had touched her round, delicate belly so gently with his calloused hands.

Hiordis swallowed against the lump in her throat, staring hard at her hands until she trusted her eyes. Then she looked up at her son, sitting as still as a hunter afraid to startle a shy doe. Such a beautiful boy. If not for him, she could never have borne what Odin had demanded of her. But, then, if not for him, Odin would not have asked it. But that did not matter. She tried to remember the question Sigurd had asked her, something
about Sigmund, how he had looked? It was hard for the boy never to have known his father, she knew that. But it was hard for her, too, to speak of him. Finally she said, “I never saw your father as a young man. He was past his sixtieth winter when we married. But you have his large eyes, his broad face. You look like I imagine he did.”

“Tell me how he died.”

“You know the story.”

“Please.”

Hiordis sighed, fingering the blue embroidery thread. “All right. It started with Lygni. No. It started with my father, your grandfather, the island king of Baltia. He looked for suitors for me, and they came. Your father was one of them. He had been married before, had had children, but all were dead, and so he came to Baltia. But Lygni was already there. Lygni had seemed fine enough until your father entered the Baltia hall.

“On the first night of his visit, your father sat by the hearth and told how he had drawn Odin’s sword from the great tree, the Branstock, when no other could shift it.”

Hiordis could not tell her son what that moment had done to her, how she had known then that Sigmund was dangerous. Not because he was descended from Odin, not because of the sword, but because his expression as he spoke—eerie, unfocused—was not quite human. To Sigurd, she said only, “That night, I chose him over Lygni.

“Lygni was a sore loser. He bided his time, waited four years, gathering enough men, I suppose. Then he attacked, striking at the town below the Volsung hall, burning it. Your father led his men out to defend the town. The battle was short. Lygni had greater numbers.”
“By the end, your father was red to the shoulders with the blood of his enemies. Yet Odin’s will turned against him. Odin himself appeared on the field, blinding everyone with his silver armor. He caught your father’s sword in his fist, and the blade shattered. Odin vanished. Then Sigmund’s men began to fall fast around him, and he grew fey and reckless, as they say warriors do at the end. He rushed toward fate, dying under the swords of Lygni’s men. That is what I saw, from where I had hidden in the woods.”

Hiordis spent some moments staring into the folds of blue cloth on her lap. With the story in her mouth, she felt how purposeless it all was: the shirt, the funeral, her life with Aelf. Everything was already over. She heard Sigurd stir in the rushes. She wanted to hold him to her, wanted to grasp that one remainder of her life. But he was not really hers. He was Odin’s, and Odin took whatever he wanted. The story always made her remember that. She said, “Go to bed, Sigurd. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

Long after Sigurd had left her, Hiordis sat unmoving, consumed by her story. She saw Sigmund lying in the trampled grass, the blood of his death wound crusting his broken byrnie, his eyes staring, sightless, into the fading sky. She had kissed his lips, had pressed her cheek against his. When she had raised her head, drawing away from him, her fine, pale hair had caught in the mail-rings.

Odin had stood behind her, silent, waiting, watching. He had been there for some time, one-eyed and grim, his white braids hanging to his belt and his spear terrible beside him. She had ignored him.
“You must go now,” he said when she had drawn her hand over Sigmund’s eyes. “Lygni’s already discovered you’re not in the hall. You must gather up the shards of the sword Gram and flee with your handmaid.”

“And just where do you expect me to go?”

“Another fleet is landing on the coast. Aelf, son of King Hjalprek of Denmark, leads them. Your future is there.”

Hiordis had closed her eyes. When she had chosen Sigmund over Lygni, she had joined herself to an uncertainty; she had known that. She had wanted to be part of something, had known herself to be strong enough. But she had not understood then what it would mean to be woven into someone else’s design, caught up in someone else’s fate.

“You’re not here for me,” she said. “You’re here for my son.”

“Don’t meddle with me, woman.”

“Maybe I’ll wait for Lygni. You know he’ll take me to his bed. I could kill him myself.”

“Don’t be a fool. Get yourself out of here.”

“Then who will avenge my husband? Who will fix this? Not you.”

Odin was growing impatient. “Save your son. The task is his, as you well know. He won’t thank you for interfering.”

“You did this,” said Hiordis. “Don’t think I don’t see that.” And yet she unbuckled the scabbard from Sigmund’s waist and felt in the grass for the broken sword, careful to find all the pieces. She forced the shards into the fleece-lined sheath, angry, cutting her fingers. Odin was right—she knew that. The rest did not matter.
Hiordis and her maid went down to the shore. Aelf’s men were securing the ship, and Aelf himself, finely dressed and wearing clean, unblemished armor, crossed the beach to meet them. He was handsome, charming. He was young. He had thick, beautiful hair, and he smiled at Hiordis, his teeth white and even. She was unimpressed.

When she identified herself, Aelf offered her sanctuary, but he wanted to know what had become of Sigmund’s wealth, for the fame of his treasure hoard was widespread. Hiordis then looked on him with some respect—at least he wasn’t a complete fool—and she took him to the cave where Sigmund had hidden that treasure from Lygni’s invading army. If she left the hoard, Lygni’s men might someday find it, and so it would go instead to Denmark with her and Aelf and Sigmund’s unborn son.

When the story had spun itself out before her, the threads of it only a little faded by time, Hiordis wept.

* * *

The next day, Sigurd stood in the crowd near the shore as the corpse was carried to the ship. Aelf and Freod took the body, stiff and stinking despite the herbs sewn into the tunic, inside the tent and laid him in the bed. Then the provisions were loaded, mead and meat, bread, fruit and leeks, also the king’s weapons and treasures. His dog was killed, then his two best horses and two cows, horns gilded, and these also went into the ship. Last was Greta, the king’s concubine, dazed and stumbling. Aelf took a burning branch from the fire on the shore. He walked backwards toward the ship and thrust the flaming brand into the kindling and timbers beneath. Then everyone took up fire.
Sigurd was the last to throw his branch onto the burning ship. He stood before it, the flames heating his face, while the others drew back. Until now it had not seemed final. Even when Hjalprek’s body had laid cold and grey inside the rocky, cave-like holding grave, he had still been there. But now. There would be no more gruff smiles, no more stories of the Volsungs told in the deep, rough voice. There would be no one who saw him as Hjalprek had, no one to say he would be the very hand of Odin when he struck off Lygni’s head some day. Sigurd felt fingers on his shoulder. Freod. The old warrior nodded grimly to the ship. Sigurd threw the branch and turned away.

The feasting lasted many days, and a great deal of the king’s wealth was spent in honoring him. The youths and the men danced the battle-dance each night in the hall, leaping among the upturned spears with their weapons in hand, howling and beating their shields. Sigurd loved the dance. He could already leap higher than the boys of several more winters, and he was faster. The men praised him, and it pleased him to be set above the others, though it made those boys glare and stand apart from him.

One night, while Sigurd stood catching his breath at the edge of the dance, Regin appeared beside him. Regin’s pale eyes, which Sigurd had often found watching him, glinted in the hearth light. “You’re fast,” said Regin, his flat voice making it a statement, not praise. “Are you strong?”

Sigurd frowned at the question. Everyone knew he was strong for his age. Surely Regin had seen that. “I am.”

“Yet they say you will not be as big as your father. Neither as tall, nor as broad.”

Sigurd fought the urge to look down. He would not show Regin his shame. “I have heard that.”
Regin looked at him with curiosity and a little puzzlement. “What will you do then, if you have to fight someone bigger than you?”

“I will have to be faster than he is.”

Regin nodded appreciatively. “You will also have to want it more, the victory. Think about that,” said Regin, disappearing into the crowd before Sigurd could answer him.

* * * * *

On a fine autumn day, when the funeral feasts were over, Aelf was made king in a formal ceremony within the town’s temple, a large wooden building near the king’s hall. Crowded at the entrance and stretching back along the road, the townsfolk and the farmers waited for their new king to emerge.

Within, Aelf’s kin, Hjalprek’s thanes, the distinguished guests, and high-ranking servants stood shoulder to shoulder. The temple reeked of stale sacrifice. The clay floor, the paneled walls, the carved columns that bore the gods’ faces, even the ceiling, were all stained with layer upon brown layer of consecrated blood. Set apart from the other wooden gods was the column of Odin. He stood behind the stone altar, his crudely carved eye enormous and watching. His ravens gripped his shoulders. His hand gripped his spear. The altar before him held the blood-bowl, the blood-twig, and the knife of sacrifice. It held also the heavy golden arm-ring of the king.

Sigurd, dressed in the fine clothes he had worn for the funeral, stood between his mother and Regin. He felt a dull ache in his chest as Aelf swore his oath of kingship on
the arm-ring. He knew Aelf was not a poor swordsman or even a bad man; he just didn’t like him. He didn’t want him to be in Hjalprek’s place.

“Changes in kingship,” Regin whispered to Sigurd as king’s thanes swore fealty to Aelf on the arm-ring, “are always so interesting. All these men. Once they were Hjalprek’s. Now they’re Aelf’s.”

“Of course,” said Sigurd, ignoring the sharp, silencing look his mother gave him. “That’s how it’s done. Why shouldn’t they pledge themselves to Aelf?”

“Oh, they should. That’s not what I meant. You wait and see. Things will be different now. These men will be different. Perhaps not right at first, but give them time.” He added, seeming to weight each word, “They will be Aelf’s men.”

Regin turned his attention back to the oath-giving, apparently unaware of Sigurd’s stare. What did Regin mean? There seemed to be more to his words than Sigurd could hear. But then, he had realized these last few days, Regin was like that, half of him always hidden.

The shifting of the crowd brought his attention back to the ceremony. People were moving to make way for the animals of sacrifice, a fine young bull and three milk-fattened lambs. Later, skinned and gutted, they would be impaled on the spits to swell the feast.

Aelf held up the arm-ring, showed it to the crowd, and pushed it up his arm. Then he took the knife and bowl from the altar and performed his first act as king. As he tore open each throat with the crusted altar blade, he caught the death blood in the bowl. Then, dipping the blood-twig into it, he moved about the temple, flicking the blood of sacrifice onto the faces of the gods, onto his thanes and the gathered men and women.
Sigurd saw some grimace as the warm blood struck them. When it splattered his own cheek and chin, he willed himself to stillness.

Aelf tapped the twig to his own forehead, and the blood ran down his nose, ran through his eyebrows and spilled onto his cheeks. He flicked the last of the blood onto Odin’s already slick and shining face, and the crowd hailed him as king. Then he returned the tools of worship to the altar and led his people out of the temple. The waiting crowd broke into cheers.

Sigurd walked behind Aelf and Hiordis, surrounded by the thanes who had sworn themselves to the new king. As they made their way to the hall and the celebration, his thoughts turned again to Regin and what he had said about these men. In truth, Regin had not said much, but there had been a warning in his voice, and Sigurd was reminded of Hjalprek’s last words. They had been a warning as well, and he still had not shaken the chill they had left in him. Things would change with Hjalprek dead—that had never been in doubt—but what danger Hjalprek had sensed, what Regin’s foreboding tone suggested, he could not imagine.
Chapter 2

After the king-making had been celebrated, the preparations for winter resumed. Within the stronghold and without, women were busy with the butter and cheese-making and with drying fish and meat. Farmers and herdsmen were bringing the sheep, goats, and the cattle in from the summer pastures, shutting the sturdy into byres for wintering, slaughtering the rest.

The king’s hunting party assembled as the autumn sun hung below the morning horizon, the horses stamping and sidling in the courtyard and the scent hounds shivering with excitement. The men laughed, boasting of past hunts and forecasting the day’s victories. This talk abated somewhat as they rode through the town, with the thud of hooves against the wooden planking swelling over their voices. They filed through the gateway of the inner rampart, the guards alert and efficient as the new king passed by them. The outer gateway tunneled through the earthen base of the rampart, where the
horses’ hooves struck out a jarring echo. Sigurd rode behind Aelf with the thanes, the other boys, and Regin. He felt Gladung’s excitement through the saddle; the horse loved to hunt as much as he did, and he had to keep a firm hand on the reins.

As they turned off the road into the king’s forest, the sun was climbing, though the grey of dawn lingered under the trees. The scent hounds hurried through the underbrush, noses down, weaving and wandering as they searched for game.

Gar, his beard still patchy on his young face and his mouth showing its usual teasing smile, urged his horse up beside Sigurd’s. “What possessed you bring that doddering old pony on a hunt?”

Sigurd scowled. Gladung was actually taller than Gar’s horse. More importantly, Gladung had once belonged to King Hjalprek. Though past his prime, he was still a fine animal. Gar knew that, Sigurd was certain. But worst of all, Sigurd hated any implication that he needed a gentle mount. He was an excellent rider—the horse-master even trusted him with the two- and three-year olds—and everyone knew it.

“Watch your tongue, Gar,” snapped Freod from Sigurd’s other side. “No man, much less a thane, should speak ill of the king’s horse.”

“It’s all right,” said Sigurd stiffly, though he was grateful to Freod. “Gar’s just embarrassed because he’s riding a mare.”

Gar laughed. “One of these days you’ll understand that riding a mare can be a lot of fun.” Gar laughed again.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Sigurd told him.

“What, laugh?”
“No! I mean I wish you wouldn’t”—Gar looked delighted at Sigurd’s confusion and embarrassment as he caught the joke—“you know what I mean!”

“So serious all the time,” said Gar, cuffing him lightly on the shoulder. “It’s not healthy.”

Sigurd gave him a disgusted look, but he did smile a little. He and Gar talked then about the hunt, what game they expected and where.

Morning was coming into the forest, the light falling golden on the tree trunks and lying between the shadows, when the hounds picked up a scent, running and belling as they followed the trail. The hunt-master sounded his horn for deer, and the hunting party strung their bows. A shape flashed between the trees ahead of them, and the men kicked their horses to a gallop, flying past the discordant, belling hounds. The stag was swift and sure-footed, dodging into the shadows.

Sigurd drew an arrow from his quiver as Gladung galloped up a rise. He watched Aelf draw his own arrow and waited. The first shot must be the king’s. They crested the rise and Aelf missed one opportunity when the stag turned to leap a fallen log. The king and his company followed, Gladung sailing over the log beside Freod’s horse. The stag disappeared into the underbrush, and the men looked around wildly. The horses began to slow. When the stag bolted into the open again, they charged after it. Aelf nocked an arrow while his horse galloped smoothly beneath him. He drew the bow and fired. The stag ran through the trees for some time, the horses pounding after it, then fell, crashing to its shoulder. It rolled, sliding several feet. They reined in the horses and trotted to where the animal lay, not quite dead. Aelf dismounted and pulled his knife from his belt. He cut the stag’s throat, and a shout went up among the men.
They hunted all through the morning, taking several red deer and some smaller game. Aelf shot a doe, but the arrow struck her flank and she ran on. Sigurd and Gar both loosed their arrows then, and she fell dead. A lot of speculation followed as to whose had been the killing shot. Most argued for Sigurd, though he only shrugged, and the arrows were pulled from behind the doe’s shoulder.

When the sun was high they stopped near a stream, where they watered the horses and tethered them for a rest. Sigurd drew a loaf of bread from his saddlebags. He dug through the strips of leather he carried for repairing his snares and the table scraps for resetting them, and found the meat wrapped in its square of cloth. He took his meal to where Gar waited for him.

“It was a good shot,” admitted Gar when Sigurd sat down, and he scratched the side of his long nose. “That doe, I mean. You think your arrow killed her?”

“You know it did. Mine struck the heart. Yours hit the lungs. She might have run ten more paces.”

“Is that so? Then why didn’t you claim the victory?”

“I knew I killed her. It didn’t matter.”

Gar shook his head. “By the gods, you are strange.” As Sigurd took a bite of his bread, Gar nodded at his bandaged hand. “Let me see it.”

Sigurd held out the hand, the fingers still bound tightly together, though the bruises were fading.

“Looks better,” said Gar, “but still, you’d think your aim would be off. You’d think you’d let your friend Gar make the killing shot. Once in a while.”
Sigurd laughed. “Work on your aim, then. It’s not my fault you’re always waving your sword around on the training field. You never pick up your bow unless we go hunting.”

“Waving my sword around,” muttered Gar, but he smiled to himself. He took a knife from his belt and cut a piece of cheese for Sigurd. He nodded toward a group of boys. “The lads over there are jealous.”

The boys sat close together, laughing too loudly.

Sigurd’s face stiffened. “I don’t care about them.”

“Ah, Sigurd,” sighed Gar.

Sigurd looked resolutely away from the boys. He could never be friends with them. They didn’t like him, and he didn’t like them either. He turned his attention to the thanes sitting with Aelf near the water. He thought, as he often had since the king-making, of Regin’s comment that the thanes were now Aelf’s men. Indeed, there was a new deference in their speech and many were already vying for his favor. He worried suddenly for Freod, who said what he thought, as he always had, his broad, weathered face stern but honest. Aelf would not like that.

In what had become habit, Sigurd let his eyes drift to Regin at the edge of Aelf’s company. As always, Regin was conspicuous among the thanes. Where they were fully armed for the hunt, Regin carried only a short knife. No one had dared comment, despite the fact that coming so poorly armed to a hunt would have earned anyone else severe ridicule. Regin’s dark, plain clothes also set him apart from the other men, who wore bright-dyed wools. Despite their efforts at nonchalance, the thanes were clearly
uncomfortable with him. They answered him when he spoke, but they still would not
look him in the eye. What was it about this man?

Some days ago, not long after the funeral, as Freod had instructed him in
improving his spear cast, Sigurd had asked how it was that Regin had been the king’s
smith. What people said of him did not make sense. How could he be so old? How could
he be a smith when he walked and talked like a lord? How could he be a lord when he
dressed so plainly and traveled alone? And where did he live? Someone had said Regin
lived near the Glittering Heath, a horrid wasteland by all accounts, but the man had
refused to say more, as though the name of that place frightened him. But Freod, too, had
been evasive, his answers vague.

“He was the smith here, sure enough,” Freod had said, answering the easy
question. “But that was in the time of King Knut, King Hjalprek’s great grandfather, or so
Hjalprek told me.”

“But where did he come from?”

“Who knows? He just was.”

Sigurd ground the butt of his spear into the dirt. “I don’t understand.”

“And that’s just as well, isn’t it. Now leave off.”

“But—who is he? Why’d he leave? How come I’ve never seen him before? How
come no one talked about him until he arrived for the funeral?”

“Aren’t you the curious one today? What’re you after, boy? It’s not like you to be
all questions and nosiness.” Freod set his heavy-knuckled fists at his waist and nudged
Sigurd’s spear with his foot. “Now pick that up and let me see if you’ve finally stopped
dropping your elbow.”
“Freod,” said Sigurd in exasperation.

Freod glared at him a moment, his mouth tight. Then he glanced over each shoulder. “Fine. But this is just the story, hear? Regin was smith for King Knut’s father and grandfather. Don’t ask me why he’s not withered and white-haired, because I don’t want to know. They say Regin came from some kind of noble family.” Freod raised his hands at Sigurd’s questioning look. “I don’t know the details. Anyway, King Knut got caught up in a long, bloody campaign and Regin helped him win somehow, and it wasn’t just by making swords and spearheads, that’s for sure. Some say Regin only gave Knut a strategy; some say it was another thing entirely. Whatever it was, Knut gifted him a good deal of gold, and Regin set himself up down south somewhere, and by all accounts he’s been there ever since. That’s all I know. Now no more talk about Regin. You don’t need to be taking an interest in him.”

* * *

When he had first become the king’s smith, Regin had been treated like any man, taken in for the pity of his ragged and ruined self, then praised for his skill. In those uncertain days he had had no choice but to live such an unacknowledged life. People had been wary of him, true, but he had been otherwise ignored. It galled him still, the shame of it, even when no living man’s grandfather could have remembered that time. He was something more now. The Counselor, most called him, and he was known to be a wise man. None could quite define that wisdom, and so they called it magic. Fools. Much of it was patience, which he had learned by necessity. He could wait for a king to die, wait for
his enemies to forget him; he could outwait any man. Yet when there was opportunity, he wasted no time.

Regin watched Sigurd slip away from his companion. The boy was stealthy, moving in silence and ducking around to the far side of his horse where none would see him. But Regin, too, could be stealthy. He muttered a vague leave-taking to Aelf, who was immersed in a debate about tributes. Aelf half-nodded, and Regin was at the head of Sigurd’s horse before the boy was finished tightening his saddle girth.

“Sneaking off?” he said, startling the boy. Sigurd’s face showed his annoyance at being taken by surprise.

“Gar knows where I’m going.”

“And where is that?”

“I have some snares along this stream.”

“Trapping is a fine method of hunting. I’ll ride with you, and we’ll see if any hapless creature has fallen into your hands.”

Sigurd nodded and pulled his reins from the tree branch. Regin left the boy and went to ready his own horse. He could sense Freod watching him. The old warrior was too obvious in his distrust; such a man could never outmaneuver him. Freod likely knew it, for he looked down at Regin’s glance.

They rode side by side along the stream bank, the leaves brittle and noisy beneath their horses’ hooves. A raven settled in the branches overhead. Regin frowned upward. Thoughtful birds, full of memory, there were not to be trusted.

When they had ridden some way, Regin asked, “What do you know of your father?”
Sigurd straightened in his saddle. The question was too direct, and it set him on edge. He answered only, “He was a great king.”

“That he was. And wealthy.”

Sigurd nodded cautiously, and Regin continued, “I assume you know your father’s wealth was hidden before his death, to keep it from Lygni. The story’s well known even beyond Hjalprek’s borders, but it’s more than just hearth-talk. Do you know who holds that treasure now?”

“King Hjalprek used to ward it for me. He said I would have it when I was older, but I guess Aelf keeps it now.”

“Aelf. I see,” said Regin in a tone of grim understanding.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Regin gazed into the branches high above, as though thinking. “You trust him, don’t you? Aelf?”

Sigurd was suddenly wary. “What do you mean?”

Regin shrugged as though to dismiss the matter, but his silence still asked the question. Sigurd frowned, sensing something in Regin’s words, not knowing what.

“I’m sure you have nothing to worry about,” Regin assured him. “Aelf wouldn’t try to keep it from you, would he? He understands that it’s not his, right?”

“Right,” said Sigurd but with an echo of Regin’s doubt. Sigurd didn’t distrust Aelf, exactly, had never had reason to, but Regin’s questions stirred discomfort.

When they came to Sigurd’s first snare, a rabbit lay panting and glassy-eyed with the leather noose around its body. Sigurd broke its neck with an expressionless efficiency
and put the animal in a sack that hung from his saddle. He reset the snare with some crumbs of cheese and a piece of bread soggy with meat juice.

As they rode on, Regin began to ask Sigurd what he knew of weapons, of dead kings, of runes and music. Sigurd answered honestly, without exaggerating as most children would, and Regin was pleased. The boy had been well brought up. His mind was keen, and even if he did prefer swords to study and craftsmanship, that was all to the good really. Regin worried for a while that he had pushed too hard with his questions of Aelf and Sigmund. The boy was more discerning than he had expected. But as they rode along the stream, Regin thought he felt Sigurd begin to look on him with less caution. He could seem easy and comfortable when it suited him.

Sigurd’s snares took them nearly a mile down the stream. He added another rabbit to his sack and a dark-pelted marten. When Sigurd had reset his last snare, they trotted back along the stream to where the hunting party had rested. From there they followed the trail of trampled underbrush farther into the forest.

After some time, they heard the hounds belling in the distance. As they drew nearer, they heard the shouts of men and the screams of a wild boar. The hounds’ voices grew frantic. Regin held back his horse even as Sigurd urged his to a canter. Regin followed behind, watching the boy pull his ash-spear free of its laces.

Most of the hunting party was still mounted, spears in hand, trying to contain the boar as it ran squealing through a clearing, pursued by several men on foot and a pack of hounds. The hounds barked and snapped, biting at the boar’s legs and ears. It was a massive animal, nearly waist high, its rounded back broad and bristled, its short legs thick. It had a long, heavy face, and the tusks were huge and yellowed. One hound
managed to grip an ear in its teeth. The boar’s head bowed under the sudden weight, but it gave a quick upward thrust and caught the hound with its tusk. The hound let out a high, pained yelp and fell away from the struggle. The boar reached the edge of the clearing and threw itself into a dense covering of underbrush. The hounds circled around, barking madly and snapping at the boar as it turned its awkward, bulky body and backed deeper into the brush. The hunt master tried to call off the hounds, but they were frenzied beyond obedience.

The men on foot slowed their pace, raising their spears to strike. Aelf was at the front of the advancement. He stopped within spear’s reach of the boar, which was breathing raggedly, its heaving sides rustling the underbrush. The light touched only the end of its tapered snout. The thick, bristled body and the small, furious eyes were hidden in the dark covering of brush.

Aelf crept closer. He shifted his spear, balancing it, and took a side step, trying to get a view of the boar’s neck. Aelf drew a breath and stabbed into the brush. There was a scream of rage and the boar charged out. Its head was lowered. In a few strides it reached Aelf and gave a violent upward thrust. Aelf fell with a cry, knocked aside by the boar’s charge. The men on foot, shouting with dismay, stabbed at the boar as it barreled past them.

The hounds flew after the boar, and the horses forming an outer ring jibbed and pranced as their riders fought to hold them. Sigurd, who had halted at this ring, urged Gladung past the other horses and into the clearing. He moved Gladung into the boar’s path, and the old stallion jogged side-to-side, ready to leap out of the way. The boar veered right, and Sigurd lunged out of the saddle, putting all his weight behind the spear.
The point stabbed into the boar’s neck, piercing arteries and veins, damaging the lungs and the spine running low through the boar’s shoulder. The boar fell to its side, and Sigurd, hands still on the spear, was flung over its back.

The boar was dead by the time the men had jumped off their horses and run to where it lay. Freod pulled Sigurd to his feet with an anxious laugh and looked for blood. Then the men remembered the king. They hurried to where he was standing, shaky and supported by one of the thanes. They walked him over to a tree, where he slid down with a grunt. His leg was bloody. He widened the tear in his trouser leg, exposing a slice through the muscle of his thigh. It would leave an ugly scar.

Regin had not joined the rush toward Sigurd or the king. He dismounted, to be polite, but he hung back. There was some silence when the hunt-master killed the gored hound, whining and bleeding to death where it had fallen, but then they laughed together about the fury of the boar and Sigurd’s kill. They cuffed the boy and ruffled his hair, which he bore gracefully enough. When the king’s leg had been bandaged, the men went back to look at Sigurd’s boar.

Sigurd was smiling, though he said little while the men talked over the entire incident. The other boys inspected the boar’s tusks, pulling down the lower lip to see how long they were and examining the boar’s neck where the spear still protruded.

What Regin most noticed, however, while the spear was pulled from the dense flesh and the body heaved up onto the back of a horse, was the coldness in Aelf’s eyes as he looked on Sigurd.

* * *
Fall passed into winter, and the snows fell. The dark months were dull but peaceful. The animals were shut into the byres, the land was still and white, and smoke rose continually from the roofs vents. It was a time for mending clothes and gear, fletching arrows and telling stories. The food was heavy, the mead thick and sweet.

When the days lengthened again, men and women went out, wrapped in furs, and by the time the snows were melting, training was resumed in the yards, and the animals were restless. Regin had not intended to stay so long, but he wanted something.

The hall was all but empty. A few women sat around the small cooking hearth, sewing and knitting while they talked in hushed voices. The hall was hazy from the winter fires, though most of the smoke hung around the rafters. It was dim. Regin and Aelf lingered by the central hearth, the fire burning low in the day’s warmth. They sat at board, playing a weighted game of strategy. Regin had begun with the disadvantage, but Aelf was losing ground.

“Your father was a fair hand at the board, but he had little gift for treachery.”

Aelf grumbled, “He could never have beaten you then.”

“Certainly not.” Regin considered his pieces and set his trap.

He watched Aelf search for what escape the board could offer. Aelf furrowed his brow, frowned, clenched his jaw, and Regin found in these subtleties a man of quiet anger. He had seen Aelf only a few times in his youth, had come to judge his promise. He thought now he ought to have tried harder to persuade Hjalprek to let him foster Aelf, but he had been little impressed with the boy’s open expression and ready smile and had dropped the matter. Yet Aelf had grown into a more sober man than expected. And even
though he lacked brilliance, even though he showed none of Hjalprek’s steely resolve, he would gain the respect of his father’s men in time.

With an effort, Regin turned his mind from the past and looked to the future. “Tell me more of the boy.”

“What of him? He’ll be a warrior.”

“Not just that, I think. His father was a king.”

“Lygni still holds the Volsung lands.” Aelf’s forehead wrinkled, and his mouth turned down derisively. “It’ll take more than childish daring to get them back. He’ll need men, and in case you hadn’t noticed, he’s not exactly a natural leader.”

Regin smiled his wolf-smile. “You seem to me a little young for such bitterness. Hiordis is not yet too old to bear you a son.”

Aelf’s laugh was sour. “What, after ten winters of barrenness you think she’ll quicken? Oh, likely.” He stared at his ruined campaign on the board. “I do care about the boy, Regin, he’s just—”

“He makes you uncomfortable.”

Aelf was offended. “Don’t be ridiculous. He’s a child.” He straightened his stiff, scarred leg.

“At the moment. But Odin’s wrath is in him—you must have sensed it—and that will be dangerous some day. He needs the right guidance; he is, as you say, not a leader. But he can learn to fake it. And even now, those who know him best—they love him beyond reason. Was that not true with your father? Think of that, Aelf. Think of that within your court.”
Aelf moved another piece, and Regin countered him, near now to victory. Aelf’s face tightened in frustration. Regin, his own face still, watched Aelf drain his mead-horn, swirl the dregs. He fingered Aelf’s taken game pieces.

“He should be fostered.”

Aelf made no reply, running his thumb around the rim of the horn.

“Let me take him.”

“His mother might object to that.”

“He is not hers to keep.”

“There’ve been other offers.”

“Of course there have. He’s the son of Sigmund, son of Volsung, descendant of Odin himself.”

“Is that why you want him?”

“Listen to me, Aelf. That boy—he’s like iron ore. Do you know what to do with him? Because I do.”

Aelf leaned forward on the table, his face full of an uneasy determination. “Let me make this plain. I don’t trust you, Regin. And neither did my father. He would have refused Sigurd to you, just as he refused me.”

“Oh, not quite.” Regin leaned back in his chair, his ice-blue eyes intent on Aelf. “I think you know very well he’d have held much tighter to that Volsung boy than he ever did to you.”

Aelf scowled. “Your tongue may be sharp, Counselor, because you’re a scoundrel and a bastard, but you strike wide of the mark.” Aelf pretended then to study the board, but the game was already lost.
Chapter 3

For three weeks, Aelf kept Regin’s offer to himself, intending to ignore it, but it grew in his mind, shadowed his thoughts. He watched the men at night, huddled by the hearth-fire, telling tales of the Volsungs to please the boy. He watched Regin, haunting the hall as he had all winter, hiding himself in silence while the men spoke too freely. And so one night, when his growing anxiety had made him too rough with Hiordis, he confessed his intention to send Sigurd with Regin once the roads were passable.

Hiordis was silent a moment then said, “Are you such a coward that you give me this news in the dark, where you cannot see my face?”

“It’s for the best, Hiordis. You knew this day would come.”

“But Regin? Why do you do this? Why would you send my son into that wolf’s den?”
“Don’t be dramatic. You’re a queen, not a village wench. Sigurd would have been fostered years ago had my father not clung to him. He must be fostered now—how else can he learn to live in the world?—and Regin’s a wise man, and cunning. Do you want Sigurd fostered with some backwater warlord or some careless, aging chieftain? Don’t forget Regin fostered my father. He is worthy of Sigurd’s lineage, and I want no quarrel with him.”

“So you’ll give Regin what he wants out of fear. Your father would never have done so.”

Aelf’s reply was angry. “He can be a valuable ally, Hiordis, and you know little of politics, hiding away with your women every day, never joining me at the hearth.”

“You’ve made your excuses.” Hiordis turned onto her side, away from Aelf.

“Now leave me alone.”

The coals were still hot on the hearth, and their glow caught in the waves of Hiordis’s hair, painted a pale orange crescent on her shoulder. Aelf smoothed his hand over her skin. “Hiordis—”

She lay cold under his touch. “Do not speak to me.”

Aelf withdrew his hand and turned away. He knew he should rebuke her for her insolent words, should send her from the chamber in disgrace. He was the king. And the decision was his. He didn’t need her consent or her approval. And yet, he did. After his own mother had died, giving birth to a stillborn son and sinking Hjalprek into years of grief, Aelf had been surrounded by women intent upon his father’s bed. He had had many mothers then, women charming and solicitous, and he had learned to love and be loved by them. Even now there were warmer beds open to him. And so he wondered why he
should care for the love of this one woman, so immovable beside him. He could not answer that question, and he gazed long into the embers, waiting for sleep.

* * *

It was some days before the matter was settled. Aelf consulted the thanes, listened to their counsel, and thought was divided. Some, sensing Aelf’s will, would only reflect his opinion. Others, whose fears of Regin had abated as the winter passed and he brought no mysteries among them, reasoned that he was crafty and careful, and that Sigurd would learn much under his guidance. Regin was, after all, the Master of Masters, the great smith and war-winner, and Hjalprek himself had been fostered by him. Still others were wary, mostly the older men, and these spoke in hushed voices of what Hjalprek had sometimes said of Regin’s house and the strange emptiness there.

“Regin has no good will,” said Freod, gesturing with a heavy-knuckled hand. “If he wants Sigurd, it’s for his own purposes. What benefit will there be for the boy? What benefit for this kingdom? I see none. Let Sigurd stay among his own people.”

Aelf’s mouth soured. “You forget, Freod, that we are not his own people, nor is he ours. He’s a Volsung and a foreigner.” He added, too late, into the men’s stiff silence, “Though we love him.”

Despite his words, Aelf grew uncertain through the counsel of the thanes. Confronted also with Hiordis’ tight silence and her fury, he began to lose his resolve.

Regin saw that the king was wavering. He saw how Aelf’s eyes followed Hiordis when she passed through the hall, wrapped in her anger, her slender neck unyielding and
her arms crossed tight against her chest. He saw Aelf, eyes red-rimmed, stare into his mead-horn at night and forget the meat on his plate. If Aelf refused, there would be no second chance. And so, late one evening, when the early spring rains were streaming off the roof, Regin found Aelf sulking in his chamber and said, “I have another boy to foster. His name is Gunnar, and he’s the oldest son of King Giuki of Burgundy. He would be as a brother to Sigurd, and I think you can guess how valuable such a foster-bond might be. Burgundy’s a rich land, sitting fat along the Rhine.”

This argument had a strengthening effect on Aelf, and when the next day he told Hiordis of Giuki’s son, even she stopped to consider.

If such a king as Giuki would send his son willingly to Regin, thought Hiordis as she sat spinning wool with her women, perhaps the old smith did have something to offer. And it was true, as Aelf said, that no one in Denmark was worthy of Sigurd. And it was true, as some of the men said, that Regin ate and drank and slept as any man. He cast no spells that she could see. He was clearly knowledgeable of the kingly arts, barring swordsmanship. And yet, she could not shake the uneasy feeling he gave her. His otherness could not be denied, and it stirred somehow her memory of Sigmund’s uncanny account of the sword he drew, fatefully, from the Branstock. She still kept the shards of it, safe and secret in a pine chest, buried deep in the earth. She did not like to think of that sword, but she could not—would not—dispose of it. So she felt about Regin. There was something deep and inevitable about him, yet she resisted, even resented, that inevitability. Aelf, she knew, bore the brunt of her frustration, but she did not care, not much. She had no other recourse.
Aelf saw that Hiordis was softened, though she still refused his touch. She would come around once the matter was settled and the boy was gone.

When Aelf summoned Regin to his private chamber and spoke of his decision, Regin said only, “You honor me, king of the Danes,” and he lowered his eyes to conceal his triumph.

Called into the room, Sigurd received the news in silence. His face showed neither worry nor surprise. Regin, though, thought he sensed a cautious excitement, saw perhaps curiosity and even a bit of pride in Sigurd’s eyes.

The boy said, “We’ll go south, that’s where you live?”

“Yes.” There was clearly something else on Sigurd’s mind. Regin prompted, “What do you know of the south?”

“Not much. But…”

“But what?”

“Do you live near the Glittering Heath? Have you seen it?”

That surprised Regin, unsettled him. “What do you know about the Heath?”

Sigurd shrugged, looking more boyish than usual. “They say it’s a strange place, a wasteland. Some say no one will cross it because something lives there. No one seems to know what. Or at least they don’t tell me.”

“It interests you, the Heath?”

“There’s something in the stories. I don’t know what.” Sigurd shook his head, looking frustrated. “Why will no one speak plainly?”

“Perhaps there’s nothing plain about the Heath,” said Regin, giving Sigurd a teasing smile meant to make light of the boy’s questions, to dismiss them.
“But—”

Regin made his tone final: “Perhaps I’ll take you there someday, and you can see for yourself.”

Back in his own private chamber, Regin sat in his chair until his fire had died and the coals were dim. Why had Sigurd asked of the Heath? Had he been clinging to that question all winter? Did he know something? Had the thanes, perhaps, been telling stories of that god-forsaken place? Or was the boy just that intuitive, somehow sensing the Heath’s importance? More than ever, Regin wanted that boy, wanted to teach and shape him, wanted to draw out his potential and see it used.

* * *

During the weeks before Sigurd’s departure, Aelf’s household awoke from its lingering winter stupor. Hiordis and her women worked their looms with a sudden vigor, beating the weaving tight with their whale-bone batons. They cut the new cloth and the cloth from their winter weaving, sewing garments for the queen’s son. Sigurd trained in the practice-yard with the thanes and began to condition Gladung for travel. There were feasts, though variety was limited by the depleted winter stores, and Aelf sat brooding by the hearth.

Finally, the saddlebags were packed and the horses shod, and the day broke clear and fine for traveling. Hiordis, her women, Aelf, and the thanes gathered in the courtyard. There was tension among the men. Many had wanted to form an escort, but Regin had refused. He intended to begin the boy’s education while they traveled, he had said, and
could not do so with a large company. Aelf had only shrugged. His indifference frustrated
the thanes, who would not challenge Regin without his support. Freod had urged Aelf to
consider what his father would have thought of Sigurd traveling so dangerously, of Aelf
allowing it. Aelf had looked hard at his father’s old friend and said nothing.

Now, with the sun a handbreadth above the horizon and Gladung chewing
anxiously at the bit, Sigurd made his farewells. He had been excited these last weeks.
During the long winter he had grown used to Regin, playing at board with him, listening
to strange, ancient stories that Regin told only to him as they sat mending summer gear.
He had even once followed Regin into the smithy, where Regin had walked among the
workbenches, lifted the tools and set them down again. Through the winter months,
Sigurd had come to dread Regin’s departure. There was no one like him in the court, no
one with that quiet, hidden look, no one who made the large men anxious without even a
word. No one who had all the mystery of a story. And so Sigurd was excited to be going
with him.

Yet, it was harder than he had expected, here at the end, standing in the courtyard
he might not see again for years, looking at the faces. Many of the men clapped him on
the shoulder, and Freod was tight-faced, obviously unhappy. Gar kept shaking his head in
a disappointed sort of way.

Aelf bid him safe journey with little more than a nod and a quick, sharp squeeze
of his shoulder. Sigurd was relieved he made no pretense of regret. It would have been
awkward.

His mother embraced him fiercely, but she did not weep. Her face was hard, her
jaw set. Sigurd felt a rush of pride, seeing her so unlike her women, so strong, so self-
possessed while they fretted and sniffed. Then his eyes started to prickle as he felt
suddenly the reality of leaving her, and he turned away quickly so she would not see. As he left her there on the stone steps, some unknown, indefinable protection seemed to dissolve.

Regin, who had been standing several paces back from the farewells, gave the necessary thanks to Aelf for his hospitality through the winter. He bowed his dark head briefly to the assembled company and walked to his horse, which stood quietly next to Sigurd’s.

Freod boosted Sigurd into Gladung’s saddle. Unaided Sigurd could not mount very gracefully, not with Gladung so tall, and Freod was conscious of Sigurd’s dignity. Freod leaned close as Sigurd collected his reins. “Wherever you get to with Regin, don’t forget your family is still here. Nothing changes that. You will be coming back to us.” Freod squeezed Sigurd’s knee and gave him half a smile, his eyes glistening. Then the old warrior forced a stern expression and jerked his chin toward the road

“I will miss you, Freod,” said Sigurd.

“Go on, then,” huffed Freod, and he slapped Gladung’s rump.

Sigurd and Regin walked their horses along the wood-paved road. “Don’t look back,” said Regin. “You would regret it later.” Sigurd did not look back, had not intended to, and they were soon through the ramparts and out of sight.

*   *   *

63
There was a good reason the thanes had wanted an escort for Sigurd. The road was safe only within a day’s ride of the king’s stronghold, where the king’s men carried out the law. Beyond that, small groups of travelers often fell prey to outlaws and other desperate men. Regin knew of these dangers, of course, but he was not greatly troubled by them. He knew how he would die, at least roughly—it had been foretold to him long ago—and his death would not come at the hands of a stranger. Traveling, then, held little danger for him.

Their journey was quiet at first, and they traveled all day, sleeping in the woods at night, or in some farmer’s steading. Two days of heavy rain slowed them, and they paid for a roof and food in a small village. Bored and restless, Sigurd passed the time practicing archery in a farmer’s barn, firing his bow again and again at a target he made from a rotten barrel. The cows were startled at first, their brown eyes wide and mouths going still. Then they would chew again, returning to their feed and their idling. The farmer found many excuses to walk by his barn, and his eyes rolled suspiciously at Sigurd. When the skies cleared, the farmer made little effort to hide his relief.

Back on the road Sigurd felt himself growing lazy in the sun. Gladung had a smooth walk, nothing but bare road stretched ahead, nothing but trees on either side, and Regin rode silent beside him. Suddenly, Regin tensed. His mouth was open to speak when a voice sounded behind them.

“Drop your coins and ride on!”

With a jerk, Sigurd looked over his shoulder to see a thin man dressed in dirty, threadbare clothes training his bow on Regin’s back.
“There are two of us,” Regin said without turning. “Do you think you’ll kill us both before one of us kills you?”

The man answered with a curse and repeated his loud, anxious demands.

Regin slowly looked over his shoulder, his pale eyes dangerous. “How good is your aim?”

“You better shut up or you’ll find out! I don’t want trouble! Just the money.” The man licked his lips and drew his bow tauter, but his hands shook. His fingers were grimy, the nails unkempt. “Drop your money or I put this arrow through your neck!”

Sigurd felt a sudden anger flush out the fear that had first gripped him. The man was afraid, sloppy, and had made him feel stupid and cowardly in his initial fear. The man was no warrior, no one to be threatening him. Besides, he would shoot first at Regin.

Sigurd pulled his knife from his belt. With his traveling cloak hanging behind him, his intention was hidden, but the movement of his arm was not.

The man shouted at him. “Don’t move! Don’t you move! I will shoot!”

“How can he drop his money if he doesn’t move?” said Regin.

“Just do it slow! I got the bow, remember?”

“I remember,” said Regin. “But you won’t shoot us.”

“Yeah? You think so?”

“I know so. I can sense the future, sometimes, and I saw your fate in your eyes as soon as I looked at you. Do you want to know how you’ll to die?”

“Shut up!”

“Do you know what Hel looks like? I saw her once, the death-goddess, when she came to a man, not unlike you, a murderer. She had a beautiful face, certainly. But she
was rotten, a corpse from the waist down, and putrid flesh hung from her in strips.” Regin inhaled strongly, and his dark brows drew together. “Do you smell that?"

“Just shut it!” shouted the man, then, “What? What!”

Regin frowned. “Something dead…rotting. That’s what I smelled, the last time she came.”

Regin focused his gaze some distance behind the man and widened his eyes. His face took on an eerie expression, like he really saw Hel coming, and even Sigurd felt a chill.

The ragged man’s breath came in bursts. He chewed at his lower lip a moment, his face tight, then he turned his head to look.

“Now!” shouted Regin, and Sigurd spun Gladung. The man whipped his head around to face them, but his movements had upset his aim. He fired the bow, but the arrow flew wide of Regin, disappearing into the woods. As the bow twanged, Sigurd flung his knife. It glanced off the man’s hands. He cried out and dropped his bow, fleeing into the trees.

“Peasants,” said Regin in disgust.

Sigurd dismounted. He led Gladung to where his knife had stuck in the mud of the road. He cleaned it on his cloak and returned it to his belt. He walked then to the man’s bow and stared down at it.

“What should we do with this?”

“Break it,” said Regin. “It’s no use to anyone but outlaws.”

It was a crude weapon, plain and poorly made. Sigurd broke it over his knee and tossed the pieces into the woods. He mounted Gladung, his boots now muddy in the
stirrups. He nudged the horse to a trot to catch up with Regin, who had started down the road.

“Were you aiming for his hands, or was it a bad throw?” demanded Regin, when Gladung slowed to a walk beside him.

Sigurd didn’t answer at first. He had thought to kill the man, but when he saw how afraid and desperate he was, his anger had died, and he had felt a little sorry for him. “I’m not sure,” he said truthfully.

“Either way, look to the fault. If your aim was poor, you need to work on it. If not, consider the consequences of your mercy. That man might have shot me, or you. In sparing him, you’ve given him the chance to rob, and perhaps kill, someone else, maybe a woman, maybe an honest man. Besides, what value was there in his life? What reason did that man have to live? He had nothing. He was no one. Outlaws, exiles—they’re the lowest of men.”

“But he was afraid, Regin. He didn’t seem like a killer. He was desperate.”

“Desperate men are sometimes the most dangerous. Perhaps he’s never killed before, but he will. Trust me. Eventually, he will.”

Sigurd fingered the hilt of his knife, frowning. What Regin said seemed true, but it didn’t make things simpler. He hadn’t really wanted to kill that man, not at the end. And yet, he didn’t like to think of him killing someone else.

Regin sighed, “You understand what I’ve said?”

“Yes,” answered Sigurd grudgingly.

“You see what consequences might follow from his escape?”

“Yes, Regin.”
“All right. Now don’t brood on it. Let it go. Besides, perhaps fate will bring justice and he’ll die of infection.”

Sigurd wanted to think on this idea and wished briefly that he could be alone. He needed some time. But Regin gave him no chance to think. Regin kept him distracted with an afternoon’s lesson in history. Regin told of many battles and conflicts between kings. Once told, he would have Sigurd repeat each story to him, and so they passed the time.

That evening they reached a small village where they paid a farmer for lodging and a hot meal. It was a poor, dirty place, but the other steadings looked no better. The farmer was distrustful, and though he gave Regin his own rough pallet for a small piece of hacksilver, he said little to them and scolded his two boys for staring.

They all ate together by the cooking hearth, a simple meal of flatbread and dried fish smeared with butter. The farmer and his family ate quickly with clumsy manners. When the plates had been wiped clean and stacked on a low shelf, the boys were sent to bed. Then the farmer and his wife set about their evening tasks while Sigurd and Regin sat hunched near the fire. The farmer mended a cracking leather halter, sewing a new strip to the crownpiece with a bone needle. His wife spun un-dyed wool, the distaff held in the crook of her arm and the spindle sinking again and again to the floor, drawing out the thread in silence. When the fire had burned low, the farmer stowed his halter, and his wife laid her spinning in a basket. They nodded goodnight to Sigurd and Regin and disappeared into the dark of the raised earthen platform along the wall.
Sigurd turned the farmer’s wooden cup in his hands, the weak, bitter ale growing warm. He glanced at Regin, who was staring into the fire, his face closed. Sigurd made himself look away, but his eyes were drawn to Regin again.

“What?” snapped Regin.

Sigurd jumped a little, caught in his staring. He drew an audible breath, then whispered the question that had troubled him all evening, “Can you really see the future?”

“No.”

Sigurd did not know whether to be relieved or disappointed. “Then you didn’t really see Hel?”

“No one sees her until they die. And even then only if their life was shameful.”

“So you didn’t see her?”

The firelight glinted off Regin’s eyes. He seemed to consider his answer. “I dreamed of her once.”

“What was the dream?”

“Well, she wasn’t coming for me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I wasn’t asking that,” said Sigurd quickly, taken aback.

Regin sighed, a short burst of breath. “There’s one man I hate above all others, one man I want dead. I dreamed once of his death, and I dreamed that Hel came for him.”

Sigurd asked, cautiously, “Who is he?”

“No one for you to be concerned about right now.”

“But what did he do?” Sigurd pressed, sensing something uncanny, wanting to know, despite the danger he heard in Regin’s voice. “What was his crime?”
Regin’s jaw clenched. “Perhaps I’ll tell you about it someday, and you can judge for yourself.” His face closed again, and he stared into the fire.

When Regin would say no more, Sigurd swallowed the last mouthful of ale in his cup and went to the bed laid out for him. Regin had been angry all day, ever since the man had tried to rob them. He was edgy, hiding more than usual. Sigurd assumed Regin was still angry with him for his poor knife throw, though Regin had denied it when Sigurd had asked.

Sigurd’s straw-stuffed mattress was not fresh and barely rustled as he lay down. He turned toward the dark wall. His thoughts drifted back to the afternoon and the man he had not killed. He counseled himself that Regin was right; it would have been better if that man had died. Yet, it still didn’t feel right. Sigurd kept picturing him, hands trembling, looking over his shoulder in fear. Was he the lowest of men? Maybe. Sigurd didn’t know. He tried to understand it all but eventually fell asleep, troubled.

* * *

They left the farmer’s steading early the next morning, after a meal of bread and whey, and traveled until nightfall. The road had become rougher and overgrown, in places difficult to distinguish from the branching paths that led to nearby villages. They camped that evening in a clearing some short way into the woods, making only a small fire for warmth and eating from their saddlebags.
“Sigurd,” said Regin heavily. “A man who goes through this life always guided and protected is a man who lives for others, in the shelter and shadow of others. Do you want to be such a man?”

Sigurd swallowed the mouthful of bread that was sitting in his mouth. “No, Regin.”

“Do you want to be another man’s thane, serving another man’s will?”

Sigurd had not thought about that before, not so directly. He considered it a moment, but the answer was obvious. “No.”

“Then you don’t want to be one of Aelf’s men, doing Aelf’s bidding?”

His face heated at the thought. “No.”

“I can teach you to be more. I can make you more. You want me to do that, don’t you?”

Here Sigurd grew uncertain. Regin was speaking so intently, and his eyes had grown wide and piercing. The firelight flashed across his face, casting strange shadows. Sigurd said, “Yes,” then, “What do you mean?”

“You say yes—that is your instinct—and I am going to test that instinct. We will both find out whether you really do want to be something more than common, and whether you’re capable. If you can manage, you’ll be the stronger for it. If not, it will save us both from wasting time. Now listen closely, Sigurd, remember what I say. The way to my house is dangerous, perhaps, like any journey. To reach any destination, you must want to get there, you must figure out why you want to get there. Otherwise, if you do arrive, your arrival is meaningless. Do you understand?”

“No, Regin, I—”
“You will. Listen. My house is well known, when you get close enough, and not difficult to find. From here, the journey takes you south across the river Elbe, then south and west to the West Plain and the river valley there.”

“I don’t understand. Why—”

“Across the Elbe. Then south and west to the West Plain and the river valley. Repeat it to me.”

“Cross the Elbe. South and west to the West Plain. To the river valley.”

“The wizard’s river valley, some call it,” added Regin with the sliver of a smile. Sigurd’s voice rang suddenly hollow as he echoed Regin, “The wizard’s river valley.”

“Right. Now. Go to sleep.”

“But, Regin—”

“Go to sleep.”

“Regin, I don’t—”

“Sleep, Sigurd,” said Regin firmly and turned his face away.

Sigurd stared at him for a while, hoping to annoy him and restart the conversation, but Regin was resolute, and finally Sigurd gave a loud sigh of frustration. He untied his thin bedroll from his saddle, shaking it out with a snap, and spread it by the fire. He lay down noisily, shifting and arranging his cloak as a blanket, and casting sharp looks at Regin, who ignored him. He gritted his teeth, and it was some time before he slept.

Regin remained by the fire, silent and thinking, long after Sigurd’s breathing grew deep and even. The boy was reasonably toughened for his age, hadn’t been coddled, at least, but it was not enough. He had been protected, was still soft underneath. He knew
Sigurd had already been in his first battle and had acquitted himself well, but even then he would have been mostly guarded by Hjalprek’s thanes. And then there was the outlaw on the road. Not only had Sigurd not killed the man, he had not expressed any true conviction that he should have. He had no sense of real danger, of the immediate, sure decisions he must learn to make, no sense of necessity. He had a temper, when provoked, but he must learn to use that temper, to draw on the strength of it. He must make it more a part of himself.

This was necessary, Regin decided, leaving the boy. He had no patience for children, and he had been disappointed too often. If Sigurd couldn’t handle this, if he couldn’t take care of himself, he wasn’t worth the time after all. Regin picked his way across the clearing to where his horse was tethered, dozing with a hip cocked. The animal was startled by his approach, and Regin hushed him quickly. He took most of the remaining provisions from his saddlebags and stowed them in Sigurd’s, then he saddled his horse and led him to the road.
Chapter 4

When Sigurd awoke the next morning, he noticed first the stillness. Regin usually woke before he did and would be busy breaking camp or making their morning meal. But this day he woke only to the sounds of the ravens stirring in the branches overhead. He sat up. Regin was not in sight. He looked to where the horses had been tethered. Gladung was sniffing through the dead winter grass for new spring shoots, and he was alone.

Slowly, Sigurd stood. He circled the clearing, his heart beating faster with each step. After two laps, he returned numbly to his bedroll. Regin was gone.

Regin had been strange last night, asking weird questions, giving him traveling directions, refusing to explain himself. It hadn’t made sense; it didn’t even now. But to guess at Regin’s motives was too much at that moment, and so he sat, thinking nothing, seeing nothing, as a quiet desolation crept into him.
When the sun was shining strong at midmorning, Sigurd knew Regin was not coming back, and he rose from his bedroll. He walked to Gladung, saddled and bridled him. Gladung nudged Sigurd’s chest in his usual affectionate way, and Sigurd stumbled backward, caught off guard. He wandered back to the cold remains of the fire. He broke camp, tying his bedroll onto the back of his saddle, his water-skin to the front, and securing the saddlebags. He mounted clumsily and guided Gladung to the road.

He rode at an irregular pace, allowing Gladung to walk sluggishly while his mind grew distant, then, gripped by a sudden sense of urgency, he would press Gladung to trot or canter. Several times, he found himself on one of the paths that branched off the main road and had to backtrack.

When he stopped late that afternoon, he was ravenous, and his hunger brought him to his senses. He made camp and ate too much from his provisions, noticing with detachment the extra food there. He slept fitfully that night, waking again and again with his heart pounding and the woods still and cool around him. Sometimes he thought he saw a figure in the dark, thought he saw moonlight catching on a cheekbone or a blade or a white beard. He would strain his eyes until they ached, and sometimes he would shout into the dark.

So Sigurd continued for some days, though his bursts of alarm grew shorter and further between. The tension drained him. At last weary and resigned, he began to regain control of himself. He was not, after all, unaccustomed to being alone and had often spent his nights in Hjalprek’s forest to hunt and be away from the hall. He also began to realize that he was not as surprised at Regin’s departure as he had first thought himself. He had grown comfortable with Regin, had begun to trust and depend on him, and that had been
a mistake. Hjalprek had always said not to trust a man who had never fought at your side. Not only was Regin not a warrior, he was the Master of Masters, known for his cunning and uncanniness, and he was perhaps even a wizard. That Regin had used no magic on the journey meant nothing; it certainly did not mean he had none to use. Sigurd recalled his first impression of Regin, when he had come for the funeral: dark, secretive, the hearth-light eerie on his face. This was not a man to trust. And yet Sigurd still traveled toward him, following the road, following Regin’s directions. He was not sure why he did, except there was nowhere else to go besides back.

Tired from his tense days and restless nights, he began to sleep better. One night, within a day’s ride of the Elbe, he slept too soundly. It was a dangerous place for the unwary, though he did not know it. There were bands of outlaws in the area, and many roaming singly or in pairs, drawn by the river-crossing and the goods it brought.

Sigurd was startled into waking, and he would have screamed had not a rough, dirty hand been clamped over his mouth. He was hauled to his feet, and his captor’s fat belly pressed against his back. Sigurd flailed his legs and twisted his body. The man tightened his grip around Sigurd’s torso, digging fingernails into his cheek. With every effort useless, Sigurd quieted, though his eyes were wide and his breath jerked through his lungs.

“What’d you want to wake him for, Feng?” complained someone several paces away, and Sigurd could just make out a shorter man’s form. “We take the horse and go. You agreed to it.”

“But we can sell him, see?” said the man holding Sigurd. “We’d get a good price for a boy this age. I could get a new pair of shoes.” The man had to hunch somewhat to
hold Sigurd firmly, which brought his body close. He stank of sweat, filth, and ale. With his cheek pressed against Sigurd’s head, he drew a deep breath. “He’s got lovely soft hair.”

“You say we’ll sell him, but don’t think I’ve forgotten what happened last time.” The other man spat in disgust. “I hate when you take captives.”

Sigurd jerked at this last word, and Feng hugged him tighter. “Come on, Rik. We’ll get a good price, you’ll see. He’s a nice strong boy.”

“But he can’t be out here by himself—there’s got to be someone around somewhere, father, brother, something. This isn’t a carthorse, you fool—it’s a quality animal, and I don’t want no one coming after us on account of the boy.”

“There’s no one around.” Feng’s voice was pleading.

“Well, it’s too late to put him back now, isn’t it? You woke him, you deal with him. I’m getting the horse.”

Feng kept one hand over Sigurd’s mouth, but he withdrew the other to fumble at his waist for some rope. Sigurd bit Feng’s hand and brought his heel down on the man’s foot as hard as he could. Feng yelped, and Sigurd twisted away and bolted for the denser forest, fleeing mindlessly as a hunted deer.

It was Rik who caught up with him and threw him to the ground. Sigurd yelled and thrashed, and Rik struck him several times in the face and chest. Sigurd was thrown onto his face and felt Rik’s knee digging into his back. Cursing, Rik jerked Sigurd’s hands behind him. Sigurd felt the rough twist of rope around his wrists. He struggled, but Rik only kicked him and dragged him back to the campsite.
“What’d I say?” complained Rik as he hauled Sigurd to his feet before Feng.

“More trouble than it’s worth. We could’ve been away with the horse by now.”

“He bit me,” said Feng angrily, and he struck Sigurd a blow that knocked him to the ground and sent his mind spinning.

“Easy!” said Rik, and Sigurd vaguely felt himself dragged out of Feng’s reach. “If we are going to sell him, he’s got to be in one piece.”

“Little shit bit me,” mumbled Feng, and he strode over to Gladung. He threw the saddle on carelessly, and Gladung sidled away from him. Feng yanked Gladung’s halter.

“Stand, you beast!”

“Quiet!” hissed Rik.

“No one out here,” muttered Feng, but he adjusted the saddle with less roughness and tightened the girth.

Rik dragged Sigurd to Gladung and shoved him up onto the horse’s back. Sigurd swayed, and they tied him down to Gladung’s neck.

They had traveled through the trees for an hour or so, Sigurd limp and nearly senseless in the saddle, when Rik stopped suddenly. “I’m getting turned around. Let’s just wait for sunup. We could’ve taken the road if you hadn’t grabbed the boy. We could’ve taken turns riding!”

“Fine,” said Feng, sulking. “If you’re going to keep complaining, then let’s just smash his head and leave him.”

“Not so fast! We’ve got him now, don’t we? We can’t be strolling down the road, in plain view of anyone camping, but that’s no reason to get lost out here. That’s all I’m saying.”
Sigurd roused somewhat as he was pulled down from Gladung’s back. He was too
dazed to struggle as they tied him to a tree, but as his captors settled in to wait for the
light, he began to recover his senses. His head throbbed and his shoulders ached from
having his hands tied behind him. He tested the tautness of the rope binding him to the
tree. It was not as tight, and he thought he might be able to work his way out. He had to
escape. That need seized him, mind and body. He edged and shifted his shoulders
downward. But with his cloak and tunic whispering against the tree’s rough bark, silence
was impossible.

Feng, who had lain down not far away, crept near. Crouching down in front of
Sigurd, he leaned close. “Think you’re getting away, do you?” he said, his foul breath
washing Sigurd’s face.

Sigurd’s stomach turned at Feng’s words and his nearness. He said, angry and
afraid, “You won’t get away with this.”

“You were by yourself,” explained Feng, his tone slow and careful as though
Sigurd were stupid. “No one cares about you. No one cares about you, or you wouldn’t
be out here by yourself.”

“King Aelf of Denmark is my stepfather, and I am Sigurd, son of Sigmund. I am a
Volsung, and Odin is my forefather. You won’t get away with this. You will rot in the
dark and stinking land of Hel, and no one will remember you at all. You’re fat and stupid,
and you’re a coward, and Odin will—”

Feng struck Sigurd hard across the mouth, making his teeth cut into his lip. “Shut
your mouth! You’re lying, and you think you’re someone, but you’re not! You’re just a
piece of shit. You think you can disrespect me? You think you can act like you’re some
noble or something and expect me to think you’re better than me? You think you can bite
my hand and make me look a fool and get away with it? Do you know what I’m gonna do
with you?” Feng leaned closer, and his wet lipsbrushed Sigurd’s ear. He said in a low
voice, “We’ll give Rik the slip tomorrow when we get close to the river. You’ll see.
You’ll see I’m better than you.”

Feng slipped his hand between Sigurd’s legs. Sigurd tried to jerk away. He kicked
frantically, bucking away from Feng’s pawing fingers. His foot struck Feng’s knee and
thigh, drove into his armpit. Feng drew back with a cry. He slapped Sigurd hard across
the cheek. Shaking, Sigurd spat in Feng’s face, and Feng slapped him again.

“Are you done yet?” said Rik from several yards away.

Feng tightened the rope that bound Sigurd to the tree, making him draw in a
sharp, pained breath. Feng stood and looked down at Sigurd. He kicked dirt at him and
walked over to where Rik was sitting. “Just making sure he doesn’t get away.”

“You know this is why I hate when you take captives. Leave him alone. We’ll be
rid of him tomorrow.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. You’re always telling me what to do.”

Rik responded with a grunt and lay down again.

Feng sat on the ground, leaning back against a tree. “Odin, right,” he muttered.

“Little shit.”

*   *   *
By the time the sun rose, Sigurd had fallen into an uneasy doze, and he was roughly awoken when Rik untied him from the tree. Now that it was light, Sigurd could see that Rik was stocky, sandy-haired with a matted beard, his teeth bad. He carried a straight-limb bow, and his fingers strayed to it constantly, as though it might have disappeared, as though it were as valuable as a sword. Regin was right, Sigurd had realized during the night. These were the lowest of men. He should have killed that first one on the road, when he had tried to rob them. He should have put his knife in that man’s eye. He should kill these two. Yet if Regin hadn’t left this wouldn’t have happened—but he couldn’t think about that. He only had to escape. He couldn’t let that man touch him again.

“He’s got it in for you now,” Rik warned. “Just keep your mouth shut, hear? Last boy ended up dead before we ever got to the river. Feng choked his life out. And that weren’t all he did to him, if you understand me.” Rik gave Sigurd a meaningful look. “He’s mild enough most of the time, does what I say, but you’ve got him riled. He’s not right, you know.” Rik tapped a stubby finger to his forehead. “Now you be quiet, and don’t cause no more trouble.”

They tried to make Sigurd walk quietly beside them. He knew he should cooperate, but he couldn’t make himself. He twisted and leaned away when they tried to pull him. It was easier somehow, more natural, to resist and be forced.

Feng dragged him a short way, his broad back bent and his heavy legs straining. He was soon out of breath, his round face red, his small mouth puckered. He took after Sigurd with his fists, and Sigurd bit his tongue to keep from crying out. As blackness
spun before him, he felt himself grabbed by Rik and thrown onto Gladung’s back. They tied him down to the horse’s neck so he could not move.

Feng grabbed the reins from Rik. Gladung pranced, anxious. The pommel dug into Sigurd’s stomach. “Hush, Gladung,” he whispered painfully against the horse’s tense neck.

Walking last night, they had gotten too far from the road, and they had to backtrack to more familiar ground. This near the river-crossing, the road was wide and well-traveled. They walked through the trees about twenty paces from it, keeping it in sight while they themselves could not easily be seen. But making their way through the woods was a slow business, the walking difficult through the undergrowth.

About midday, they heard voices on the road. Sigurd willed himself not to draw his captors’ attention; they had not thought to gag him. When the travelers drew near, merchants by their clothing, Sigurd gave away his intent by taking too deep a breath before he yelled. He managed only a loud but inarticulate sound before Feng clamped a hand over his mouth.

“That was real stupid,” Feng whispered in his ear.

On the road, the travelers stopped. “Did you hear something?” asked one.

“Thought I did,” said the other.

“Hello?” called the first. “Is someone there?”

Sigurd breathed hard against Feng’s hand, furious.

“Who knows,” said the second. “How much farther to the crossing do you think?”

“Oh, another ten miles? Twelve?”

“We’d better get moving, then, if we want to catch the ferry today.”
“Right. I’d rather not spend the night this side of the river. These woods are simply crawling.”

The travelers kicked their horses to a trot and were soon out of earshot. Feng looked over his shoulder at Rik. “You got something I can gag him with?”

Rik patted his chest and waist. He had only his short knife and bow. “Check his saddlebags.”

Feng released Sigurd to rummage through the bags.

Sigurd spat, “You bastards! You sons of whores! Odin—”

“Shut up!” yelled Rik and Feng together.

“Hel will devour your corpses. She’ll—”

“Do you want me to cut your tongue out?” demanded Rik, pulling his knife from his belt. “I will do it.”

Sigurd strained against his bindings. He glared at Rik, though his stomach went queasy. With his rotting teeth bared and the knife naked in his hand, Rik looked like he meant it.

“Some fine things in here,” said Feng, his hand in Sigurd’s saddlebag. “Spare cloak, food, coins. We’re set for months.” He shook Sigurd’s coin pouch, listening to the soft clink of gold, then tied it to his belt. He pawed again through the bag. “Here we go,” he said, pulling out a woolen stocking. He gagged Sigurd, tying the stocking tight behind his head. The gag cut painfully at the corners of Sigurd’s mouth and the bruised skin there, and the wool chafed his skin.
“You know, I’ve been thinking.” Rik crossed his arms, fingers brushing the tip of his bow. “Why’s this boy got a horse like this? And he’s dressed like a damn noble. Did you see his sword? Did he say anything to you?”

“No,” said Feng quickly. “Maybe he’s a merchant’s son or something. Who cares?”

Sigurd breathed furiously at Feng’s lie and tried to speak, but the gag made his voice a dull mumble.

“But the sword, Feng,” Rik went on. “It’s pattern-welded, and the hilt’s inlaid with gold. I’ve never taken anything like that off a merchant, much less a merchant’s son. Not to mention the way he talks back.”

“Who cares, Rik?” Feng repeated. “No one will know.”

“I’m not so sure. If he is some noble, and we get caught, they’ll stretch our necks. Or worse.”

“It won’t happen.”

“Well…” Rik rubbed his jaw, scratching at the matted beard. “I guess if we strip him before we get to the river—if we find some rags for him instead—he’ll look like any other peasant. And we could cut off his hair. With those bruises he doesn’t look so fine anyway. Gods, look at his cheek—did you have to—” Rik shook his head. “Still…”

“That’s right. We take his clothes. He’ll look like a peasant.”

“All right,” sighed Rik. “Let’s get going. At this rate it’ll be another night before we reach the crossing, and I want him off our hands.”

As they started forward again, Feng dropped back from Gladung’s head, pressing near to Sigurd. “You are pretty, sure enough. You’ve got a girl’s eyelashes, you know,
and such nice golden hair, all soft and waving.” He stroked Sigurd’s hair with his warm, damp hand, twisting a lock of it between his thick fingers. “I’ll keep it.” Sigurd felt bile rising in his throat, but he was bound too tightly to turn away.

Sigurd grew numb in mind and body as the afternoon passed. Feng and Rik ate a good deal of his provisions as the day wore on but offered none to him, and his tongue felt huge and dry in his mouth. Hope rose briefly when another, larger group of travelers approached on the road. He worked his jaw to loosen the gag until Rik cuffed him on the back of the head. The travelers passed by without pause. When Rik untied Sigurd and dragged him off Gladung to relieve himself, he never removed his hand from Sigurd’s shoulder. A weight settled in Sigurd’s stomach. He began to doubt his chance of escape.

But then, as the daylight weakened, he sensed someone watching from the shadows of the wood. He turned his face as far as he could. He thought he saw a man, white-bearded. Then the figure was gone. Ravens cawed overhead. Excitement, unlooked for, unaccountable, flared within him.

“Damned birds,” muttered Feng.

Sigurd strained his eyes for any further sight of the white-bearded man. Several times he thought he saw him, a strange, silent presence in the darkening wood. The ravens grew noisier.

“I wish those birds would shut up,” fretted Feng, his round face tense. “They’re giving me a weird feeling”

“It’s nothing,” said Rik from where he walked behind Gladung, though he sounded uncertain. “They’re getting ready to roost for the night.”

“You don’t think they could be spies for Odin?”
“Don’t say that,” snapped Rik. “Why would you say that? They’re just birds.”

Sigurd felt his uncanny excitement boil to sudden urgency, and he began to act before he quite understood his plan. He closed his eyes and let his body go slack. He leaned all his weight to one side, sliding as far down Gladung’s shoulder as his bindings would allow, pretending to faint.

“Hey, grab him!” shouted Rik, and Feng jerked in surprise, shoving Sigurd back into the saddle.

“Look, Feng,” said Rik, “I know you’ve taken a dislike to the boy, but if he can’t stand on his own feet tomorrow, we’ll get cheated on the trade. Give him some water, man, before he’s sick.”

Feng muttered under his breath, but he took the water-skin from Sigurd’s saddle. He untied Sigurd from Gladung’s neck, and Sigurd continued to feign unconsciousness. Feng splashed water onto his face.

“Wake up, you!” He slapped Sigurd’s bruised cheek.

Sigurd winced and opened his eyes, trying to look confused.

“Well, ungag him!” said Rik. “Give him a drink.”

Feng tugged the gag from Sigurd’s mouth. Sigurd gasped at the relief of fresh air. Feng grabbed him by the shoulder to straighten him in the saddle. Gladung was a tall horse, and Feng had to reach high to tip up the water-skin for Sigurd.

Sigurd choked on the water, and it spilled down his face. Feng cursed but held up the skin again, his fat belly pressing against Sigurd’s leg. The ravens were screeching now, and Sigurd felt Gladung shiver, nerves taut.
Sigurd spun Gladung with a pressure from his knee. Gladung’s haunches slammed into Feng, and the man fell with a cry of surprise. Sigurd yelled, and the old stallion leaped forward.

They did not get far before the horse screamed and faltered. Pine needles stinging his face, Sigurd looked down wildly but saw nothing. Gladung ran on for some time, breaking hard through the underbrush. Even as his breathing grew labored, Sigurd did not try to stop him. Flat against Gladung’s neck to avoid the low branches, his thoughts were only for the outlaws behind him and the danger of Gladung tripping on the trailing reins.

Gladung’s breathing grew ragged and desperate. He began to slow. A cry rose in Sigurd’s throat when the horse stumbled. Gladung tried to recover his footing but fell to his knees, then his shoulder. Sigurd was thrown from the saddle.

Sigurd lay unmoving. His shoulders burned and his right leg throbbed. His head swam. When his vision cleared, he struggled to sit up. He heard a horrible, whistling breathing. He rose unsteadily. His bound hands upset his already uncertain balance, and he ran only a few stumbling steps before falling. He crawled the rest of the way to Gladung.

Gladung was not yet dead, but he soon would be. His eyes were glazed and staring. Blood pooled on the ground near the girth, and the arrow’s feathers were just visible sticking out from under his side. The fall had driven the arrow through his lung. His flanks jerked and shuddered, then a last breath eased his body to stillness.

Sigurd was stone.
Then his eyes burned and tears began to clear tracks down his dirty face. He leaned against the horse. The sudden energy that had flooded him during his flight was gone. He was exhausted. He was wretched for Gladung and absolutely alone.

He thought he must have fallen asleep because when he opened his eyes, the woods around him were nearly dark. He was lying against Gladung’s still shoulder, and he sat up with a start. His nose was running, and his cheeks felt stiff. He rose, shaky, and walked around Gladung to his saddlebags. His leg pained him, but it was bearable, perhaps only bruised. He dropped to his knees and inched backwards to get his hands near the flap of the bag. He worked the bag open and fumbled inside for his spare knife. He gripped it as best he could and rubbed the blade against the rope binding his hands. At last the rope fell away, and he chafed his sore wrists and moved his stiff shoulders carefully. He leaned back against the saddle. Resting his hands in his lap, he looked out into the darkening forest with a hopeless sigh.

He considered, for the first time, returning to Aelf. This was the most sensible decision. Regin had abandoned him. But should he crawl to Aelf, in failure, because it would be easy? He could imagine Aelf’s barely concealed smugness, his triumph. It made his jaw clench. But to continue? He had no idea how to get to Regin’s, despite the vague directions he had been given. It would take weeks. He had no horse. And the way was dangerous, more so than he ever could have imagined. The more he thought of each course of action, the more impossible each one seemed. He propped his elbows on his knees and let his head fall into his hands.

He had no idea how long he sat, leaning against Gladung’s body, when the hair rose on the back of his neck. He strained for a warning sound, expecting his captors. He
heard only the faint spring breeze. But when he looked up he saw, where the moonlight dripped down through the trees, a white-bearded man.

   It was same man he had seen earlier, in the shadows of the wood. It was Odin.
Chapter 5

Moonlight caught in Odin’s beard, which shone pale and brilliant under the trees. His nose jutted from his hollowed cheeks like the mountain from the earth, ridged and rocky. His one eye, deep-set under the thick, white brow, was hidden in shadow. The other he had sold long ago. It lay still at the bottom of Mimir’s fountain. He had traded it for a drink from the cold, clear waters; he had traded it for wisdom, for the world’s memory. And so the socket was empty, sunken, shuttered.

Odin moved like water, the hem of his long, full robes brushing silently over his sandaled feet. He stopped in front of Sigurd, who scrambled to his feet beside the dead horse. Odin looked down at him, staring from his shadowed eye. “So,” he said in his deep, resonant voice. “You’re free.”
Sigurd could not take his eyes from Odin’s face, where the moonlight lay almost tangible over the grim features, and it seemed there was something immeasurable, unreachable beneath. For a moment, it seemed to him there was nothing else in the world.

When he found his tongue again, he said only, “My horse is dead,” his voice hushed and flat.

“I see that.” Odin looked over Sigurd’s shoulder at the huge, still body. “He was brave and loyal, your Gladung.”

“Yes.”

“He could not have wished for a better death.”

Sigurd said nothing, knowing this was true but unable yet to admit it.

“Hjalprek had an eye for horses. Gladung was a generous gift.”

“He was the best horse,” said Sigurd fiercely.

“Not the best,” Odin corrected, “but he was a fine animal. I’m pleased that you honor him. That is as it should be. A man should honor his horse and treat him as his friend and companion. The man who doesn’t is ungrateful; he does not see the world. Come, we’ll burn his body.”

Sigurd removed the bridle; he unbuckled the saddle and pulled it away, its blanket stiff with sweat, edges crusted with blood. Then Odin sent him to gather kindling. Sigurd wandered through the webs of moonlight, lying clear and cold on the forest floor. He returned to Odin with his arms full.

“It’s not very dry,” said Sigurd.

“No matter. Throw it on.”
Sigurd found Gladung’s body laid atop logs and limbs, covered with leaves and branches. He felt foolish, like a child, tossing his armful of twigs onto this pile. “You didn’t need me.”

Odin’s face remained expressionless, ancient, unmoved. “Because I could have done it all, do you wish you had done nothing?”

Odin’s tone filled this question with meaning, and a careless reply caught in the back of Sigurd’s throat. He squinted into the darkness, where he could concentrate; it was difficult to think staring into Odin’s face. Finally he said, “I guess I would have been ashamed to do nothing.”

Odin smiled a little. “All your kin chafes against stillness, against idleness. They are like the wave beating against the breaker, fighting its way to land.”

Sigurd felt an emptiness filling in his chest, as though the wave Odin described rushed into him. Stories of the Volsungs had teased at this empty place, trickled through it and found its hollows. Those stories seemed now like faint echoes of the lives of his forbearers. Odin’s words were something more; they were words of knowing, and Sigurd heard in them the shout that makes the echo. For a moment, he understood, deep within himself, that Odin was truly his kin, not just a god and a power and a name. He was the surge beneath the swell.

Odin touched Sigurd’s shoulder. The touch was deceptively human, Odin’s hand strong and warm, like a man’s hand, only smoother, perfect. “Step back.”

Odin marked the fire-rune over the mound with his fingers, and a light sparked deep within the kindling. The flames snaked through the wood, flowing in rivulets from the source, dancing and flickering over the logs until the fire flared. It engulfed the
mound, popping and crackling, sending sparks high into the air. The fire burned so hot there was almost no smell, though Sigurd could see the dark shape of Gladung’s body within the flames.

He sank to the ground, entranced by the leaping dance of light, the heat easing the soreness from his body. Odin sat beside him. His robes brushed against Sigurd’s knee, and Sigurd caught a scent of the forest and of wool. From the corner of his eye, he watched the rise and fall of Odin’s chest, saw the strong curve of his back as he leaned over his knees. It made him stranger somehow, more awesome, to be so godly and so human.

“You look much like my son, Sigi,” observed Odin, “your grandfather’s grandfather. It surprises me, sometimes, when I see you. And yet, your mother has left her mark as well. That is good, I think.”

Thrilled and terrified by the intimacy of this knowledge, Sigurd pulled at the tough, dry grass in front of him. He said, hesitantly, “Sigi built the Volsung hall. He founded the kingdom.”

“He did. When he was exiled from the north, I gave him men and ships so he could take what land he would and settle there. Sigi roamed many years, and he won great wealth in his wanderings, but he began to despair. No man can long survive away from hearth and hall.

“One day, as his ships sailed along a bright coast, Sigi looked up, and he saw a mighty tree high on a bluff. The Branstock. Sigi ordered the fleet to land, and he went up onto that headland. He told me once that when he saw the tree, he felt again the joy of his homeland, and the pain of his exile was eased. Sigi caused a fine hall to be built around
the Branstock, commanded that the tree be unharmed. He vowed that all his descendants would rule in that hall, at the roots of the Branstock, that none would be cast out as he had been. It was a rash vow, but he had suffered much in his exile. He knew, though, from that first moment when he fell to his knees beneath the Branstock, while his wandering fleet idled, weary and worn, in the bay below, that it was his fate to find that tree, to build a hall for his descendants. He was redeemed by it.”

The Branstock had often been described to Sigurd: a massive oak that was warm to the touch, as though its bark were flesh. The Volsung hall around it had a floor of patterned stone and carved walls hung with weavings and weapons. It had many roofs and many rooms, and it stood on the bluff like a crown. He could almost see the tree and the hall, as though his mind carried some impossible memory of his homeland.

But something in Odin’s story troubled him. It was well known that Sigi had been cast out for murder, a murder of pride and anger. It was also known that Odin could see the future. He thought how easy it would have been for Odin to prevent the murder, to prevent Sigi’s shameful exile.

Odin must have sensed some question in him, for he said, “You may ask, though you may not like the answer.”

“Why,” Sigurd began haltingly, “why did you not keep Sigi from his crime?”

“It was his fate. I had foreseen it, but it had to be. I do not command the Norns. They spin and weave as they will, and their web of fate can be unraveled by none. They have power over us all. You must think, though: had Sigi not been exiled, he would not have founded the Volsung kingdom. You would never have been born, nor your father.”
Sigurd considered this uncomfortable answer, and a new question teased at his mind. He tried to force it away, sensing its danger, but it burst from him suddenly: “Can you see my fate?”

Odin smiled ruefully, looking away into the fire with his deep-shadowed eye. “I cannot interfere. You will find it for yourself. Let that be enough.”

“You don’t need to tell me,” said Sigurd with a sudden, grim conviction. “I already know it. I’ve heard it many times. I’ll kill that murdering whoreson Lygni, who calls himself a king. I will take back my father’s kingdom.”

“Who has told you this fate, that you are so certain?”

“Hjalprek. He knew. My mother, though she never quite said it.” Then he added, as though it were obvious: “It is expected.”

“When you listen to others, Sigurd, try to judge for yourself whether their vision is clear. To see the future is rare. To speculate and hope—to anticipate—is common. Is it what you want? It means little to do something simply because it is expected. That is a passive fate, such as any man may have. What future do you want for yourself? That is where true fate comes from—meaningful fate, Sigurd, greatness—for those strong enough to make it so. All the rest—they are just men, and they are forgotten. Do you think it only chance that one man is given a glorious fate, while another is not? That a man need only wait, only meet what challenge may be granted to him and he will live forever in the minds of men simply because the Norns have favored him? It is not so. The Norns are farseeing, and they are shrewd. They weave a fate to fit the wearer. Only those who show themselves worthy of their favor have any chance of gaining it.”
“I—” Sigurd halted, troubled. Then he set his jaw. It hurt him that Odin could think he might not really want Lygni dead, that it was only the will of others. He was not passive; he would not wait, like a common man, to see what the Norns would weave. That Odin might think that of him was unbearable. “Of course it’s what I want. What else could matter? There are no other Volsungs left. There’s none but me to take back the Volsung lands. I’ll be in shame until Lygni’s dead. How could I not hate him? He’s a false king—that’s what Hjalprek called him, and it’s true. You can’t want him sitting under the Branstock, like a fox, like a thief? If not for him, my father would have lived. If not for him, my mother would never have married Aelf. Hjalprek is dead, and now I must treat Aelf as my king? He is not what Hjalprek was, and he is not my king. He doesn’t want me, nor would I serve him, nor would I live in his hall. Regin, at least, understands this.”

Sigurd fell silent, his body utterly still. He stared into the fire, beyond it. Regin’s last words to him, so cryptic, so abstract, surfaced in his mind, took on a sudden meaning. He frowned, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet at first but grew stronger, more certain. “Regin said I had to figure out why I wanted to arrive at my destination. If I didn’t know, then it was pointless to get there. Regin is crafty—he knows things. Hjalprek always said there weren’t men enough to destroy Lygni; he could outlast a siege—he hasn’t the honor to fight. He’d sit in the hall, safe, like a coward. Hjalprek always said the kingdom would have to be taken by stealth, with cunning. Regin could teach me that. Do you think that’s what he meant, about knowing why I wanted to get somewhere?”
Odin made no response for some time, as though he were considering some
intricate problem. Then he said, “Regin is indeed crafty. He has much to teach. But be
ware of him, Sigurd. *Remember* that he is crafty and not entirely to be trusted.”

“He’s a wizard, isn’t he?” asked Sigurd hopefully.

“He’s…wise, in his way, and very old, as far as men go. His brothers had magic,
so did his father. Regin did not inherit what he wanted, but he has his own skills. Some
would call him a wizard.”

Sigurd nodded, feeling that something was settled. He watched the flames, his
thoughts on Regin. It was a test, Regin had said. Regin wanted him to make his own
decisions, to look after himself. He could do that. Hadn’t he escaped from the outlaws?
Wasn’t he stronger and faster and better than the other boys his age? Had any of them
killed the boar that had defeated Aelf? He didn’t expect Regin to take care of him, didn’t
want that or need it. And when he arrived at Regin’s, Regin would see—and Odin would
see—that he had made his own decision, that he wasn’t afraid, that he was ready to learn,
to be something. He would not sit, idle, and wait for the Norns. Nor would he wander
pointlessly to Regin’s, nor hesitate, hoping someone might tell him to turn back. This, he
told himself, was what Regin had meant. Odin had not disagreed. Odin, surely, would say
something if he thought Sigurd should do otherwise.

Odin’s thoughts, though, were his own, unknowable, hidden within the secret
cavern of his empty eye. But he, too, watched the fire, seeming to think, and he watched
the boy.

As the night deepened, two ravens, blacker than the sky, visible only as shadows
against it, swept down through the trees, disturbing the other ravens roosting in the
branches. Their names were Hugin and Munin, for they were thought and memory, and they were Odin’s eyes in the world of men. Sigurd’s face stirred with wonder and startled comprehension as they drew themselves out of the night and settled onto Odin’s shoulders, speaking to him in their rough, scratching voices. Odin stroked the breast of each bird. After a time, they quieted, perched then like cast-iron statues, the flames catching in the gleaming pools of pitch that were their eyes.

The fire burned low. The wood, nearly exhausted, crumbled around the blackened bones. Sigurd felt his mind growing oddly hazy, his body weary, limbs heavy. Odin’s face went still, his one eye almost closing as he stared into the forest, all moonlight and shadows and night-dark trees.

An animal was moving toward them, a horse. It trotted, smooth and silent, through the forest, the delicate patterns of moonlight gliding over its neck and back, over a silver saddle. It wore no bridle. Sigurd could barely focus his eyes as Odin rose to meet the horse, as the horse lowered its head, the high, arched neck flexing. Its coat was as white as Odin’s beard, though the grey of youth lingered in the long, full mane and threaded through the sweep of its tail.

“Sleipnir,” murmured Sigurd, and a memory drifted through his mind. It was a memory of one of Hjalprek’s favorite tales, and he could fix his vague thoughts only on the point of the story: the horse of Odin is the best—he is the Fast Traveler.

“None faster in the nine worlds,” said Odin. Hugin and Munin, who had moved with Odin like they were part of him, seemed to emerge from his body. They lifted into the night, where they became shadows once again. Then Odin swung up onto Sleipnir’s back, fluid and effortless, as though neither earth nor air resisted him.
The last thing Sigurd saw, before he slumped over beside the dying embers and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, was Odin and his white horse fading into the dark forest, like ghosts.

* * *

Sigurd awoke with the sun in his eyes. It cut through the tangle of branches, seeped through the bright leaves beginning to fan from their buds. He sat up, stiff and aching, his ankle throbbing. One side of his face was painful, and when he touched it, the skin felt puffy and hot. At first he could not think where he was or why, could not think what had last happened. Then he remembered: Odin had been here. It seemed bizarre in the daylight, unreal. And yet, beside him was a huge circle of ash, and Gladung’s burned bones lay within it. He looked too long at the bones, thought too much on what they had been, and his eyes began to sting. He stood abruptly and went to his gear.

He stuffed his dry mouth with stale bread and salty cheese, wishing he hadn’t lost the water-skin in his escape. He chewed greedily, growing more voracious as he ate, until an image flashed into his mind: he saw Feng devouring his food, dog-like, saw Feng’s wet mouth on this very loaf of bread, crumbs on his lips and in his filthy beard. He thought of Feng’s hands, dirty and sweaty, touching him. He swallowed his mouthful, forcing it down against a sudden heave of his stomach, and shoved the remaining food into his saddlebags, buckling them shut.

He drew his sword from its sheath. He walked a circle around the ashes, stabbing the point into the ground, searching for soft earth. The ground was tender from the spring
rains, and he soon found a place to dig a grave for Gladung’s bones. The sword made an awkward spade, good only for cutting and loosening the earth. He spent most of the morning on his knees, deepening the hole with his hands, which were soon thick with mud.

When the hole was large enough, he gathered the bones. They were brittle and fragmented, and he broke many of the larger ones as he pushed them down into the grave. He set the last piece, the crumbling skull, atop the others and began to sweep the loose earth over them. Stopping suddenly, he looked over his shoulder at his gear. He hated to leave the saddle, which Hjalprek had given him, but he couldn’t carry everything. He would not leave it for the profit of outlaws.

He stripped the saddle of its valuable silver stirrups, its rings and buckles. These he packed into his saddlebags. The saddle itself he placed in the grave. When he had filled the hole again with earth, he collected his gear. He tied his bedroll and the bridle to his saddlebags and slung them over his shoulder, along with his quiver of arrows. He belted the sword at his waist, carried his bow. His burden was heavy and awkward, and he was sweating by the time he found the road.

The sun was setting as he came in sight of the river-crossing. He was limping, his ankle swollen and bruised, chafing against his boot. He could see the huddled buildings of a small town across the river, and the ferry docked there for the night. On the near bank was only a ramshackle inn, a stave building with no windows. Smoke rose from the roof vent, and he could hear voices inside as he drew near. There was a stable beside the inn, and a horse trough. He drank from the scummy water, washed his hands. He thought
briefly of slipping into the stable to sleep there, but he could hear men’s voices in the shadows. He walked instead toward the inn.

* * *

Sigurd could not have known, would not have guessed, whose voices he heard within the darkened stable. Drunk and idling in the shadows were the outlaws Rik and Feng, angry with each other, easing the pain of their loss with the stolen gold and what it had bought them.

With the clay jug nearly empty and the trenchers licked clean, they sat discussing a second jug when Sigurd walked past the stable entrance. Feng patted Rik’s arm excitedly.

“Rik! Rik! It’s him!”

Face slack with drink, Rik raised the jug, swirling the ale. “What’re you on about?”

“The boy, Rik. He’s right outside. I saw him!”

Rik’s face tightened, and he squinted, bleary-eyed, toward the entrance.

Feng lurched to his feet, a dark flush creeping up his neck. He wiped his palms against the damp, dirty front of his tunic. “I’ll get him. He won’t get away this time. I’ll bite his nose off—I’ll do it.”

The jug hit the ground with a crack as Rik staggered down the aisle after him.

“Feng! Leave it, you fool! Not here!”
Sigurd was nearly to the door of the inn when he heard the commotion in the stable: the breaking jug, the raised voices, the heavy footsteps. When he saw Feng, red-faced, filthy, his mouth hanging open stupidly, weaving toward him with Rik close behind, his heart leaped into his throat. If Rik hadn’t grabbed Feng’s belt, sending them both reeling to the ground and jarring Sigurd from his stupor, things might have happened differently. But when Feng fell, Sigurd strung his bow and whipped an arrow from the quiver.

As Feng rose, kicking Rik away, Sigurd’s first arrow lodged in his shoulder with a dull thud. Feng’s scream of pain twisted into a sickening gurgle as the second arrow tore through his throat.

“Gods!” Rik exclaimed, scrambling away. He fell before he made it to his feet, an arrow deep in his chest.

Sigurd dropped his bow, drew his sword. He advanced toward the sprawled men. Blood spurted from Feng’s neck, leaping away from the wound; it spread from his other arrows in sticky, glistening pools. Feng’s mouth worked desperately for a moment then went still. His eyes stared, empty.

Seeing his coin pouch at Feng’s belt, Sigurd cut it roughly from the body. Absurdly, it felt like stealing. He heard movement behind him. He spun around, bringing up his sword. Several men crowded at the inn door; a few were approaching. He lowered his sword but did not sheath it.

“They killed my horse,” he told them. “This money is mine. They stole it.”
The men said nothing at first. Those still gathered under the lintel trailed after the others, but no one came too close. One of them nodded appreciatively at the arrows. Another finally ventured, “What happened?”

“They captured me, two nights ago. I escaped, but they killed my horse.”

There was silence, and the men shifted uncomfortably. Then one of them, a ruddy-faced man with gentle eyes, said, “What’s not to believe? Look at his face. His eye’s almost swollen shut.”

“Still,” someone argued, “two men are dead.”

“But if they robbed him—” began another.

“They weren’t even armed.”

“He’s only a boy,” reasoned the ruddy-faced man. “What’s he supposed to do?”

“He could have called for help.”

The innkeeper interrupted the argument. “Well, it’s nothing to us. They’re obviously outlaws. I thought so when they bought the ale. So did some of you. As long as the boy buries the bodies, I don’t care. And all of you will be going your own ways tomorrow anyhow.”

The men nodded at the innkeeper’s wisdom, even the more contentious shrugging sudden indifference. With the sun almost lost behind the horizon, it was decided that burial could wait until morning, and the corpses were dragged into the woods.

The question of blame forgotten, the men began to congratulate Sigurd on his marksmanship and pressed him for the story. Sitting by the hearth with a cup of ale and a trencher of bread and meat, Sigurd told them vaguely what had happened. They wanted more. They wanted a tale of adventure. Why was he traveling alone? they asked. Where
was he from? Where was he going? What had the outlaws done? What had they intended? Sigurd gave only brief answers to these questions. All these men were strangers and he owed them no explanations. At last, bored with his reticence and wary of his court-bred speech, they left him alone.

Apart from the innkeeper’s chamber and the kitchen, the inn was a single narrow room, dark as a cave. Men snored on their straw pallets, and the room stank of ale and food and unwashed bodies. Sigurd stared into the hearth-fire’s fading embers. Those outlaws, he reasoned, got what they deserved. Had they been caught by Hjalprek’s thanes—Aelf’s thanes—they would have been killed anyway for their crimes, and death, when it came, would have seemed a blessing to them, for it would not have been granted lightly. Besides, if he hadn’t killed them, they might have killed someone else. And that fat one…he was bad.

Sigurd wondered if Odin had known of their fates. He must have. It was strange, thinking back to when Odin had sat beside him, imagining that Odin had known what was coming. And it was strange to think that he had killed three men in less than a year. But not murdered them. That, he would never do.

When Sigurd finally slept, he dreamed. He was sitting beside the holding grave, where Hjalprek’s body had been kept before the funeral. He wanted to ask Hjalprek something, though he wasn’t sure what; he felt only the burn of a vital, unanswered question. As the stone began to roll away from the entrance, a sudden dread crept into him. When a hand appeared at the edge of the stone, pushing it, it was not the king’s hand. It was softer, dimpled at the knuckles, and the fingernails were black crescents. He stumbled backward, dumb with horror, as Feng squeezed his body past the stone. An
arrow was sticking out of his neck, and his mouth hung open like a gaping wound. Sigurd ran. But no matter how hard he pumped his arms and legs, he moved as though through water, unable to free himself.

In his bewildering, suffocating slow motion he ran through a forest he did not know. He could feel Feng close behind him, catching up. He saw a horse through the trees. At first he thought it was Gladung, but it was white. Then a hand closed on his shoulder. He did not scream, but terror seized him, and he fell uselessly to the ground, smothered under Feng’s grotesque weight.

Sigurd woke. He lay in deathlike stillness, too frightened to move, his heart echoing in his ears. Something brushed his leg. He jerked away with a strangled cry, and his foot struck flesh.


Sigurd’s pulse began to ease as the man turned roughly onto his side, soon snoring again. Sigurd settled on his pallet, pulling his cloak tight. He lay motionless, guarding himself, until morning.

When the day dawned, the innkeeper, face puffy with sleep, came to Sigurd as he tugged on his boots. “Spade’s in the stable,” he said. “You can bury them where they are.”

As Sigurd crossed the inn’s yard, the ruddy-faced man who had spoken for him the day before caught up. “I’ll help you.”

Sigurd nodded, embarrassed at his own relief.

When they reached the place where the bodies had been, the grass was flattened, bloodstained, and bare.
“Huh,” the man said, propping a forearm on his spade. “Must have got dragged off. Wolves, maybe.”

“Wolves,” echoed Sigurd.

“Happens sometimes, especially when it’s damp. Smells are stronger. Lucky for us though, eh?” The man smiled at him, an honest, unworried smile that crinkled around his gentle eyes.

“Yes,” Sigurd agreed. “Lucky.” But he thought: Hel was here. She came in the night, took the bodies. He shivered at the justice of that.

* * *

When Sigurd had taken the ferry and descended into the town across the river, he sought out the merchants and horse traders. He sold his bridle and stirrups and the silver pieces from his saddle, sold even some of his spare clothes. They cheated him and he knew it, but he needed a horse. There were none like Gladung along the traders’ picket lines, not that he could have bought anything so fine, and he had to settle for a heavy-headed plow horse. The trader threw in a rotting, grimy bridle but no saddle.

He traveled south and west as Regin had instructed. He passed through forests and over heaths, struggled through bogs with the stodgy, reluctant plow horse. He rode or walked under the constant rains and killed what game he could find. His few remaining coins he traded for bread or lodgings when he reached a town or settlement. Where there was nothing but trees or vast stretches of scrubby heath, he tethered the horse and slept wrapped in his cloak.
Sometimes there were roads, in areas where some petty king or chieftain kept order, or where trade was lively. In such places, causeways were to be found as well, and Sigurd would ride with relief over the raised planks or gravel that stretched through some sticky, treacherous marsh. Between smaller towns, muddy tracks were more common. With the sky interminably grey, he was often uncertain of his direction. Townsfolk and farmers offered little more help than the hidden sun, for he could tell them little of his destination, and they had little knowledge beyond their own concerns. Couldn’t he be more specific about where he was going? they would ask. Who was it he was trying to reach? Regin? It sounded familiar, but they couldn’t be sure.

That Sigurd knew almost nothing of Regin or his destination became a sharper reality to him. As he grew weary and frustrated, he had to force his purpose firmly into his mind. When his thoughts drifted over the miles between him and Hjalprek’s kingdom, imagining his mother weaving with her women, wondering what business occupied the thanes, he forced himself to see Aelf’s hand in all those things. Nothing was the same with Hjalprek gone; that life was over. He would fix his mind’s eye instead on the Volsung lands, as he imagined them, picturing Lygni as a soft-faced man slouching beneath the Branstock. Riding toward the future that Regin promised, determination formed like a root within him.

The moon had waxed and waned again before he drew near enough that people were wary when he asked about Regin. One evening, while he sat with a farmer and his wife at their hearth, eating a portion of the rabbits he had killed and traded for shelter, he asked if they knew of Regin and where to find him.

The farmer stopped chewing. “What do you want with him?”
“I need to find him.”

The farmer snorted and picked at his teeth with a knife. “You’ve got five more
days, maybe six. When you get close to the river valley, it’s mostly farmland, good, rich
soil, they say. But here’s what’s strange. Hardly anyone farms there. Now why’s that, I
ask you? Well. It’s not for no reason, is it? You wouldn’t catch me there, not for the
fortune you could grow out of that land. This”—the farmer gestured at the hut around
him—“is good enough for me.”

The farmer’s wife, pouring mead, nodded at her husband’s words. “Boy, you
don’t want to have anything to do with that place. Why don’t you go home? Get someone
else to run your errand, whatever it is. Your mother must be worried to tears.”

Sigurd ignored her. “Why don’t people farm there? Surely not because of Regin.”

“It’s not that,” said the farmer. “Not entirely, though he’s strange enough. No,
there’s something more. That land—it’s got some kind of curse on it.” He shivered and
took a drink. “Everyone knows that.”

“I thought you said it was good land.”

“It is, it is,” said the farmer, anxious to be understood. “But there’s something not
right there. No one ever stays long, no one with sense. Who’d want to go so near the
Glittering Heath?”

Sigurd’s breath caught. “So Regin is near the Glittering Heath.”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“Tell me about the Heath.”

“I don’t know anything about the Heath,” protested the farmer. “Just that it’s evil.
And that valley lies right in its shadow.”
Gooseflesh rose on Sigurd’s arms. “What’s evil there?”

“I don’t know. Know one knows. But it’s a bad place, and that valley is cursed.”

“It’s an old curse, a curse of fire,” the farmer’s wife added. “All burned. Everything. Everyone dead.”

“A monstrous fire,” agreed the farmer, picking at his teeth again. “Long ago.”

Sigurd frowned, beginning to suspect he was hearing nothing more than idle peasants’ talk. Fire, after all, was not uncommon. “Have you ever been there? Either of you?”

“No. Never,” said the man quickly. “But I hear Regin’s hall is the strangest thing yet. Covered in iron bracings, they say, like the metal’s grown up around the walls, like something living. Unnatural, that—you tell me it isn’t. And another thing”—the man leaned closer to Sigurd, as though he might be overheard—“the woman who lives there—”

“The woman?”

“The woman—some say she’s his sister—she walks around, muttering. She brought the birds.”

The farmer’s wife stirred the fire. “That’s what they say who’ve been to the house, trading and so forth.” She added, “They say Regin raises fine fat lambs.”

“I wouldn’t go near that place,” insisted the farmer, cleaning his trencher with a heel of bread. “Not for anything, not for the fattest lamb east of the Rhine. Sometimes, just thinking about it, I don’t feel safe even here. We’re not much out of Regin’s shadow.”
Sigurd slammed his cup onto the hearth-stones, making the farmer jump on his stool. What could people such as these know of Regin? “You speak only of gossip, nothing of truth, and I shouldn’t have listened. King Hjalprek of Denmark was fostered by Regin, and the Danish kings have a long connection to him. He’s a worthy man, not some village sorcerer. And I’ve never heard anything about this woman.”

The farmer eyed Sigurd with a sudden apprehension, and his answer came in a tone at once cautious and defensive. “I doubt any know of her but local folk. She’s only come in the last year or so. Just appeared, seemingly, with no handmaiden, nothing. Now you tell me that’s not something odd.”

Sigurd stopped at no more farms. After several days he found himself riding through land less riddled with marshes and bogs. It was a gentler landscape, and from there the river valley was easy to find. The river itself was wide and placid, and the land that rolled away from it was indeed lush and should have been busy with crops and grazing animals. But it was true, as the farmer had said, that there were few people.

He rode along the river for two days, traveling slowly as the sun at last began to burn through the sky’s grey weaving. He caught fish and forced weak, sputtering fires from driftwood. Eventually the far shore rose, sloping steeply from the water, standing higher and more tree-covered than the flat, grassy side.

One day, as the afternoon shadows stretched into evening, Sigurd followed a bend in the river, and a startling building came into view on the far, high shore. It was built of wood, like any house, but there was something more. He could not make it out from such a distance, but something dark covered the walls, reaching even to the roof. Some kind of latticework crested the ridge, and carved figures were mounted at each end. Along the
latticework were a number of shapes, and they were moving. Birds. Several other buildings stood around this high one, small, ordinary structures, a stable, perhaps, and a dairy. There was grazing land beyond, and Sigurd could see sheep and cows. A paved path ran from the top of the slope down to the river, and a wooden bridge spanned the water. Someone was waiting there.
Chapter 6

“You took longer than I expected,” said Regin, when Sigurd halted before him. He ran his eyes over the boy, with his worn, stained clothing, over the bare-backed, thick-barreled horse. “You met some trouble.”

“You didn’t give me very good directions.”

Regin smiled a little. “No, I didn’t. But here you are all the same. You seem to be in one piece. You’ve still got your sword. That’s something.”

Regin said nothing of the horse. He could see Sigurd expected him to ask, was steeled for it. The boy, with his chin held a little too high, was clearly conscious of his own shabby appearance. He seemed to feel a sense of failure in what he had lost. On the contrary, Regin was pleased. What he saw was not loss, but gain. The boy was leaner, tougher, older. There was a pink scar on his cheek; it would fade, but perhaps the
memory would not. That was good. Sigurd knew something of the world now, how dangerous it was and what it meant—how important—to take care of himself.

As Sigurd followed Regin over the bridge and up the path to the house, the dark shadows snaking across the walls were revealed to be intricate, twisting ironwork, much as the farmer had said. The same work could be seen on the window shutters and doors. Sigurd could not make out the pattern, but it was finely wrought, the work of a great craftsman. He wondered if Regin had done it, supposed he must have. The ironwork gave the house a defensive appearance, like a fortress, but there was something too delicate, too beautiful about it.

An old man, wiry and silent, emerged from the stable to take Sigurd’s horse. Without a word, he led the animal back across the yard, past the wide vegetable garden. Beyond the stable and the other outbuildings was a pasture, surrounded by a wattle fence, and some cropland, strangely ordinary.

From the roof of the house, a falcon screeched. Regin squinted up at it, distaste shaping his mouth. Following his gaze, Sigurd eyed the blue-grey falcon and the other gathered birds. “Why do they sit up there?”

“For the view, I suppose,” said Regin wryly, and he motioned Sigurd to follow him into the iron-braced house.

Inside, the house was bare, or so it felt. Perhaps, thought Sigurd, it was only that there were no people. A few chairs stood about, a table, some cushions and baskets. All these, worn and clearly old, were well made. The floor was spread with fresh rushes, the hearth-fire lit. A throbbing hoot sounded from above, and he looked up to see a large grey owl, its body barred with ghostly white, swiveling its head in the rafters.
“This will be yours,” said Regin, stopping at one of the chamber doors that lined the main hall. “Once you’ve cleaned up, come to the hearth.”

It was a simple room, furnished with only a table and chair, bed and chest. A basin of steaming water and a towel rested on the table. Clean clothes lay on the bed. When Regin was gone, Sigurd dropped his gear on the chest and sank wearily onto the bed. He rested his eyes a moment, beginning to relax, but the silence made him uneasy, and he got up.

Shortly after, dressed in the clean woolen tunic and trousers, the curling ends if his hair still dark from washing, Sigurd sat across from Regin at the hearth. A pot of stew was warming on top of an iron stand, the coiled feet of which straddled the fire. With the day dimming, shadows filled the hall. It was a large room for two people, the hearth-light reaching only to the edges of the raised platforms, the walls lost in darkness. Waiting for the stew to heat, Sigurd turned a clay cup of warmed mead in his hands, his thoughts catching on the unsettling stretch of empty space behind him.

“You’re all right?” Regin asked as he stood over the pot, stirring it with even strokes.

Surprised, Sigurd answered automatically, “Yes.”

Regin’s black brows twitched together, and he searched Sigurd’s face with his pale, piercing eyes. Unsure of what Regin might be capable, Sigurd worried that he could see into him, and he set his thoughts against it.

Regin looked away at last, settling back into his chair, hooking one leg over the other. “I’m sorry about your horse.” His voice had turned brusque. “I didn’t expect that. I know he meant something to you.”
Sigurd’s grip tightened on his cup. “He…yes, he did.”

The dark, elegant brows drew down. “That is hard. But a man must accept losses as he accepts gains. To bear loss well, with courage and fortitude, is kingly. I’m glad,” he added, “that you didn’t lose your sword or, it seems, your honor. I commend you for that.”

A long, slow breath eased from Sigurd, an unexpected relief. At the same time, his hand strayed to the sword, his fingers brushing the familiar teeth of the dragonhead pommel. It would have been terrible to lose it; it had been a gift from Hjalpr ek.

Regin nodded at the sword. “May I see it?” When Sigurd had passed the weapon to him over the fire, Regin examined its edges, tested its balance. “I haven’t made a pattern-welded blade for ages. This was one of the last.”

Sigurd looked at him incredulously. “You made this sword?”

“What surprises you about that? I’ve made many weapons for Danish kings.” Regin handed it back. “I’ll sharpen it for you tomorrow. Whatever blockhead sharpened it last had no sense of symmetry. And,” he added disapprovingly, “it looks like you’ve been digging with it.”

It occurred to Sigurd how strange it was that Regin had once lived at the court where he himself had been born, to think that Regin would many times have sat in the king’s hall, as he had, many times ridden through the fortress gates, and all of it impossibly long ago. Hoping Regin would somehow account for the years of his unnaturally long life, he ventured, “Why did you leave the court? I mean, when you were smith there.”

Regin’s body stiffened, though his tone was casual, “What do you know of it?”
“They say you worked at the court for…many years, and then you left and came here. No one seems to know why. You farm here. How can you prefer that? Any king would gladly take you as his smith.”

“I do not prefer to farm; it’s peasants’ work,” said Regin. “But how can I live off commissioned weapons alone? It does not pay so well as that.”

“But you could set up in a court. That would be better, wouldn’t it?”

“If I wanted to live under another’s thumb again, yes, I suppose that would be better. Now enough of your questions. You’re much too direct. You think I will reveal my reasons to you, simply because you ask? You need to develop a sense of delicacy—and some kind of strategy—if you want to gather information.”

Sigurd felt his cheeks grow hot. He had not thought himself so obvious.

As he watched Regin stir the pot again, he wondered where Regin’s house servants were, or whether he even had any. There were clearly men who worked the farm, but he had seen no one inside the hall. If there were servants, they were certainly silent. He wondered, too, about the woman the farmer had mentioned: whether she existed, where she was. He noticed, through the shadows gathering along the walls, a loom. It was warped with wool of the same green as his tunic, and the shuttle rested between the waiting strands.

“Tell me,” said Regin, handing Sigurd a trencher of stew and settling back into his chair with his own serving, “did you think at all about what I said to you before I left?”

“You mean about why I wanted to get here?”

“Obviously.”

“I want—do you know of my father’s kingdom?”
“Of course.”

“Then you know that a foreign king controls it. That should not be.”

Regin tasted the stew, swirled his carved spoon through it. “You want to take it back, and be king yourself?”

Sigurd frowned. He had not really thought of being king. “I—yes, I suppose so.”

“You suppose?” Regin set his trencher on his knee. “It is no small thing, to be a king. No small responsibility.”

“You’ll help me? I must learn.”

Regin tapped his spoon absentmindedly on the edge of his trencher. “To be king?”

“No. Yes. Well, to get Lygni, I mean. They say it will take stealth and cunning, not just force.”

“I can help you,” said Regin easily. “Remember, though, it’s not just for me to teach, but for you to learn. You must work hard. You must listen to me and try to understand the things I tell you. You must trust that there’s a reason behind what I do. Behind everything I do.”

Sigurd nodded.

“I’m curious: are you angry? That I left you?”

Sigurd didn’t answer at first, and his eyes went to the blackened iron stand in the fire, following the coils of the feet. “I know why you did it.”

Regin took a bite of his stew, motioned for Sigurd to eat. “And why is that?”

“So I would get here myself. So I would make my own decisions. And I did.”

Sigurd stirred the forgotten stew, breaking the skin that had formed over it. He ate several hurried spoonfuls. It was thick and salty and roused a dormant hunger.
“You don’t resent it?” Regin’s voice was interested.

Sigurd shrugged. “I liked traveling by myself. It was like being alone in Hjalprek’s forest. It was quiet. I could think about things. And listen to things, like the wind and the rain and the birds.”

As Sigurd cleaned his trencher, Regin filled it again. “Do you like birds?”

“I like their wings. I like how they fly.”

“Have you ever noticed how much they talk? How much they watch and listen? You must careful of birds. They keep few secrets and cannot always be trusted.”

“Then why do you have so many?”

“They’re not mine. They belong to my sister.”

Sigurd’s heart leaped. “Your—”

“She’s cautious of people.” Regin stilled. “I see someone’s told you of her. You didn’t let the peasants scare you, I hope? They gossip abominably.”

Sigurd lowered his eyes to his stew. “No one said much.”

“I’m sure,” said Regin sarcastically.

In his chamber, as Sigurd settled into bed and blew out the gold bloom of a tallow candle, the sudden dark pressed upon him, eerie in its silence and stillness. Hjalprek’s hall, full of his thanes, family, guests and servants, had never been silent, never still, even in the dead of night. Always, someone could be heard: snoring, shifting, making love, shuffling about in the dim hours to bake the bread. Sigurd’s nights outside as he had traveled had been noisier yet, the wind teasing at the trees and grasses, sometimes howling over the heath. And there had been the animal and insects, always busy.
It was because of the silence that he heard the hushed voices and faint, floating notes of a harp in the hall. Creeping over the rushes in his bare feet, he moved like a hunter to the door. He eased it open just enough to press his eye to the slit. He could see Regin, dark hair like a shadow around his head, sitting at the hearth, brushing his elegant fingers across the strings of a harp. At first, he saw no one else. Then a movement caught his eye, someone shifting in the darkness beyond the reach of light.

“I think you’ll like him, Ragnhild,” said Regin. “You weren’t here to see it, of course—you were lurking in that stinking hole—but when Hjalprek arrived here all those years ago, after I had left him on the road, he had more to say of his travels, and more to say of himself. He had found parties of merchants and traders to join for various legs of his journey, and he rode in comfort and safety to my door. He learned much of trade that way, and much of people, but little of self-sufficiency. Do you realize: Sigurd must not have even tried to join a party. It would have been easy, a boy that age with a face that echoes the gods, with a nobleman’s sword at his waist, a boy who could simply have said, ‘I am the son of King Sigmund of the Volsungs, and King Aelf of Denmark is my stepfather.’ He could probably have hired an escort with nothing more than a promise of payment. Instead, he drags himself across miles and miles of heath and bog, through the bewildering forests, cold, wet, and alone. What does that tell you?”

The shadowed figure flowed into the light, graceful, seeming almost to drift across the floor. Her hair was the tortured, delicate grey of wood ash, though she looked no older than Regin. Her face should have been beautiful, but it was too angular and too absent. The edges of her voice were rough, rusty like a seldom-used sword. “That he’s a fool.”

Lifting the pot from its stand on the hearth, Ragnhild muttered something Sigurd could not hear, to which Regin responded, “Oh, what do I care what you think, you old witch. Don’t think I don’t know you’re against me. Don’t think I don’t know that’s why you’re here, to subvert me. Or to try.” Regin propped a foot on the edge of the hearth, leaned back against his chair. “I could turn you away. You know that, don’t you? Why shouldn’t I?”

The withdrawn, wandering look of her pale eyes vanished for a moment. “You want no more dishonor, maybe. I am your sister.”

“Go away, woman.”

Ragnhild disappeared down the hall with the pot, flowing into the shadows as she had flowed out of them. Regin returned his attention to his harp, which whispered a subtle, haunting melody against his fingers.

*   *   *

Regin did not allow Sigurd to watch him sharpen the sword, though the boy had asked. Regin preferred to work alone, had never shared his craft with anyone. Many young ironsmiths, many gold- and silversmiths, had come to him over the years, hoping he would share some secret. But the depth of craft their common minds and insensible hands were capable of learning could be taught by anyone. What he did was beyond them, and it was his alone. He could hear the voice of the metal, could give it form. He could draw out its heart, temper it, make it deadly at the core.
At the edge of the farm, his smithy lay within a hill, in a cave, for it was close to the earth that Regin could best understand the language of the ores. When the forge’s fires burned, smoke would trail from the cave’s mouth. It always followed the same path, rising to the roof of the cave, drifting along it to the open air, like a lazy, nebulous river. It had taken him a lifetime to hone this simple skill. It chafed him that he had no greater power over fire, for he wanted to bind it, wanted it fully under his control.

Deep within the cave, a thinly beaten silver mirror caught the light from the braziers, casting it everywhere, onto the rough stone walls, over the forge with its massive bellows, the anvil, the scattered tools. Regin worked at his bench, filing away the imperfections, finding the true edges of the sword he had made for Hjalprek early in his fosterage. When the edges were even and sharp, he polished the sword against an oiled whetstone. As he smoothed the blade against the stone, he heard an echo of the frustration he had wrought into it. Listening to the sword now, he was surprised. He must have sensed, even then, that Hjalprek was not enough.

When Regin returned the sword, fine and gleaming, its pattern bright, the boy held it to the sun. “It’s beautiful,” he said, and the sun streamed down the blade onto his face.

* * *

Through the spring and summer months, Sigurd’s education consisted largely of history and geography, runes and strategy. He and Regin spent hours in the chilly room where Regin kept his vellum maps, many crumbling with age, some freshly drawn.
Through these, Regin showed Sigurd the changes in boundaries and kingship. They discussed power: who lost it, who gained it, why.

“This is the kingdom of Giuki, is it not?” asked Sigurd one day, his finger on the Burgundian lands that hugged the Rhine to the south. Before he had left Denmark, his mother had said that a son of Giuki was to be fostered with Regin as well. It had meant little to him then, and he had nearly forgotten. But after months away from the companionship of Hjalprek’s thanes, away from his mother, without even his horse, he felt an unexpected loneliness.

“That is Giuki’s kingdom, yes. Giuki does not have the kind of army that his eastern neighbor Budli of Hunaland has”—Regin pointed to a kingdom separated from Giuki’s by a dense forest—“but Giuki has the Rhine, and better trade.”

“What’s the name of Giuki’s son? I don’t remember.”

“You don’t lie well, Sigurd. You should avoid it whenever possible. Gunnar is coming here, as you plainly know. Soon enough. Now. Since we’re looking at this area, I will tell you of the wars between Budli’s father and Giuki’s, and how the Dark Forest that lies between them offers both protection and danger.”

Sigurd leaned over the map with a sigh. He was not accustomed to so much study.

Regin did not restrict Sigurd’s education to maps and memorization, however, and in truth Sigurd spent more time out of doors than within them. He hunted and practiced his archery. He made a sturdy shaft for a gleaming, deadly spearhead that Regin produced from his smithy. This spear he cast again and again at targets he had fashioned and hung on the pasture’s trees. When Sigurd complained of having no opponent for his sword practice, Regin joined him in the yard with a blade of his own.
Regin was a better swordsman than Sigurd had expected. He was strong and cunning, often lulling Sigurd into complacency, then punishing the mistake with swift, hard blows. That was something he liked about practicing with Regin, that he didn’t hold back as much as Hjalprek’s thanes had. They had never cut him, had never pressed him harder than he could handle. Regin, though less skilled than they, gave him a truer training. Regin did not offer much advice in terms of form, but Sigurd preferred learning this way, figuring it out himself.

Regin also sent him on a number of errands, many of which took several days. He was sent to buy grains, sent to collect herbs, to cut firewood. Sometimes Regin set a task with no obvious purpose.

“Fill this basket with mud from the bottom of the river,” Regin once instructed him. “Be sure you go out to the middle, where the mud is best.”

“What do you need it for?”

“For the garden.”

Sigurd took the basket. He was not fooled any more than Regin expected him to be, but anything was better than staring at maps and runic tablets. The river was still swollen with spring rains, and the cold shot through him when he dove from the bridge. Though he was a strong swimmer, it was a struggle to the bottom, and his lungs were burning long before he reached it. When he surfaced, kicking hard against the dragging weight of the basket, he was some way downstream. He struggled to the shore, flopping onto his back as he hauled the basket, now half empty, after him.

“Good work,” said Regin when Sigurd had carted the dipping basket up the slope to the house.
One thing Regin did constantly was pose questions to him, asking how he would handle a given situation. The kitchen is on fire. What do you do? Two neighboring farmers claim to own the same cow. What do you do? You’ve taken your army on an autumn raid and the river ices over before you can make your return trip. You and your men are stranded in enemy territory. What do you do?

As they sat by the hearth on a rainy morning, Sigurd carving a crude bone flute, Regin posed his most difficult question yet. “You’ve killed a man. Why is unimportant. There could be many reasons. He attacked your kingdom. You attacked his. He insulted your father’s honor. Whatever. You’ve killed him. He has a young son. What do you do with this boy?”

“Do with him?”

Regin only raised an eyebrow.

Sigurd’s heart pounded in his throat. “Why would I do anything with him?”

Regin said nothing for some time, only stared ruthlessly into Sigurd’s face. Then, “What are you going to do to Lygni?”

Sigurd went still, the flute forgotten in his hands. “Well? What are you going to do to Lygni?”

“Kill him.”

“And why?”

Sigurd swallowed hard. “Because he killed my father.”

Regin nodded, satisfied with the understanding he saw in Sigurd’s face. “Children are as much to be feared as men, for what they threaten is the future. You must always think ahead.”
Late in the summer, when the light was changing, Regin walked through the long shadows of early morning to find Sigurd. Whether he should be bowing to Ragnhild’s wishes, he was still uncertain. He didn’t trust her, couldn’t see what she wanted. He didn’t mind Sigurd getting bruised, even broken bones would heal, but if she came back without the boy…he would kill her, sister or no. Whether she had understood him when he told her that, or had even seen him standing before her, was unclear. Her mind was always roving far away, folded in fire and earth. Yet, Regin reasoned, an excursion with her might be good for the boy. The more Sigurd learned to do, the better, and he grew stronger, braver, more resourceful with every challenge Regin put to him. Not only that, but Regin had business of his own, and he would have to leave Sigurd behind with Ragnhild whether he wanted to or not.

Regin found Sigurd where he knew he would, casting his spear at a ring-painted target. A vision caught at Regin, dazzled him: for a moment, the boy seemed to be made from the golden light of the dying summer, like some fey spirit. The skin of his face and arms, his bared chest and back, lean with young muscle, were tanned brown-gold. His hair hoarded every shade of it, shifting from the darkest honey to the lightest, brightest sun-fire.

The golden image dimmed as Sigurd faded into the shade of the tree, wrenching his spear from the center of the target. He moved back two-dozen paces, centered himself. Regin’s brow drew down. The boy hadn’t seen him. He must learn to mind his surroundings. Regin lengthened his stride. When Sigurd raised his spear and took his first
leaping step to throw, Regin, still several yards away, snapped his cloak. Sigurd faltered. The spear flew wide, knocking a chunk from the edge of the target and clattering against the fence behind. Sigurd whipped around.

“You startled me.”

“I know. You weren’t paying attention.”

Sigurd’s expression was defensive. “I was concentrating.”

“Concentration is good, but you mustn’t lose awareness of what’s around you. That is dangerous.”

“What’s there to be ware of here?” demanded Sigurd stubbornly.

“Nothing, as far as it goes. But do you intend to stay always among cows and sheep? Always throwing your spear at immobile, wooden enemies, conveniently painted with concentric rings?”

“Of course not.”

“Then do not practice as though that is all you expect from life. Be creative. Invent some obstacles, some distractions—some challenges—for yourself.”

At first Sigurd looked defiant, a fist hard at his hip, then he sighed. “I didn’t think of that. Maybe—yes—I could chase that young bull over here.”

“Good idea. But that can wait. I have a journey to make. I may be gone a month, perhaps more, perhaps less. I’m riding south to collect Gunnar of Burgundy.”

Sigurd’s attention sharpened.

“It’s past time he begins his fosterage,” Regin continued. “Kings are holding onto their sons far too long these days, getting soft. It didn’t used to be this way.”

“Can I—”
“No. I go alone. You would be in the way. Besides, you’re needed here. I expect you to oversee the farm. We’re coming into harvest time. Everyone knows their responsibilities, but it’s hot, and you may need to crack the whip. You can do that?”

“Yes. At least, I think I know what needs doing.”

“You’ll figure it out. There’s another thing. Ragnhild tells me there’s a bird, a falcon, some miles from here. She wants this bird. You’re to go with her and help her capture it.”

“You don’t like the birds, Regin. Why do you allow her to keep them?”

“They occupy her. Not that it’s any concern of yours why I do what I do. Now. Get your things. You may be gone several days.”

In his chamber, Sigurd pulled on his lightest tunic, changed into his boots. He stuffed his pack with twine and rope, leather strips, his traveling cloak. His knife he strapped at his waist. His bow, bound into its leather case, he slung across his back. When he had passed through the hall on the way to his chamber, Ragnhild had been sitting at the hearth, ready to travel, seeming to listen to the grey owl hooting softly in the rafters. Over the summer, he had grown accustomed to her, learned to move around her, as Regin did. Though he often did not see her for a day, sometimes more, it was clear that she alone kept the house, silently working her loom, tending the kitchen garden, sweeping the hearth, serving food. None of this work was done by Regin’s four farmhands, for they rarely passed through the door, and when they did, they never stayed long. They lived in a small house near the stable, working by day in the fields or the dairy, disappearing into their own shelter at night. They were a dull-eyed group, and they hardly spoke to him.
Ragnhild hardly spoke to him either. This in itself did not trouble him, but sometimes he caught a glimpse of something wild, almost feral, in her eyes. Then she would turn her face away, muttering to herself as she so often did, or to her birds. He sometimes wondered what was wrong with her, whether her mind had been addled by illness, or injury, or age. Though he mostly took her behavior as a matter of course—she did him no harm, seemed hardly to notice him—sometimes he worried that something darker lay beneath her vague expression.

* * *

An old road, badly overgrown, led through the fertile land of the river valley. Because hardly anyone came to work the land, the trees were taking it back. Walking, as Ragnhild did not like to ride, they passed only a few farms, all of them gloomy, unkempt places.

The sun bled its heat onto the landscape, burned itself into the worn gravel where it still marked the old road; it caught in the eyes of the travelers and brought out the sweat on their faces.

Despite the building heat, Ragnhild moved with grace, like a gliding swan, and almost as silently. But her mind was an undertow. Ever since the Phantom of the North, returning to his rafter after a night hunt, had brought news of the falcon with its snow-white breast, she had been restless. She had to have him—he was the King Falcon, the great hunter, and she had never seen his like before. She would capture him, trap and tame him. Then, when he was complacent and gentle, she would bind him to her, wind
his mind through her own. She could not bind him entirely against his will—that was impossible—but his will could be smoothed away after she caught him. So it had been with the others. So it would be with him. The owl had also told her that this great white bird had escaped from a falconer. He would be overwhelmed by his freedom, ready to be taken again.

The boy intruded on her thoughts. “Do you want to rest?”

A boy whose name was guardian and victory. But what victory, she wondered, and whose? She couldn’t see it; he was a blank to her, meaningless. She didn’t answer him, her mind already spinning away past the valley. She searched for the thoughts of songbirds as they sat in the trees or pulled worms from the earth, searched for the minds of the hawks and eagles as they swept over the fields to see what stirred in the grasses. She searched for any sign of the white falcon, any memory, but wild birds had much to think about, and what she found was mostly wind and heat, worms, seeds and insects, nests, quarrels, and death.

Miles later, the valley melted into heath, worn scruffy and dry by the summer sun. Sigurd sweated under his linen tunic, and damp hair curled against his forehead. Though sweat also darkened her ash-grey hair, Ragnhild seemed tireless; they had stopped neither to eat nor to rest. When he watched her from the corner of his eyes, she made no sign of noticing. She muttered things he could not hear. Sometimes a scowl would seize her face, sometimes a look of fevered excitement.

As they walked, Sigurd felt a tension growing in his shoulders. There was something strange about the heath they crossed. Whatever troubled him could be neither seen nor heard, for the heath stretching before them was covered by ordinary, low-
growing plants. Small animals could be heard among the scrub, and birds were to be seen flitting from bush to bush. For all that, there was a stillness and a threat that surrounded the heath, like an enormous, invisible pair of arms waiting to tighten their hold. To cast off this formless grasp, he broke again into Ragnhild’s silence.

He said her name, waited for a response. When none came, he raised his voice.

“Ragnhild.”

Concentration slowly gathered in her face. When she spoke, each word was like a stone dropping. “What do you want, Victory-Warder?”

The uncomfortable, deliberate rendering of his name and her ambiguous tone made him uncertain. For a moment, he felt that she was not just odd and unpredictable, not just Regin’s aloof, mysterious sister who muttered to her birds. She was dangerous. He said only, “What’s this bird we’re after?”

“He is a cloud on the wind. He falls from the sky like a thought, breaks the breast of his enemy.”

Sigurd frowned, sifting through the answer. “A white falcon? That can only mean one thing.”

“The sky king,” she confirmed.

“So where is he? Where are we going?”

“ Unblock your ears, thick-headed boy. The birds speak of it. We’re getting closer.”

As the sun faded toward evening, they drew near a wood at the edge of the heath. Ragnhild stopped so suddenly that Sigurd walked several paces beyond her before he noticed. Her eyes stared like a beacon, and he followed her gaze into a dead tree,
towering above the others. High in the bare branches perched a huge white bird, its breast gilded with the late light.

“Oh,” he breathed.

They made camp at the edge of the wood, far enough from the falcon not to alarm it. With the image of the sun-sparked bird blazing in his mind, Sigurd forgot his weariness. He searched with Ragnhild among the trees for strong, straight branches until the last of the light slipped away. By the campfire, they cleaned the branches of twigs and leaves, cut them into even lengths. Sigurd assembled the box trap, stacking the pieces, binding them with rope at the corners. When the trap was finished, it was nearly two feet tall, large enough to hold the bait they would catch for the falcon.

Sitting back on his heels to inspect the trap, he said, “It may take some days to find a covey of grouse.”

“No. They’re not far.”

Ragnhild spoke the truth. The next morning, Sigurd followed her along the edge of the woodland until she stopped to crouch behind some scrub. Nearby, a number of grouse, the males dark blue and glossy, conspicuous with their bright red wattles, strutted about in the cool of dawn. Taking the trap and some wild blackberries, Sigurd crept as close as he dared. He set the trap by propping up one edge and securing the bait, crushed and pungent, to the trigger.

When the trap was sprung, a young male, thrashing and squawking, was caught. They clipped his wings and took him back to camp. Sigurd fashioned a leather harness, to which he attached dozens of loops of stiff twine, and a tether secured to a stake. He bound the bird into the harness, and he and Ragnhild returned to where they had seen the
falcon the day before. He was gone, which was unsurprising. He would be hunting, and so they would have to wait for another morning. They returned to camp, shutting the grouse under the box trap.

The following day, they rose before dawn, taking the subdued grouse again to where they had seen the falcon. As Sigurd stole across the heath into open ground, he could see the pale shape of the falcon in the lightening sky. He pounded the stake into the earth with a rock and joined Ragnhild at the edge of the trees.

The grouse fluttered about confusedly on its clipped wings, pulling against the tether. The movement drew the falcon’s eye, though it did not leave its perch for some time. When it finally rose into the air, it glided, bright white against the blue sky. It spiraled above the bait, observing. Suddenly, it dove, plummeting toward the earth some distance from the bait and sweeping low over the heath. The falcon flew in behind the grouse, trying to startle it into the air. The grouse flew awkwardly to the end of its tether. When the falcon struck, it was jerked to a halt, its talons tangled in the snares on the grouse’s harness. Shrieking, the white bird tumbled to the ground.

Sigurd bolted across the heath. The falcon thrashed and screamed, and the stake began to shudder loose. He pinned the tether under his foot, shocked by the strength of the falcon. When the falcon paused, panting on its side, he grabbed its feet. He lifted it, letting it dangle upside down, and released the dead grouse from its harness. Carefully, he untangled the falcon’s talons. It hung, suddenly serene, without struggling, as birds do when held upside down. Ragnhild appeared at his side wearing a heavy leather glove.
“It’s a white Gyrfalcon, the bird of kings,” he said wonderingly. “Look at the beautiful black pattern on his back and wings. He’s magnificent. But”—he sighed disappointment—“he’s already got jesses on his legs.”

Ragnhild slipped a leather hood over the falcon’s head. She cut away the rotten, ruined jesses and tied new ones.

“He belongs to someone, Ragnhild. Who’s the nearest king?”

“He’s mine.”

“But where does he come from? Someone’s lost him.”

“He was born in the mountains. Then a falconer had him. He escaped. That is all he understands.” She settled the falcon, sightless, onto her gloved arm. Then she turned from Sigurd, returning with the falcon to camp.

While Ragnhild sat on a fallen log with the falcon, looking on him with an unsettling concentration, stroking his breast with the back of her finger, Sigurd dismantled the grouse trap. He laid out the materials, planning a cage for the falcon. As he began to construct the bottom, Ragnhild told him, “We don’t need that.” without ever raising her eyes from the bird.

“It’s a long way back. This would be the easiest way to carry him.”

Ragnhild didn’t answer.

“Are we even starting back today?”

Still she said nothing.

Sigurd stared at her for a moment, but the sight was unnerving. A wandering breeze lifted wisps of grey hair away from her smooth-skinned face, and the morning light sharpened her cheekbones and the blade-like thrust of her nose. Her eyes made an
almost tangible connection to the falcon. When the fine hair began to rise on the back of Sigurd’s neck, he left her there.

He wandered into the woods, following deer trails, lying silently in the underbrush to watch for game. When the sun was high and blinding, he returned to camp. Ragnhild had removed the falcon’s hood, and the bird stared back at her with an unflinching eye. Sigurd took his bow and wandered away again, heading for the place they had caught the grouse. The covey was hidden now in the heat, and it took him some time to flush them out. He shot two. They spun to the ground with arrows in their breasts. He knew he should not have killed so many. They had the other to eat, and over-hunting was wasteful. But he had nothing to do—he could not sit idle.

The next morning, Sigurd awoke to the sounds of Ragnhild breaking camp. They ate cold grouse and started across the heath even as the sun rose. The falcon, hooded, perched on Ragnhild’s forearm as they walked. Sigurd marveled at her strength and stamina: the falcon was huge, nearly two feet tall and heavy-bodied. When they had traveled several miles, Ragnhild all the while murmuring to the falcon, she removed the hood and cast him onto the wind.

Sigurd drew a startled breath. “You’ll lose him.”

Ragnhild paid him no attention. She was far away, her thoughts winging through the cloudless sky.

The falcon returned to Ragnhild’s wrist from time to time, but mostly it carried itself. It disturbed Sigurd to watch the falcon, so recently masterless, following them back to Regin’s as though it were going home, as though it did not even think to fly away.
Ragnhild wielded some kind of power over the bird—of that he felt certain—but how she did it, he could not begin to imagine.

As they followed the old road through the river valley, the falcon disappeared. Sigurd swept his gaze again and again across the sky. Ragnhild showed no sign of concern, did not even look up. When at last Regin’s house came into view across the river, he was chilled to see a flashing white speck at the peaked edge of the roof.
Chapter 7

The arrival of the white falcon deeply distressed Ragnhild’s other birds. They abandoned the roof, leaving the falcon perched there alone, gazing across the river and the valley, gripping the carved figure mounted at the roof’s edge. Some attempted to take shelter in the hall, but the high, alarmed calls of the grey owl, and his flashing yellow eyes, sent them streaking out the windows again. The trees around Regin’s house rustled with arguments—ravens croaked, kestrels screamed, songbirds twittered nervously—and many took to living farther away, in the pastures and even across the river, straining against Ragnhild’s hold over them.

The Gyrfalcon, though, paid them little attention. He hunted the geese and the other water birds on the river, flushing them into the air, snatching them in flight and driving them to the ground, breaking their breastbones. He caught rabbits and voles,
shrews, and the wild birds of the valley. He swept over the browning fields like a herald of winter, snow-white and deadly.

Sigurd watched for him to fly away, waited for his escape, but he returned always to the roof. That Ragnhild could bind the falcon, that she could bind all the birds, intrigued him, but it troubled him also. He thought of the falcon before they had caught him: perched in the bare branches of a towering tree overlooking the heath, circling, so bright, against the vastness of the sky. He was a glorious bird, kingly, and Sigurd hated to see him held captive through sorcery.

When harvest came into full swing, however, he had little more than passing attention to spare for the falcon. The hay, already cut and curing in the homefield and meadows, had to be turned for even drying. The tedious work seemed without end. Sigurd spent all day in the fields with the men, now and then steering them away from the shade to which they were drawn in Regin’s absence. As the Haymaking Month blended into the Corn Cutting Month, they harvested the cereal crops and gathered the hay into the barn, building the surplus into haystacks. Sigurd worked as hard as anyone, but he hated it. He had no interest in farming, thought it beneath him, and he resented the time it took from his weapons practice and his solitude.

It was with relief that one afternoon he watched a dark form in the distance shape itself into a horse and rider. His responsibilities seemed to wash away from him like mud in the river. When Regin dismounted in the yard, Sigurd was there to meet him.

“Where’s Gunnar?” he pressed, even as Regin’s foot touched the ground.

Regin untied his saddlebags. “Where do you think?”

“You left him on the road?”
“He won’t take as long as you did. He doesn’t have nearly as far to come.”

Sigurd looped the reins in his hand. “You aren’t worried that King Giuki might be angry? Gunnar is his heir.”

Regin’s only answer was a cold look that clearly meant for Sigurd to mind his own business. Sigurd was not intimidated by this expression, but he recognized its finality. Regin only answered questions when it suited him.

Regin slung his saddlebags over his shoulder. “Any problems while I was away?”

Sigurd shrugged. “The harvest is fine.” He nodded toward the roof. “Ragnhild got her falcon.”

Regin did not look up. “I saw it riding in.”

Inspecting the farm the next day, Regin was pleased with the work that had been done. The harvest was on schedule; nothing had been overlooked. The tools were clean and oiled, the animals content. The credit did not all belong to Sigurd, as Regin kept no idlers in his service, but still, there was evidence of leadership. When Regin had lingered so long at Aelf’s court, he had returned to less order than he saw now. The boy, apparently, was capable of authority. He also had a sense of responsibility, as he had returned to the fields that morning without complaint, only disappearing with his spear when Regin had dismissed him.

By the time Gunnar arrived a week later, the heavy harvesting work was over, and Sigurd had returned to his studies and weapons. Neither he nor Regin noticed Gunnar’s approach; they were engrossed in sword practice in the yard.

Sigurd made a stab at Regin’s torso. Regin knocked the blow aside and shoved Sigurd with his foot. As he stumbled back, Sigurd blocked Regin’s downward blows with
the flat of his blade. Though the blows were not full strength, they were still enough to send shudders up his arms. When Sigurd caught one blow against his cross-guard, he made a swift twist, trying to wrench Regin’s sword from his grip. Regin kept hold of his sword, but he was thrown off balance, and Sigurd slashed at his thigh. Regin only just blocked him. Having overreached in his attack, Sigurd left himself open to Regin’s kick at his elbow.

Regin then knocked Sigurd onto his back with a chest-blow from the pommel of his sword. Sigurd made one last desperate swing as Regin brought down his sword to end the fight. Regin’s sword spun from his grasp. A look of surprise flashed across his face. The look was gone in an instant; he whipped his knife from his belt and flung himself down on Sigurd. Before Sigurd could bring up his sword again, Regin had the blade pressed to his throat.

“That’s not fair!” Sigurd banged his sword pommel on the ground. “You said we were practicing swordsmanship—I didn’t even bring my knife!”

Regin grinned wolfishly. “That wasn’t very wise of you, was it? Do you expect all your enemies to fight fair? You’ll get yourself killed.”

Sigurd’s retort was cut off by an exclamation from across the yard. “I say, excellent show!”

Gunnar of Burgundy leaped down from his horse. He was of an age with Sigurd, though he looked younger with his round face and stockier build. He had a proud bearing, and there was a determined, conscious set to his mouth, even as he smiled. His hair, the color of tarnished copper, was combed back neatly. He wore the fine clothes of a king’s
son, gold-embroidered and well fitted. Behind him, two men were dismounting their own horses.

Sigurd scrambled to his feet as Regin let out a high, deafening whistle that brought one of his men hurrying from the dairy to take the horses.

“Arrived safely I see, Gunnar,” said Regin, retrieving his lost sword.

Gunnar gave him a peevish look. “Thanks to the escort of my cousins, yes.”

Gunnar formally introduced the two men, who nodded with stiff dignity, then he turned to Sigurd with an air of excitement. “Your kin are held in high esteem in my father’s country. I will be proud to claim Sigurd of the Volsungs as my brother, for brothers is what we will be, even until death.”

Sigurd’s neck flushed at this overblown greeting, but he sensed something real and valuable beneath it as he took Gunnar’s offered hand. “I never had any brothers.”

“I have two. We can share them.”

Sigurd smiled, and an unknown stiffness eased from his face.

“Come, boys,” interrupted Regin, as the horses were led away. “Everyone will want to wash before supper.”

Turning toward the house, scanning its twisting black bracings, Gunnar said, “Interesting ironwork,” as though it seemed nothing more to him.

As they sat around the low-burning hearth-fire for the evening meal, Regin asked Gunnar only the barest questions regarding his journey. Gunnar told of his travels, of the weather and of lost horseshoes, but he left out any reference to Regin having abandoned him on the road. Sigurd noticed that Gunnar’s cousins, both reserved, inexpressive men,
gave no indication that they knew what had happened. It was not until the next day, when Gunnar’s escort had departed for Burgundy, that Regin spoke more directly.

He had brought files and whetstones from his smithy, and they sat in the cool of the hall at a sturdy oak table. Relenting to Sigurd’s persistent arguments that he should teach him something, at least, of his craft, he guided the boys through the sharpening of their swords, spearheads and knives. It was hardly a rare skill, but it was best learned under Regin’s exacting eye. Wiping the excess oil from a whetstone, Regin fixed Gunnar with his cool blue stare.

“So. Gunnar. You didn’t tell your kinsmen of my mean trick.”

Gunnar raised his chin with a look of strained patience. “It was no concern of theirs. A king must have discretion; he must know what to tell his people and what to keep to himself. Perhaps you did not realize it, but you left me not five miles from their lands.”

“So what did you tell them?” Regin sounded merely curious.

“Only that I needed an escort. They thought you rude, of course, but assumed you had intended for me to come to them. If you’re thinking me cowardly for not riding on alone”—Gunnar’s voice rose—“I will remind you that I am my father’s heir, and it would be nothing short of stupid for me to risk my life on perilous roads, for nothing.”

“Of course,” agreed Regin.

“It would be irresponsible. I have more to think of than myself.”

“Absolutely.”

“I would willingly risk—or even yield—my life for a worthy cause, one that serves my father’s kingdom, but not simply to prove something.”
“I see you understand a little of what it means to be king. That is not without value. But, Gunnar, you may have other things to learn, things less comfortable to you. I hope I will not find you unwilling.”

“Of course not,” objected Gunnar. “That’s why my father sent me here. He would have the Giukings remembered for something more than trade and fine wine. It is my duty to bring some greater renown to my people.” Gunnar abruptly turned his attention to his sword, running his finger along the edge to test its smoothness. The conversation seemed to be over until he looked up at Sigurd. “Did he leave you on the road?”

“Naturally.”

“What did you do?”

“I rode here alone.” Sigurd felt his cheeks grow warm. “Stupidly, I suppose.”

“It must have taken weeks! Tell me what happened. Did you meet trouble?”

Sigurd stroked the whetstone evenly against his sword, concentrating on the angle as Regin had instructed. “I killed two men. I had to.”

Regin looked up in surprise.

Out of pride, Sigurd had not told him of the outlaws. He had felt tougher, somehow, by keeping it to himself. Besides, Regin had expressed no real interest in hearing of his journey, and Sigurd had always felt it beneath him to draw attention to himself.

Yet as Gunnar pressed him for the story, he found himself telling it in much greater detail than he had at the inn. He discovered an unknown excitement in the telling and an unexpected pride in the attention of his listeners. He said nothing, though, of Odin or of Gladung’s burial. Those things he would keep for himself, Odin most especially.
“What a horrid man!” cried Gunnar in disgust when Sigurd had described Feng. Then, at the end of the story, he commented, “By the gods, I’m glad you killed him—both of them. That’s just the sort of men who make trouble at the edges of the Dark Forest along Burgundy’s eastern border. They should be routed out and put to the sword. But the innkeeper…he should never have made you bury them yourself. How absurd. How degrading!”

“I didn’t have to bury them.” Sigurd leaned over his sword again. “The bodies were gone in the morning.”

“Gone? What do you mean?”

Sigurd looked across the table at Regin, who raised an eyebrow.

“Just disappeared. Without a trace.”

“How strange,” said Gunnar, when no explanation was forthcoming. “Now can someone explain to me why there’s an owl in the rafters?”

* * *

In the last months of summer half-year, Sigurd and Gunnar spent most of the daylight hours out of doors. There was work to be done on the farm, and at times no one could be spared. For all his proud bearing, Gunnar never complained of the dirt on his clothes, or of the tedium. Within two days of his arrival, he had learned the names of each of the farmhands, and he worked with them as easily as he did with Sigurd. Though his compliments of their work often sounded self-important, he had such a genuine smile and
seemed so earnest that he soon had those dour-faced men nodding back at him with satisfaction.

When Sigurd and Gunnar were not needed in the fields, they practiced in the yard with their swords or cast spears and shot arrows at Sigurd’s painted targets. After one morning of sword practice, however, Gunnar refused to use real swords.

“By the gods, I don’t want my arms chopped off!” he gasped, using his sword to push himself back to his feet.

Sigurd was offended. “I think I have a little more control than that.”

Even with the wooden practice swords, Gunnar found himself bruised and embarrassed. Not only had he never committed as much time to swordplay, his reflexes were slower, and he was not as strong, despite his compact build. He also lacked Sigurd’s drive and instinct.

In archery, they were closer to equal. When they grew tired of shooting from the ground, they brought Gunnar and Regin’s horses into the pasture for mounted practice. There was no question that Gunnar’s was the finer horse: the chestnut stallion was muscular and light-footed. After a few minutes on the horses, Gunnar traded him to Sigurd for Regin’s placid black gelding.

When Sigurd objected, Gunnar shrugged. “You’re clearly the better rider. Raudfaxi deserves you.”

Thrilled by the chance to ride a fine horse again, Sigurd leaped into Raudfaxi’s saddle and pushed him to the limits of his training. He asked the horse to burst into a gallop from a halt, then slide to a stop, made him sidestep at the walk, trot and canter, turned him on his forehand, wheeled him on his haunches. When Sigurd brought
Raudfaxi to a walk, his look of concentration dissolved into a smile. Gunnar, astride Regin’s horse, smiled back and declared he had been right.

When Raudfaxi had recovered his breath, Sigurd and Gunnar rode to the opposite end of the pasture. There they found the young bull, dozing through the last warm days of the year, and chased him back to their practice area. Cornered and harassed, the bull charged them in fury. Sigurd maneuvered Raudfaxi out of the bull’s path, spinning him away from the lowered horns. Gunnar galloped Regin’s wide-eyed gelding past the bull’s haunches, poking him with the end of his bow. The bull took off after Gunnar but was no match for a horse’s speed.

As the bull pounded back to Sigurd, snorting with rage, Sigurd held Raudfaxi in place as the horse pranced excitedly. When the bull was almost upon them, Sigurd nudged Raudfaxi with his knee. Raudfaxi leapt aside, and Sigurd, bow at the ready, put two arrows into the target before the bull had thundered to a stop. Panting, it glowered at Sigurd from the edge of the pasture. Gunnar drew up his horse beside Raudfaxi.

“Poor beast,” said Gunnar. “It’s unfair—you know it is. I’ll take him back.”

When Gunnar had driven the bull to the other end of the pasture, he came flying toward Sigurd again. Foam flecked the chest of the black gelding. Gunnar drew an arrow from his quiver and fired at the target as he sped by. The arrow struck the painted band of the center circle, close to perfect.

“Good shot!” shouted Sigurd as Gunnar hauled the gelding to an awkward stop just short of the fence.

As the autumn deepened, Sigurd and Gunnar took to hunting in the river valley and beyond. Most of their time was spent in the wooded areas where the game was most
abundant, but they roamed through the open fields as well. One day, while crossing the grassy stretches, they lingered on the old, obscured gravel road.

“This must have been the main pass through the valley,” observed Gunnar, crouching among the dying grasses beside Raudfaxi.

Sigurd looked down from Regin’s black gelding. “I think there used to be a lot of people here.”

“Yes,” said Gunnar. “This was once part of a wealthy kingdom. With the river flowing into the Rhine, the farmers exported a good deal of grain and livestock. The king’s fortress and city lie…somewhere—I’m not sure exactly—but not far from here.”

“Regin never told me any of that! Whenever I ask him about the valley, he just shrugs the question away. How do you know about it?”

“We aren’t that far from Burgundy, a week or so only. My family remembers the history, though few others do.”

Sigurd’s brows pinched together. At last he would get some answers, though he had not looked for them from Gunnar. “So what happened here? Why’s it empty?”

Gunnar’s face darkened. “As to that, I can’t really say. Something destroyed the king’s city, and the village here was destroyed soon after. Or so my father told me.”

“Destroyed by what?”

Gunnar didn’t answer at first, then, “Fire.”

Sigurd’s heart leaped at the word, the same word the farmer had given him months ago. It sounded different coming from Gunnar, crouched so still, his fingers barely touching the old road. “Were they invaded, then?”

“It’s unclear what happened.”
“But why didn’t they rebuild? This is good land.”

“No one knows, seemingly. It was a long time ago.”

Sigurd had more questions, but Gunnar rose abruptly and mounted Raudfaxi, his face closed as they rode on through the valley.

The fields were turning golden, the wildflowers all but finished. Forgetting the road, enjoying the fading summer, they raced Raudfaxi and Col, as Sigurd had named Regin’s horse, across the open country. Their races held little sport, for Col could never stay with Raudfaxi more than a few strides. Giving up on the race, Sigurd guided Col toward a low line of stones laid together in the grass. As they sailed over the stones, an eerie feeling swept through Sigurd. It was the same feeling his dream of Feng emerging from Hjalprek’s tomb had given him, a feeling of unsettled death. He drew Col to a stop and looked back over his shoulder. The stones were the remains of a wall. He slid down from Col.

As Gunnar galloped Raudfaxi back to Sigurd, he called out, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Sigurd walked to the end of the line of stones, turning to find more stones scattered and half-buried, revealing where another wall had been. “This was a house.”

Gunnar jumped down from his saddle. “It must have been destroyed when the valley burned.”

“It doesn’t make sense. How could everything have been destroyed so completely? And to not rebuilt in good farmland? Why is there nothing in this valley but the odd stone foundation? Fire is not enough to explain it.”

Gunnar looked suddenly uncomfortable, but he said nothing.
Sigurd kicked through the grasses, scanning the area within the stones. Then he
drew his sword. He stabbed the point repeatedly into the ground. The sword struck
something solid. He dropped to his knees and began to claw through the dirt. His fingers
found the hard, sharp edge of something, and he unearthed a broken clay jug. He set the
fragment aside. As he widened the hole, he discovered something soft and dragged it
from the earth. He shook it gently, brushed away some of the soil, brought it close to his
eyes.

“What is it?” demanded Gunnar, when Sigurd had dropped it suddenly.

“A shoe.”

“We should go.”

Sigurd returned to the hole, pawing deeper. He felt something hard, and an
ominous feeling rose in his stomach, telling him this was not another piece of the jug.
What he found broke with a hollow snap as he pulled it from the earth.

“Sigurd,” said Gunnar warningly.

Sigurd brushed the earth away, bit by bit, to reveal the whiteness of bone. He
shivered. It was actually several small bones, set close together. A foot.

“Sigurd, let’s go,” demanded Gunnar, and Sigurd dropped the bone.

Sigurd gathered up his trailing reins, startling Col from his grazing. He leaped
onto the horse, who took off after Raudfaxi before he was settled in the saddle.

* * *
By unspoken agreement, they did not ride through the open fields of the river valley again. It seemed suddenly a haunted place. Instead, they hunted the woods on Regin’s side of the river, chasing down deer and foxes until the snows lay thick on the ground. Often the Gyrfalcon flew above them, but it would stray only so far from the house. Sigurd would watch through the bare branches as it wheeled away from them. If he allowed himself to imagine the falcon drawn, mindless, back to its perch on the roof’s edge, his mood soured and the hunt would be spoiled. When Gunnar would ask what troubled him, he would not answer. Gunnar took little interest in the birds, seemed rarely to notice them. Sigurd did not think he would understand.

When the cows and sheep had been shut into their byres for winter, Regin was busy in his smithy. Several commissions had been made in the fall, one by King Giuki’s eastern neighbor, Budli of Hunaland, and two from farther kingdoms.

The envoys who brought the requests were typically courteous, circumspect men, but their discomfort with Regin and his house showed between the cracks in their courtesy. They carefully avoided mentioning Ragnhild’s birds, though their eyes would drift to the huge grey owl watching from the rafters like a phantom. As for Ragnhild herself, she would float through the hall with an effect more ghostly yet. Her hair, like tendrils of mist, formless and obscuring, hung loose about her face. But nothing could hide the chilling blue of her eyes, an eerie echo of Regin’s. Mostly Ragnhild’s were inward looking and absent, but sometimes she would stare into one person or another, and her stare was like a promise of death, like a knowing of it.

King Budli’s envoy was a stouter man than the others, warlike and seemingly untroubled by the strangeness they sensed. He delivered his message with arrogance,
making the request sound more a command. Regin scowled at the envoy, tempted to refuse.

“The sword is to be a gift from King Budli to his son, Atli, who is coming into his manhood,” the envoy announced after draining a cup of mead. He made a sweeping gesture with his sword-hand, as though to encompass the world. “King Budli is certain of Atli’s great destiny to conquer and rule”—his eyes slipped for the briefest moment to Gunnar—“and King Budli would have his son’s might sharpened by the finest blade money can buy.”

Regin frowned into his own cup, answering cryptically, “Money can only buy so much. Besides, Gunnar, son of King Giuki of Burgundy, is my foster-son. What kind of blade should I forge for his father’s former enemy?”

“The Budlungs and Giukings have been at peace these past twenty years. There’s no need to dwell on a long-dead feud.”

“So you say,” broke in Gunnar, his knuckles white on the arms of his chair. “But what of the reparations still owed to Burgundy for the senseless burning of field and fold? Where is the respect of the Budlungs for the Giukings when such remains unpaid?”

The envoy retorted, “Those reparations were demanded by the Giukings but never agreed upon by the Budlungs. There is no debt owed!”

“Peace, Gunnar,” warned Regin as Gunnar’s face twisted furiously. “What would your father think of you stirring up trouble with your hotheaded words?”

In the end, Regin agreed to make the sword. To refuse would only further shake the uneasy peace between Gunnar’s father and King Budli. But in addition to the sword for Budli, he planned a letter and a jeweled ring for King Giuki, to explain himself and
avoid a misunderstanding that might jeopardize his fosterage of Gunnar. It was already clear to him that Gunnar lacked Sigurd’s prowess and brazen courage and was therefore of little direct use, but he had a galvanizing effect on Sigurd, and that was worth something.

As the days darkened toward winter, Regin concealed himself in his smithy. In secret, in silence, he uncovered his small hoard of ornaments, prying loose the flat stone that lay over the plain wooden box. Crouching near the hole, he held black rods of niello in the brazier’s shivering light, fingered copper wire, considered the lusters of tin and brass. He did not want to make the sword, did not want to make anything—it galled him to labor for others—but he would not make the sword poorly. It would be flawless, or he would destroy it.

One day, as he worked the bellows, the fire blazing intermittently against his face, he paused, listening. From the house drifted the faint notes of Gunnar’s harp. When Gunnar had first brought forth his harp shortly after his arrival, Regin had felt a pang of regret. Gunnar had a fine voice and nimble fingers. He could have learned much of the craft, had that been his life’s path; he was someone worth teaching, as no other Regin had known. Indeed, he had begun to instruct Gunnar in spite of himself, and the boy’s harping had grown more graceful and more powerful over the months. Many evenings, Gunnar would put the boys’ latest hunt into song as he picked rhythmically at the six strings.

It was too bad, really, that Gunnar’s talent served primarily to enhance Sigurd’s. Yet such was the case with any craft, and Sigurd’s skills were more important, more useful. Regin was relieved that Gunnar seemed to have a generous spirit and seemed to little begrudge Sigurd his greater prowess. That could change, of course, but for now
Gunnar’s open hand and fierce friendship were as valuable as Regin’s tutoring. Through Gunnar, Sigurd had begun to see that might and honor were only increased when shared and realized by those around him.

It was true that even now Sigurd would sometimes redden and withdraw when Gunnar’s embellishments became too overblown, but he did take part in Gunnar’s music and would join in with his own awkward verses recounting Gunnar’s feats. He would also tell tales of the Volsungs and seemed to take an ever-growing pride in that heritage. That was good. Regin needed Sigurd to take some notice of fame, to realize that in order for him to further glorify his forefathers, he would need the acclaim of others, and that would require great deeds.

* * *

Through the winter days, the plume of smoke slipped continually from the mouth of Regin’s cave, rising through the bare branches of the surrounding trees to disappear on the wind. During this time, Sigurd and Gunnar were left to themselves. They practiced with swords and spears in the snow-covered pastures or entertained themselves with songs or small tasks by the blazing hearth.

On one blustery day in the depths of winter, Gunnar and Sigurd sat at the hearth making new arrows. Regin had forged for each of them a fine set of steel arrowheads. These they were fitting to shafts, which they fletched with red- and blue-dyed goose feathers. Ragnhild worked quietly at her loom. She snaked the shuttle through her threads, smoothing them with her fingers, and they soon forgot she was there.
“My brother Hogni will be jealous when he sees these,” said Gunnar smugly, trimming a feather. “Just look at them! Regin doesn’t mess around, does he? I’ve never seen arrowheads etched with such an intricate pattern. I would hate to lose one. I suppose I should give some of them to Hogni.” Gunnar looked pained. “It would be right.”

Sigurd rummaged through the basket of feathers. “Perhaps I’ll give him some of mine. Will he be worthy of them?”

“I hope so. He’s young yet. He’ll certainly have to make something of himself if he’s to help me bring honor to Burgundy.” Gunnar’s mouth twisted. “Wines and livestock are hardly the stuff of legend.”

Gunnar did not often express these frustrations, and Sigurd never knew what to say when he did. He had learned that this anger lay within Gunnar, that it was the hard edge beneath his laugh, the cold center in his eyes. He wanted to know more of it, to know its true source, but he valued his own privacy too much to disturb his friend’s. They worked silently for a while, carefully trimming the feathers, scraping knots and splinters from the shafts. The scream of the hunting Gyrfalcon came faintly through the window.

Gunnar raised his head a little at the sound. “My father always wanted one of those. They’re rare, this far from the mountains.”

“That’s what I thought, when we captured him on the heath.”


Sigurd shrugged, taken aback by the intensity of Gunnar’s voice. “Beyond the valley. A full day’s walk from here. We followed the old road, then left it and veered east toward a forest.”

“The road, though. It kept going through the heath?”
“I think so. Yes, it—” A sudden apprehension swept through Sigurd. He had asked Regin about that heath, having sensed some silent threat there. Regin had dismissed the question. Just a scruffy, worthless stretch of land, he had said, like the many heaths that covered the region. Not even worth marking on the maps.

Gunnar sprang from his chair, sending shavings and bits of feather flying from his lap. He hurried down the hall, scattering rushes, and disappeared into the room where Regin kept his maps and tablets. He emerged again with a piece of old vellum fluttering in his hands.

He thrust the map in front of Sigurd. “Show me where you were.”

“He doesn’t need to show you, Gunnar, Leader in Battle,” said Ragnhild from where she stood at her loom. Both boys jerked with surprise. “You already know something of that heath, or what it becomes if you walk far enough.”

“Ragnhild,” muttered Gunnar anxiously, though he could not seem to think of anything else to say.

She looked over her shoulder at them, pale eyes flashing. “Oh yes, oh yes, it is a dangerous place. He Who Surrounds With His Arms never sleeps, never sleeps. Do you not know it yet, Warder of Victory? Perhaps you did not think it so close. Perhaps you let the Counselor waylay your suspicions.”

“Think what so close?” asked Sigurd warily, though he feared he already knew the answer.

Ragnhild’s eyes gleamed. “The Glittering Heath, of course.”
Chapter 8

Rumors of the Heath had grown so old that few remembered anything of it except that some dark secret lay there. Not only had time rendered it enigmatic, but the rumors had been obscure to begin with. In generations past, merchants, traders, even whole bands of warriors, had disappeared from the Rhine where it passed near the Heath. It seemed that none survived to tell the truth of the tales. Few remembered that once a fine city had lain at the Heath’s edge, on the banks of a tributary, under the towering hills. As for the Heath’s location, it was not to be found on many maps. For generations, it was so dreaded that people feared to set it down, to make it permanent; it was simply a blank, an unmarked, unnamed spot of vellum that the eye avoided. As the Heath grew quiet and the rumors faded, the blank on the maps lost meaning, and the Heath’s precise location was forgotten except by those who dwelled near enough still to fear it. Only they told of the destruction wrought long ago on all that fell within the Heath’s shadow. Most discounted
those tales, as Sigurd had done, for they stank of gossip. And it was true, as Sigurd had sensed, that those who told those tales knew them only as such. But there was something of truth there, nonetheless, and only a few knew anything more. One of those few was King Giuki of Burgundy.

It was neither Regin’s wisdom nor his craft that had caused Giuki to send his oldest son so near the Heath. Memory is long where wrong is done, and so the Giukings remembered that place. Obscured by time and uncertainty, their hatred had grown faint. Yet, they treasured it, treated it like a rare seed, grown dry, to be soaked and sown when conditions were right. This seed of hatred was the property of the king, and he passed it to his heir when he had lost hope of cultivating it himself.

The fragmented story that contained this hatred had been given by Giuki to Gunnar some years past. There was a duty at the end of that story, though Gunnar did not fully understand what that duty required of him: Giuki had been unclear, as his own father had been.

It was this confusion that kept Gunnar awake the night after Ragnhild had spoken of the Heath. He felt the weight of his father’s expectation, of his family’s long buried shame. He sensed he had a part in it, a responsibility, but he did not know what. Or, at least, he could not yet accept it. He lay within the dark of his chamber, grasping at answers, feeling them dissolve. It was too cold to sleep there. The chamber was a summer one and had no fire. He should have taken his place beside Sigurd at the hearth. But when he had lain down alone, he had not thought of his body. He scarcely felt his feet growing numb and useless or his ears aching with cold. Indeed, when Sigurd knocked at his door,
he did not hear it. When Sigurd cracked the door, letting in a wedge of light, he did not see it.

“Gunnar, are you awake?” Sigurd raised his voice: “I know you are. I can see the light on your eyes.”

Gunnar started, struggling up against the heavy covers. “You scared the piss out of me. What are you doing?”

“Tell me why Ragnhild thinks you know so much about the Glittering Heath.”

Gunnar sat still on the bed, the line of light cutting across his chest and face.

Sigurd allowed him the silence of a few heartbeats, but he had already put away his respect for his friend’s privacy. He was close to the mystery of the Heath; he would not be brushed off again. He had sensed something dangerous when he crossed near it with Ragnhild, and he had sensed the presence of death in the valley. They were connected, of that he was certain. He dropped his voice low: “Don’t lie to me.”

Formless in the dark, with only a voice, Sigurd seemed distilled to his bare self: full of power. He often seemed that way to Gunnar, if Gunnar did not look at him directly. From the first, Gunnar had wanted to share his burden with Sigurd, to tell him his story. Gunnar did not like solitude, and if Sigurd held the story with him, he thought he would not be so heavy. But it was more than simply sharing the weight; it was sharing it with Sigurd, who was so quiet, so strange, so strong. “I wouldn’t lie to you. I couldn’t.”

“Then tell me.”

“Light the candle. I can hardly see you.”
When the candle had cast its circle around them, Sigurd sat beside Gunnar on the bed. Their breath came in misty plumes. Sigurd pulled one of Gunnar’s blankets around his shoulders, burying his hands in the wool.

“My family,” Gunnar began haltingly, “was not always known as the Giukings. The first King Giuki, for whom we are named, conquered Burgundy some hundreds of years ago. That King Giuki came to the land of Burgundy because it was rich and fertile and not well governed at that time. There was no king there, no true administration. Anyway, he came alone from his ancestral lands. His family had been a royal one—he was no peasant—but the line was almost at an end, and his people were gone. They were not loyal. They would not stay with the kings once they began to fail. His people were—my father would be so angry if he knew I were speaking of this—”

“You’ve begun. You must tell me.”

Gunnar worried a thread in the blanket across his lap, unraveling it from the weaving. He went on without looking up, as though Sigurd had not spoken. “If he knew you, maybe he would understand. He might see that…I cannot—he would understand.

“Before Giuki gave his name to himself and his descendants, he had another name. He was the last of the Nibelung kings. The Nibelungs had once been a wealthy people, before Giuki’s time. Their treasure hoard was said to be without limit, for they made that treasure themselves.”

“Made it?”

“They were…miners. And smiths.”
Sigurd wrinkled his brow in confusion. This history did not sound like a history of kings. The kingdoms of men were founded on raiding and conquest. Kings acquired wealth; they did not create it.

“It was a long time ago,” said Gunnar, sensitive to Sigurd’s skepticism. “I’m sure a lot of kings today—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Not everyone can claim descent from the king of the gods. Most of us—”

“Gunnar, it doesn’t matter. Just go on with the story. You were saying the Nibelungs had a lot of treasure.”

“Yes. They did. Very wealthy. But that treasure was stolen from Andvari, the Nibelung who guarded it. Andvari was the cousin of the king at that time, and very powerful.”

“What do you mean ‘very powerful’? He was strong? Fast?”

Gunnar tore the thread he had loosened from the blanket and stared down at it. There were some parts of this story he would not share, not even with Sigurd. “Not exactly.”

“What, then?”

“He was a sort of shape changer.”

“A wizard?”

“Not quite. But he could turn himself into a fish—a pike, actually—and so he kept the hoard with him beneath a waterfall, outside the Nibelung lands. The Nibelungs thought this location was secret and safe. After all, it was under the water, behind the fall. It was remote. And Andvari had powers of concealment. No man could have discovered
it. That much of the story is known by my family. What happened next is unclear—some part of the tale is missing.

“Andvari lost the hoard. He claimed that it was stolen by the god Loki. Why, I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. What I do know is that it ended up in the hands of another king, the one who ruled the lands bordering Andvari’s waterfall. That king was called Hreidmar, and he had two sons. One was named Fafnir.” Gunnar paused. “The other was Regin.”

Sigurd blinked. He had not expected to find Regin within Gunnar’s tale, and it took a moment for him to make sense of Gunnar’s words. He had always suspected that Regin concealed some turbulent history, but this he did not understand. “What does Regin—”

“My father says that his father told him, and his father before that, that Fafnir still holds the treasure. And that he, too, is a shape changer.” Gunnar worked another thread loose from the blanket.

“Like Andvari?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. My father says he must be a monster of some kind. The Heath has been a forbidden place since the time of my forbearers. Some still do not trust the hills of the Rhine, knowing that the Heath lies somewhere beyond them.”

“A monster,” said Sigurd, marveling at the word.

Gunnar shuddered. To him, the word meant nightmare, impossibility.

Sigurd pulled up the blanket, which had fallen from his shoulders. “So you want the treasure? Is that it?”
Gunnar stiffened at Sigurd’s tone. Sigurd made it sound so greedy. “It’s the inheritance of my people. No other can rightfully claim it.”

“And what of Regin?”

“What of him?”

“He must know of the treasure. He might consider it his by right.”

“It’s not. It was stolen from the Nibelungs. No payment was made, no agreement of any kind. That makes it the property of the Giukings, as descendants of the Nibelungs.”

Sigurd said nothing, but the candlelight caught his frown.

“Surely you must understand this,” said Gunnar. “Do you not want to regain your father’s kingdom? Is it not yours by right? What difference if generations have passed? It’s the same thing.”

It did not seem the same thing to Sigurd. Perhaps it was only that he had spent so many hours studying maps and kingdoms with Regin, but it was clear to him that wealth and land often changed hands. It belonged to whoever was strong enough to take it. His own debt of revenge was different. Lygni had been the cause of his father’s death, not a distant ancestor’s. His was a remembered history, not a forgotten one. Besides, his father’s kingdom was not something that was owed to him; rather, it was something he had a right and an obligation to earn. But he could not say so to Gunnar. Instead he said, “I suppose it hardly matters now, considering that Fafnir has the treasure.”

Gunnar only twisted the two loosened threads together.

“Let’s go find him.”

“Fafnir. Let’s go find him. I want to see what he is. I want to see the treasure. Don’t you? How do you expect to get it back if you don’t even know what you have to kill to get it?”

For a moment, Gunnar looked as though this idea of killing Fafnir had never occurred to him. Indeed, he had never allowed himself to think of it so directly, as a goal. Mostly, he had focused on the treasure. Killing Fafnir was so impossible that he had not allowed it to be real. Not even his father had spoken of it.

“Besides,” Sigurd went on. “Why should Fafnir even know we’re there? We don’t have to confront him. All I want to do is look.”

“Just because we know where the Heath is doesn’t mean we can simply wander across it and hope to see him.” Gunnar added emphatically, “Without him seeing us.”

“I don’t mean we should try to stumble across him. There might be a way to find him without looking.”

“How?”

“Ragnhild, of course. Fafnir is her brother also. Where do you think she goes when she leaves here? Sometimes she’s gone for weeks. And every time, Regin gets into such a foul temper. I never understood why it should anger him. I always thought he should be relieved she was gone. But maybe she goes somewhere he doesn’t like.”

Gunnar’s heart pounded. Sigurd’s voice seemed to be coming from far away, from a dream, for this could not be real. At last he dragged his own voice out of his stomach: “What are you saying?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’ll follow her next time she leaves. She’ll lead us to Fafnir.”
Ragnhild did disappear from the house once during the winter, but neither Sigurd nor Gunnar saw her go. Sleeping in the hall as they did, they knew she must have walked past them in the night, and they were irritable with one another when they discovered their lapse in the morning. Regin, too, was irritable. He was also distracted, so much so that Gunnar once beat him at nine-men’s morris. Sigurd had never seen Regin lose while playing at board. When Regin was left with no moves, Sigurd’s hand clenched unconsciously around the scabbard he was oiling. Gunnar’s expression was triumphant, but it faltered when Regin smiled wolfishly at him and commended his strategy.

After Sigurd and Gunnar missed one opportunity to trail Ragnhild, they took turns keeping watch at night. As the weeks passed, more and more of this responsibility fell on Sigurd, for Gunnar could not stay awake. The boys became sloppy in their lessons, and Regin grew impatient with them, and suspicious.

When they felt she would not notice their attention, they observed Ragnhild during the day as well. As always, she worked her loom and cooked the meals, and it began to occur to Sigurd how strange it was that she completed such ordinary tasks. To test her reaction, he one day asked her to mend some socks for him. She answered angrily, “Do I look like your slave?” and threw a darning needle at him so that it lodged in the wool of his tunic.

At last, when the snows had thawed and most of the lambs were on the ground, Sigurd and Gunnar found their opportunity. Late in the night Ragnhild passed by the hearth, and the sound of the owl hooting in the rafters startled Sigurd from his doze. He
raised his head from the blankets to see her moving silently across the hall. When she had slipped outside, flowing, it seemed, through a crack in the door, he elbowed Gunnar awake.

“She’s leaving.”

“Hmm?”

Sigurd was already pulling on his boots. “Ragnhild is leaving. Get up.”

Face puffy with sleep, Gunnar threw his blankets aside and fumbled with his own boots. He pinned on his cloak and gathered his sword and bow. The small bundle of supplies he and Sigurd kept ready he slung over his shoulder. In his hurry, he jostled his eating knife from its sheath. It slipped from the unsecured opening, and the hilt struck the hearth-stones. The sound was unnaturally loud in the quiet. Gunnar snatched up the knife and stuffed it into the bundle, as though the sound could be gathered back into silence. He looked sheepishly at Sigurd, who grimaced.

When they left the house, they could not find Ragnhild. They looked down to the river, expecting her on the bridge. They looked out across the valley, ghostly pale in the moonlight, but it was empty.

“There she is,” said Gunnar, nodding toward the pasture.

Ragnhild was climbing over the fence with something in her arms. It was a lamb, still weak from birth, and its bleats were high and thin. The deeper, more frantic voice of the ewe could be heard from somewhere in the dark. Sigurd and Gunnar ducked back into the blackness at the wall of the house. They scarcely breathed as Ragnhild crossed the yard, passing within twenty feet of them. When she had descended the hill and crossed the bridge, they followed her into the valley.
There was little to hide them on the road as they trailed Ragnhild. The trees were scattered, and the farms that still stood were far removed from the old roadway. They kept back far enough that she was out of earshot but not out of sight. They walked in a tense silence, ready to drop to the ground at any sign of notice from Ragnhild.

Gunnar was grateful for the silence. He did not trust his voice. He would not have admitted it to Sigurd, who he could see was thrilled by this adventure, but he was growing uncertain. This decision seemed to him unwise; they had no idea how far Ragnhild would take them, no idea where she would take them. The risks outweighed the probable gains. Yet, something weighed on him, pushed him forward, something more pressing than his father’s vague expectations. He was bothered by what Sigurd had said some months ago, what he had implied: that Gunnar would be unable to do what was necessary to take back his family’s inheritance. He was angry at that idea, and it was the only thing that kept him moving, so precipitously, across the empty land.

By the time the sun was evident beyond the horizon, they had reached the edge of the valley. Sigurd stopped and gazed across the scrubby, spring-drenched stretch of heath. Ragnhild was far in the distance, little more than a dark stain against the lingering browns of winter.

“It won’t be easy to follow in the daylight.”

“It wasn’t easy in the dark,” remarked Gunnar.

“The road seems to continue in this direction. What do you think: should we let Ragnhild out of sight and just follow the road? Will she stay on it?”

“We can only guess. It seems more important to ask whether the road itself will continue. Suppose it doesn’t. You know, I’m beginning to think—”
“It seems to me that she would stay on the road. Where else can the road lead but to Hreidmar’s city?”

“That’s possible.”

“Well, where else would it go?”

“If we’re simply going to follow the road, why do we need Ragnhild at all? We could follow this road at any time, perhaps during the summer months. Then we could make an excuse to Regin about why we’re gone. Can you imagine how angry he’s going to be?”

Sigurd looked hard into Gunnar’s face. “I’m going on. I don’t just want to see Fafnir. I want to know what Ragnhild has to do with this. I want to know what Regin has to do with it.”

“Why?” Gunnar’s face twisted with sudden annoyance. “What has any of it got to do with you?”

Sigurd could not answer that question. He only knew that something drew him across the Heath. Right now, he hardly cared about Lygni and his father’s lands. This was so much more. He said only, “There’s a mystery here. I want to know. You want to go back?”

Gunnar sensed that Sigurd would go on alone. Gunnar could hardly admit it to himself—the thought lurked at the edge of his mind—but he would not go alone. He could plainly see, however, that if Sigurd went on and he went back, he would know himself a coward. “I wasn’t saying I want to turn back. I’m not afraid.”

They stepped out onto the Heath, eating bread and hard cheese as they walked. For most of the day, it looked like any other heath they had seen: flat, spotted with low
plants, spiky with stiff grasses. But as the sun crossed into the afternoon, the landscape
began to change. The plants grew fewer, the grasses sparser. Soon enough there was
hardly any vegetation at all, just scattered, stubbornly growing shrubs. Wind or time or
something more powerful had eroded much of the soil as well. But what most troubled
them was not the barrenness. It was the sparkle and shine. The afternoon light, growing
strong, glinted off the open ground, like sunlight that strikes unsettled waters. They
thought, each to themselves, that the sun was catching on the jagged humps of stones that
lay exposed. They did not speak of this to one another, for they knew it did not really
explain what they saw. Neither suggested, neither considered, leaving the path to see
more clearly what glittered across the Heath.

* * *

There were no birds this deep into the barren lands, and so Ragnhild could expect
no warning of her brother’s whereabouts. It mattered very little, for he rarely moved these
days; he was lethargic, lazy with time, and easy to find. He had not always been this way.
Once, he had been the terror of the Rhine. He had been so beautiful then.

The lamb had long since stopped crying. It was limp and careless now, and she
had almost forgotten it. She took the skin of sheep’s milk that hung from her shoulder.
She held it to the lamb’s mouth, forcing the narrow opening between its teeth. The lamb
came awake, snorting milk out its nose. It did not understand the false teat, and she had to
stroke its throat until it would swallow. It began to suck. That was good; a live lamb
would make a better gift than a dead one.
She searched for bird minds, empty without them, knowing they were too far away. She wanted more news of the boys. She wanted to know how far behind they had fallen, whether they still followed at all. She knew the Phantom had announced her departure, knew the golden-haired boy had seen her leave. She had sensed them in the valley, seen them in the mind of a hunting owl. She had thought they would come. Their interest had been ill disguised, especially by the golden one. He had a fire in his eyes. The other, the red-haired boy, had something else in his eyes, something cold. The Counselor saw the strength of the golden one, but he was blinded to the strength of the other. She saw it. It was buried, unknown even to the boy himself, but it was there, and it was greater, perhaps, at least for her purposes. She and the Counselor, after all, did not want the same things. He wanted to destroy the terror of the Rhine. She wanted to awaken him.

* * *

As the day dimmed, neither Sigurd nor Gunnar could walk farther. There was no secure place to sleep—all was open ground. Neither suggested leaving the road to search for some symbol of shelter, a stone, a rise in the ground, anything solid to suggest the idea of protection. But if the road did not feel safe, at least it felt certain; it came from somewhere and led to somewhere. The Heath beyond it was less trustworthy.

They lay together under their cloaks, shivering. Even if they had dared a fire, there was no fuel. They lay with their backs to the faint depression of the road, sharing their claim on the fine line that marked the way. They had little to eat and drink, for they had not expected the journey to be so long, and they had their return to consider. They
were exhausted by the walk. It was an arduous distance in the thawing months, when their bodies had lost strength through the winter. Despite their weariness, they slept little during the night. The moon shone bright, exposing them. Across the Heath, what had glittered during the day gleamed and shivered with the moonlight, unearthly. When the moon went down, darkening the Heath at last, they slept some, though they would wake now and again to see the stars glimmering.

They rose early in the morning, still exhausted but relieved the night was finally over. They divided a little bread and soaked it in water from their skins.

“How much farther, do you think?” asked Gunnar, staring down the faded road, squinting at the horizon.

Sigurd shrugged. “I wish we’d brought more food. There’s nothing to hunt here. No birds. No rabbits. Not even mice.”

Gunnar shuddered. He hated the barrenness, the lifelessness. He thought of his home and how bright the green must be by the river. He imagined his brother laughing with the men in the training yard. He imagined his sister, dark red hair slipping from her braids, arguing that she, too, should be allowed a sword. He imagined his mother and father seated in the fine hall, listening to the complaints of farmers and neighbors. He wondered if Sigurd thought of such things. Sigurd rarely mentioned Denmark or the people there. He spoke mostly of the Volsung lands, though he had never seen them.

Watching his friend now, Gunnar saw nothing of the sadness and loss that he himself felt in this god-forsaken place. He saw only determination.

As they started down the road, Gunnar could not keep himself from asking, “What could possibly kill everything?”
“We’ll see soon enough.”

“Do you suppose Fafnir changes to a bear? That would make the most sense, wouldn’t it? I’ve heard of other shape-changers who become bears.”

Sigurd frowned doubtfully.

Gunnar tried another suggestion, hoping for some agreement. “I suppose he could be a wolf. I’ve heard of that, too.”

“Maybe he’s not an animal. Or not exactly.”

Gunnar’s heart skipped a beat. “Not a—what else would he be? You don’t mean to suggest—”

“We’ll see soon enough,” Sigurd repeated. “I think we should walk faster. Ragnhild never tires. I don’t want to lose her.”

That day passed much as the previous one had: in silence and watchfulness and anxious hurry. Still they saw no creatures, living or dead. As the morning wore on, however, hills began to rise in the distance before them. They rose to the west as well, and those were the hills of the Rhine. Scraggly, skeletal trees emerged far to the east. Eventually, these features began to converge, and the Heath narrowed. As they drew nearer the hills, late in the day, they could see that they were steep and rocky, mountainous, cliff-like, and a river flowed before them. They could see also that other structures, even and organized, hugged the base of those hills, reaching to the river.

The sun was disappearing behind the western hills by the time Sigurd and Gunnar drew near enough to the river to understand what lay beyond it. There was some kind of city there—Hreidmar’s city, they both supposed. The moon was rising as they came to the bank of the river, and by this light they saw that the city lay dead and ruined.
Gunnar stood well back from the water. “Why is it still standing at all? There was nothing left in the valley except for some foundations.”

“The houses in the valley were built with wood. Look how pale these buildings are. I think they’re stone.”

“Where could so much stone have come from? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Sigurd squinted across the river. “Can you see how the hill behind the city is nearly flat in front? See how the moon shines on it? The stone must have come from there.”

Rising above the town was a cliff, where a hill appeared to have been roughly cut away, as though hacked by a giant’s axe. The rocky insides of the hill were exposed and flattened.

“But how can that have happened? And what is that dark place there in the middle? Do you see it? Where the light disappears.”

Despite the moon shadows that clung behind coarse cuts in the rock, mottling the cliff’s surface with light and dark, there was a wide swath of black that shadow could not explain. It was a mouth, a chasm, an emptiness in the cliff. Sigurd did not answer Gunnar’s question, for it was obvious to both, if only by instinct, that that was where they were going.

Gunnar lowered his eyes from that black mouth, not wanting to contemplate what might lay concealed within. He returned to his earlier question. “Who could move so much stone? Enough to build a city? Men could not have done such a thing. Even the gods’ wall at Asgard was built by a rock giant and the magical horse Svadilfari, the sire
of Odin’s own mount Sleipnir. And that was in the beginning of the world. Who could have done this?”

“Hreidmar? His father before him? There’s obviously some magic in the lineage.”

“Speaking of the lineage, what are we going to say to Regin when we get back? Seeing this…well, this is what he came from. It puts him in perspective, doesn’t it?”

“You’re getting distracted. That doesn’t matter right now. All that matters is that city and this river and how we’re going to get across. So what do you think? How should we cross the river?”

“Cross the—you’re not seriously thinking of crossing tonight? That’s stupid. We should wait until morning and find a safe way.”

“Wait? Gunnar, don’t you want to see what Ragnhild is up to? We can’t waste any more time. Besides, do you really want to sleep here by the river where anyone can see us?”

“Better that than in the city. By the gods, it looks like a cursed place. And just how do you expect to cross the river, anyway? There’s no bridge, no boat, not even a log to float us across. And if you’re thinking of swimming, I can tell you right now, you’ll be swimming alone.”

“Is this how you plan to regain the honor of your family? By giving up?” Sigurd felt the barb of this taunt as he watched indignation and shame fighting in Gunnar’s face. Then Gunnar looked away from him and walked stiffly to the water. Sigurd followed, his belly heavy with guilt.
They looked up and down the river, searching for any means of crossing. Gunnar pointed across the water. A boat lay on the far bank, useless to them. Gunnar sat down to remove his clothes and boots.

Naked and shivering, they waded into the river with their clothes and gear held over their heads. The water was frigid with snowmelt and the current swifter than it looked. When the bottom dropped and they began to swim, they struggled hard against the waters. Their arms burdened with gear, they had little control, and their legs were soon burning from exertion. By the time they reached the middle, Gunnar could no longer propel himself. He drifted farther and farther from Sigurd and was soon slipping under the surface. With a cry Sigurd swam toward him. He grabbed Gunnar’s hair before losing sight of him, but he, too, was then pulled under. Sigurd kicked against the dragging weight, but he could not reach the surface. He let go of his gear and wrapped his arms around his friend. He kicked at the water with all that was left of his strength, but it was not enough. Weakened by the cold and the current, he drifted with Gunnar into the depths.

When someone—something—pulled at him, lifting him through the waters, he had no will to resist or to aid. The only strength he still had was in his grip on Gunnar. He felt himself dragged onto the bank by cold, delicate hands. He felt a cool breath against his ear, heard the watery trickle of a female voice.

“Don’t be in such a hurry to find the bottom. My sisters and I will wait for you. Come to us one day, within the Rhine, for that is the one safe place, if we allow it.” The voice floated away, as though made of nothing more than wind or water, and the touch of hands dissolved.
When Sigurd came to full awareness, it was still dark, and he was alone with Gunnar on the bank of the river. He and Gunnar were dry, and their clothes and gear lay beside them. He looked down to the water. Whatever secret the river contained was hidden again beneath the surface. All that remained of it was a sound and a sense in his memory. Even so, he little doubted what had pulled him from the river. Water spirits were common in the skalds’ stories, though he had never heard of any who had encountered one. And he had never heard that they saved men, only that they lured them from the banks with their music and drowned them. By the time he sat up, squinting hard at the water, he had forgotten the maiden’s invitation, or command. He would not remember it for many years.

Reluctantly, he nudged Gunnar, who came awake as from a deep sleep. “Are you all right?”

“What—where—what happened?”

“I don’t know. There was—I don’t know. Get dressed. We need to hurry.”

They put on their clothes and stood to survey the city, even ghostlier now that they were so near. Moonlight washed the broken faces of the walls and spilled over the rubble that lay within the streets. The city looked as though it had been smashed with a gigantic club. The damage seemed random. Some buildings stood nearly untouched; others were razed to the ground.

Sigurd and Gunnar picked their way through the streets, over the heaped stones. Though the buildings were broken, it was clear that all had been finely made. The stones were chiseled and smoothed. Where fragments of wooden doors could be seen, these were carved, some even braced with iron.
The street they followed, straight and wide, led inexorably to the cliff. As they
drew near it, they could see a stone path cut into the rock, and this led steeply up to the
wide, dark mouth. Beneath the darkness, along the path and the face of rock, deep marks
were gouged. They were evenly spaced, the marks of gigantic claws.

At the foot of the stone path, Sigurd and Gunnar looked at one another. There
seemed to be no other way. Sigurd set his face and started up the slope. The path, though
wide enough for a wagon, was treacherous with rubble, and there was no protection from
the sharp drop of the edge. When they reached the top, they stood before the swath of
darkness, the entry into the cliff. They could see the remnants of carvings around the
opening, though the opening itself was jagged, like a wall that had been torn away. Deep
within, a light shone.

In silence, they crept into the cave. The smell was terrible, sulfurous and
suffocating, and grew stronger with every cautious step. They could hear voices near the
light and, once within the walls, they could see Ragnhild standing there. The small,
sputtering fire burned in a massive hearth, and they could see that what had seemed only
a cave was actually a great hall. There were huge, rocky pillars that stretched from floor
to roof, and the floor itself, though filthy and strewn with debris, was smooth and even.
The firelight did not reach far beyond the hearth, but just outside its circle, something
glinted.

Feeling their way along the floor, Sigurd and Gunnar stumbled into a pillar. They
hid themselves behind it. They had come some distance into the hall, but they were still
too far away to hear clearly what Ragnhild was saying. Sigurd looked around for some
closer hiding place, but it was too dark to see anything. He crept quietly forward, feeling
his way to the next pillar. Gunnar’s hand gripped his cloak. With aching, stomach-turning slowness, they moved from pillar to pillar. At last they were close enough to hear Ragnhild’s words.

“No more of this childish hiding. My brother, I can scarcely see you.”

“It’s too bright,” complained a deep, grating voice at the edge of the darkness. “It hurts my eyes.”

“You’ve lain too long here in the black cave. Wake up. Speak with me. Didn’t I bring you one of the new lambs? Will you be so ungrateful?”

A growl sounded, so low it was felt more than heard. Ragnhild did not move. Then something heavy, impossibly huge dragged itself across the floor, edging into the light. A talon emerged, then another. They were massive, curved like scythes, and the fingers that housed them were scaled and shiny. High in the air the light shone on the underside of a bearded, reptilian chin and the nostrils of a dragon.
Chapter 9

“It’s too bright,” repeated Fafnir. “I don’t like fire.”

“How can you say such a thing?” chided Ragnhild.

“Well, I don’t,” said Fafnir stubbornly, but he settled into the light, snaking his long, spiked neck down to bring his huge face nearly to the ground. His eyes were small and bright, jewel-like, all color and glare and solidity. The head was angular and would have been fine in smaller proportion. The glistening, oily scales that started small and even on his face swept along the neck, growing larger and darker until they disappeared into the shadows that hid his shoulders and body. The scales varied from copper to gold, and they were rubbed pale and clean in places; in others they were the green-streaked bluish-grey of age and disuse.

From his hiding place, Sigurd could not see Ragnhild’s face, only the proud straightness of her back, the wide, confident setting of her feet. But he gave her only that
passing notice; it was the dragon that drew him, as the moon draws the tide. He was a
beautiful creature, unearthly, like something the gods had created in one of the other eight
worlds and placed in Midgard by mistake in some ancient, forgotten time. He was pulled
so strongly by the mystery and magnitude of the dragon that he might have forgotten his
circumstances had not Gunnar been pressed close behind him, his heart beating hard
against Sigurd’s back.

“The boys followed me,” said Ragnhild in her dry, unused voice, and Sigurd felt
Gunnar turn solid as the stone pillar that concealed them. His own heartbeat hurried
suddenly to match his friend’s, and his hand strayed unconsciously to his sword. “The
Counselor thinks to use them. He is plotting and scheming and waiting.”

“As he always has—that is his nature. What’s so different? I told you before I
don’t care. He’s always trying to create a hero. He’s never succeeded. Why should he
now?”

“Be wise, brother. The Volsung—”

“The Volsung,” said Fafnir scornfully, and his chin rose from the ground, the
threads of his scaly beard quivering. “A child. What should he care about me? Why
should he help Regin?”

“What of the treasure? You think he won’t be tempted?”

Fafnir’s tail, ridged with spikes, the end sharp as a whip’s lash, snapped briefly
into the light, slipped again into darkness. “He won’t defeat me. No one can. The hoard is
mine. Who would dare take the helmet and the rings? Who would dare touch the golden
otter? No fool so great will live long.”
“That is as it should be. You are the fire-wyrm, the gold-keeper, the life-eater. You strip glory and pride from men. You leave them nothing, not life, not dignity, not even a body to burn or bury. You are the mighty.”

The hooked nostrils flared with a sigh that swept, sulfurous, through the hall.

“You exhaust me.”

“I only want what’s best for you.”

“All I want is darkness. And to keep the hoard in the circle of my body.”

“But you are forgotten, brother.” Ragnhild’s voice was pained.

Fafnir’s eyes narrowed briefly, glinting gold, then his head dropped to the ground.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m tired, so tired. The weight is crushing me.”

Ragnhild stood silent for some time. Then she went to the dragon, knelt beside the massive head, which was nearly as large as her entire body. “Poor brother. Poor wyrm.” She stroked the shining scales of his face. She traced the prominent bones of his nose, caressed the short horns that grew back from the base of the skull, smoothed the spiny crest mounting his neck.

Silence settled into the deep, cavernous hall. The fire burned low, and soon all Sigurd could see was the outline of Ragnhild’s shoulders and the sweep of her ash-colored hair as she leaned against the cheek of the dragon. As for the dragon himself, his nostrils and the bony ridges above his closed eyes were limned with light; the rest of him was invisible.

The fear Sigurd had felt when Ragnhild had named him had long since ebbed away. Awe had washed into him again. The dragon was so beautiful, impossible, something out of song. He longed to move towards that terrible creature, longed to touch
him, as Ragnhild did, to feel with his hands the strength and the godliness. Yet, there was a sadness about him, strange and disturbing. It made him human in a way Sigurd did not like.

At his back, Gunnar shifted, and it was as though the column had moved, for Gunnar had been that still, and Sigurd had forgotten him. He felt a question in Gunnar’s catching breath. He set his hand against Gunnar’s stomach to still him.

Time passed, though it did not seem to. It seemed as though they had all been caught in a moment, preserved. The only sign of life and change was the dying of the fire. It fell eventually to fragmented embers, and Sigurd could then only imagine Ragnhild’s hunched form, Fafnir’s great stillness; he could see nothing but the last, hopeless glow.

When it happened, it happened so quickly, the silence and darkness were shattered so completely, that when Sigurd thought back on it later, it was that suspended time that seemed unreal, dreamlike. Gunnar moved. He shifted the silence around him, sent an echo through the hall as his foot, whispering over the grimy floor, nudged at something small that rolled and pinged, metallic, against the stones.

The dragon’s massive bulk reared like a wave off the floor, and the fire that exploded from him sheared the air of the hall. Another blast arced high and wide. Flames caught here and there, on a decaying tapestry, on a broken door, in pools of shimmering oil, and the light was captured and cast everywhere by the gold and silver and the many-colored gems that were scattered and heaped in that great space.

The head of the dragon, snaking on a lithe and arching neck, reached nearly to the high, rough vault of the ceiling. Thick with age and old muscle, the body widened through the chest and belly, and sail-like wings fanned out angrily from behind the
shoulders, shuddering. Under the scaled skin of the forelegs, huge ropes of muscle
twisted and strained, clenching the bladed claws. Dense, powerful haunches and the
deadly tail supported the dragon, held him towering.

Sigurd and Gunnar stumbled back from the pillar. The dragon’s chest swelled
with breath, and a scraping, piercing scream split into Sigurd’s ears. Trapped in his shock
and horrified amazement, he did not even think to draw his sword. Gunnar’s hand was
still wrapped in his cloak, and he felt the pull at his throat. He shared with his friend the
instinct to run, but something stopped him, held him hunched and wincing before the
dragon. Some might have called it courage, but he decided later it was not. Rather, he
could not bear the shame of running.

Hauling unconsciously at Sigurd’s cloak, Gunnar knew he would die. It was a
certainty that welled from a place deep within him, a place that knew he was a failure, a
fool to have thought himself courageous. In the midst of his fear and despair, he felt also
what a waste it was to die here. All this washed through him, barely acknowledged or
understood, in the moment that the dragon raged above them.

When Gunnar turned to run, hopelessly, the dragon crashed to the floor, cracking
the stones and sending a tremor through the earth. He wound, serpent-like, through the
hall, whipped around behind the boys before Gunnar had gone three paces, surrounding
them with his arms. Sigurd jerked his sword from its sheath. The dragon brought his huge
face near to him, and the wide mouth stretched into a grin. Yellowed teeth, thicker than
Sigurd’s legs, longer than his sword, jutted from the dark gums.

“You think you can hurt me with that? A child’s toy?” The voice was deep and
had a faraway sound, booming up from the well of his lungs. “Did my brother make it”—
he paused to scrutinize Sigurd—“little Volsung? Nothing he could create could harm me. You couldn’t scratch my itch with that.”

Anger bubbled up through Sigurd’s fear. He would not die like a coward, dropping his weapon in defeat; he would not resign himself. Hurrying death, in one motion he swept his sword over his head, gripping it with both hands, and leapt forward, the blade aimed at the dragon’s eye. Fafnir flinched, and the sword struck just below its mark, knocking loose a shining red scale.

The dragon drew back his head, and a screeching roar tore through the air. He lunged at Sigurd. Snatching the sword in his teeth he tossed it across the hall toward the doorway. Gunnar, who had stood as stone since the dragon circled them, stumbled back, tripping over a scattered set of golden armor. Even as he fell Fafnir seized him in a grip as hard as iron bracings. The dragon’s other claw swept out to grab Sigurd. The boys struggled against the scaly fingers, thick as branches, as Fafnir rose. Awkward on his hind legs, Fafnir lumbered deeper into the hall, back to the shadowy hoard of treasure.

“Only thieves and cowards sneak about in the dark,” said Fafnir as he settled onto his haunches, his leathery, veined wings folding noisily behind him. “Did you think to steal a coin? Perhaps a ring or a ruby so you could say you got the better of me?” He waited for a response. When none came, he shouted, “Speak!”

Sigurd and Gunnar both flinched from the sound. Fafnir looked from one to the other, transfixed them with the uncertain color of his eyes, which shifted from the deepest blue to violet to red. “They are cowards, then,” he muttered.

Sigurd’s voice shook loose from his throat. “I am no coward.”

“Then you are a thief.”
“I am no thief. I wouldn’t take one coin from your hoard unless I had killed you first.”

“So that’s it. You’re a fool, or mad. Not the first I’ve seen, though you’re a little young for it. But what of your shy friend? You don’t speak for him, I think.” Fafnir swung his face to Gunnar. Gunnar said nothing, made no movement. Fafnir squinted at him; his hooked nostrils flared. He brought Gunnar close to his snout. Gunnar made an inarticulate sound. The dragon sniffed. “There’s something familiar. It tickles my memory. What did you call him, sister?”

Ragnhild, who had been knocked to the floor when Fafnir first reared up in fury, stood. She was a little unsteady on her feet. “He is Gunnar, the leader in battle, the red-haired boy of Burgundy.”

“Burgundy…it doesn’t sound right. Are you sure? There’s something about the face. And the smell, I know it somehow.” Fafnir frowned, and his reptilian face froze in that expression for several tense moments. His eyes had a solid, dead look to them, as though he had left his body. He scarcely breathed.

Gunnar’s own eyes were almost as absent, for he could not bring his mind to focus on the reality before him. He felt only a detached sense of horror and helplessness. The circumstances were too grim, and too incredible, for him to contemplate.

Fafnir’s face came alive at last, and the narrow lips curled back from jagged rows of teeth. “You’re a Nibelung. You can’t hide that smell from me. I know what you want. I know what you think is yours. I heard the speech from several of your ancestors just before I killed them, when they came here looking for trouble. Oh, they made me angry. The hoard is mine. Your people have always been insects, seeking to crawl among it. It
took two hundred years to rub the smell of you from the hoard. Does my brother know
who you are? Answer me!"

Gunnar’s mouth worked mutely.

“Speak up!”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re a timid little dwarf, like your forbearers.”

Hearing the word, at last something like courage rose in Gunnar. “You
abomination! I don’t know why the gods permit you to live.”

“The gods! It was the gods who brought me to this impasse. The gods. What have
they ever done but betray those who trust them?”

Sigurd shot his voice into the dragon’s face. “Odin will see you destroyed!”

Fafnir’s eyes narrowed briefly, but then he sighed. “I grow weary of this game.
What do you think, sister? Should I roast them? Or do I eat them raw?”

Ragnhild’s voice held a rare note of uncertainty and desperation. “Why kill them
now? Why not send them back to the Counselor in shame? Let him see the futility of his
plans. Let him, too, be shamed.”

“That is tempting, but I don’t think so. Why give second chances?”

“Why not?” echoed a voice from the dark space of the entrance. “Are you afraid
of that second chance?”

The dragon’s eyes widened briefly in surprise, then he pulled his face down into a
cruel grin. “Regin. Come to watch me crush the life from your little hopes?”
Regin stepped into the light of the scattered, flickering fires. His clothes were dark. His face was grim, jaw set, and his eyes glinted like ice. “You’ve grown smaller since I last saw you.”

“Smaller! You are insolent. It’s no wonder our father had little patience for you. Arrogance without quality. You have not even have Ragnhild’s erratic sense of the future. Nor do you have the speech of birds. Nor the gift of transformation or fire-shaping. The Counselor.” Fafnir snorted. “Do you value such faint praise?”

“Ever have you been short-sighted, as our father was. Ever have you underestimated and failed to plan. You do not think.”

“These are heavy words for a man with no strength and no weapon. Do you not see me? I could kill you with my next breath. I could kill your would-be thief and the little warrior. All I need do is close my hands.”

“Hands? Do you still think yourself human?”

Fafnir growled, and the sound shook through the floor, shifting treasure.

“You may bristle and threaten, but you know you will not kill me. You brought a great enough curse on yourself when you murdered our father. You will not increase that burden with my death.”

“You push your luck.”

“It is not luck that preserves me.”

“By the gods, where do you come by this conceit? After I cast you out, and shamed you, and forced you to scrounge a living from your own poor skill, still you speak to me without respect.”
“You speak of respect? You, who murdered his father because he coveted his brother’s carcass?”

“Do not speak of Otter that way!” Fafnir’s tail whipped out from behind him, arching high through the air. It slapped the ground not five paces from Regin, nearly shaking him from his feet. The tail slid back then, slipping back to the hoard, searching for Fafnir’s most valued treasure. It found the otter, frozen in red-gold, contorted into a living stance. The tail touched it gently, slid away.

Fafnir scowled at Regin. “You would kill me for that ‘carcass,’ and all it ever held. If you could. I know it. There is an evil in your heart, brother. You do not yet know how great.”

“I would never raise my hand against you.”

Fafnir narrowed his impenetrable, jewel-bright eyes at Regin, seemed to speak without words. For a moment, an expression of discomfort, of uncertainty, whispered across Regin’s face.

Fafnir looked satisfied. Then he closed his fists a little, eliciting grunts from the boys, who had stared at Regin with desperate hope since his arrival. “But what of my prisoners here?” demanded the dragon. “They’re no kin of mine, nothing off limits. Just fresh bones for the pile.”

“You will not kill them.”

“Oh?”

“There are several reasons,” began Regin, his voice sharp with its usual confidence. “If you would but pause to think. They may be no kin of yours, but one is the kin of Odin, last of the Volsung line. Would you be the one to cut that thread? Will you
bring the wrath of Odin down on yourself? You may speak with whatever scorn you like, but you know, as few others do, the depth of suffering the gods can create when they choose. And there is another reason. You think I do not see the future, but that is only because you think too narrowly. You will surrender him without a fight. I know this because Odin is not here. Do you think Odin wants this Volsung killed as a child? What use would he be in the ranks of the dead? Odin’s army of the Einheriar must fight for him at the world’s ending. The boy must live to his prime to join those ranks. Odin will see it so. Were there any doubt that you would release him, Odin would be here to smite you. He is not. Therefore, it is obvious that you will let him go of your own will.”

Fafnir’s lithe neck was still as a wave frozen in mid-crest. Then he broke himself loose from Regin’s words. “And what of the other? He has no such godly protectors. What will you say, oh Counselor, to save him?”

“Can you still change back to your man-shape?”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

“I cannot help but wonder how far you’ve traveled from your own humanity. Would you murder a king’s son without cause? You were not always this way, brother. You were a man, once.”

A pained look came into the dragon’s eyes for a moment but disappeared behind anger again. “You think to manipulate me. Take your Volsung boy.” He extended his blade-sharp grip roughly. He tossed Sigurd at Regin, letting his claws scrape against Sigurd’s side as he did. Sigurd careened into Regin, knocking them both to the ground. Regin rose calmly and pulled Sigurd, clutching his bleeding side, to his feet.

“This one,” said Fafnir, “is mine.”
At the words, Sigurd made an unstable movement forward. Regin caught at his arm, cautioning him to stillness.

“Chaos-bringer,” spoke Ragnhild from the edge of darkness, where she had stood a silent watcher. “Though the child’s life is yours by right, grant me a boon. Let him live.”

“What! Not you, too. Why do take his side?”

“I do not take his side. As ever, I am on your side, on our side. But let loose the boy. Trust me. I have seen a fate for him. It serves purpose.”

Fafnir grunted, and smoke swirled from his nostrils.

“Heed her,” said Regin. “You know—you have said—she is wise in the ways of the future. Don’t be a fool.”

“He is no fool, Counselor. And he has a right to the boy. But, brother, what satisfaction from crushing him so easily? You are He Who Surrounds With His Arms—he is nothing to you; he’s nothing.”

Fafnir gave a sigh that sent acrid smoke into the air. “You tire me, both of you. I am tired. My throat is sore from speaking. My eyes sting. Leave me.” He loosed his grip on Gunnar, who fell the long distance to the floor, impacting with a dull thud and the snap of bone. “Go away. I’m tired. Go away.”

Fafnir lowered himself to the ground. He crept to the back of the hall, scraping his scale-armored belly over gold and the scattered jewels and treasures. He curled himself into a ring on the floor, his tail reaching to his snout. In the middle of the dragon-ring stood the red-gold otter, mouth stretched open. Fafnir reached out a foreleg, gripped the otter in his claws, pulled it to himself, wedged it against his body. He took one last look
at Regin, his eyes glinting red-gold, then the lids closed. The dragon’s body heaved with a sigh and went still.

“Come,” whispered Regin. He motioned to Gunnar, who lay white-faced on the ground, both hands gripping his broken leg. He struggled to his feet and limped drunkenly to Regin.

Sigurd supported Gunnar as they headed for the hall entrance. As they passed through the crumbled archway, they stepped into the chill before dawn. They turned down the slope of the rubble-strewn path, making their way into the ruined city, leaving the dragon to sleep.
Chapter 10

Though morning was full on the Heath, it was dim in the forested land at its eastern border. The trees here were stunted and unhealthy, their branches uneven. Still, they obscured the view of the Heath, filtered and diffused its glitter. Regin’s gelding, usually so placid, stared around in fear. Sigurd smoothed his hand over the tense neck and tightened the knotted rope that bound him to the tree. When he, Regin, and Gunnar had first reached this place where Regin had left his horse and gear, Col had whinnied high and loud at the sight of them. The broken reins had been hanging to the ground and the additional rope, tied by Regin as a precaution, had been frayed. While Regin had eased the boot from Gunnar’s rapidly swelling foot and gathered materials to brace the leg, Sigurd had gone to calm the horse. Now he stood with Col’s face pulled into his chest. He stroked the ears, rubbed the whiskered chin. The horse relaxed briefly, then jerked his head up again, his dripping flanks heaving.

Sigurd skirted the wide hole the horse had dug, throwing back the earth with his pawing, and went to where Regin was hunched over Gunnar’s leg. Clamping his hand to his side against the stinging pull of split skin and the fresh seep of blood, Sigurd kneeled beside them.

Regin slit Gunnar’s trouser leg with his knife and cut away the material, tearing it into wide strips. Eyes narrowed in concentration, he felt for the break.

“Have you set bones before?” asked Gunnar through clenched teeth.

“I broke my finger as a boy,” said Regin. Before Gunnar could protest, Regin gripped the leg with both hands. It made a dull popping sound when he set it, and Gunnar cried out with the pain.

“The splits,” said Regin without looking up.

Sigurd handed him the sturdy, hastily smoothed branches that were cut and laid out. Regin showed him where to hold these against the leg, then he used the strips from Gunnar’s trousers to tie them securely in place. When the leg was bound, Regin rose brusquely, speaking no word, and went to collect kindling for a fire. Sigurd shot Gunnar a look of some apprehension, and Gunnar’s eyebrows rose through his grimace.

Sigurd had been expecting Regin to speak for some time—to scold them, to demand an explanation, to offer one—and Regin’s continued silence was unsettling. At first, silence had been an instinct for all of them. When they had descended the cliff’s sloping path and entered the night-dark, ghostly city, the thought of Fafnir, huge and curled inside the cavernous hall, had eclipsed all else. Even the ruined city had seemed only an echo of him.
When they had reached the river and set Ragnhild’s boat into the water, Gunnar, face white and clammy, had broken the silence, saying simply, “Ragnhild.”

“Why should you care about her?” Regin had demanded. “She can ford the river upstream. If she chooses to leave.”

After that Regin had not spoken again while they walked. He had supported Gunnar with impatience, forcing him to limp as quickly as possible. Sigurd had aided his friend as he could, but his own injuries had kept him hunched and wincing. When they had reached Regin’s makeshift camp, Sigurd had forgotten, for a moment, the oppressive silence. Seeing the horse and supplies, he had felt only relief.

Now, as Regin lit the fire and set a pot of water over it, Sigurd longed for him to speak. He wanted Regin to explain himself, to explain the dragon, and he was prepared to endure any punishment in order to hear it.

Regin, however, was not ready to speak with the boys. He busied himself, hiding the tremor of his hands. It had been so long, so long since he had seen Fafnir, longer than the lives of men. It was easy to forget the power, the immensity, of the dragon-shape. Regin tended to picture his brother as he had once been: dark-haired, awkward in his human body, quick to anger but never sure what to do about it. The dragon was more difficult to consider. More than that, he could not yet still his hands against the fear that had crept into him as he had fled through the city with Sigurd and Gunnar. He could not keep his thoughts from the image of them held high in the dragon’s claws. That he would not soon forget. It was one thing for Sigurd to be headstrong and adventurous; it was another for him to be killed pointlessly. Worse, he did not know what effect the sight of
the dragon would have on the boy. Would he think of the possibilities? Would he look to
the future? Or would he be afraid?

When the water was warm, Regin motioned Sigurd to come to him. “Take off
your shirt,” he said, and Sigurd pulled the bloodstained tunic over his head.

Two gashes wrapped from Sigurd’s chest around to his back. Sigurd had kept his
hand clamped to these during the walk from the city, and the bleeding had mostly
stopped. Regin dipped a clean rag into the water and began to wash the wounds. Sigurd’s
face set into a frown while Regin scrubbed, but he made no sound, and only once did he
pull away. When the wounds were clean, Regin threaded a sharp, curved bone needle and
began to stitch. He knew little of leech-craft; his stitches were clumsy and drew some
gasps and flinches from the boy. When the gashes were red and puckered around the
stitches, he smeared salve on the wounds. His work left Sigurd hunched and pale-faced.
Regin doubted either of the boys were ready to be grateful for his rough ministrations, but
Gunnar would be crippled and Sigurd feeble with infection had he not come prepared.
They would be dead had he not come at all.

They ate bread, cheese, and dried meat from Regin’s saddlebags, drank watered
wine from his wineskin. When they had eaten, before they were rested, Regin sent Sigurd
back to the river to fill the skins.

Crouched on the bank, Sigurd held the skins under the surface of the water and
gazed across the river. They had traveled some way east of Hreidmar’s city to reach the
forest, and the ruination was obscured by distance. Still, it was strange how the tumbled
city blended with the cliff face behind it. Where one ended and the other began was
impossible to see from where Sigurd crouched. The blending was heaviest at the entrance
to the hall, which looked no more than a gash in the cliff. Sigurd shuddered. What lay within that cliff was beyond what he could have imagined. He had not been prepared.

Traveling south, they stayed within the woods. The branches of the trees, bare and scratching, were a constant annoyance. They caught at cloaks and tunics. They snapped back at whomever followed too closely.

The horse was highly distressed by the whip and shudder from the trees. He skittered whenever they brushed his legs or haunches, and Gunnar was soon sweating with the effort of holding him to a walk. Gunnar’s own tension did not help calm the animal. His leg throbbed; it felt enormous. But it was not only pain that kept him stiff in the saddle. A vague horror coursed through him, one he could not consider fully, one he refused to define. From time to time he would begin to shake, and the tears would run. He wanted so badly to go home.

Walking behind the horse, his arm held protectively over his stitched side, Sigurd tried not to notice Gunnar’s distress. He looked away when he saw his friend shaking. He concentrated on the ground when a gasp or choked sob escaped him. Sigurd was worried about his friend, but he was also disappointed. He had expected more from Gunnar. When the nervousness of the horse, barely checked by Gunnar, caused Regin to take the reins and lead the animal, Sigurd felt a twist of guilt in his stomach. He should have gone to help.

They traveled all that day through the trees bordering the Heath. They could see the barren land through the thin branches. The deadness, the eerie glitter. None suggested they leave the stunted woods, though walking the Heath would have been easier. When the forest began to take them too far east in the late afternoon, they stopped for the night.
Unless they wanted to travel two days out of their way, they would have to venture out onto the Heath. That could wait for morning.

With little food, less water, and no blankets besides Regin’s, their camp was uncomfortable. The ground was still damp with snowmelt. For dry kindling they snapped brittle branches from the trees, and their fire was small and sputtering. They leaned close to it against the cold evening.

Reaching under his heavy cloak, Regin drew Sigurd’s sword from his belt. Sigurd made a sound of surprise. Regin handed him the weapon.

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to give it back after you forgot it so easily, but I’m tired of carrying of it.”

“How did you—”

“I found it among the rubble of the archway when I was coming in. You didn’t mention its loss.”

Sigurd looked down at the sword. He had thought of it several times during the day, but his regret had been mixed with disappointment. It was a fine weapon, keen-edged, beautiful with its swirled light and dark pattern of folded, melded metal. But for all its quality, it was ordinary, just a sword. And it was too small. It was not enough to bring before Fafnir.

Seeing the disappointment in Sigurd’s face, Regin said, a little sharply, “It no longer pleases you?”

“I was sorry to lose it. Hjalprek gave it to me.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“It’s a child’s sword. I have thirteen winters. I want a man’s sword.”
“You aren’t ready for a man’s sword. You don’t yet come above my shoulder. And I’m still stronger than you. Give yourself time to grow.”

“You won’t make me a new sword?”

“No. Not yet.”

“But someday?”

“Patience, Sigurd.”

“I want something strong, deadly. I want something powerful. My father had a great sword.”

Gunnar, who had been sitting quietly with his swollen leg propped on Regin’s saddle, his face glassy with pain, drew himself out of his stupor at the mention of Sigmund’s sword. “The sword Odin struck into the Branstock. Gram. They say Odin shattered it. What happened to the pieces?”

“I don’t know. I’ve asked my mother. She won’t speak plainly. I think she might have it somewhere. Why else wouldn’t she just say it’s lost?”

“What, exactly, did she say?” asked Regin.

Sigurd’s eyes squinted with memory. “She said: it has gone into darkness. She called it an evil weapon. Once, she struck me with her weaving shuttle for asking.”

Regin looked thoughtful. “Hiordis is an unbending woman. But if she has the sword, or knows where it is, then it will come to you someday.”

Gunnar frowned. “But if it’s broken…”

Regin spoke as though the answer were obvious: “Why should it not be reforged?”
Sigurd had not thought on the Volsung sword for many years. Like his father, it was part of the stories, not part of his own life. It seemed unreal, inaccessible. He shook his head, disbelieving. “Gunnar’s right. It’s of the gods. They say that Weland himself made it. How could it be healed? Who could possess such power?”

“Someday, Sigurd, I hope you will learn to extend your faith beyond the gods. Theirs is not the only strength in the world.”

Sigurd lowered his eyes from Regin’s ice-blue stare. What did Regin mean? Was he saying he could mend the sword? Was he saying that Sigurd should claim it? Regin was right about one thing: if the sword was in his mother’s possession, it should come to him. Who else, save Odin, could claim it? But it did not seem possible, to mend a blade that Odin himself had broken. Sigurd wanted to descend into thought and silence, to be alone. But there was something he wanted even more right now. He wanted Regin to speak, to tell of his own history, to tell of his brother. Before Regin could begin to brood and ignore him again, he raised his first question.

“Regin,” he said abruptly, “how did you know where we had gone?”

Regin stiffened. “It wasn’t difficult to guess. Ragnhild was missing—I know where she goes. You two were gone at the same time…. I’m not a fool. I don’t know why you followed her. I don’t know how you knew of Fafnir. I won’t ask either of you now; I assume you’ll lie. But I will find out.”

Gunnar’s throat constricted at these words. What had he done? Why had he ever spoken of Fafnir and the gold? Why could he not have kept silent?

Sigurd’s eyes flicked guiltily to Gunnar. To Regin he said, “Well. We owe you our lives.”
“Yes,” agreed Regin, “you do.” At first it seemed he would say nothing more, then he burst out: “And I suggest you think long and hard on that. What foolishness. What stupidity! Fafnir is none to be trifled with. He is evil and dangerous and not someone to confront unprepared. What were you thinking?”

“We didn’t go to confront him. We never intended him to see us”—Regin laughed sourly—“We only wanted to see what Ragnhild was doing. We hid in the cave—”

“The hall,” Regin corrected.

“The hall. To watch and listen. But then”—his eyes flicked to Gunnar again—“he sensed us and was angry. We never meant to speak with him.”

What made Regin most suspicious was not Sigurd’s emphatic denials. It was Gunnar, tense as a bowstring. That surprised him. That he would have to unravel. It was, he sensed, the key to this mystery. Prodding, he said, “Sigurd I can understand. He’s foolhardy by nature. But you, Gunnar. How did you let him persuade you—as I can only imagine he must have done—to walk, like an offering, into a dragon’s lair?”

“We didn’t understand. We didn’t think.” Gunnar straightened himself. He forced the sound of confidence into his voice. “You’re right: it was foolish, and we almost paid for that foolishness with our lives. But our…stupidity…is not the greatest issue here. I have some questions for you.”

Regin smiled to himself. Gunnar’s discomfort was obvious—that he must learn to hide. Yet, as soon as he was attacked, he slipped under the spear and cast it back again. He would be a fine king someday.

“How,” Gunnar went on, “would you like to explain that your brother is…so monstrous in shape?”
All day Regin had considered what to tell the boys. If he refused to speak, they would create their own ideas; they would imagine reasons. Better that he guide them, he had decided. Besides, it was a story he had always meant to tell. He had not meant to tell it so soon, when Sigurd was still so young, but perhaps even that could be turned to advantage. Regin fixed a somber expression on his face, put into his voice a tone of resignation, of confession. “Are you sure you want this story? It is not a pleasant one.”

“Please, Regin,” pleaded Sigurd.

Regin sat back, folding his arms inside his cloak, and he was silent so long that Sigurd and Gunnar both feared he would say nothing more. At last, he stirred himself, and his pale eyes strayed up to the darkening sky. He seemed to be searching for words.

“Fafnir,” he began, “learned to take the dragon-shape when he was young. Hreidmar—my father—believed in a great destiny for him. He was the first to have been gifted with such power. His was greater even than Hreidmar’s, who was himself a frightening wizard. Often Hreidmar would ask Ragnhild, who could sometimes sense the future, what Fafnir’s dragon-shape would bring. Always her answer was the same: death and glory. Hreidmar understood this foretelling as a fine promise. But I was always suspicious of Ragnhild. Her visions were obscure, unreliable to begin with, and I never trusted her to be forthright. It is not her nature.”

Gunnar spoke across the fire: “I knew nothing of her skill until yesterday. Why does she hide it? I would’ve asked her some things.”

“She would not see for you. She has only seen for herself for many, many years, and I think she now sees only what she wants. Do you think I’ve not asked her myself? Had you spoken with her in the time before, you might have learned something, though it
would have been clouded. Now, you will get nothing from her, only fragments of her own desires. Put it from your mind. And, Gunnar, do not interrupt me again.”

Gunnar dropped into silence, though a look of frustration lingered on his face. Regin, too, was silent, considering his words. When at last he spoke again, his voice was sharp in the stillness.

“Fafnir was not the only one able to change form. We had another brother. Though Hreidmar was bound in human shape, as I was, as Ragnhild, Otter was not. He was so named because that was the shape in which he was born, and it was the shape he favored all his life. We did not often see him as a man. We did not often see him at all, though he would sometimes come to sit with us by the hearth in the evenings. But he was never content there. He longed for the waters.

“Though it is Fafnir who ends this story, it was Otter who began it. There is a waterfall some miles upriver from the city. Otter spent most of his days there, where the water pools under the fall. One day, Otter lay on the bank eating a fish. He had a habit of eating with his eyes half-closed. Fafnir would tease him and say that he did so because he did not want to see his food diminish, but it was not true. Otter was a simple creature; he cared nothing for power or ownership. More animal than man, I think he was—no man can live for such small pleasures.

“It happened that while Otter was lying on the bank with his catch, content and unwary, Loki and Odin came traveling downriver toward the Rhine. In those days, the gods were often to be seen in Midgard. I myself, as a child, had once seen Thor in his goat-pulled chariot. Anyway, when Odin and Loki came upon Otter, Loki took up a stone from the river. He threw it, striking Otter in the back of the head and killing him.
He cut the skin from Otter’s body, gutted and quartered him. He did not know, or so he said later, that he had killed and mutilated the son a king.

“All this came to light when Odin and Loki came to my father’s hall seeking shelter for the night. Loki carried a bulging leather bag, stained with blood. He pulled from it the shapeless, dripping skin, held it up for my father to see. The light shone through the eyeholes. I’ll never forget Loki’s words: ‘I killed this careless beast not an hour ago,’ he said. ‘Look how huge he is! The skin is a gift for you, king. Let us all feast on his sweet flesh.’

“Hreidmar was struck dumb for some moments. Then he let out a yell of such ferocity that the hall echoed with it. He spoke words of binding and justice. These had power; he was, as I said, a great wizard, and he trapped the gods inside those words. I could see Fafnir, standing beside me, longed to take his dragon-shape, which my father had forbidden him ever do in the hall. Outside his dragon-shape, he never knew what to do with himself. How was this man ever to be king? He never knew what to say, how to act; he was awkward. His inability to decide kept him standing in furious silence, impotent. Hreidmar, meanwhile, was so enraged that I feared he would kill Odin and Loki there in the hall. That would have brought the wrath of all the gods down on us. We would never have survived it. I spoke to my father: ‘Let them tell us how this has happened. Let us see then what is best to do.’ ‘Speak!’ my father shouted, and Loki told of his mistake. He swore he had not known Otter was anything but a simple beast.

“Hreidmar demanded of Loki why he should believe the god of lies. He was so fixated on Loki that he took no account of Odin. Odin’s silence made me suspicious. Why did he not speak? Why did he neither confirm nor deny Loki’s claims? And why,
with his knowledge of the future, had he not foreseen this result? If he had foreseen it, why had he not acted against it? These were my thoughts as I watched Odin stand so calmly, bound to the stone pillar in my father’s hall.

“As for Loki, he did protest loudly. He begged Hreidmar for understanding. He praised the strength and glory of his kingship. His words, though, had little effect. I could see I would have to act. I did not trust my father to come to reason on his own; he was too hot-tempered. I posed a solution. I said to him, ‘Why not demand a wergild?’”

Regin’s fingers strayed unconsciously to the hard knot of bone just below the bridge of his nose. His father had been so angry when he had interfered. Still he remembered the crack of breaking bone as his father struck him, remembered the blood that had flowed over his mouth as he dropped to his knees. It did not matter how many lifetimes he lived; that moment would be with him forever. Seeing Sigurd watching him, head tilting slightly in thought, Regin dropped his hand. He searched a moment for the thread of his story. Finding it, he went on as though there had been no pause.

“Hreidmar brooded for some time on the prospect of wergild. It was a legitimate compensation. My father knew this. But he was not ready to be placated. He called my sister into the hall and demanded of her a foretelling. I suppose he turned to her because he didn’t trust Odin’s foresight, but he should have been more cautious of Ragnhild as well. She told my father she saw a great treasure that many would covet, that would be the legacy of his kingdom. He did not stop to consider what that might mean. I looked again to Odin, but I could not read his face; it was closed.

“My father demanded of Loki this mighty wergild. Besides, my father argued, Otter had been more than a man; he expected full compensation. Loki would sew together
the otter skin to give it form again. He would fill it with gold and other treasures. He would gild the outside as well, leaving not one hair uncovered. Loki agreed. My father loosed his binding then. He was not polite. He demanded Loki leave at once to find this wergild. Loki took up the otter skin and departed.

“How he acquired the wergild I know only by his own account. When he returned to us some days later, he did indeed bring a mighty treasure. Hreidmar then invited him in as a guest and asked where he had found such wealth. He was pleased as he began to listen to Loki’s explanation.

“When Loki had left my father’s house, he had traveled first to the sea goddess, Nan. He borrowed from her a net that could capture any water creature. He went back with the net to the fall where he had killed Otter, back to where the water pooled among the rocks. None of us knew it until Loki told his story, but Otter was not the only one who dwelled under the fall. The other was named Andvari.”

Tension had been hardening Gunnar’s body since the first mention of the treasure. At Andvari’s name, his jaw clenched, and his hands gripped his thighs. His broken leg dropped from where it had rested on the saddle, and he drew it closer to his body. There was no way to stop Regin from saying what Gunnar knew he was about to say, the words that were never spoken in Burgundy. His discomfort was not lost on Regin, who looked at him sharply, brows twitching together a moment before he spoke again.

“Andvari was, like Otter, a shape-changer. But he was not like Otter. Andvari’s other form was not that of a man. Andvari was a dwarf.”

Sigurd’s eyes flew to Gunnar, whose face had turned hard and cold as iron. Gunnar had told him that Andvari was his kin. How could that be?
“Andvari,” Regin went on, his own eyes still on Gunnar, “had in his possession a great treasure. He had the entire wealth of his people, who were called the Nibelungs. No man could have found that treasure, so well was it hidden by the force of the water. I’ve often wondered why the Nibelungs would not have kept their wealth in their own land. But they were dwarves, whose hearts are full of greed. No doubt their king felt the treasure was safest away from his own people. It was not safe, though, from Loki.

“How Loki knew of the treasure, who could guess? He is lord of chaos. When he reached the fall, he cast the net into the water. He caught Andvari, who dwelled there in the shape of a pike. He hauled Andvari to the bank. When the dwarf transformed to his shrunken form, Loki demanded of him the hoard. Andvari refused. Loki threatened to cut the hands and feet from his body, and, being a coward, Andvari gave in. Loki made Andvari dive again and again into the water to bring up the gold and jewels. Loki gilded the outside of the skin, which he had sewn together, with red-gold. The mouth he left open, and he began to stuff the treasure through that opening. No matter how much he stuffed into the skin, it never seemed to fill. I’ve always suspected my father of this trickery. When all the treasure Andvari had brought to the bank was inside the otter, the skin at last was full. Andvari sulked beside the water, for every piece of the hoard was gone, save for one he had kept hidden. Loki, though, was not to be fooled. He demanded the final piece, a gold, rune-cut ring, and Andvari was forced to enter the waters again to retrieve it.”

Here Regin hesitated. The next part of this story he would not tell. Andvari had not been simply a shape-changer. Like many of his kind, he had had a darker power, the power to lay enchantment. As he had slipped back into the waters, Andvari had cursed
the treasure and all who would possess it. Any who held but one piece would be doomed to misery and death. So Andvari had said.

“All this Loki told to my father when he brought the golden otter back to the hall. He left out not one detail. I expect he wanted my father to know the full extent of the treasure he had won for his son’s death. When Hreidmar inspected the gilding of the otter, he noticed one whisker that was not covered. For this, he demanded the ring Loki had kept for himself. Loki was reluctant to part with it, but Odin took it from him and passed it to my father, who looked grudgingly content.

“As the months passed, my father brooded over the treasure. He would sit in the treasury weighing it in his hands, counting the pieces. Fafnir and I grew impatient with him. We demanded our rightful share. He had lost his son and was the king; the greater part of the treasure was his by right. But something should have come to me and to Fafnir, for we had lost a brother. My father, though, would not part with a single coin.

“Fafnir grew angry with him. He began to speak treasonously, to drop hints that he would take his share if it were not given freely. I warned my father that Fafnir was growing agitated, but he would not listen. Fafnir I tried to calm, for nothing but evil could come of his fighting with our father. He, however, was inconsolable in the loss of his share. He turned to violence, breaking cups, smashing furniture, assaulting the guards and servants. He began to take to the sky more and more, wheeling in his dragon-shape, terrifying the people of the city.

“One day he came to my father in the treasury, demanding again his share. I had followed him, to see what happened. When my father refused once more, refused even to look up from the gold, Fafnir drew his sword and thrust it into our father’s back.
Hreidmar fell upon the hoard, wasting his blood there. Fafnir took the treasure, all of it. He has held it ever since.”

The rest of the story—Fafnir’s deepening madness after the murder, his massacre of the people in the hall, his destruction of the city and the surrounding countryside—Regin would not tell. He also would not tell how Fafnir had cast him out, shamed him, left him to starve and to beg.

“Has he no weakness?” asked Gunnar.

“He is mortal. He can die—he will die—as my father and brother did. Both of them, though, were taken by surprise. And neither was as strong as Fafnir. The slayer of the dragon must be both powerful and cunning.”

Sigurd and Gunnar fell silent as they considered this idea. Both remembered the immensity, the potency of the dragon. Was it possible?

Regin interrupted their thoughts. “It’s late. We have far to travel tomorrow. And the next day. You both need to rest.”

Had Sigurd and Gunnar not been injured and so weary, they might have lain awake until dawn, the image of the dragon before their eyes, Regin’s story in their thoughts. Even exhausted it took some time for them to fall asleep, and the deep, grating voice of the dragon followed them into their dreams.

Hours later, when both boys were breathing deeply, Regin still sat by the dead fire. Seeing the dragon had stirred so many memories, memories he had thought distant and painless. He had not told this story since the day, generations ago, that he had stumbled into the Danish court, filthy and ruined. Then, he had simply fled north, running as far from Fafnir as possible. Yet, even in those hopeless days, it had not taken him long
to begin to think, to plan for retribution. All this time, all these many years, he had
waited. Now, with the sight of the dragon and the hoard fresh in his mind, he felt again
the fear and uncertainty. But he also felt anticipation. At last things were happening, and
a hope he had scarcely allowed himself to acknowledge, stirred.

* * *

They traveled the Heath the next day, leaving the dubious shelter of the trees to
walk the barren, exposed plain. They were beyond the glitter here, and what they
traversed looked dead in an ordinary way. Still, none of them could prevent the prick at
the back of the neck, the sense that they were being watched.

Late in the morning, a strange thing happened. In the distance, they saw dark
shapes in the sky. As the shapes drew nearer and took on form, they could see that they
were birds. But they were not of one kind. They were many, and they flew in no pattern
but in chaos. They bumped and tumbled, often sagging low as they were hit, as though
they had not enough sense to keep from one another’s paths.

“What in Midgard are they doing?” said Gunnar, his face screwed up in
confusion.

“Look!” Sigurd pointed at a huge white bird towards the rear. “It’s the Gyrfalcon.
They’re Ragnhild’s birds! Falcon!” he called. “Falcon!”

“They fly to her,” said Regin. “We won’t see her again. Not for a time.”

“Regin! Please! Help! The falcon!”

“There’s nothing I can do. She owns him.”
“No!”

The birds were passing overhead; they would soon be gone. Sigurd ran, pulling the stitches in his side. He could not let her take him. “No!” he called. “To me!” He raised his arm.

The falcon faltered. It flew on for several wing beats, then it turned, swerving uncertainly back to Sigurd.

“Yes! Come!”

The falcon swooped down, landing on Sigurd’s arm, gouging him with his thick, curving claws. Sigurd winced, and his arm dropped with the weight. He stroked the head of the bird. He rejoined Regin and Gunnar, the falcon perched quietly on his arm and the cuts in his side bleeding again through his tunic.

“He’s heavy.”

Regin’s eyebrows rose. Never would he have guessed that one of Ragnhild’s birds could be called away from her. Perhaps her hold was weakened by the distance. Or maybe the falcon was stronger than the others, more independent. But why had it come to Sigurd? And why had Sigurd cared enough to call it? These last days had raised many questions, and as they turned south again, Sigurd’s arm shaking under the bird’s weight, Regin’s mind roiled with conjecture and expectation.
Chapter 11

As they stumbled wearily across the bridge, the falcon sprang from Sigurd’s arm and flew to the roof. He settled onto his old perch, the highest carved figure at the roof’s peak, from which he looked down on the river and the valley. Sigurd watched him with a heavy heart. The falcon would surely be gone in the morning. He wore no hood, no jesses, and his mind seemed to be free. There was nothing to bind him now.

As Gunnar was laid into a bed, ashen with fatigue and pain, Sigurd looked on his friend with a knife twist of guilt. The journey across the Heath had been his idea. The will to cross the river, to enter the hall, to watch, all had been his. Worse, having begun the trouble, he had not been able to end it. Now, if Gunnar died, it would be his fault. He burned with shame and failure, with fear. He turned from the bed, strode for the door.

“I’ll ride for the nearest physician.”

Regin called after him, “The sun’s going down. Wait until morning.”
Sigurd stopped with his hand against the doorframe, not looking back. “Regin. If something happens to Gunnar…it will be—I can’t just sit here.”

Regin’s mouth crooked. He had suspected from the first that Sigurd had been responsible for the misadventure, and now he was certain. In truth he was pleased—Sigurd’s courage, his foolhardiness were great assets, if kept under control. But Regin could not show his approval. Sigurd needed to feel the weight of failure. And so, though Gunnar was not in the danger Sigurd feared, Regin would allow him to make the trip. But he would not let him to do it at unreasonable risk. Sigurd was exhausted, and the gashes in his side were still at risk of infection.

Regin said with forced patience, “You want to help your friend, and that is good and right, but you must rest first. If you die on the way, you’ll be no help to Gunnar or to anyone. Go in the morning.” When Sigurd began to protest, Regin cut him off: “I’m not asking, Sigurd. You will go in the morning.”

At first Sigurd was still. Then his face tightened with anger, and he pounded his fist against the doorframe, beating a dull thud from the wood. His hand throbbing, he swung back towards the bed. He sat with a grunt of furious resignation, refusing to meet Regin’s eyes. Someday he would not have to obey like a child. Someday, he would make his own decisions.

* * *

The sun was rising as Sigurd led Raudfaxi, faster than Col or any of the sturdy workhorses, from the stable. Raudfaxi pranced and sidled, sensing urgency. As Sigurd
trotted the chestnut stallion around to the front of the iron-braced house, he looked to the roof. The falcon was still perched there.

The early spring light struck the falcon and the roof’s carved figures, drawing from them a depth and complexity he had never noticed. Perhaps because of the light, perhaps because Fafnir still gripped his mind, Sigurd saw something then that had been hidden from his eyes: he saw the carved figures for what they were. Always before he had seen only intricacy and chaos. There had been no meaning. Now he saw that the carving was neither random nor meaningless. From the wood, where the falcon perched, emerged a looped, lashing tail. Down from the tail twisted the contorted body of a dragon, its face distorted and buried among the iron bracings that swept up the walls of the house.

A chill bled from Sigurd’s neck through his body. He raised his eyes from the image to the falcon, whistled for the white bird and lifted his arm. The falcon hesitated, looking down with its dark, suspicious eye. Then it sprang from the dragon’s tail and spread its wings.

Sigurd rode hard and fast for the nearest village, some twenty miles south of Regin’s. The falcon wheeled above him, hunting. It would disappear for hours at a time, and always Sigurd feared it would not return. Then it would glide out of the sky, seeming to emerge from the clouds or the sun itself.

When Sigurd returned to Regin’s with the physician, a lean and kind-faced man, Gunnar was already somewhat recovered. He was still clammy and pale, but he could sit up in bed, and he was alert enough to grit his teeth when the physician removed the bracings from his leg.
The physician inspected the break, his brow furrowed in his age-spotted face. He nodded approval. It had been set well, he said, and he gently rebound the leg. The long ride had been unfortunate, but the break should heal cleanly in time. He recommended bed rest and pulled from his leather bag some herbs to be steeped in water. He seemed surprised to have been called at all.

Sigurd’s injuries he had already inspected, and he had cut some of Regin’s stitches so the wounds could drain. He had had to scrub some pus from them, for they had grown inflamed. The scars, he declared, would be ugly. The curvature of the cuts and Regin’s poor stitching had seen to that. The physician had wanted to know how Sigurd had sustained such injuries. A skeptical line had wedged between his brows at Sigurd’s awkward, halting story about a wolf, but he had said nothing.

As Gunnar’s leg healed through the spring, much time was spent in study. Regin spoke of strategy in war, strategy in alliances, strategy in law-making. Gunnar would listen and argue, his whole body leaning into the conversation while Sigurd’s eyelids drooped with boredom.

One day, Regin brought a sack of stones from the river and a sack of iron slag from his smithy. He swept clear the rushes from the floor and arranged the stones and slag to represent the ranks of two opposing armies. He made mountains of woven baskets, rivers of narrow cloth, forests of scattered grain. One army he gave to Gunnar, another to Sigurd. As with nine-men’s-morris, he weighted the odds unevenly, a difference in numbers, an advantage of terrain.

As the boys moved their bands of warriors, Regin would demand their reasons. What would this move achieve? What results did they expect?
Exasperated, Gunnar complained, “If I have to explain myself, Sigurd will know my plans, and they’ll be ruined.”

“Your point is well taken,” said Regin. He had been waiting for one of them to address this problem, to think of secrets.

Though Sigurd managed his army well enough and won from time to time, it was clear that Gunnar controlled the field. Gunnar treated the battles as real, moved his stones as though they mattered. Sigurd could not look the game that way.

Eventually, he demanded, “Regin, what’s the point of this? Men are not stones to be moved about. A band of warriors is not a lump of slag to compare in size to another lump of slag. This game takes no account of will. It takes no account of the skills or the hearts of the men who are fighting. A smaller force may defeat a larger one if the warriors are greater in power. And explain to me why any of this even matters! Is it not the battle itself, the blows and courage of each man, that are weighed by the gods? I don’t see the point of any of this!”

Regin was silent for a time, studying Sigurd’s anger. At last he said, “Will you be a king or a warrior?”

“I will be a warrior-king.”

“What does that mean to you?”

“I will fight beside my men, as a king should.”

“How will you command them?”

“Why should I command them? They will command themselves. They must fight for me because they respect me and want glory for me and for themselves. How can they respect me when I sit back from the battle, when I move them like pieces on the board?”
Gunnar said, “But what if you are killed?”

“What do you mean, Gunnar? Isn’t that the point? To die in battle? What else could I want? What else could you want?”

“But who will lead your people then? I think the king does not have such careless luxuries as the men who fight for him.”

Sigurd pressed his fingers to his eyes. “Gunnar, I don’t understand you. You have skill with bow and blade. Why would you want to hold back from the fight?”

Gunnar opened his mouth to retort, but Regin cut him off: “All right, all right! Both of you make good points. Each of you speaks your own truths. Let the matter lie. Time will judge between you.”

As the weather improved, they spent more hours out of doors. Gunnar’s leg healed cleanly, and by the hot days of Sun Month he walked without a limp. Sigurd’s wounds had healed long since, though they left him with two red, puckered scars that curved around from his back to his chest and stomach.

Sigurd and Gunnar spent the summer half-year much as they had the one before: training, helping with the farm. They also spent many nights, sometimes weeks, camping and living in the hills and woods that spread south and east from Regin’s house. Sometimes they traveled west to the Rhine, where they would swim and fish and live on the shore. At times Regin would join them. Regin would bring his harp, and he and Gunnar would play together. Regin had a rich singing voice, and it transformed his severe face into one of cool beauty. Gunnar’s voice had more depth and resonance, and together they made a rare sound.
Never did the boys approach the Heath. They did not even speak of it. When, on occasion, Sigurd would try to prod Gunnar towards the subject, Gunnar would turn cold, still as a tree, and Sigurd would sigh in frustration and drop into silence himself. Eventually, he stopped trying.

As for Ragnhild, she did not return. Save for the falcon, all her birds were gone, even the phantom-like owl who had lived in the rafters. The only other reminder of her presence had been her loom, and this Regin had removed from the hall. The falcon—whom Sigurd had named Skadi for his hunting prowess and his wintry color—Regin would not allow inside, though Sigurd tried to bring him. Regin was still suspicious of the bird and didn’t like it near him. On the days Regin camped with the boys, the falcon left its usual perch beside Sigurd and roosted in a nearby tree.

Winter, too, came and went, and the boys grew. Gunnar’s face lost its softness at last, and he began to develop his father’s square jaw and thick, corded neck. Sigurd was taller than Gunnar, his build cleaner. He was quick and agile, even graceful, and his focused power brought Gunnar’s greater, duller strength to nothing.

Despite the development of both boys in body and mind, Regin began to worry. What they needed—what Sigurd needed—was experience, and Regin began to feel keenly the limits of his fostering. Each of them was past a fourteenth winter, and Sigurd had little experience in combat, Gunnar none. Isolated in the river valley, there was no opportunity for them to apply what he taught. And so it was with mixed regret and relief that he emerged from his smithy one spring evening to see horsemen, wearing the colors of King Giuki’s court, riding down from the southern hills.
“Hogni!” cried Gunnar, embracing his brother as soon as he had swung down from his horse.

Hogni, two winters younger, was of a height with Gunnar, though he was neither as thick nor as strong. His hair was darker, a deep auburn, and his skin freckled. He clasped Gunnar fiercely. “It’s been far too long. You’re so big!”

“Am I? I was thinking the same of you.” Gunnar’s expression faded suddenly from joy to hurt. “Why did you never come to see me? You don’t know how badly I’ve missed you. I never would have thought you’d forget me so easily.”

Hogni looked down, his brown eyes hidden for a moment behind coppery lashes. “I didn’t forget you—how could I? Father wouldn’t let me come. I asked him so many times, and always he was the same. You know how he is: he won’t explain himself. All he would say was that I would distract you. What does that mean? I wanted to come, Gunnar, you must know I did. I—I’m sorry. I should have come anyway.”

Gunnar embraced him again. “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now.” He leaned back from his brother, studying him, and his voice became serious. “Why are you here?”

Hogni’s face turned grim, and he glanced back at the dozen men who had ridden with him. “You’re needed.”

“Not father—”

“He lives. He’s fine.” Hogni gripped Gunnar’s arm. “There’s war.”
Gunnar opened his mouth on a question, but Regin, standing a little behind with Sigurd, interrupted. “Gunnar. These matters are weighty, and shouldn’t be discussed standing here in the yard. Sigurd, Axel is in the dairy; call him to help with the horses.”

When the horses had been stabled, the men and Hogni washed the spring mud from their faces and hands. Together with Sigurd, Gunnar, and Regin, they crowded near the hearth with bowls of leek soup. It was watery, stretched thin for sixteen people.

Sigurd watched Gunnar ladle more soup for Hogni, and it pained him to see the joy on Gunnar’s face. For two years, he and Gunnar had been as brothers. Yet all they had done together—the hunts, the games, the training, the dangerous journey across the Heath—seemed like nothing now. He and Gunnar might be foster-brothers, but that would weigh as nothing against blood. He felt a sudden loneliness. For two years, it had been as though neither he nor Gunnar had anything but each other. But it had never been true. Gunnar had much more. Though Hjalprek had treated him as a son, Sigurd had never known any blood family but Hiordis. Hiordis’s brother still lived, but Sigurd knew little of him, had never met him. Even Hiordis was far away, not part of his life. The loss of her had troubled him in the beginning, but now that he had kept her from his mind for nearly two years, she almost did not exist. Gunnar, though. He hadn’t realized how much Gunnar had come to matter, how much more real he was to Sigurd than his own family. Yet now that Gunnar’s true brother was here, Sigurd knew that Gunnar did not have the same feelings. He could not.

Such thoughts were Sigurd’s alone, for Gunnar had none of the kind. But he was too caught up in the joy of seeing his brother, and the fear of his brother’s news, to notice Sigurd’s dark expression.
When Gunnar had settled once more into his chair, he looked over the men from Burgundy, recognizing some as his father’s warriors. He turned back to Hogni and said, his voice hard, “Who?”

Hogni stirred his soup, not eating, “Atli. King Budlung died during the winter. Atli is king now.” Hogni’s mouth twisted. “You can imagine.”

“Atli. That snake.”

“He sends small, secret bands of his Hunaland warriors though the Dark Forest. They raid and tear through the newly planted crops. They’ve not yet attacked the city, but the people in the countryside call on father to strike back. He’ll have to.”

A memory rose in Sigurd’s mind, one of Regin showing him a map of the southern lands. Burgundy and Hunaland were separated by a dense forest. Regin had lectured him on the advantages and the dangers of such a borderland. He could not remember, though, what those points had been. He said, addressing no one in particular, “Why such small attacks?”

Gunnar answered, “I’m sure he hopes to provoke my father into sending his army through the forest. There, Atli could ambush them. Don’t you think, Regin?”

Regin stroked his dark beard. “Likely so.”

“Father doesn’t know what to do,” said Hogni. “He prays to the gods for guidance. Gunnar, he wants you to come home.”

“Of course,” said Gunnar. “Of course I will.”

Hogni nodded resolutely and made to stand, as though they would leave that instant. Gunnar motioned him down. He looked to Regin. “You must forgive my father
for not sending his request to break my fosterage straight to you. I’m sure he meant no disrespect.”

Regin inclined his head. “He has much on his mind.”

“You support my decision to leave?”

“I would not keep you from your duties.”

“Thank you, Regin. You’ve taught me a great deal. Perhaps now I can use it. But there’s one more thing”—Gunnar looked to Sigurd—“I do not wish to go without my foster-brother. Will you allow it, if Sigurd should wish to accompany me?”

Regin looked thoughtful, as though he had to consider this request. In truth, he was pleased that Gunnar had asked; otherwise he would have had to suggest it himself. When both Sigurd and Gunnar began to look worried and hopeful, he opened his hand, a gesture of offering. “Of course.”

At the words, Gunnar rose from his chair. “Sigurd? Will you fight with me?”

Sigurd grinned. “I would do nothing else. When do we ride?”
Chapter 12

The journey to Burgundy took ten days. The spring sun was bright and strong, and winter’s snow had long since melted. Astride a spare horse that Hogni’s escort had brought, Sigurd rode beside the brothers. Skadi, hooded against the noise and movement of so many people, perched on his arm, which was strong and steady from this accustomed weight. Where there were stretches of road, there was room for only two to ride abreast. At such times, Sigurd would fall back with the armed men. He could see that Gunnar and Hogni had much to discuss—people, places, memories—that meant nothing to him.

They camped in the evenings because the escort refused to stop in the villages or at any farmsteads. With war in Burgundy, they did not want to spread news of the king’s sons traveling across open country. When they camped, Gunnar would play his harp and sing, or they would tell stories. At first, Sigurd’s reserve made Hogni shy of him, but at
Gunnar’s urging, Hogni was soon asking questions of the Volsungs, demanding tales of Sigmund or Volsung or of Odin’s son, Sigi.

Though Sigurd told the stories, he was too immersed in his own bitter thoughts to be much moved by Hogni’s interest. Each night, when the men and the brothers had fallen asleep, he would lie awake. Everything had felt right when they had started the journey; there had been a common purpose, a sense of camaraderie. Gunnar had asked him to come, and that had bound them together for a time. But as they had ridden south, Sigurd had felt a growing distance between himself and Gunnar.

His mind circled again and again to the knowledge that Gunnar and Hogni were brothers, blood brothers, and there was a sister yet in Burgundy. Sigurd had no such connections, to the Giukings or to anyone. Worse, telling stories of the Volsungs made him think differently of his duty to his own dead kin. Now, as never before, he could see what it would mean to have no brothers to help him. Gunnar might be riding home to his family, but when Sigurd rode into the Volsung lands, there would be only enemies. What he had to do he would do for the dead, and he would do it alone.

On these nights, when Sigurd would fall asleep at last, he would dream of the Volsung hall, as it had been described to him. He would see himself wandering through it, empty. It was a strange place in his dreams—immense, cold as Fafnir’s cave—and he could never find what he was looking for. These dreams left him to wake unrested, and they drove him further into silence. He did not see that Gunnar looked on him with concern. He did not realize that Gunnar was trying to bring him and Hogni together, to make them all brothers.
Gunnar, who had never experienced loneliness, did not understand Sigurd’s unhappiness, though he saw it. One night, determined to draw Sigurd from his brooding, Gunnar sat with him by the glowing remains of the cooking fire until everyone else was asleep. He knew that Sigurd was waiting for him, too, to turn over in his blankets. He would not. He also knew that Sigurd could stay wrapped in silence forever, and he did not have the patience for that. He would fix this problem, whatever it was, now. And so, eyes gritty with weariness, he matched Sigurd’s silence until Hogni stopped shifting on the hard ground and fell into the stillness of sleep. Then he said, his low voice breaking into the silence like a shout, “I think he wants to trade me for you.”

Sigurd did not reply. Taking a stick from the kindling pile, he traced it through the dirt, marking the runes of his name. He smoothed the writing away with his foot, drew a pattern of chaos.

Gunnar went on, his tone light, probing, “After all, how can a simple mortal like me possibly compare to a son of Odin?”

Sigurd scratched out his drawing and answered brusquely, “No. He’s devoted to you. I don’t think he’s fool enough to trade a brother for a nothing more than a name.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t try that. What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious, Gunnar? What do I have but my name? Nothing.”

Gunnar’s broad forehead wrinkled. “What are you saying? What do you mean by that?”
Sigurd broke his stick against the ground, tossed it into the circle of fire-stones, “Never mind.”

Gunnar dragged his fingers back through his copper hair. “Sigurd, what’s the matter? Just tell me.”

“What’s there for me to say? You have your brother now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sigurd gave Gunnar a look of disgust and shook his head. He dropped his eyes to his drawing. There was no meaning in it now, only twisted and intersecting lines. He rubbed it out with his foot.

Gunnar frowned at Sigurd, his eyes squinting with confusion and frustration. At last, comprehension eased into them, lifting the thin, coppery lines of his eyebrows.

“What, you think—now I’m going home—that it changes anything?”

“You think it doesn’t?”

“Of course it doesn’t!”

Sigurd snorted disbelief. “I’m tired.” He rose and wiped his hands clean on his trousers. “I’m going to bed.”

“Sigurd,” said Gunnar angrily, as Sigurd spread his bedroll and lay down, showing his back. He drew up his blanket. Gunnar strode to where he lay. “I don’t think so,” he said and whipped the blanket off him.

“Hey!”

As Gunnar threw down the blanket, Sigurd sprang up. He tackled Gunnar, grabbing him around the middle and driving him to the ground. Gunnar hit hard, and Sigurd was pinning his arms before he could react. Gunnar brought up his knee and
hammered it into Sigurd’s side. Sigurd grunted as the air was shocked from his lungs. He lost his grip, but before Gunnar could twist out from under him, he set his knee in Gunnar’s chest. He tried to pin Gunnar again, but Gunnar grabbed his reaching hand and wrenched it out from under him. As Sigurd lost his balance, Gunnar wedged a foot against his friend’s stomach and tossed him overhead.

Sigurd fell into Hogni, startling him from sleep. As Hogni hollered and scrambled out of the way, Sigurd dove again for Gunnar, who was halfway to his feet. Unprepared for such a swift return, Gunnar was knocked to the ground once more. Sigurd, though, had been moving too fast. He overshot. As he scrambled around to grab Gunnar, Gunnar punched him in the ribs.

Sigurd fell back, wheezing. The shock in his face quickly hardened to anger, and he came back at Gunnar with a blow to the jaw. Before Gunnar could even bring his head around again, Sigurd drove his elbow into the joining of Gunnar’s neck and shoulder. Gunnar cried out in pain and fell to the ground. He took one last, desperate swing at Sigurd with his foot, catching him in the stomach. Sigurd’s body contracted around the blow, but he fell on Gunnar once more, hands at his throat.

It took Sigurd several moments to realize Gunnar had given up and that the look on his face was one of pain and panic. He withdrew his hands roughly and sat with a thump beside Gunnar’s prone form. He hunched over his shuddering stomach while Gunnar gasped and choked the air back into his lungs.

Hogni, who had watched the end of the fight with wide eyes and the bewilderment of sleep, took a cautious step towards them. “What—” he started but seemed unable to find anything else to say. A few of the men were sitting up wearily
from their bedrolls. Neither Gunnar nor Sigurd noticed any of this movement or confusion.

“Curse you, Sigurd,” wheezed Gunnar at last. “Did you have to—?”

“You kicked me in the stomach,” complained Sigurd around gritted teeth.

“I—you started it!”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Yes, you did!”

“No, I didn’t! You took my blanket!”

Gunnar struggled to his elbow. His look of disbelief and disgust was so intense that Sigurd, trying to protest, felt his belly begin to shake with a painful laughter.

“What’s so funny?” demanded Gunnar.

Sigurd held his hand against his belly, wincing, but his whole body shook with repressed sound.

Gunnar gritted his teeth furiously. “What are you laughing about?”

The sound began to seep, then spurt from Sigurd, like water through the cracks of a dam.

Gunnar’s face softened to a smile. “What!” he demanded, but then he, too, began to laugh. “Your temper is terrible,” he said as Sigurd lay down beside him, wiping the tears from his eyes.

* * *
When they saw the fields and farms of Burgundy, Gunnar’s breath caught and his face broke into a smile. His was a mild country, moderate, the hills neither so steep nor so rocky as those bordering the Heath. Farther south, they would rise again, growing into the mountains at the source of the Rhine, but here they were gentle. The city and its farms lay in a valley sunken between two hills. The king’s hall, obvious even at a distance by its size and high vantage, was backed up onto the north side on the valley, facing south. It hugged the hill behind and looked down to the city and the river-harbor. Beyond the city stretched the farms. Beyond the farms were the summer pastures, and farther east began the trees of the Dark Forest. The border of the forest, once sharply defined, had blurred over the generations, creeping back into the pastures at the edge of the kingdom.

As they traveled the road through the farmland, the tender shoots of crops could be seen pushing up from the furrows. When Sigurd asked Gunnar of Burgundy’s famous vineyards, Gunnar explained that these were terraced in the hills facing the river.

By the time they reached the gates of the city, word of their coming had traveled ahead of them. The gates, smooth planks of weathered wood, were open wide. Within, people were already beginning to line the streets, and a small group of colorfully dressed riders was making its way down from the king’s hall.

It took all Gunnar’s will to hold himself from kicking Raudfaxi to a canter. He would not disgrace himself by flying into the city like a child. But it was hard. He could see his mother and his sister on their horses. His father, astride his sturdy stallion, bright in his blue clothing, was at the front. Sensing Gunnar’s eagerness, Raudfaxi pranced, lifting his knees high.
Some of Gunnar’s dignity cracked when his sister, Gudrun, called his name and trotted her winter-shaggy pony ahead of the others. She was a beautiful child of eleven winters, her hair as dark and brilliant a red as Hogni’s. She had none of his freckles, though; her skin was pale and rich as cream.

“’Run! Look how you’ve grown!’ exclaimed Gunnar as she wheeled her pony alongside Raudfaxi, who flicked back his ears in irritation.

Gudrun reached for Gunnar’s hand, her cheeks dimpling. “Oh, Gunnar!” But just as quickly as she had smiled, her mouth curved into a frown. “Why were you gone so long? I’ve missed you! Hogni won’t let me practice archery with him. He says girls can’t shoot, but I’m just as good as he is!”

Gunnar laughed. “You can shoot with me and Sigurd. But don’t expect to beat him. He never loses.”

Gudrun looked a little shyly at Sigurd, and her eyes widened as they took in the huge white bird.

Sigurd nodded to her. “Hello.”

“You’re Gunnar’s foster-brother.”

“Yes.”

“Father says you come from the north. He says you’re kin of Odin. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

Gudrun’s milk-pale cheeks stained with a sudden pink. “Well,” she floundered for her forgotten manners and said awkwardly, “I hope you’ll be happy here.”

Sigurd inclined his head. “Thank you.”
Gunnar smiled reassurance at his sister, whose face had reddened further. She snuck another look at Sigurd, her eyes drifting from the bird to his face, then darting down to her own hands.

The two groups merged with shouts and grins. As they milled in the street, the sounds of laughter drifted over the gathered people, who strained and jostled to see the king’s son, to judge him.

When they turned toward the hall, Gunnar’s father and mother rode on either side of him. Giuki’s usual stern demeanor was somewhat softened, but he looked on Gunnar expectantly, anxiously even, yearning for something. Grimhild showed none of her husband’s strain. Her eyes were bright with tears, and her teeth flashed in the sun as she laughed and smiled and leaned toward Gunnar.

Having fallen back, awkward, from this meeting, Sigurd watched with both longing and disdain. When he returned some day to Denmark, no one, he was certain, would ride out to meet him. And he would never expect such simple joy from his own mother; she was harder, tougher, than that.

Sigurd forced his eyes away from the scene before him, looking instead over the buildings, the people, the walls. The city hardly looked like one threatened by war. The walls, old and weathered, were lightly manned. The buildings were crowded together, and merchants’ stalls leaned one against another. Fire, here, would devastate. Except for a jitteriness that simple excitement could not explain, the people looked unconcerned. Only Giuki, with his grim eyes and back hunched as though he bore a great weight, showed any sign of understanding what war would mean. When Hjalprek had led his thanes and his army into battle—or even contemplated it—the entire Danish court would
stir with a passion and a readiness, with a will. Where was that will here? Where was that sense of purpose?

Riding beside him, Hogni grinned, unaware of Sigurd’s disapproval. “No more dried meat and hard bread. I don’t think I could have faced another day of it. Father will have the cooks and bakers running around like madmen for days. We’ll have lamb and beef and all kinds of things. And wine. Have you ever had Burgundy wine? It’s the best. You’ll see. I bet you didn’t eat so well at Regin’s.”

“No, we didn’t. But, then, that wasn’t the point.”

“Point of what? What do you mean?”

“The point of being at Regin’s. The point was to prepare. For life. For war.”

“Yes, but…father says that feasts are important. We have lots of them. Father says the king must be generous to his people and give them cause to celebrate. If he doesn’t, they won’t respect his kingship. They won’t come to the city to trade and farm.”

“The king must be generous, that’s true. But the only ones he must be generous to are his warriors. They are the ones who support him and would die for him and his kingdom.”

Hogni’s freckled face shaped his confusion. “But the farmers and the merchants are the ones who make him wealthy, not the warriors.”

“And who keeps the enemy from his gates? When the enemy can destroy every farm and merchant stall with fire and sword?”

Hogni made a vague sound of protest, as though to dismiss this possibility. But before he could fashion an answer, he had to haul his horse to a stop. They had arrived in the courtyard of the king’s hall.
It was a fine courtyard, wide and cobbled with square stones. The hall, built of dark, weathered wood, stood atop a stone platform. Several steps led to the top of the platform and the front doors of the hall. The doors, their pattern thickly painted, stood open. Set back from the front of the hall, a tree was planted on either side, roots sunk deep below the cobbles and branches beginning to bud. Sigurd could see that farther back were several outbuildings, a smithy, the stables, dairy, the barracks, perhaps. Beyond these buildings was a wide field—the training yard by its targets and torn ground. The fence marked the edge of the training field and of the city, and the hillside rose behind it.

They dismounted in the courtyard, and their horses were led away by boys brawny and dirty from their work in the stables. A falconer came with gloved hand to take Skadi, and Sigurd passed the falcon to him with reluctance. Hooded, Skadi made only a mild protest, beating his huge wings and screeching at the indignity of being handed off.

Sigurd’s grim mood began to settle below the surface when Gunnar pulled him from the crowd to introduce to his father. Giuki was older than Sigurd had expected, his beard more grey than red, and when his eyes wrinkled around his smile, the creases folded deep. Sigurd guessed him near fifty, old indeed for Gunnar to be his first-born. Yet the resemblance was strong. Like Gunnar, he was loud and grand, declaring that the fates had been kind to weave Gunnar’s life-thread with that of a Volsung. Sigurd accepted this praise with a nod and thanked Giuki for his welcome. The king clapped him on the shoulder with a bear-like hand.

When the feasting began that night, Sigurd could no longer restrain himself from enjoyment. It had been two years since he had last been in a king’s hall, and he had
forgotten the energy and excitement of such a place. It was unsettling at first, with the
dozens of servants hurrying among the tables crowded with men. The voices were loud
and many, the smells of wine and mead, food, dogs, and bodies strong. It took a good
deal of Sigurd’s concentration to study his surroundings. Still, it was exciting. At last
things were happening. It had been time to leave Regin’s, to do something.

Inside, Giuki’s hall was a fine one, finer than Hjalprek’s had been. Where
Hjalprek’s walls had been hung with antlers, Giuki’s were striped with bright tapestries,
jewel-like in their color and intricacy. Giuki himself, in his blue cloak and tunic, was a
sapphire set in a gold-painted throne. His red hair was a faded ruby, grey streaked.

Giuki had grumbled loudly about the indignity of his son coming home dressed as
a farmer, for Gunnar had long ago outgrown the fine court clothes he had brought to
Regin’s. Over the years, his dress had become simpler and more practical. Sigurd’s
clothes, too, had made him frown. A Volsung, he said, should show the people what he
was.

Now Sigurd and Gunnar, dressed in fine wools and linens, Hogni beside them, sat
together with the king. They were surrounded by the king’s thanes and fighting men.
Grimhild poured the wine among this circle, tipping the silver flagon with grace, flowing
around the men like water around boulders.

A pig turned on the spit, and a servant carved tender, dripping slabs from it,
passing these into the wooden trenchers of those gathered near. Sigurd felt his belly
straining uncomfortably against his belt, yet he held out his trencher again to accept the
offered meat. He was dizzy with the strong wine, and he laughed with the others as the
court skald told bawdy tales to the strum of his six-stringed harp.
When the skald was easing his throat with a cup of wine, Giuki turned to Sigurd.

“Tell me: where did you get that fine white bird? He can be nothing other than a Gyrfalcon.”

Sigurd answered before he thought: “He was enslaved by Regin’s sister, but he broke from her when I called him.”

“Enslaved?” said Giuki, his fleshy face hardening. “How so?”

The king’s tone awakened a wariness in Sigurd’s wine-clouded mind. He blinked away the haze in his vision and said with caution, “She had a way with birds.”

Giuki frowned, unsatisfied, and looked to Gunnar for explanation. Gunnar gave a slight shake of his head, a warning in his eyes, and Giuki took a deep breath. He forced a laugh. “Well, it seems that you, too, have a way with birds. That’s a rare animal. I’ve always wanted one myself.”

“Skadi, I think, is one of a kind.”

“Skadi? You name him for destruction?”

“I named him for the north. And for the hunt.”

“Well, the name aside, he is a magnificent animal, and it’s fitting that the last Volsung should master him. Though, we can hope you will someday have children of your own and no longer be the last. Continuing your line is a great obligation, one that cannot be approached without ruthlessness and determination. Remember that. You have no greater duty.”

Sigurd shifted on his stool. He had never thought of children. He had thought of women and, isolated at Regin’s, that had sometimes been a frustration. But children. That was different.

“Of course, father.”

Gunnar fetched his harp from his bedchamber and returned with it to the hall. He tuned it with care, testing each string against his voice. As he began to play, the hall fell silent around him. He sang a song Regin had taught him, one that traveled deep into the sounds of anger and despair and came again into the high, light notes of pain.

“That is no song of Burgundy,” said Giuki, when the last echo of the harp had faded.

“No. It’s something I learned.”

“From Regin?”

Gunnar brushed his fingers across the strings, sending the notes whispering through the hall. “He says it’s a song of doom.”

“Is that what you would bring into my hall?”

Gunnar shrugged. “It’s a beautiful song.”

Before Giuki could protest, Sigurd came to Gunnar’s defense. “It’s long been held by the Volsungs that doom and fate are closely bound, perhaps one and the same. I asked Regin of this once, and that was when he first played the song. At the end, he asked me why the song was beautiful. I said it had feeling. I said I would not soon forget the sounds. Regin would say nothing more, but I think his point was that doom will be remembered.”
Giuki didn’t answer at first, then, “I would not question the wisdom of the Master of Masters, but I wish he had taught instead of wealth and victory. Now, Gunnar. Play something else. The men want to laugh.”

* * *

For the first several weeks that Sigurd and Gunnar were in Burgundy, there were few attacks by the Hunalanders, and these were mostly raids on the border farms. Though patrols of ten to twenty went out each day, riding though the farmlands and along the edges of the kingdom, the cover of the forest made it easy for raiders to avoid them. And so the patrollers spent most of their time watching for the smoke from burning farmsteads. Sometimes they would come across a band of raiders and chase them back to the trees; sometimes they would catch and kill them. In one such encounter, however, an entire patrol was destroyed. When not a man returned in the evening, Giuki sent out a troop to find them. What they found were ten bodies, headless and strewn across a farmer’s burned pasture. The farmer and his family were not found. Everyone expected war then, but the king only accepted the news in grim silence.

Giuki made compensation to those whose homes were destroyed, if there were any survivors. He walked through the city, speaking with the people as he always did. He invited traveling merchants and musicians to his hall. He listened to disputes. Though some farmers began to abandon their homes and the kingdom, the loss was a trickle, and most of the Burgundians followed the king’s example, going about their daily business.
And so, other than the restlessness of his thanes and a certain unease that shadowed his people’s lives, there was nothing to force the king into war.

During this time, the boys practiced in the training yard with the men who were not that day riding patrol. At first the men would not press Sigurd or Gunnar, for they did not know their skill and were afraid to harm them. It was not until Sigurd threw down his sword in disgust and reproached them for weakness that they put weight behind their blows.

They tried not to show it, but both boys were sore and tired in the evenings. For two years, they had fought only each other and Regin. The heavy training they now experienced showed them how soft they were. Dismayed by the strain of his efforts, Sigurd pushed himself each day near to exhaustion, and he grew stronger.

Giuki’s fighting men were certainly better than he had expected. When Hogni had first spoken of his father’s uncertainty, of his hesitation to embrace war, Sigurd had imagined cowardice. When he had seen the carefree welcoming of Gunnar, he had sensed weakness. The truth of the matter, he came to understand, was more complex. Giuki was no stranger to war. While his own father had lived, there had been constant warring between the Giukings and the Budlungs, and this conflict had spilled over into the early years of his own kingship. Even in these latter days, Giuki kept a small but strong force at hand. The wealth of his kingdom was such that it drew greedy eyes. Had he not been prepared to defend it, he would not long have held the land.

His thanes, who numbered fifteen, were all experienced warriors. Another sixty soldiers were under their command. These men rode to answer the seasonal attacks from the river, when nearby kingdoms sent their men a-viking during the spring and fall.
Against such minor threats, Burgundy was guarded, and these threats kept the king’s fighting force ready. Additionally, all men, in the town and countryside, were expected to fight when called. Though it had been years since such a need had arisen, this obligation was a standing one. Now, with war brewing, the men of Burgundy waited for the king to speak.

Knowing now of Giuki’s history with war, and knowing of Burgundy’s existing defenses, Sigurd found the king’s hesitation all the stranger. One day, as he and Gunnar sat in the shade of the smithy while Gunnar’s sword was sharpened, he asked him why his father did not counterattack, why they were not yet riding to war.

Leaning back against the wall, Gunnar said, “I, too, expected him to move before this.”

“But why doesn’t he? He has good men. They want to fight.”

“My father remembers the past wars with the Budlungs. Those were dark times for Burgundy. The coffers were almost emptied, and the land was so trampled and burned that it took years for the farms to grow prosperous again.”

Sigurd drew up his knees, crossed his arms over them. “Frankly, I don’t see why that matters. So the kingdom becomes poor for a few years. That’s the purpose of raiding, to restore that wealth, to increase it.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” snapped Gunnar. “I can hear it in your voice. You think Burgundy is weak, that its people are cowards.”

“No, Gunnar. That’s not what I think. I think there’s no reason to hold back men who want to fight. Ortwin, your father’s captain, seems a good commander. He’s old, but he’s strong, and I heard the men say he has more battle scars than anyone else in the
kingdom. They say he fought with your great-grandfather against the Budlungs when he was young. He wants to take the men into battle. You can see it in his face.’

The corner of Gunnar’s mouth lifted at a memory. “Ortwin wants to die in battle. He’s been complaining for years that he’s still alive.”

“Well, it’s the king’s responsibility to give his men that opportunity, isn’t it?”

“Now I see. It’s not Burgundy you criticize, it’s Burgundy’s king. Be careful what you say of my father, or what you imply. Don’t forget where you are, or who I am.”

Sigurd began to protest, but Gunnar gave him a sharp look, a knowing one. Sigurd lowered his eyes to his crossed arms. “I’m sorry, Gunnar. I shouldn’t have spoken so.”

The hard line of Gunnar’s jaw softened. “It’s all right. To be honest—and I would only say it to you—but such thoughts have come into my mind as well. My father doesn’t want another ten years of war with the Budlungs. He will soon have to accept that those years may be upon him, whether he wills it or not. But be patient. My father is no coward. Once he resigns himself to war, he will fight without fear.”

Despite Gunnar’s words, the days of training dragged on. It was still planting time, Giuki argued, and he would not bring in the farmers until all the seeds were sown.

Sigurd and Gunnar continued to spend these days of waiting in the training yard. The ground of the yard was trampled, and there were bare crescents and stretches where men had circled and struggled against one another, where they had fallen with their heavy wooden shields. Hogni, who spent much of his time with Sigurd and Gunnar, would join them here, and even Gudrun one day insisted on taking her turn at the archery targets. Her presence halted most of the exercises, as all the men stopped to watch her, their smiles indulgent. Her arms shook against the strain of the bow, but she put all her arrows
into the target. When Grimhild’s maid shouted at her across the yard, she jumped, sending an arrow flying wide. With a huffed breath, Gudrun strode back across the yard, dress swishing against her angry stride. The harassed-looking maid gripped her arm and led her away. She did not make a second appearance. As Sigurd watched her go that day, his eyes caught on the deep red hair of her hair and the swing of her dress around her body. Gunnar broke his concentration with an elbow to the chest, and they returned to their exercise.

Though Hogni practiced close combat, he spent most of his time at the edges of the yard where the targets sat pocked with arrow and spear marks. He was a promising archer, and it was for this reason that Sigurd gave him a gift of seven arrows. These were valuable, for they were some he had made with Regin’s rune-etched arrowheads. He gave also an ash spear shaft of perfect weight and balance. After Sigurd had cut and smoothed the shaft, Regin had carved into it some simple designs. Sigurd had made it for himself, but he had nothing else to give. In return, Hogni had given him a finely tooled belt, set with gold studs, and a twisted silver torque.

In the days at Regin’s, Sigurd had grown accustomed to companionship, even come to value it. But despite his friendship with Gunnar and despite the gifts he exchanged with Hogni, he still held back. He felt awkward being friendly and soon gave it up.

Despite Sigurd’s reserve, Hogni was drawn him. He would watch with wonder as Sigurd practiced with the men in the yard, ducking with lithe grace under their heavy blows, sneaking his sword in for the killing stroke when they were not expecting it. When Sigurd would come to the line of targets to cast his spear, he would send it again and
again into the heart. Sigurd was generous with his advice, and Hogni hung on his words, collecting them like jewels.

“I told you Hogni was in awe of you,” muttered Gunnar one day, leaning against his spear. “And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Gudrun can’t stop looking at you either. I don’t know what it is, Sigurd. You won’t even talk to anyone.”

“That’s not true. I just said hello to your cousin Wulfric.”

Gunnar shook his head in disbelief.

“Don’t lean on your spear like that,” chided Sigurd. “You’ll bend it.”

Gunnar straightened with a sigh. “You’re as bad as the weapon’s master.”

“Well, you don’t want it bent, do you? It’ll ruin your aim.”

“All right, all right!” Gunnar held out the spear and squinted at it. “See? No damage.”

Sigurd did not respond. He was staring across the yard, his eyes narrowed, focused like a hunting hound.

“What is it?”

“Your father.”

Giuki, hands clasped behind his back, was walking among the men, watching them practice. He was dressed in his usual fine clothes, but chain mail glinted at the bottom edge of his tunic, and he wore a hard leather byrnie. A heavy sword was strapped at his side. Ortwin came to speak with him, and they walked together, the captain pointing to this man or that, Giuki nodding, asking questions. They spoke for some time. Then the two men moved into an open space in the yard and drew their swords.

Gunnar said, “Come on, let’s get closer. I haven’t seen my father fight in years.”
Standing with the men, the boys watched Giuki and his captain. The ground was soft with a recent rain, and soon the fighters and nearest spectators were splattered with mud. Ortwin was an impressive swordsman. He was surprisingly fast for his age and quite cunning. He had driven Sigurd to the ground on more than one occasion. Giuki, though, pressed him hard. The king was slowed and stiffened by his broad belly, but he was strong. He struck with terrifying downward blows, and Ortwin’s arms shook with every block he made.

In the end, Giuki knocked Ortwin to the ground and lowered his sword to the captain’s throat. A cheer went up in the circle of men. Giuki held out his hand for Ortwin and pulled the man to his feet. Ortwin came up rubbing his shoulder. Sigurd wondered whether the captain had allowed himself to be beaten, for he was truly a fine swordsman. Still, it was good to see the king among them. At last he was in action, at last showing some acknowledgment that war was coming.

“See?” whispered Gunnar. “He’ll take us to war. He’s just working himself up to it.”

Sigurd frowned, his excitement dimming. How could there even be a question? Had imminent war not been the point of calling Gunnar home? What, in the end, would it take to make Giuki fight?

It was not until a week later that he had his answer.
Chapter 13

On the day Giuki would be moved to war, Sigurd rose early and knocked at the door to Gunnar’s chamber. When there was no answer, he slipped inside. The sun had not yet risen, and he had to strain his eyes to make out Gunnar’s form on the bed. He leaned over his friend and nudged him. Gunnar mumbled and turned in his sleep. Laying a hand on Gunnar’s chest, Sigurd shook him awake.

“By the gods!” Gunnar struggled to his elbows. “Do you have to do that?”

Sigurd sat on the edge of the bed. “I was thinking: why don’t we go out on patrol this morning? I’m so tired of doing the same thing over and over in the yard. Not to mention that I haven’t seen anything of Burgundy since we first rode in.”

Gunnar rubbed hard at his face. Speaking through his hand with groggy impatience, he said, “I don’t think my father would like that.”

“Why not?”
Gunnar dropped his hand. “Because. What if something happens to me? What if something happens to you? Can you imagine the kind of message he would have to send to Denmark?”

Sigurd was still a moment, planning his words. “What are you going to do when the fighting finally does start? Sit in the practice yard with a wooden sword while the men go to war?”

“Of course not—”

“Then what you’re saying makes no sense at all. You’ll be in danger in war. You could get killed then. If that’s acceptable, what’s the difference now? Besides, your father has another son. And if I get killed, Aelf won’t care and my mother…she’ll survive.”

“It’s just…I’m telling you, my father won’t approve.”

“I don’t understand why that worries you so much. One day, he’ll dead and you’ll be king here. Sometimes I wish you would act like it.”

“You are impossible. And so rude.”

Sigurd rose from the bed, shrugging indifference. “You needn’t come with me if you really don’t want to.”

As Sigurd strode for the door, Gunnar called after him, “Wait. Damn it all. I’m coming.”

When Sigurd and Gunnar led their horses into the courtyard to join the patrol gathered there, Ortwin cast a suspicious eye over them.

“Your father didn’t say anything about me taking the two of you.”

“He won’t mind. Besides, it’s just a patrol. There’ve been no attacks for four days.”
“Aye. That’s why I’m expecting one, today, maybe tomorrow, the next. It’ll come.”

Gunnar turned to Raudfaxi and tightened the saddle girth. “Don’t forget, Ortwin, that I will one day be your king.”

“Unless you get killed, of course. Then, not only will you not be my king, but your father, who is my king, will carve the bloody eagle out of my ribs and breastbone.”

“He’ll do no such thing. Now please stop arguing with me. The sun’s coming up, and we need to get moving. If you don’t take us with you, we’ll follow, and then you’ll be in trouble with both my father and with me. Sigurd and I have excellent training; you’ve seen it yourself. We need experience. Do you intend to deny that?”

Ortwin cursed and spat. “No. That’s true enough. Get on your damned horses.”

They trotted down the main road of the city, the hooves of twelve horses pounding a dull beat over the wooden planks. The sun, just peaking above the Dark Forest to the east, spread a weak grey light through the city. The ring of metal echoed from several smithies, cows lowed in their milking stalls, and a few merchants were moving their wares down the streets. Otherwise, the city was still.

At the main gates, two guards stood on the watching platform and four on the ground. As they filed through, Sigurd looked over the gate, as he had several times, with a critical eye. The wood was too old, weak, and there was no rampart, no moat, no outer gate. Sigurd thought of Hjalprek’s stronghold, of the layers of defense there, and of the hard, grim people within. He thought of descriptions of the Volsung stronghold, an impregnable fortress high on a bluff over the sea. Despite the warriors Giuki kept in his
service, the Burgundians were not a war-like people. They were traders and merchants, soft and vulnerable as children.

The patrollers let their horses break into a canter as they passed by the nearest farms. Some miles out from the city, they came into the scattered farmlands and pastures at the edge of the kingdom, the land that lay in the shadow of the forest. Here they slowed to a walk. They trekked though the pastures, keeping well out of bowshot from the trees, looking for any sign of raiders.

The sun grew hot as the day wore on, and Sigurd felt sore and irritable. His saddle was stiff, his horse lazy. His legs ached from urging the sluggish gelding to walk at the pace of the others. He thought longingly of his horse Gladung. The memory of Gladung raised also the memory of Odin, who had come to him the night Gladung had died. He vaguely recalled Odin’s horse, the godlike Sleipnir, moving like a ghost through the trees. How he wanted such a horse.

On one occasion that Sigurd and his horse fell behind, the patrol disappeared around a hill in a farmer’s pasture. As Sigurd dug in his heels, pressing the hard edges of his boots against the horse’s sides, a flash caught his eye at the edge of the forest. He hauled at the mouth of his horse, and the confused animal ground to a stop, neck braced against the sudden pull. At the forest-border, sitting his horse in plain sight before the trees, was a rider. His spear was held high. The sunlight that caught on it flashed across the field into Sigurd’s eyes. The rider was too far away for Sigurd to see his face, but he was turned towards him and close enough to notice Sigurd’s attention. The rider did not move. Behind him, under the trees, Sigurd could see the glint of more weapons and the
movement of horses. Fear and excitement flooded his belly, and he kicked his horse to a trot.

“Ortwin! There are men! In the trees!”

“What!” Ortwin pulled his horse to a stop, and the rest of the patrol, stringing out before him, straggled to a halt. “Where?”

“Straight east of us.”

“How many?”

“I couldn’t tell. One man was out in the open. The others were in the trees; I don’t know how many there were.”

“One man was in the open?”

“Yes. Like he wanted to be seen.”

“You think he knows you saw him?”

“He must. It surprised me. I didn’t think to…yes, he must.”

“All right.” Ortwin turned to address the patrol, which had formed itself around him and Sigurd. “We’ll ride back to the farmstead we just passed. We’ll fortify ourselves within the house. If they attack us there, we’ll destroy them. If they won’t come to us, two men can ride back to the city for reinforcements.”

“We’re not going to fight them?” demanded Sigurd.

“No. Not unless they attack.”

“Why? What’s the point of the patrol if we don’t fight?”

Ortwin’s eyes drifted to Gunnar, and he jerked them back to Sigurd. “The man in plain sight is obviously a lure. A lure serves but one purpose: to spring a trap. There could be fifty men in there, and they have all the advantage of cover and surprise.
Burgundy can scarce afford the losses if we’re all killed.” An argument tightened
Sigurd’s face, and Ortwin’s voice sharpened. “There’s a reason I give the orders, and it’s
because I know more than you. I won’t explain myself again, and if you argue with me
once more I’ll knock you senseless and ride with you across my saddlebow, king’s son or
not. Men, to the farm! Ride hard! Our intent will be obvious regardless.”

The patrol galloped for the farmstead. They flew through the pasture, scattering
sheep. They tore over the edge of the homefield and trampled a line of rising crops.
Passing through the wattle fence that surrounded the house and its outbuildings, they
gathered within the yard. Ortwin called out to the people within the low-roofed house,
demanding entrance in the name of the king. When no one answered, Ortwin sent a man
to the door. The man pounded and shouted for a response. When still no answer came, he
kicked open the door. He hadn’t made it two steps inside before he fell back with an
arrow in his throat.

Ortwin cursed. “Back! Ambush! Back! Back!”

The men wheeled their horses and charged for the gate, slamming into one
another. As they crowded through the gateway, two men were shot from their mounts.
The patrol horses sidled and spooked, and their riders struggled to control them. Before
the patrol could reform, a thundering of hooves sounded from across the field. Five
Hunaland raiders had emerged from the trees and were charging towards them.

“Ready your weapons!” shouted Ortwin. “Kill them fast, or we’ll have the others
behind us!”
He pulled his shield from where it hung at his back, drew his sword, and kicked his horse to a gallop. The patrol followed him, yelling and swinging their blades and spears high.

The patrollers and the raiders met with a ring of metal and the thud of bodies slamming into one another. One patroller and two raiders fell in the first moments, skewered by sword or spear, and the bodies tangled under the frantic hooves of the horses.

Sigurd ducked under the sweeping arc of a raider’s blade. The man’s tall horse gave him an advantage of height, forcing Sigurd to thrust upward. He aimed for his opponent’s torso, but the man twisted away and swung his own blade down again. Overreached as he was, Sigurd could not raise his shield high enough in time, and the blow glanced off his shoulder before it caught in the edge of his shield. The raider’s sword was wedged hard in the wood. When he tried to pull it free, he jerked the shield from Sigurd’s weakened grip. As the raider’s arm sagged with the unexpected weight, Sigurd brought his sword up again and thrust it into the man’s ribcage. He wrenched his sword free with an effort and brought the blade down on the raider’s neck. The man fell from his horse into the confusion of bodies on the ground.

Sigurd looked for a second opponent, but the last of the raiders was already falling under a patroller’s blade. He searched for Gunnar, saw him sitting white-faced astride Raudfaxi, his shield broken and his tunic splattered with blood. Ortwin was close at his side. Before Sigurd had a chance to yell to his friend, Ortwin called for the patrol to reform.

“Look to the farm!”
Four raiders had emerged from the house and were astride their horses. They filed through the gate and charged toward the patrollers, who were down to five men and two boys. As the patrollers spurred their horses to meet this second group, what they did not see were the other four bands of raiders riding towards them from the neighboring farms.

The patrol clashed with the second band with as much fury as before. Sigurd swung for a raider, but the man he met now lunged instead for the throat of his horse. The beast fell with a broken scream, plunging to the ground and flinging Sigurd from the saddle. Sigurd tumbled away from the fight, choking air back into his lungs.

As he dragged himself to his feet, he searched for the man who had killed his horse. The raider had already forgotten him and was joining one of his companions in attacking Ortwin. Furious at this disregard, sword still clenched in his first, Sigurd leaped over the body of his fallen horse and grabbed the reins of the raider’s mount. With a violent tug, he wrenched the horse’s head around.

As the horse’s body swung, the raider was shaken off balance. His expression was half surprise, half anger as he tried to right himself. Before the man could react, Sigurd stabbed at his torso, catching him low in the belly. The raider let out a scream and toppled from the sidling horse. He fell to the ground with a heavy thud and struggled again to his feet.

Sigurd made a two-handed downward swing with his sword, but his opponent caught the blow against his sword hilt. As Sigurd raised his sword for a second stroke, the raider swung hard for Sigurd’s belly. Sigurd leapt back from the blade. The man’s desperate swing had left him unbalanced, his arms extended, exposing his neck and bloodied belly. Sigurd brought up his sword again, shifting his grip. As he turned the
point downward, he heard Ortwin shout something, but the words were lost in the
deafening anger of his blow. He stabbed his enemy at the joining of neck and shoulder.
He jerked his sword free, and the man fell to the ground, the blood leaping from his neck.

Shaking with fury, Sigurd looked to the rest of the fight. What he saw made no
sense. Raudfaxi was galloping away with Gunnar, two patrollers fleeing beside him. In
front of Sigurd, Ortwin, his sword-arm dripping blood, his face contorted with horror,
was shouting. The captain had the reins of a skittering horse in his shield-hand, and his
own horse was sidling beneath him.

“Get on! Now!”

The urgency of Ortwin’s tone snapped Sigurd into action. He ran to the horse
Ortwin held. Jamming his foot into the stirrup, he leaped on the horse as it tried to swing
away from him. Ortwin spurred his horse to follow Gunnar and the patrollers. Before
Sigurd was settled in the saddle, his own mount charged after Ortwin’s.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a dark blur moving against the green
pasture. Looking over his shoulder, he understood. Several small bands of raiders were
converging, drawing closer.

The diminished, strung out patrol fled through pasture and field, leaping fences
and stone walls, pounding through streams. Arrows flew over Sigurd’s head. One of the
patrollers ahead of him was shot from his horse. He heard Ortwin cry out with pain and
looked to see the captain with an arrow in his back. Ortwin was hunched over his
saddlebow, his face lowered nearly to his horse’s neck.

Ortwin’s horse began to flag. Sigurd’s own mount was nearly blown, sucking
hard for air, and it fell to the speed of the captain’s horse. The single patroller who rode
with Gunnar was also dropping back. When the patroller’s horse caught a spear in its flank and fell screaming, Sigurd felt a flash of fear. He realized suddenly that he might die here, without purpose, for nothing.

As the raiders began to swarm around him and Ortwin, the captain shouted to him in a rasping voice, “Stop your horse! Now!”

Sigurd braced himself in the saddle and hauled at his horse’s mouth. The startled animal stopped so hard it nearly fell to its haunches. Sigurd clung to the mane, moving with the horse as it skidded and righted itself.

“We’ve only got a second,” said Ortwin, struggling with his own frantic horse as the raiders ground to a confused stop ahead of them and began to turn. “They’ll focus on me. If you get a chance, you must flee. If not, I will see you in Valhalla.”

Sigurd had time only to gather his reins and raise his sword before the raiders swept back toward them. Heart pounding, he swung his horse away from the first spear that was cast, and it passed over his shoulder. The second he had time only to dodge, and it flew within inches of his chest and grazed the flank of his horse.

Ortwin raised his sword with a chilling scream and cut furiously at the raiders who charged him. Several fell under his sword before a spear caught him in the neck. Time slowed then, became unreal. Sigurd, in the midst of a blow to a raider’s throat, watched the look of surprise freeze on the captain’s face, watched him move with his sidling horse for several more moments, as though he were not already dead.

As Ortwin tumbled into the confusion of horses, Sigurd slashed and hacked at the men around him, wielding his sword with a blind desperation. With every mad beat of his heart, he expected to feel the pierce of sword or spear. He kept swinging. But then he
brought his sword against the spear of one of the raiders, and the blow sent a shiver up his arm that made him pause mid-stroke.

The man rode a white horse, a horse with no bridle. The man himself wore a grey-blue cloak, and his long braided beard hung white and shining to the silver saddlebow. His face was obscured by a wide-brimmed hat, but Sigurd knew, by the thrill in his blood, what lay beneath.

Another raider joined the white-bearded man and made a stab at Sigurd. But the raider fell dead, his throat crushed by the butt of the stranger’s spear. A second raider met a similar fate, though the band did not seem to realize what was happening, or who rode among them.

In the space of seconds, the white horse maneuvered between Sigurd and the raiders, and the way opened for Sigurd to flee. The brim of the hat lifted, and a single searing eye looked out from under it. At first Sigurd could not move, as transfixed by Odin as he had been by the dragon.

In his deep, commanding voice Odin spoke only one word: “Ride.”

Sigurd did not want to leave. For two years he had longed to see Odin again. For two years the memory of him had lain beneath his thoughts, beneath his actions. Spellbound as he was, Sigurd might not have fled at all had Odin’s horse not laid back his ears and snapped at the rump of Sigurd’s own mount. The horse leapt forward with a startled squeal, and Sigurd had to scramble for reins and balance. He did not need to be told a third time. He kicked the horse to a gallop and rode hard and fast in the direction of the city.
As the horse thundered across the field, breathing, it seemed, with a second wind, Sigurd glanced back. The band of raiders was milling about in confusion, as though they had not seen Sigurd’s escape. He looked forward as his horse leaped a fence into another pasture, and when he looked back again, the raiders were riding in another direction, as though they thought they were chasing him. Odin was gone.

About half a mile from the city, Sigurd spotted a horseman at the top of a hill. He drew his horse to a halt, staring with suspicion at the figure. Then he recognized the chestnut horse and the rider in the green tunic and leather breastplate: Gunnar. Sigurd spurred his horse again.

“Thank the gods!” exclaimed Gunnar, when Sigurd reached him. “I thought you must be dead!”

Gunnar’s face was white and pinched, his fine coppery hair dark with sweat and plastered to his forehead, his tunic torn and bloody. “Are you all right?” demanded Sigurd.

“I’m fine. It’s not my blood. Are you all right? Your shoulder’s bleeding.”

Sigurd looked at his shoulder, probed it with his fingers. The bleeding had slowed, and the fabric of his tunic was beginning to stick. “I’m all right.”

“How did you escape? The raiders were right behind you and Ortwin. Where is he? Is he dead?”

Sigurd swallowed the quiver in his voice, said steadily, “He is dead.”

Gunnar’s jaw set. “Then he is in the hall of warriors now. But how did you escape? You and Ortwin and the raiders were behind me, then I looked back and you were all gone. I didn’t expect to ever see you again. But I waited, just in case.”
“Odin did not yet want me to die, I guess. He saw me safely away.”

Gunnar looked confused, but he nodded acceptance, seeing that Sigurd would say no more. “We should get back.”

“Yes. But, Gunnar,” said Sigurd, stopping Gunnar as he turned his horse toward the city. “You shouldn’t have waited. It was too dangerous. You should’ve ridden for the gates.”

“I know. Don’t tell my father. But I couldn’t leave. I was so afraid. Truly, I thought you were dead.”

“There was nothing you could’ve done.”

“I know. No might against many, as they say. But still. I felt cowardly, running when you were fighting. Wouldn’t you?”

Sigurd let silence speak his answer.

Gunnar jerked his chin towards the city. “Come on. My father needs to know what’s happened.”
Chapter 14

When Sigurd and Gunnar rode into the courtyard of the king’s hall, Giuki was waiting there. The king stood at the bottom of the stone steps, thick arms crossed against his chest and a grim expression on his face. When the boys drew their horses to a halt, his eyes flew to Gunnar, to the blood splattered across his tunic and over Raudfaxi’s saddle blanket. For a moment, his face lost its color and strength, drooping like softened wax. He made a movement forward but checked himself when Gunnar dismounted unaided.

Stable boys came to take the horses, and Sigurd and Gunnar walked to the king. Sigurd wondered if they should kneel, or bow, or lay down their swords, as would have been expected in Hjalprek’s court. But Gunnar stood with his back straight, looking like an oak braced for the storm, and so Sigurd did nothing.

In a clear voice, Gunnar said, “My lord, we are all that remains of today’s patrol. Atli flaunts his insolence by sending more and more men into our lands. Who knows how
many may be in the Dark Forest? He lays clever traps and ensnares us like animals. His
disrespect is blatant, his intentions obvious. What can he want but to take our land and
our wealth, as his father before him wanted? It is time we taught him a lesson.”

A breath heaved in Giuki’s chest. “Ortwin?”

“Dead.”

“Perhaps that is just as well, if he was so great a fool as to lead my son into such
danger. I would have had more than words for him.”

Anger flashed into Gunnar’s eyes. “It was not his fault.”

“Whose then? Yours?”

Gunnar opened his mouth to retort, but Giuki raised a hand against the response.
He stared Gunnar into stillness, then demanded, “Explain.”

Gunnar told of the raiders in the trees, of the patrol’s approach of the farmstead
and the ambush laid there. He described the patrol’s fights against the first two groups of
Hunaland raiders, of the many that emerged from neighboring farmsteads and of the
flight from them. He did not clearly explain his or Sigurd’s escapes. His own he was not
proud of; he felt, somehow, that he should have gone back to help his friend. When
Sigurd had ridden up the hill, he had been so relieved that at first he did not feel ashamed
to have been waiting in the distance. That had come later, as they had ridden for the city.
He told himself, as Sigurd had told him, that even to have waited was foolishly
dangerous, but it helped very little. Sigurd had been the one who had faced the greater
danger, and Sigurd, as usual, had prevailed. How he had prevailed, how he had escaped,
Gunnar did not understand. Sigurd had implied that he had outrun his pursuers, that they
had given up. And so that was what Gunnar implied to his father. Giuki listened to all of
Gunnar’s report without interrupting, though his mouth compressed with every new conflict described.

When Gunnar had reached the end of his explanation, he said, “With a fresh horse I can ride out with a troop to collect the bodies. They’re scattered across the countryside; without me or Sigurd they might not be found.”

“In the morning.”

“But—”

“The sun will be down soon. Do you see in the dark?” Giuki waited for Gunnar to fail to answer, then he said, “Sigurd will go straight to the physician and have his wound stitched. You, Gunnar, will come with me.”

Giuki turned away briskly. He climbed the steps to the hall without a glance behind. Gunnar looked briefly to Sigurd, who was watching the king with an expression of wariness, even mistrust. Seeing that, Gunnar felt his own wariness thrill to fear, but he settled a look of determination on his face and forced himself to anger. Then he followed his father.

Like his father, he passed through the doorway without looking back. He strode through the hall with purpose, but he refused to hurry. His mother was standing on the raised platform at the hall’s edge, weaving shuttle forgotten in her hand. She was staring after Giuki with an anxious expression. She turned at the sound of Gunnar’s footsteps. When she saw him, blood-covered, step though the doorway, she gasped and started towards him. He stopped her with a shake of his head. He had no time for her now.

He followed his father through the hall, past the hearth and the tables, where servants looked up from their chores. Gunnar followed him past the gold-painted chair of
the king, past the watching eyes of the thanes and soldiers who wanted explanation and
dared not ask. Giuki turned into the wide and well-scrubbed passageway that led to the
king’s private chamber. Gunnar trailed him into the room and closed the door before he
could be ordered to do so.

The chamber was spacious and rich, already warmed against the chill of evening
by a fire laid in its hearth. The window faced south and west, catching the fading light of
the sun as it streaked the waters of the Rhine. Bars of light and shadow were laid across
the floor, and Giuki passed through these into the room’s dimness. His arms were crossed
once more against his chest. He fixed Gunnar with a cold eye.

“If you ever sneak off like that again, I will stripe your back.”

Gunnar gave his father’s expression back to him. “Father, I will acknowledge that
I should not have gone without your permission—”

“You should not have gone at all!”

“—but I will remind you of my age and my station—”

“Your station is to lead the people, not play soldier! By the gods! Do you not see
your own foolishness? All the men are dead. This is no child’s game!”

Gunnar shouted, “Will you not let me speak?”

Giuki’s voice was as sharp and cold as a blade: “Not until I have spoken. Do not
forget who is still king here.”

A muscle jumped in Gunnar’s jaw. Several seconds passed before he relented,

making a barely perceptible dip of his chin.

Giuki’s face softened with Gunnar’s submission, and he turned away from him,
walking with a sudden weariness to a wooden chest at the foot of the bed. He sat on the
chest, planting his hands at the edge of it. He looked hard at Gunnar, though his anger seemed now to be mixed with worry. Gunnar did not like the expression he saw. He had braced himself for the lash of his father’s tongue, had been prepared to lash back. What was this?

Giuki said, “I want you to understand something. I did not reprimand you in the courtyard for a reason. I will not live forever. I may not survive this war—don’t look surprised, Gunnar, you know it must be war now—and I hope you will learn what it costs us. You will be king, perhaps soon, and you must have authority. The people must respect you, and so they must see you respected. Though it is strange to think it, you are not a child any longer. I knew when I sent you to Regin that you would not return as one.

“You have spent two years away from here. You have, perhaps, been exposed to other ways of thinking, and so you have, perhaps, forgotten the ways of doing in Burgundy. I cannot believe, however,”—Giuki’s voice began to harden again—“that Regin would have taught such foolishness as your actions today displayed. Going on patrol! Can you possibly think of a stupider way to get yourself killed?”

A flush swept from Gunnar’s neck to his face. An ugly look twisted around his mouth. For the past year, a sense of failure, of shame, had shadowed him. As he faced his father, who sat there, useless, cowardly, accusing, that shame twisted into anger.

“Actually,” he said coldly, “I can.”

At Gunnar’s tone, Giuki turned as still as a hare under a fox’s eye.

“Perhaps,” Gunnar went on, “I could get myself killed by a fire-worm, one large enough to fill this entire hall, one so ancient and so evil that the gods themselves leave
him untouched and forgotten. That, I think, would be stupider. Or perhaps I should ask: would it be acceptable to you?”

Giuki’s voice came so low, so desolate, that it was like the last whisper before death, “A fire-worm?”

“Oh, yes. Shall I describe him further? He is a serpent with scales like plates of red-gold armor, though each link is harder and more impenetrable than what any smith could forge. Each fang is as long and thick as my forearm. His tail is a spiked whip, only it’s the size of a tree. His wings are as large as a ship’s sails, and his face…his face you cannot imagine. His eyes flash every color as though they had no color of their own, or as though they possessed every one. It is a face of evil.”

Giuki’s hand covered his own face. His fingers pressed against his eyes, as though Gunnar had conjured the dragon with his words and he refused to see it.

“This is the obligation you’ve passed on to me,” said Gunnar, “the duty in which I can do nothing but fail. How should I kill such a beast?”

“I would not have guessed—”

“That is was impossible? That I would be killed?"

“I would not have guessed—”

“What is that treasure worth to you?”

Giuki’s hand dropped, and his back straightened like a roped pulled tight. “You saw it?”

“The great wealth of the Nibelungs? Or perhaps I should call it the dragon’s hoard, for I don’t think it is truly anything else now. Yes. I saw it.”

“What was it—what did you see?”
“I saw unimaginable wealth. Unattainable.”

“Can you—can it not be killed?”

“I cannot imagine how.”

Giuki’s green eyes flashed in the golden light of the setting sun. “There must be a way.”

“How can I understand you? You berate me for riding out with the patrol, a minor risk, and yet you expect me to kill a dragon?”

Giuki winced at the word, but he said, “If you are killed on patrol, are you not just as dead as you would be if you were killed by the worm?”

Gunnar reddened. “One is more certain than the other!”

“You say. But look how many men were killed today! If you are killed on something as mundane as patrol, something anyone can do, what use are you to either the kingdom or to the line of the Giukings? What will you contribute? How can you hope to reclaim the hoard when you are killed by cowardly dogs that hide in the trees and strike without honor? Is that the worth of your life? Is that what you would sell it for?”

Gunnar spoke slowly, as though nothing mattered but this one question: “You truly still expect me to kill Fafnir, after what I’ve told you of him?”

When Giuki, his eyes evasive, did not respond, Gunnar knew he had his answer. Hurt and angrier now than he had been before, he demanded, “Why did you not ask me of Fafnir when I returned? Is that not why you sent me to Regin in the first place? I cannot believe now that your mind has not been on the hoard all this while.”
Giuki’s answer was slow in coming. “I’ve had much on my mind, and I did not ask you because… I could not. I expected to be disappointed. I expected you would have failed to find anything.”

“Oh, I found something.”

“How? How did you find him?”

Here Gunnar hesitated. He did not want to tell his father what had happened. He could not tell him that Sigurd, too, knew of Fafnir and the hoard. He could not tell him of Regin’s rescue. Those things he would not admit. He had his father on the defense, and he would not surrender that advantage.

He said only, “It wasn’t difficult. He was in Hreidmar’s city, as you had guessed. I think he’s been there since the city was destroyed. I think he’s been lurking in that hall for many hundreds of years, growing fatter and more evil all the while.”

Sitting limp on the wooden chest like a child’s doll, Giuki’s shoulders drooped and his eyes, though turned to Gunnar, stared beyond him. Gunnar could not tell whether it was disappointment or a stupid, numb hope in his face. Before his father could recover to challenge him again, Gunnar seized his opportunity to press harder, to expose his father’s foolishness and the injustice of his expectations.

“You ask an impossible thing, one that would require inhuman mettle and inhuman prowess, something for the gods to do. How do you expect me to do this?”

When Giuki did not move, did not respond, Gunnar tore through the bars of light and shadow that marked the floor between them. He grabbed the front of his father’s tunic. “Answer me!”
Giuki, shaken loose from his thoughts, rose abruptly, forcing Gunnar back several clumsy steps. “I will not answer you! You must answer yourself! You know, for I have told you, of the shame of the Giukings. You know, for I have told you, what we were and what we had. One may redeem the other. But it will not be done without strength or without sacrifice!”

“My sacrifice it seems, not yours!”

Giuki ignored this. “You listen to me. It’s time you start asking yourself whether you will be the one to recover the wealth and the pride of our people. How long are we to sit here on the Rhine, making our names on trade? Do you want to be the next merchant-king of Burgundy? Is that your great ambition for yourself?”

“You say this to me, you, who never attempted to retake the hoard yourself, who can’t even find the courage to take our people to war against an old enemy who disrespects us and makes us look weak? You say this?”

For a moment, a look of pain and shame came into Giuki’s eyes, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come. “What will this war accomplish compared to recovering the hoard?” He waved his hand as though brushing away a fly. “It is nothing.”

“Is that how you will justify your cowardice?”

Giuki struck Gunnar a blow across the cheek that sent him reeling backwards.

“You speak to me of cowardice when you refuse to even contemplate doing the one thing that you know will restore us!”

Gunnar spoke through teeth gritted with pain and anger, “Can you not make a connection between one thought and another? This argument began with you chastising
me for riding with the patrol. You expect, I suppose, that I should stand before Fafnir like a child, with no battle-experience.”

Giuki said nothing at first. His eyes darted back and forth across Gunnar’s face, and a sudden resolve came into them. “So it’s battle-experience you want, is it?”

Gunnar felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“Well, do you? Or is it simply talk? Perhaps I should be having this conversation with your foster-brother? Do you think I cannot see that he’s the one with true mettle? How many men has he killed now? How many have you?”

Gunnar would not answer.

“You will soon get your experience, which you claim to want. There will be years of war here. It cannot be avoided now. Endangering yourself today, you have seen to that. Fafnir will have to wait.” A look of surprised satisfaction, of sudden insight, came into Giuki’s face. “Perhaps, by then, you will be battle-hardened. Perhaps your spirit will be strengthened as well as your arm. Perhaps, by then, you will be ready.”

Gunnar shook his head in hopelessness and disbelief. “I cannot kill him. No matter how much battle-experience I have. It is impossible. I cannot do it.”

Giuki closed his face, drawing a stillness over it. Only his eyes, burning green as sun-sparked emeralds, showed anything. “You will do it. You must.”

Gunnar’s own face drained of color, and his thin, copper brows drew together. He shouted at his father, giving him one word that contained all his desperation, all his frustration, all his fear: “Why?”

“That treasure belongs to us.”

“That’s not good enough!”
“That treasure is the one thing that can bring us honor. It is the one thing that can lift our shame.”

“No one even knows! Not even Hogni!”

“I know!”

“Who cares? So our ancestors were—”

“Don’t say it!” Giuki’s face was now as pale as Gunnar’s.

“What does it matter? Why do you even want the hoard? It was made by them! How does that restore our honor? How does that not just connect us to them?”

“No one need know of the connection; they need only see that we possess the greatest treasure hoard known in Midgard. That alone will ease the shame we feel.”

“Who feels shame? Why should we? We already have a wealthy kingdom. We are generations from the dwarves—they are no longer part of us!”

At the word, Giuki sprang towards him, the mass of his body moving with surprising speed. He grabbed Gunnar by the rim of his byrnie and drove him back several frantic paces to the wall. His eyes blazed. His lips were drawn back like a dog’s, and his skin was blotched and burning, as though a heat from within were seeping out.

“If you ever say that word again, I will rip out your tongue by the roots. The shame of that word will die on your lips.”

Gunnar, dragging for breath against the fist at his throat, stared with horror. Never had he seen such a look on his father’s face. When his father had told him of the history of the Giukings, he had done it with detachment, as though he felt nothing. When he had told Gunnar of his obligation to reclaim the treasure, he had done it with the solemnity of a king passing a duty to his heir; it had been an entrustment, and as such it had been
something Gunnar had both feared and prized. That had pushed him to discover Fafnir. Having discovered the dragon, he had felt betrayed by the impossibility of the task, but he had fought to convince himself that his father had not realized what he asked. Now, he did not know what to think. He felt confusion and despair; he felt he did not know his father at all.

At last Giuki let go of Gunnar’s byrnie. He stepped back shaking, spent, and drew a trembling hand over his eyes. “Leave me. I must speak to the thanes. I must arrange for the army.”

Gunnar, leaning against the wall, his breath rattling, stared at his father.

“Leave me!”

Gunnar pushed off the wall and strode for the door.
Chapter 15

The summoning of the army began the next day. Before the sun rose, messengers began to ride for the farms, through the streets and to the harbor, even to the nearby villages under Burgundy’s control, to deliver the orders of the king. Each household and farmstead owed the king one man of age fifteen to fifty.

Riding out with a troop and a wagon to collect the dead, Sigurd and Gunnar watched the messengers fly past them, their horses’ breath exploding from their nostrils like plumes of smoke. It was early morning, still cold and dim. The troop traveled the main road, walking at the wagon’s pace towards the forest where the fighting had begun. After the events of the day before, after the loss of their captain and their companions, after the narrow escape of two kings’ sons, the soldiers were cautious and hard-faced. They kept the boys surrounded, and their eyes were wary, looking for trouble.
Sigurd watched his friend from the corner of his eye. He had hardly spoken with Gunnar the night before. By the time Sigurd had left the physician’s quarters, his shoulder stitched and aching, Gunnar had closed the door to his chamber and would not answer. He had emerged for the evening meal, had sat beside Sigurd at the hearth, but he had spoken little.

While the mead and meat, bread and spring vegetables had been served, the king held counsel with his thanes. It would be war, he said, as soon as the army could be organized. The satisfaction of the men upon hearing this news was obvious, though it was paled by the death of Ortwin. None had expected to go to war without him. Now it would be Wulfric, Ortwin’s second in command, a cousin of Gunnar’s and a sister-son to the king, who would lead the army under Giuki. He was an excellent fighter with sword and spear, liked by the men, and experienced in river-combat, but he was young and had never been in a full-fledged war. It made many uncomfortable.

When the king had first made his declaration, Sigurd had looked to Gunnar, surprised, but Gunnar’s face had shown no reaction. Never had Sigurd seen him so deadened. He could not imagine what could have happened between Gunnar and his father to cause it. It was so counter to Gunnar’s usual vigor that even the men around him noticed and were discomfited. They did not even ask him how he had fared in the fight. Sigurd knew Gunnar had killed his first man, for Gunnar had said so as they had ridden for the city. Sigurd told the men of this, for it was not a feat to go unremarked. The men had pressed Gunnar then, but he described his kill with little enthusiasm. Discouraged, they turned to other matters. Even Sigurd and Hogni met this same stoniness, and they, too, had to turn from it.
Now, riding with the troop, Gunnar looked less deadened and more determined. Sigurd was reminded of Gunnar’s arrival at Regin’s two years ago. As Gunnar had dismounted Raudfaxi in Regin’s yard, Sigurd had noticed a conscious set to his mouth and a cold in his eyes that contrasted his seeming easiness. Though it had never left Gunnar entirely, that look had faded in the time at Regin’s. Now it claimed Gunnar’s face as though no other expression had ever been there. The cold that had shrunk to pinpricks in his eyes was seeping outwards again. Sigurd longed to speak with him privately, to know what had happened, but no opportunity presented itself, and Sigurd did make one. Besides, he was troubled by his own thoughts. Odin’s appearance had shaken him.

He knew he would be dead had Odin not come. He would be dead, as Ortwin was. He thought of something then that had meant little to him before. When Regin had argued with Fafnir, he had said that if Sigurd were in true danger, Odin would be there to save him. At the time, Sigurd had thought Regin’s words nothing more than manipulation. But perhaps they had been more. Was Regin that wise? If so, was it true that Odin protected him? If so, why? What did Odin want? There were many things Sigurd wished he could have asked Regin, wished he would have. Regin, he began to think, was indeed wiser and more cunning than he had realized. How could he have squandered so much of his fosterage on childish enjoyment, on games? How foolish he had been. He had lived with the Master of Masters and had asked so few questions. Of course, there could be no certainty that Regin would have answered those questions, but Sigurd had not even tried to seek his wisdom. When he had first come to his foster-father, he had been determined to learn from him; he had had purpose and focus. In truth, he had learned and he had listened. But his focus, his intentions, had blurred after Gunnar’s arrival. He could not
regret their friendship, could not wish Gunnar had never come, but it seemed now that all that time spent could have been spent more wisely.

* * *

Wulfric, leading the troop, dropped back to speak with Gunnar and Sigurd. Wulfric had been raised in his uncle’s court. His parents had died when he was young, and, because he was so much older than Gunnar, he treated his young cousin more like a nephew. As a sister-son and the oldest of Gunnar’s cousins, Wulfric stood after Hogni in line for the throne.

He shared the red coloring of the Giukings but little else. He was tall and lean and showed no interest in commerce or politics. He lived for the army; his talk was weapons and combat, and he had pushed as strongly as any for war. For years Ortwin had prepared him to fight. For years, like all the men, he had waited.

He drew alongside his cousin. Trying to shift Gunnar from his silence, he said, “Ortwin told me something the other day, something I think he would not have said to you, but something I think you should know. He said to me: ‘Wulfric, our days can be counted, for they are few. That cousin of yours will some day lead the army himself. We will be demoted.’ He said this, of course, with his usual sternness, but I could tell he meant it, and I know he was right. I tell you this because I want you to see the trust he had in you. That, I’m sure, was why he took you with him yesterday. Believe me: I knew him well.
“Don’t let your father discourage you. He’s good to his people; he has given them prosperity—that, I think, is why they call him ‘the Generous,’ for, with no wars, he has had little cause to be a great ring-giver to his warriors. But what I meant to say is this: I mean no disrespect to him, for he has been good to me, but I’ve seen he can be hard on his kin. More than that, he doesn’t always see what is needful. You mustn’t let his words trouble you. You did the right thing, riding with the patrol. I know you did because Ortwin agreed to it.”

Gunnar’s face had not changed as Wulfric spoke, and he gave no indication of having heard his cousin. Wulfric began to look uncertain, but Gunnar answered at last, “It’s the king’s responsibility to see what is needful. He serves no other purpose.”

Wulfric thought on that, his hands resting on his saddlebow and his head bobbing with the beat of his horse’s hooves. “True, perhaps. But no man holds all wisdom in his mind. Even Odin had to die before his knowledge was complete. Isn’t that so, Sigurd?”

Sigurd nodded. “In the early days, Odin hanged himself from a branch of the world-tree. They say he traveled down to the roots of Yggdrasil, and there, at the bottom of the world, he found the last of his knowledge.” Sigurd’s eyes turned in on a memory. “The Volsungs say, or so King Hjalprek heard it, that Odin knew only through pain could wisdom be attained, and so for nine days and nine nights he swung there, dying. When at last his body failed, he traveled the paths of death. When he willed himself to life again, he brought with him death’s knowledge, which was the making of the runic symbols, and through these we may know past and future. At least, that is what the Volsungs say.”

Wulfric’s lean face was certain. “So it must be. Who could better know the mind of Odin than his own kin?”
Sigurd’s reply was brusque. “I think none could know the mind of Odin at all. I think none could know what’s behind his actions. He saves one, not another, allows death to come near, drives it away. Why? What does he want?”

The sudden intensity of Sigurd’s voice, the strain, shook even Gunnar from his thoughts. He looked up at Sigurd, and a question knit his brows.

Wulfric answered carefully, “I thought it was known what Odin wants: he wants warriors for his army. He wants the courageous dead to fill the halls of Valhalla, that they may fight for him at the ending of the world.”

“Do you think that’s all?” asked Sigurd desperately, as though Wulfric would have the answer.

Gunnar said, “Perhaps you can ask him some day. I’m sure he’ll have more time for you than for any other. I don’t expect to see him until I’m dead—what use would he have for me before then?—but you might. Always I have expected him to appear to you. He is your grandfather, after all. It may be a few generations back, but you are the only one living.”

Sigurd’s face twitched with guilt. He had never told Gunnar of Odin’s first visit to him. In the beginning, he had not known Gunnar and had not wanted to share it with him; later, the memory had settled too deep, grown too private.

Gunnar saw that something was hidden, and his breath caught as Sigurd avoided his eyes.

Sigurd, looking hard at his horse’s mane, asked, “You think he cares so much for his kin?”
Gunnar’s mouth jerked with a frown. “Of course. He gave the sword Gram to your father, didn’t he?”

As Sigurd tilted his head in acknowledgment, Wulfric broke in, “That is said to be the greatest weapon any mortal has possessed. No one knows what became of it. How I would love to see that sword! I’ve heard that its metal is none known to man and that it can blaze as bright as the sun. I’ve heard it can wail like the wind and has been known to hum with the sound of metal shaking from a slap against an anvil, though it be held still in the air. A skald who came once to Giuki’s court said soldiers have described it as being as eerie as old woman staring into the runes to see the future.”

Wulfric’s face had grown rapturous. When he fell silent, no one said anything for a time, then Wulfric laughed at himself. “Listen to me, describing Gram to Sigurd! I should be asking him to speak of the sword himself. Well? What do you say? Am I as overblown as a cheap harp-scratcher?”

Sigurd answered stiffly, “I’ve never seen it. I was raised in Denmark by King Hjalprek. The sword was broken when Lygni took my father’s land.”

Wulfric shifted in his saddle and stumbled through a vague affirmation that Sigurd would prove himself worthy of such a sword and that Odin would, perhaps, grant him one. When neither Sigurd nor Gunnar responded, Wulfric excused himself and returned to the front of the troop.

Gunnar was glad to see him go. He knew Sigurd well enough not to press him in front of Wulfric, and he had some questions. When his cousin had settled into his position well ahead of them, he looked hard at Sigurd. Keeping his voice low so the men around them would not hear, he said, “You have seen him.”
“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry, Gunnar.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just…it seemed something private, I guess.”

Gunnar looked hurt.

“I’m sorry,” said Sigurd again, offering nothing more.

“Tell me.”

“Later. Another time.”

Gunnar sighed in frustration; he knew what that meant. “Why can’t you just tell me? What is there to be secretive about?”

“I could ask you the same thing, couldn’t I? What happened last night? It was all so sudden. What did your father say to you?”

“Don’t change the subject,” said Gunnar stiffly.

“Fine. I’ll tell you about Odin if you’ll tell me what your father said.”

“I cannot.”

“Was he angry with you?”

“Yes.”

“For riding with the patrol?”

Gunnar hesitated. “Yes.”

“What else? What is it?”

“Forget it.”

Sigurd’s brows drew together, but he let it go.
With the wagon, it took some time to reach the place where the bodies lay. The bodies of the raiders were all gone. Luckily none of the patrollers had been mutilated beyond their death-wounds. The wagon drew in close, and the troop dismounted. When Gunnar made to hand his reins to the one of the men minding the horses, Wulfric placed a hand on his arm.

“You’re a king’s son. This is not for you to do. You needed only to guide us. Let the others handle this.”

Gunnar shook him off. “I’m not my father. I won’t leave the dirty task for someone else.”

A line wedged between Wulfric’s brows, but he inclined his head and left him.

Sigurd followed Gunnar in helping the men as they stacked the bodies into the wagon. It was a grim task. The bodies had cooled and begun to stiffen overnight. Eyes stared, and Sigurd once had to retrieve an arm several paces from its owner. He willed his stomach to stillness and hoped he did not look as queasy as Gunnar.

When the bodies were loaded, the wagon returned to the road. It was too heavy and large to follow the path of the chase. The troop, dragging three litters, went to find the last bodies. Several times Sigurd and Gunnar became confused, disagreeing about which way they had fled. But the path was marked, in the low, wet places, by the hooves of so many horses, and at last they found all their companions.

When they reached Ortwin, his body pocked and ruined by spear, arrow, and sword, his neck almost severed, everyone fell silent. They laid their captain into the litter
with care. Wulfric found his sword in the trampled grass, cleaned it, and set it into Ortwin’s stiff and blood-crusted hands. They drew the litters to the road where the wagon waited, loaded the last bodies, and began the long walk back to the city.

In the time they had been gone, tents had sprung up like summer corn in the fields outside the city walls. A few men walked among them, armed and grim.

* * *

That night, after the bodies had been prepared and burned, there was feasting in the king’s hall. The thanes and soldiers drank in remembrance of the dead and told stories of them. Somberness disappeared from the men’s faces, and excitement built in the hall as they praised the dead and spoke of the glory of Valhalla.

Giuki, leaning back in his gold-painted chair with a horn of mead, looked satisfied. He drank to the dead with his thanes and showed his readiness for war. He spoke of the dishonor of the Hunalanders, who attacked from the trees, hiding themselves like cowards. He spoke of the might of Burgundy, of the gathering army, of the greatness of the kingdom. He called on his skald to sing of war and glory, and the men were driven to a frenzy of expectation. Giuki looked at that moment every bit a king of war.

Only Grimhild, who had shared his bed for fifteen winters and borne him three children, who had suffered through the early days of their marriage as Giuki scowled and stalked the hall for reasons she did not understand, could see the panic in his eyes. She served the wine, struggling for grace against the weariness that weighted her hands, and remembered the long sleeplessness of the night before. After her husband and son had
argued, Giuki had held counsel with his thanes and celebrated the coming war with them. But after the men had gone to their pallets, after her son had withdrawn into his chamber in silence, Giuki had lain awake beside her. He would not say why Gunnar looked so drawn. She knew that his anger about Gunnar riding with the patrol did not explain it, but Giuki would speak. She was not surprised he did not confide in her. He never had. She had been chosen for her beauty and her discretion, for her mildness. She had never pressed him. But she had sensed, lying there last night beside his huge, trembling form, that he felt ruin around him.

He had been this way when she first came to Burgundy. She had been so unhappy then. She had not understood his anger, and she had felt herself at fault for it. But then she had learned of the wife she followed. Wulfric had told her. He had been young then and had not understood that he spoke of something forbidden. Now, she saw in her husband the same fury and desperation she had seen then. He had learned well how to cover it, and he showed those around him nothing but the face of a king. But Grimhild knew better, though she pretended otherwise. She was mild, but she was not stupid. Those early years had taught her to see.

She slipped in her weariness. Though she caught herself on the edge of a table before she fell, some wine leapt over the lip of the flagon and spilled into the rushes at her feet. She thought no one noticed; everyone was caught up in the conversation and the music, but then she saw Gunnar rise from his chair. He came to her and took the flagon from her hands.

“I will pour. Please sit.”
She wanted to lay her hands on his face. He was such a good boy. Few sons would take time for their mothers as he did. He had sat with her some mornings while she wove, telling her of Regin’s house and his time there, answering her questions and her need for him. Always he had been a shelter for her. His birth was what had saved her from Giuki’s anger. All through her pregnancy, Giuki had fretted. He had kneaded her belly, stared at its naked mound. He had looked for defects and accused her of growing a malformed babe. How she had cried then. She had been very young. But when Gunnar crowned and showed his perfect face, Giuki had fallen into a chair like a dropped garment. Giuki, she thought, had almost begun to love her then. And so Gunnar had been very precious. Each of her children had been, for Giuki had brooded and threatened through each pregnancy. He had seemed to hate her until each child was born. Then he would show again that small affection she wanted so much. Her children could not have meant more to her. Gunnar, though, had been her first, the most important.

She squeezed his hand; she could not help herself. “No. You must sit with the men. You must show yourself to them, as your father does.”

Gunnar frowned, and his nostrils flared. “I will pour.”

“Please, Gunnar. No. Please sit among the men. You are part of their company and you must be with them.”

“Very well. But give the flagon to another and sit with us. Or retire to your chamber. You’re exhausted.”

When he turned from her and took his seat beside his friend, he dutifully joined the conversation, but he would not smile. His friend, the Volsung boy, did not smile either, but then she never had seen him do so. He frightened her a little. She didn’t know
why. One thing was certain: her son loved him as he loved his own brother, and what
Gunnar loved he loved without restraint. He had always been that way. Whatever passed
into his heart he never let go.
Chapter 16

It took some time for all those summoned from the countryside to be gathered. Many, though, arrived in the first two days; nearly eight hundred men came walking through the fields and down the roads to swell the camp outside the city walls. It was a sight that had not been seen in Burgundy for twenty years. Gunnar, Hogni, and Sigurd spent an afternoon standing with the guards atop the watching platform over the city gates.

Sigurd leaned against the wooden railing and squinted into the distance. A few indistinct figures were moving down the main road to the city. “How many more will come?”

Gunnar’s answer was certain: “Four, perhaps five, hundred.”

“And how many beyond that is Burgundy able to muster?”

“At least twice as many.”
Hogni smiled proudly and shook a lock of auburn hair from his forehead. “Burgundy is a large kingdom.”

“Indeed,” agreed Sigurd. “I had not thought it so big. There seem to be a great number coming from the north. We didn’t see so many riding in last month. Where are all these northern villages?”

“Some villages that owe allegiance to Burgundy are in the south, but most of them, yes, are to the north,” said Hogni. “We missed them riding in last month because the guard wanted to stay out of sight. They weren’t that far from us. From where we rode, they were only a few miles to the west—don’t you think, Gunnar?—closer to the river.”

Sigurd squinted into the distance again, not now looking at anything. “What reason do the northern men have to fight for Burgundy? What does Burgundy do for them?”

Hogni shrugged, and he spit over the railing, watching it fall to the wood-paved road twenty feet below. “They come to Burgundy to trade and sell their goods. Also, they’re under Burgundy’s protection.”

Sigurd frowned. “What protection can Burgundy offer? There are only sixty or seventy warriors ready at any time. What use is that to a village fifteen miles away?”

Gunnar broke in, “You certainly ask a lot of questions that suggest Burgundy is not worth fighting for.”

Sigurd’s cheeks, still winter-pale, stained with red. He and Gunnar had had similar conversations before, and Gunnar always brought the discussion to this point. “I didn’t mean—” began Sigurd impatiently, but then he saw the skin around Gunnar’s eyes
wrinkling with a suppressed smile. Sigurd gritted his teeth; he did not like to be teased.

“Are you going to answer my question?”

“Yes. But let me ask you one of my own. Which way does the Rhine flow?”

“From the south to the north, towards the sea.”

“And from where is attack likely to come?”

“From the river, of course.”

“And from which direction?”

“South, with the current.”

Gunnar looked satisfied. “Obviously.”

“And what is that supposed to mean, ‘obviously’?”

Gunnar sighed, as though it strained his patience to explain. “Anyone south of
Burgundy going a-viking in the raiding seasons must float right by our port, which is well
protected by the ring of sharp, close-set pikes that stretches through the water from one
end of the harbor to the other. There is an opening wide enough for only one ship to pass
into our harbor at a time.

“You may think we have but seventy ready warriors, but they are fierce on the
river. They know how to fight there. That, you have not yet seen. So. Any threat that
floats our way can be handled. Now to understand, you must understand one of
Burgundy’s other fine commodities: river passage. Any who would pass by unmolested
pays a fee to Burgundy. Any who would pass by is also let to know what is and is not
permitted within Burgundy’s lands. Any who would pass by is reminded that they will be
trekking back up the river in a few months as they return home. They are let to know that
Burgundy has a long memory and does not forget insolence. And so Burgundy’s villages are kept safe. River passage is a fine trade, very lucrative.”

Sigurd’s mouth twitched at the smug, satisfied look on Gunnar’s face. “I can see that it would be. There are many reasons Burgundy is known for its wealth.”

This comment, though lightly spoken, struck a nerve in Gunnar, as Sigurd had known it would. Gunnar turned to him angrily. “You think you’re so much better than everyone. You think none can compare to the mighty Volsungs, known for their battles. After all they’re the favored descendants of Odin, near to gods next to us simple mortal folk. And yet, whose kingdom is his own? And whose has been lost to an enemy? Who has been conquered?”

Sigurd’s face bleached as pale as old bone, and his hands clenched at his sides. “You talk too much, Gunnar. You always have, relying on words. You think they can strike as hard as sword-blows. But I can show you the truth.”

Sigurd jerked his sword from his scabbard and swung it over his head, where it hung like a snake’s head ready to strike. Gunnar took a step back. The guards, who had paid the boys little attention until now, turned sharply at the sound of the sword hissing from its scabbard.

“Stop!” commanded one. “What’re you doing?”

The other moved toward Sigurd, his hand raised as though to quiet an animal. “Don’t be a fool.”

The swirled light and dark pattern of the blade gleamed in the afternoon sun. Sigurd’s jaw was tight, and the muscles of his arms flexed and strained. “Is this how you will back your words, Gunnar? Standing behind men who protect you?”
“Stop it!” cried Hogni, his hands gripping the railing. “Sigurd! What are you doing?”

Sigurd spared Hogni a flick of his eyes, and the younger boy’s look of horror gave him pause. His sword dipped a little.

“Must you be so quick to anger?” demanded Gunnar. “How easily you forget we are friends!”

“You words were not words of friendship.”

“I’m sorry, all right? I shouldn’t have said that. I didn’t mean it.”

“You meant every word, though you would now hide behind your apology.”

Sigurd turned his sword and thrust it back into its scabbard. Striding to the edge of the platform, he ignored Gunnar’s angry, stricken face and Hogni’s confusion. He descended the ladder in a few long steps, leaping down the last five or six feet, and stalked off into the maze of Burgundy’s streets.

He had wandered through the city only once before; it did not interest him. He was soon lost, as he had intended to be. He passed by rows of merchants’ stalls, where the merchants sat desolately. Few came to buy their goods now; everyone was braced for war and holding fast to their money. Sigurd spared the merchants little thought. Many of them, seeing Sigurd’s fine clothes or recognizing him as Gunnar’s foster-brother, rose from their stools in hope as he approached. He refused to meet their eyes, and they soon sank back down.

When Sigurd had walked for some time, he began to think. Gunnar’s words still stung. They stung, he knew, because of the truth in them. When he had been very young, it had been easy to think of how he would avenge his father and take back the Volsung
lands. It had seemed so simple. Now, it was so complicated. He was far from the lands of his people. He had no kingdom, no men. His father’s wealth had been in Hjalprek’s keeping, but now Aelf had it, and he doubted it would come to him at all. Always he had imagined simply killing Lygni. He had imagined it would be that act that would gain him his father’s kingdom, for it was that act that mattered to him. Now he understood there was so much more to do. He would have to plan, organize, find men to fight with him. Without those men, he would never get to Lygni to kill him in the first place. And he had no men to call on. He had nothing. He might be a king’s son, might be a Volsung in name, but right now he was, in truth, only the friend of a king’s son in that king’s land. Gunnar was right, in his way: he had his own kingdom, and clearly there were men to fight for it.

As the day began to darken, Sigurd thought of going in to the hall, to eat and drink with the men of Burgundy, who still celebrated the coming war, but he felt distant from them, outside.

He wandered instead to the harbor. It was quiet, though some fishermen were still bringing in their boats and the day’s catch. Sigurd avoided them. He walked the harbor street, from which branched the paths to the docks, until he reached the edge of town. Here the palisades that stretched in a semi-circle through the water reached the bank and joined the wall that swept around the city. At one of the last docks, where there was no one nearby, he walked out. He sat at the end of the dock, hanging his feet over so the hard leather soles of his boots skimmed the water’s surface. The Rhine here was especially wide, the far bank lost in shadow as the sun sank behind the hills. Though it was not
obvious by sight in that sprawling body of water, the current was still fast with the spring melt. Only within the barrier of the palisades was it calm.

He sat there as the river grew dark and the fishermen disappeared into their houses. At last, the only people in sight were the guards who watched the river. They stood atop platforms much like the one over the city’s main gates, but they seemed not to notice Sigurd. Their eyes were on the river, watching the darkness and the distance for trouble.

The moon was rising when Sigurd began to sense something in the water. Some instinct chilled him, and the fine hairs rose along the back of his neck. He searched the water, but nothing disturbed its surface. He sat, strung tight as a bowstring, for some time before he heard it. It came from near the break in the palisades, the gap where the ships and the boats came and went. It was a woman, laughing, her voice like the sound of water.

He was reminded, in a deep, unconscious way, of the voice he had heard when he was pulled from the river before Hreidmar’s ruined city. Gooseflesh rose on his arms. A splash under the dock made him spring to his feet, drawing himself away from the water. His heart pounded and held him frozen for several frantic beats. At last he found the courage to drop to his knees. Slowly, he leaned over the edge of the dock. The water was dark and still, black with shadow and strong with the smell of algae-slick wood.

He heard the laugh again; this time it came from the middle of the calm, protected waters. His head snapped up. It was then that he saw what would haunt him for many years. Glimmering in the moonlight, as a pearl would, was a woman’s face. She was young, and very beautiful. She smiled when she saw him looking, and she arched in the
water. Her breasts, round and firm, broke the surface. A flash of pale belly followed, then she disappeared under the surface again. Moments later, more laughter, this time from several voices, came from somewhere down the river. They soon faded and were gone.

Still on his knees on the dock, Sigurd fought to steady himself. His breath came hard, and he felt a warm stirring in his lower belly and loins. His thighs felt weak. He rose, shaking. He clenched his jaw and willed his body to stillness. There was a strange desire in him, one he did not quite understand, one he did not want. He stood on the dock for some time, frustrated. He stared at the waters, looking for something more, but there was nothing.

* * *

He left the dock and the harbor, walking fast though the city’s streets. The hair still pricked at the back of his neck, and his body still felt tense and uncomfortable, almost foreign to him. When he reached the courtyard of the king’s hall, someone rose from the steps. Gudrun.

“I was waiting for you,” she said when Sigurd drew near.

“Why?”

“What did you say to my brother? He was very unhappy.”

“It’s none of your business, Gudrun.”

Her lips pursed. “It is my business.”

“How’s that? What, next will you advise your father on matters of law? Your brother’s affairs are far beyond your concern. You’re only a child.”
“I am not.” Gudrun straightened her back in indignation. She tugged at her dress and tabard, and the moonlight caught at the small mounds of her budding breasts. “My mother says I’ll get my blood soon, and then I’ll be a woman.”

Sigurd forced his eyes away from her. “You shouldn’t speak of such things. Such talk should be only among women.”

Gudrun neither lowered her eyes nor showed any embarrassment. “What did you say to my brother? He is my business, whether you like it or not. Perhaps you would understand that if you had any brothers of your own. You think you can take all his time. You think he cares for nothing but you. But he has more to think about.”

“I think he thinks of little but Burgundy.”

“How should he not? He will rule it someday.”

“Yes,” said Sigurd sourly. “That is true enough.”

“Now will you tell him you’re sorry?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“What makes you think you can speak to me this way? Your mother is not so forward. She is polite, and a lady. Perhaps you should learn something from her.”

“My mother says I should be bolder than she is.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Now. What of my brother? Are you his friend or not?” Gudrun stared expectantly, and she crossed her arms, looking uncannily like her father, except that she was small and fine, and beautiful.

“You know I am.”
“Yes. That’s why I know you’ll do the right thing. My brother would not want you to be unhappy, would he?”

Sigurd hesitated, but Gudrun’s earnest face pulled the truth from him. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Well, then. You’re his friend, and you wouldn’t want him to be unhappy either.” She smiled as though something were settled, as though all was forgiven and right again. She gripped Sigurd’s sleeve and pulled him up the stairs. “Come! There will still be bread and meat in the kitchens.”

“Where’s your maid?”

Gudrun’s smile turned mischievous. “Don’t tell.”

Sigurd smiled back. She was so pretty.

“You’re very handsome when you smile,” she told him. “You should do it more often. My mother says so, too. She says she’s never seen it before, but I have. It makes you look like one of the gods, like Frey maybe, or Balder.”

Sigurd flushed, his smile faltering.

“Oh, come now. Don’t look like that!” she laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

Sigurd stopped, and Gudrun stopped, too. He put his hand to her side. He squeezed, feeling the firmness of her young, trim waist, and his hand drifted up to brush the underside of her small breasts. She looked a little frightened, and Sigurd felt her heart pound under his hand, but she did not turn away. He leaned close and kissed her mouth. Her lips were so soft and smooth. She gasped a little, and Sigurd drew back quickly. Gudrun looked for a moment like a startled doe, then slowly she raised her hand. Her fingers brushed Sigurd’s throat. He swallowed hard. She dropped her hand and looked
down, suddenly shy. They turned, awkward now, to the hall doors and walked in together.
Chapter 17

Sigurd did not apologize to Gunnar, nor did Gunnar say anything more of the matter to him, and so it lay heavily between them. Because the following days were hectic, it was easy for them to avoid one another. None of the men, caught up in the preparations for war, seemed to notice. Grimhild once asked Gunnar what troubled him, but he was brusque with her, and she did not ask again. Hogni and Gudrun also saw there was a problem still, and they discussed it in low voices. Hogni said nothing to his brother or to Sigurd, only watched them with a frustrated expression. He would not challenge Gunnar, and Sigurd daunted him. Gudrun confronted Gunnar one morning when she caught him by himself on the way to the privy, but he spoke so harshly that she was hurt by it, and so she ignored him. At Sigurd, she cast shy looks. Whenever he noticed her attention, a flush would bloom across her pale cheeks. Sigurd, less shy, would watch her until she left the room, flustered.
Nothing even began to be resolved between the boys until Gunnar, hating the argument, weary of it, finally sought an end.

On the evening before Giuki’s army would march, Gunnar saw Sigurd walk into the stables. He intended to follow, but he waited for some time, stalling. He did not really want to speak with Sigurd. He may have insulted Sigurd, but Sigurd had insulted him also and Sigurd had broken trust with his raised sword. The thought that it should be Sigurd who apologized kept Gunnar lurking under the eave of the smithy until it grew dark. Sigurd, though, would never speak first; Gunnar knew that. To be reconciled would never mean more to Sigurd than his own stubborn pride.

When Gunnar finally grew bored and resolved, he entered the stable with a stiff, deliberate stride. Within, he passed grooms and stable boys who were checking buckles and hooves, counting sacks of grain, and loading the supply wagons. The horse-master, hurrying down the aisle between the rows of stalls with a pot of salve in his hands, nearly plowed straight into Gunnar.

“Please, sir,” muttered the horse-master, “forgive an old man’s clumsiness. I was walking blind.”

“Be at ease. You have my thanks—my father’s thanks, I mean—for your work. The horses will be ready?”

“They will, sir. All the thanes’ mounts, all the wagon-horses, your own Raudfaxi.”

“Excellent.”

The horse-master’s face betrayed some impatience, but he asked politely, “Can I help you with something, sir?”
“Oh, no,” said Gunnar. “You’re quite busy. I only came to see my horse. Please. Don’t let me keep you.”

“Thank you, sir.” The horse-master inclined his head and hurried off.

Gunnar stopped at Raudfaxi’s stall. The chestnut stallion turned from his hay at the sound of Gunnar’s voice. He came to the gate with a soft whicker and nuzzled the front of Gunnar’s tunic. Gunnar rubbed his knuckles against the stallion’s forehead.

“I have nothing for you. No, not even a handful of grass. But I need something from you. You must be quiet and calm tomorrow. You must not let anyone see me unnerved.”

Raudfaxi, seeing Gunnar had nothing to offer, turned away from his whispered pleas to nose through his hay again. Gunnar left him. It was silly, childish, speaking to a horse. What did he expect but to be passed over for hay? He walked the aisle, peering into the dim stalls, looking for Sigurd. It was not easy to see with so little light. The sconces were few and set high, for the fear of a stable fire was great. He reached the end of the stable, where the last of the winter’s hay was growing musty. Sigurd had come in. He had to be here somewhere. Sigurd might even have seen him. That thought annoyed Gunnar, but he wasn’t going to leave until things were fixed. Tomorrow they would enter the Dark Forest to seek out the Hunalanders. The fighting might be ugly, for the Hunalanders were fierce fighters. Many would die, both of Hunaland and of Burgundy. He or Sigurd might be among them. Gunnar could not let a petty argument stand between them, not right now.

He found Sigurd at last, nearly invisible in a shadowy stall. How Sigurd could see in that darkness he did not know. Gunnar took a fat tallow candle from its sconce and
leaned over the stall gate. The horse was a huge black mare with a heavy, round rump.
She had an arched neck, nearly as thick as a stallion’s, and a long, wavy mane. Sigurd
was bent over one of her hooves, brushing aside the long hairs of the fetlock to inspect
the heel with his fingers.

“Where did she come from?” asked Gunnar in surprise. “I’ve never seen this
horse. My father has nothing of the like.”

Sigurd jerked a little at the sound of Gunnar’s voice, but he did not look up. “She
came from Denmark.”

“What? How?”

Sigurd lowered the hoof and straightened to face Gunnar. “My mother sent her.
Officially, Aelf sent her, but I know my mother pushed him. Her letter said as much, and
Aelf would never send anything to me. You didn’t see the messengers?”

“Your mother sent her here? How did she know you weren’t still at Regin’s?”
Gunnar shook his head, disbelieving. “There’s no way news could travel that fast.”

“Her letter didn’t explain. She only said that this horse—her name is Nott—
comes from the island kingdom of her brother, Gripir, my uncle. Gripir is a great
horseman, and he raises many of the finest in the north. My mother only said that she had
heard of Gladung’s death and that she knew I would be wanting a horse for Burgundy’s
war.” At Gunnar’s look of lingering disbelief, Sigurd shrugged and added, “Perhaps the
runes told her. Maybe Odin did.”

Gunnar felt a chill sweep his spine. “She’s beautiful. I’ve heard of the great black
horses of the north, but I’d never seen one. Do you think—do you really think that Odin
told your mother? Would he?”
Sigurd shrugged again. “Maybe.”

“Odin has come to you before…that is remarkable enough. But that he would go to your mother on your behalf…” Gunnar shuddered, and the candle flame wavered above his hand, sending the light flickering across his face. “It’s almost too much to think of.”

“I’m all that’s left of the Volsungs. He has no other mortal kin.”

Gunnar frowned acknowledgment.

Sigurd’s brows drew together, as though he were squinting to see something.

“Why does Odin trouble you so much?”

“He doesn’t trouble me,” said Gunnar indignantly.

“He does.”

“You’re mistaken. I honor Odin, as he deserves. He is the Allfather, the maker of man. What can men do but respect him?”

“You sound like an altar-keeper.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Sigurd stroked the horse’s black neck, denying Gunnar an answer.

“Well,” said Gunnar briskly. “I only came to make sure you had a suitable horse for tomorrow. Obviously you do. You have a good saddle now?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Well. You seem to have what you need. Sigurd?”

“Yes?”

“Nothing,” said Gunnar roughly, his chin lifting. “Never mind. Sleep well. We ride out early.”
As Gunnar left the stable, his chin fell. His shoulders slouched. He had wanted repair things with Sigurd, had intended to. What had stopped him? Sigurd’s coldness? He had expected that, had been prepared for it. Was it the horse? The talk of Odin? Whatever Sigurd cared to say, Odin did not trouble him. Still. To think of Sigurd, in a vague and detached sort of way, as a descendant of Odin, that was one thing. But to imagine Odin, the Allfather, the god of gods, coming to Sigurd, speaking with him like a father or grandfather…that was quite another.

There was something more, though, Gunnar knew. He did not like to admit it, but the truth was, at Regin’s, even when they had arrived in Burgundy, he had always felt equal to Sigurd. Sigurd was a king’s son. So was he. Moreover, in Burgundy, it was so obvious that Sigurd had so little: no family to speak of, no kingdom, no wealth, and these things helped to dim Sigurd’s blinding lineage. Gunnar had actually felt grander than Sigurd, for a time. But Sigurd’s words of Odin, the unexpected appearance of the horse—they changed things. All of it made Gunnar feel diminished.

He went back to the hall, where the men were still drinking, gathered around the hearth and crowding the tables ringing away to the walls. The braziers were all blazing. The hall was filled with light but for the ceiling, which was lost in a darkness that hung high above the celebration. Yet below this dark barrier, all the tapestries were warm with their colors, and the signs of feasting—music, platters of meat, half-filled cups and horns, dogs trotting from table to table for scraps—were apparent.

At the hearth, Giuki was growing lazy-eyed, slumping in his gold-painted chair as he raised his mead-horn to pledges of victory. Beside him, Hogni’s eyes were wide with excitement and envy. He would not ride with the army tomorrow, and he was not pleased
to be left behind. He had argued, two days ago, that he had twelve winters and that Sigurd
had been in his first battle before that. Giuki had reminded him that he was not a Volsung
and had warned him against such comparisons. It had irritated Gunnar to hear this. Even
now, as he sat beside his brother and remembered that conversation, he thought how
unjust it was, how chafing, that everything should come down to a comparison with
Sigurd.

Gunnar forced himself to laugh with the men around him. They clapped him on
the shoulder and congratulated him on the coming of his first battle. A few of the king’s
thanes asked him where Sigurd was. He should be among them, they said, before the
march. Gunnar responded easily enough, telling of Sigurd’s horse. Sigurd, he explained
with a slight sneer, had a great attachment to such animals. They already knew of the
horse. The merchant band that had brought it had spent the morning in the city. Gunnar’s
face stiffened when they told him. Everyone, it seemed, had known of the horse but he.
Everyone, it seemed, took an interest in Sigurd’s affairs.

* * *

Before the dew rose on the tender spring grass, the army was assembled. Giuki sat
his heavy stallion before his men. He had summoned over thirteen hundred, but today he
would take only a quarter of them into the forest. A small force, he had decided, should
be able to crush whatever scattered bands Atli had there. To move the whole army would
cost too much be so complicated. Besides, he was leaving the better part of the army to
do something more important: to protect the river and the harbor and the city. If they
failed to kill Atli’s raiders, that was one thing. If attack came from the river in their absence, if trade were compromised, that was quite another.

The men before him were farmers, blacksmiths, and craftsmen. They carried their own weapons: knives, spears and bows meant for hunting, axes made to split wood. They stood still and ready, yet their faces were tense, their posture uncertain. They had been organized according to their weapons, and the mass was supposed to be divided into troops, each commanded by one of his fighting-men. No such organization was apparent this morning.

Ranged on either side of him were his thanes. Wulfric was at his right hand, and the man looked almost as drawn as Giuki felt. Wulfric had fought many times on the river, and he had been in a few minor skirmishes on land, but he had no experience of true war. He was young, largely untried. It was a great misfortune that Ortwin was dead at such a time as this; it was an expensive loss. Giuki tried not to let these worries show on his face. His men must see nothing but certainty.

He nodded to Wulfric, who yelled to his commanders. Giuki turned his horse about, and the mass began its slow march to the forest. To his left, Gunnar rode his red stallion. Giuki could not quite tell what expression was on his son’s face: fear, excitement, perhaps both. It was difficult to see much beyond the silver helmet that hung low on Gunnar’s forehead and reached down to guard his nose and cheeks. The boy was well protected in his mail and byrnie, and he had a good sword at his side. Though Giuki was glad for that, he was still angry with Gunnar. He knew, in a dim corner of his mind, that it was unreasonable, unfair, but he couldn’t help it.
To make matters worse, he could not keep his eyes from Gunnar’s foster-brother—the Volsung. He was so obviously the finer. Everyone could see it. His great black horse walked with a grand, marching stride. The boy carried his falcon on his arm. Giuki had teased him about it earlier, asking whether he thought they were going on a hunting trip, but Sigurd had only shrugged and said the bird was a weary of his perch. In anyone else, carrying the falcon would have seemed like posturing, but the boy was so unaware of the looks and thoughts of those around him that it could not be so. It terms of armor, what Sigurd wore was no better than what Gunnar did, but it looked different on him. He did not seem encumbered by it. He sat straight and easy. More than that, his face was so calm. Even his eyes were quiet, as though he feared nothing, as though death were not even in his thoughts, as though his mind were somewhere else. If he had a son like Sigurd, he could hope for so much. He could expect anything.

Giuki led the army some distance south of the city to a river that flowed from the forest into the Rhine. Here he turned to the trees. Few knew of it, but there was an old road that ran through the forest, and it followed this river. Once, generations ago, there had been trade between the Giukings and the Budlings. Once, men had traveled between the kingdoms without fear. There was some hesitation at the edge of the forest, where the trees began to come together. The line of horses slowed, and the men behind them slowed, as though there might be a question of turning back. The only one who seemed not to notice was Sigurd, whose horse walked on with its powerful steps, drawing ahead of the others. The king and his thanes dug in their heels, hurrying after him.

Progress through the forest was slow. The road was overgrown and rubble-strewn. It was the best route for the supply wagons, but there was still a good deal of stopping to
move limbs and rocks from the path. In places there were hoof prints and droppings, but most of them were at least a few days old. When the scouts rode out to follow these tracks, they came back with nothing to report. One thing was certain: Atli had not sent wagons, at least not this far; the road would have been clear. That gave Giuki some hope. When they found the Hunalanders, they would surely outnumber them.

The road wound and swung and made sharp turns around jutting hills as it followed the lay of the land. The river, in places deep and slow, in others fast and angry, flanked it on one side. On the other side rose an undulating ridge that shifted from steep to sloping to steep again and was cluttered with deadwood and brambles.

Sigurd and Gunnar rode side by side most of the morning. Sigurd wished he had been friendlier to Gunnar the night before. He knew Gunnar had come to set things right. Sigurd wished he had let him. When Gunnar had first appeared at the stall door, he had meant to relent, but then…Gunnar had been so awed by the horse, so cowed by the thought of Odin. All of it had made Sigurd feel that he, too, had something. It had made him feel grander than Gunnar, which he usually did not. And so he had been cold. He had regretted it as soon as Gunnar had left. Now, he wished Gunnar would try again. Gunnar did not.

Scouts fanned out and returned every hour or so. They never had much of use to report: long-deserted campfires, dry droppings, a discarded sword hilt or a broken bridle. All that was certain was that Atli’s men were, or had been, in the forest near the road, but that had already been known, or at least assumed. By midday, however, the situation began to change. Some of the scouts had not reported back for several hours. By early afternoon, when those men still had not returned, the king and his thanes began to worry.
What the king did not know—though he feared it—was that his scouts were dead. Atli’s bands were scattered throughout miles and miles of forest. Giuki’s missing scouts had discovered some of these bands. They had been too far from the army to call out a warning, and they had been outnumbered.

Atli’s scattered bands were not without organization. They were part of a larger force, one that had divided and spread for the purpose of harassing Giuki’s border. They had divided also because they expected a response from the Burgundians. Dispersed as they were, few of their own number would be found by the Burgundians. If Giuki turned back to Burgundy, he would turn back disappointed. If he marched on Hunaland, the scattered bands could hurry back to rejoin the army before Giuki arrived for war. Despite this scattering, there was one large group of Hunalanders. Just over a hundred men were gathered together some miles ahead of the Burgundians.

After the scattered bands had encountered Giuki’s scouts and killed them, they crept close to the road to see what Giuki had brought. They were surprised. He had only a small force. The Burgundians did outnumber the scattered Hunalanders, but they were still fewer than expected. Messengers from each band were sent to warn Vingi, who commanded the Hunalanders from his position with the bulk of the force.

When the reports began to arrive, Vingi brooded over the maps he had been drawing over the past months, though he knew them by heart. He traced a finger along the dark line of the road to a place, some sixty miles east, where he could create a trap.
Though he was outnumbered, the land would be to his advantage. It would be risky, but success would be rewarded, and he was ambitious. He sent back a message.

* * *

Giuki’s army camped that night on the road. No fires were allowed, and the men were cautioned to speak in low voices.

Sigurd and Gunnar shared a tent with the king. Several of the king’s thanes ate a cold, simple meal with them. Gathered around the light of a few stinking tallow candles, the company was quiet and tense. Gunnar made some efforts at discussion, asking of the king’s plans. He wished he had asked his questions before the march began, but he had been angry still with his father and distracted by his argument with Sigurd. Stupid, he thought now, to have allowed such trivial matters divert him from what was more important. It was disturbing, here in the middle of the march, to realize there was not much of a plan at all. Stupid, he thought, to have trusted in his father.

“But,” he challenged, “how will we find these bands if we stay on the road?”

“We won’t stay on the road,” retorted Giuki. “When the scouts come back with some useful information, we’ll track down the bands and kill them.”

“And if we don’t find them?”

Wulfric poured the king more wine and spoke before Giuki could answer. “That is a possibility. But they will see us and report to Atli that Burgundy has risen. That may make him think twice about harassing our border.”
“Not if he’s as brutal as everyone says,” argued Sigurd. “Do you remember, Gunnar, when the envoy came to Regin from King Budli? He said that Budli anticipated a great destiny for Atli, a destiny of conquest. If there was truth behind those words, such a man as Atli will not be cowed by a few hundred Burgundians.”

“What should we do then, Volsung?” snapped Giuki. “You seem to think you’ve got an answer.”

“March on Hunaland with the whole Burgundian army, before Atli is ready for you.”

Giuki laughed sourly, “There wouldn’t be a Burgundian left alive. Until you two are older and have more wisdom, you must let the men decide these things. We may not find every Hunalander in these woods, but we will kill any we do find, and that will be enough.”

With these words, the king dismissed his thanes. Gunnar and Sigurd exchanged a look as the men left. Both knew how Regin would scorn this sloppy strategy. If Regin were with them, how different things might be. But Regin, most likely, was planting crops right now.

Like the rest of the Burgundians, the boys went early to their pallets. Like the rest of the Burgundians, they slept very little.

The next day passed much as the previous one had. A few more scouts disappeared, and nothing was seen of the Hunalanders. It was not until three days later, in the early afternoon, that Giuki’s army found what it had been looking for.

The road narrowed. Where it had been wide enough for ten or more to walk abreast, it began to squeeze the front of the army into a funnel where only four or five
could move shoulder to shoulder. Those on horseback rode in twos and threes. It would not be easy to get the supply wagons through, and ahead it looked worse. The river pressed close on one side, and it was narrowed here, the waters fast and turbulent, spinning among the rocks. The hills were steep on the other. Ahead the road turned around the sharp foot of a hill, and it was impossible to see what lay beyond. When they were still almost two hundred paces from the turning, Gunnar edged Raudfaxi closer to his father’s horse. Giuki’s mount flicked back his ears in irritation as Raudfaxi pressed between him and Wulfric’s horse.

“Father,” said Gunnar in a low voice, “send a scout down the road. I don’t trust that turn.”

A look of worry passed over Giuki’s face, but he hardened his mouth against it.

“Getting jumpy?”

“I agree with Gunnar,” said Wulfric.

“I never said I didn’t,” grumbled Giuki, and he sent out his command.

As the scout neared the turn, a band of men stepped out from behind the hill’s foot. At their head was a man dressed in fine armor, clearly the leader. The scout hauled at his horse’s mouth so abruptly that the animal nearly fell to its haunches. He wheeled the horse around and charged back to the army.

“Men!” he cried.

“I can see that,” said Giuki through gritted teeth.

“So!” yelled Atli’s commander. “This is the might of Burgundy!”
Giuki ordered the thanes who rode before him to make way. They pressed close to the hill on one side and the river on the other, and Giuki kicked his horse past them.

“Where’s your master?” he called to the Hunaland leader. “I don’t speak with dogs!”

“That’s high talk for a man commanding an ill-organized, frightened mob of peasants! Where are your warriors, King Giuki? Where are your men?”

“I could ask the same question! You have but a straggling line of pups behind you. What madness has driven you to challenge us?”

“Your eyes are not very good, king.”

“Oh? You expect me to believe you have more than fifty men at your back?”

“And do you have more than four hundred? My scouts counted fewer.”

“Your ‘scouts’! Do you mean the sly pack that slinks about in the forest, the cowardly fiends who murder my good farmers? Do you mean the misbegotten sons of swine who strike without warning, without cause, and without honor?”

“If you had fewer farmers and more warriors, your kingdom would not have been troubled! But, as it is…well, we all know you are a king of farmers and merchants. Your reputation for trade reaches far and wide. What a legacy you pass to your son! How proud you must be, King Giuki!”

“You speak loudly for a man whose name and deeds are a mystery! Do you always hide behind you mouth? Perhaps you must! Perhaps you have no name or deed to speak of!”

“I am Vgni! Son of Vengel! I am counselor and cousin to King Atli of the Budlungs. My deeds are well known—”

“By whom? The kitchen staff?”
“They are well known! I killed Dunkel, chieftain of the Wolkens! He thought to raid a line of supply wagons coming to the great King Budlung. He learned of death from my sword. I killed—”

“We’re not interested in your small exploits! Though I’m sure King Budlung was relieved that his grain arrived unharmed, do you see how you bore my men? If you were a harper in my hall you would be tossed out on your ear! Let us fight!”

“You are a rude and dishonorable man, Giuki! Would you interrupt the tradition of flyting? It is the custom to trade insults before a king and his men are killed in battle!”

“I think you seek to stall me, Vingi, son of Vengel! Why are you so anxious to stand here hurling words instead of spears? Or perhaps you are frightened? Enough! Prepare yourself! Men of Burgundy! Steady your shields! Ready your weapons! Let us avenge the deaths of the good folk of our land!”

“Archers!” cried Wulfric, and the men bearing bows struggled past the horses to fill the narrow width of road.

Few of the arrows struck flesh. The Hunalanders had withdrawn around the foot of the hill as soon as the archers had moved forward. They returned arrows of their own, and Giuki and the other mounted men hastily backed their horses, crowding and almost crushing the ranks behind them.

“Dismount!” commanded Giuki. “Get the horses out of the way!”

Sigurd tossed Skadi into the air. He had no time to watch the bird reach safety. He leaped down from Nott, pulling his spear free of its lashings, and sent her trotting towards the rearguard with the other horses. He pulled his shield around from where it hung at his back and loosened his sword and knife in their sheaths. At last, after so much waiting—
years of it—here was battle. He spared a glance for Gunnar, who was readying his own weapons. Gunnar’s face was tight and white, his body stiff in an aggressive posture.

Seeing that, a moment of worry stung Sigurd, but it was swept away, forgotten, as he ran beside Wulfric with the first wave of men.

They surged down the length of road to the turning, where the Hunalanders had emerged once more to meet the attack. Sigurd and a few others cast spears as they ran. Some of these found their mark. Many were blocked by shields or flew wide into the river or lodged in the jut of hill.

Men yelled as they threw themselves into the fight. There was the sound of splintering wood as axes broke through shields. There was the ring of metal as swords met. There were screams from those who fell underfoot.

Where the Hunalanders held the road, there was room for only a few to fight. Some of the Burgundians tried to ford the river to reach the Hunaland flank, but the current was strong and most were swept from their feet before they could strike a blow.

Sigurd struggled past the Burgundians around him. He could not reach the front. It was so crowded with men from both sides that it was impossible to do more than push. When men fell they were trampled underfoot or knocked out of the way into the water. More came to fill their places.

At last Sigurd was pressed to the front. In that confusion, the men’s blows were heavy but ill aimed. Sigurd ducked under swords and around spears and swept his blade under the guards of the Hunalanders. But the crowded conditions were impossible. It was a mess. Ridiculous. In his frustration, something boiled up from his stomach, flooding his
body with heat and energy. He grew frenzied, furiously cutting and ducking, weaving himself into the mass of Hunalanders.

Wedged among them, Sigurd became the target of many Hunaland blades. Each of his blows were met with four and five. When an axe swung down at him, Sigurd threw up his shield, catching the blow against the metal disk at the center. The shield split in two. Sigurd cried out at the pain that reverberated up his arm. He fell to the ground and was soon under the feet of many men. Kicked and stepped on, already forgotten he crawled to the edge of the road, searching desperately for a place to stand. When a space opened near the river’s edge, he struggled to his feet. But before he could raise his sword to fight, he was knocked into the river by the press of bodies.

Dragged under water by the weight of his weapons and armor, Sigurd struggled to keep his head up. The water was no more than four feet deep, but he could not stand in the current. He bounced against rocks and scraped the bottom when he was pushed under. He was stopped at last when he struck a boulder. The water sprayed over him and pinned him against the rock. Fingers white and straining to grip the slick rock, he crawled and pulled himself partway up the boulder, enough to catch his breath and get his bearings. He could see the supply wagons on the road and the mounted men around them. He had been swept to the rearguard of the Burgundians.

“Over here!” he shouted. “A rope! A rope!”

One of the men looked over, startled, and leaped down from his horse. Another searched frantically through the wagons, shouting to the others for a rope. When one was located, the men threw it to Sigurd. He caught it and wrapped it around his hand. Then he
pushed himself off the boulder and back into the current. He was swept downstream until
the rope swung him back towards the bank. The men hauled him from the water.

Expecting thanks and some joke about the rescue, the men were smiling when
Sigurd snapped at them: “Why do you sit here uselessly? Stand ready with the rope! You
may save others from the river that they may return to the fight. Make some use of
yourselves!”

“That’s fine thanks for pulling you from the water!”

Sigurd did not answer. He had no time to argue with these men. He had to get
back to the front. He began to push and shove past the men strung out along the road,
men waiting for their turn to fight. He would not wait.

* * *

Gunnar stood beside his father within a ring of thanes. They were pressed against
the hillside some distance from the fight.

“I thought we would’ve broken through by now,” said Giuki. “There must be
more of them than it seemed. Wulfric!”

Wulfric was pushing his way through the ring of men. He leaned against the
hillside, dragging for breath. Chain mail hung broken from his shoulder.

Giuki gripped his arm. “How many are they?”

“I can’t say for certain. I would guess a hundred. They have the advantage,
though. They’re defending a small pass, and they’re fierce.”

“Can we press through?”
“In time, I think. Though we’ll lose many men to do it.”

“Perhaps not,” said Gunnar, and both men looked at him in surprise. “While some hold the front, we could send a second group up the hill. They could climb over the rise that protects the Hunalanders and drop down on them.”

Giuki turned to Wulfric. “Would it work?”

“Maybe. But it would be risky. As soon as the Hunalanders see our men coming over the ridge, they’ll shoot them. Our force will be divided.”

“I don’t like it,” said Giuki. “If those men are killed, we may not have the numbers to press through the pass. It could mean defeat.”

Gunnar held his father’s eye. “It could also mean a swift victory.”

“It’s not worth the risk,” said Giuki, looking away. “We’ll continue as we are.”

Gunnar gritted his teeth. It chafed him to stand here and do nothing, especially when Sigurd had charged ahead with the men. It pained him to watch this messy, slow fight. To make matters worse, he had long since lost sight of Sigurd. When he asked Wulfric about Sigurd, Wulfric shook his head. He, too, had lost sight of him. Gunnar nodded as though it were all a matter of course, but when Wulfric laid a hand on his shoulder, he had to shrug it off to hold his composure.

The fight dragged on. After what seemed hours, Gunnar heard an exclamation of surprise from one of the thanes. The man called out Sigurd’s name. Gunnar’s heart raced and he strained to see through the ring of men and weapons. When the men moved aside, Sigurd pushed into the center. Soaking wet, he leaned over his knees to recover his breath.

Gunnar hurried to him. “Thank the gods! Are you all right?”
Sigurd nodded, still bent over. “I got knocked into the river. I was swept downstream and had to make my way up here past all the men. I’m going back to the front.”

“You are not!” barked Giuki. “If you hadn’t gotten away so fast the first time I would never have let you up there! This is no place for kings’ sons to fight. It’s little more than a brawl! You must wait for a better advantage.”

Sigurd straightened. “I will not wait.”

“You will do as I say!”

“I won’t,” said Sigurd calmly. “Kings’ sons and kings should fight wherever their men fight.”

“You insolent boy!”

“I’m going. But I won’t push to the front again. I’m going over the hill.”

“That’s what I said!” exclaimed Gunnar.

The corner of Sigurd’s mouth lifted. “Yes, it’s the only way around that mess. Regin would have seen it from the first.”

“I can stop you,” warned Giuki. “Don’t think I can’t.”

“But you won’t. How would you live down the shame of holding a Volsung back from a fight?” Sigurd looked around. “I need a shield.”

Giuki grunted his anger, but he swung his own shield down from his back and thrust it into Sigurd’s arms. “You stupid boy!”

“Thank you, sir.” Sigurd hefted the shield and pushed back through the ring of men.
Gunnar tightened his helmet strap with a yank. Taking a deep breath, he followed.

Giuki reached for his sleeve, but Gunnar shook him off. “Don’t stop me.”

Giuki gritted his teeth. He turned to his men. “Go with them!”

The ring of guards dissolved as they followed Sigurd and Gunnar, pressing past the men before them until they reached the hill that protected the Hunalanders. Giuki ordered more after them, and soon there were over thirty men at Sigurd and Gunnar’s backs.

The climb was not easy. The hill was steep and tall, and the earth crumbled beneath their feet. When they neared the top at last, they dropped to their bellies and crawled along the flat crest to peer down on the Hunalanders. As Wulfric had estimated, their numbers, diminished now, were about a hundred. Giuki’s force was still more than twice that, and the attack from above would cut the Hunaland numbers drastically.

As Sigurd readied his sword and the men around him hefted spears and nocked arrows to their bows, a falcon’s shrill cry drew Sigurd’s attention. It was Skadi, perched high in the trees above. Sigurd cautioned the men around him, and they lowered their weapons.

“What is it?” hissed Gunnar.

“I don’t know,” said Sigurd, feeling the hair prick along the back of his neck. “Something.”

Skadi screamed again, and Sigurd saw it. At the top of the hill, stretching along the ridge above Giuki’s army, was a line of men. With yells, with weapons high, they charged down the slope towards Giuki’s flank.
Chapter 18

Axes and swords primed to split helmets, the Hunalanders crashed into the Burgundians. Some of these charging men were met with spears swung hastily into their paths; more were met with nothing but surprise and half-raised shields.

The initial impact sent many Burgundians flying into the river, where they struggled, as Sigurd had, to fight the current. The road was soon chaos. Weapons were swung desperately on that narrow, precarious battleground. Both sides struck many of their own men. Giuki, having sent his guard after Gunnar and Sigurd, having given up his shield, was hard pressed. Swinging his heavy sword, he cleaved the heads and necks of Hunalanders. He was a big, broad-shouldered man with strength to match. It was a shame, many thought later, those who seen him fight, that Giuki cared so much for trade and commerce and so little for war. He could have been more, they said, if he had chosen.
Gunnar saw the first few blows his father dealt, but soon the confusion of helmets and shields and weapons made it impossible to locate him. It was with helpless shock that he had watched the surge of Hunalanders. After the first heartbeats of fear, there was nothing in him but a numb certainty that Burgundy could not win.

Beside Gunnar, Wulfric had risen to his feet, his face slack with horror and disbelief. Like Gunnar, like all the men crouched there on the hilltop, he was stupid with astonishment. But his numbness did not last long, for there was only one thing to do, only one purpose he could now serve. He swung his sword overhead and shouted to the men crouched around him, “To the king!”

As Wulfric tore down the hill, tripping and sliding in the loose, rocky soil, Gunnar, Sigurd, and the thirty men surged after him, screaming as loudly as the Hunalanders had done. For the space of a few blows, the advantage was theirs. They hurled themselves down on the backs of the Hunalanders. They hacked and stabbed, catching many unawares.

Gunnar cut the hamstrings of one man and slashed another across the back of the neck. In that desperate, hopeless moment when he knew he would fail, when he knew nothing mattered but this fight before him, his body was driven by instinct. He thought nothing, felt nothing but an ecstatic violence, wild and primal. Later, he would realize something important about that experience. He would realize that what he had felt then, how it had made him fight, with abandonment, was how Sigurd fought every time, in every battle. Later, it would help him to understand why Sigurd loved it so much, why he cared for little else. It was the most free and exhilarating moment of Gunnar’s life, and he would never again know anything like it.
The advantage of Wulfric’s band did not last for long. There were almost one hundred Hunalanders cutting into the Burgundians from the side, not to mention those still guarding the pass. The band fought hard to reach the king. Wulfric led them to where he had last seen Giuki, where the road was thickest with their enemies. The king was not easy to find, swallowed by that confusion. Cutting hard through the Hunalanders, Wulfric charged forward when he caught sight of Giuki’s golden helmet and bright tunic. With a final, furious blow, he cut the head from a Hunalander poised to bring down his axe on the fallen king.

Giuki’s sword arm hung useless, his chest heaved and shuddered, and a gash in his forehead spilled blood down his face. Wulfric helped him to his feet. The thanes cut a circle around the king, though they were hard pressed to maintain that border. There was a half-hearted effort to pull Gunnar and Sigurd within the circle, but the boys ignored these gestures, and there was no time for arguments.

Gunnar had little attention to spare for Sigurd, but he caught flashes of him. There was a moment he saw Sigurd, face caught between anger and rapture, slice a man through the groin and continue the movement, drawing his blade up and around to bring it across the man’s throat. Later, Gunnar would remember these flashes, and in his memory, the colors of them were red and gold.

Gunnar was strong for his age, but he was not quick, and he had little stamina. As the thanes fought to move their wounded king toward the rearguard and the horses there, Gunnar slowed. He was tired. Worse, some hope had stirred in him when they found his father, and he was distracted by it. It was not a good time to realize that he did not want to die. He struggled to maintain his position and his footing. He had several close calls,
some of them averted only by the blades of those around him. He could not maintain the power of his own blows, and more and more he almost failed to raise his shield in time. When a sword came down on his head, ringing against his helmet and knocking him to the ground, he was too weary and too dazed to fight back. As he fell, he had just sense enough to realize that the hands that grabbed him pulled him not to safety but away from it.

Sigurd saw Gunnar take the blow to the head, saw the Hunalanders begin to drag him. He did not think. He leaped after Gunnar’s captors, slicing at their backs. As they turned to fight, Sigurd gave them little chance to swing their weapons. He was fast and sure in his movements, seeming to see and anticipate everything. When there was only one remaining, gripping Gunnar’s byrnie and still hauling him, Sigurd flung his sword, sending it spinning end over end after the man. It caught him between the shoulder blades. Sigurd had no time to retrieve the sword, which Regin had forged, which Hjalprek had given him. The Hunalanders were closing in again. Sigurd grabbed Gunnar and dragged him through the confusion of fighting towards the river. He tumbled into the current, pulling Gunnar with him.

The cold water shocked Gunnar to his senses. He flailed in panic as the river swept him and Sigurd downstream.

“Don’t struggle!” shouted Sigurd. “Let the water carry you!”

They were soon swept past the Burgundian army and away from the fight. They grabbed at a bare, fallen tree that leaned over the water, but neither could get a firm grip on the algae-slick branches. When they reached a bend in the river, Sigurd grabbed at the protruding roots of a tree. He lunged for Gunnar, snagging him by his sword belt. He
tried to haul himself and Gunnar up, but he didn’t have the strength to fight Gunnar’s weight and the current.

“When I let go, swim for the eddy!” he cried.

Sigurd let go, and they stroked hard and clumsily to reach the calm behind the river’s bend. They waded to the bank and hauled themselves up with shaking arms. For several minutes, they lay there, feet still in the water, as they gasped for breath and waited for the world to still around them.

Sitting up, Gunnar drew his legs under himself. He unbuckled his helmet and held it in his lap, fingerling the dent that creased the top. Gingerly, he probed the crown of his head. Pain throbbed away from the touch. He tossed the helmet aside. Elbows dropping to his knees, he said, “I owe you my life.”

Sigurd dragged himself into a sitting position. “No. I’m sure they meant to ransom you. If they didn’t guess you were the king’s son, they would at least have seen you were a noble. Your armor speaks well enough of that.”

“Then, at the least, I owe you my pride. How I would have hated if my father had to buy me back from Atli. Can you imagine it?” With a look of disgust, Gunnar cast a stone into the river. It disappeared in the current without a ripple. “Thank you.”

Sigurd drew his feet from the water. “You would have done the same for me.”

“Yes, I would have,” agreed Gunnar readily, almost sharply. Then he looked hard at Sigurd, and there was something pained and earnest in his face. His fine, red brows pinched together, and his eyes were bright and severe beneath them. “If I had been capable, which I doubt. If I had had the courage, which I doubt.”
There was nothing Sigurd could say, no honest reassurance he could offer or
denial he could make. Gunnar, he sensed, was not looking for that. He was speaking his
own truth, and Sigurd could not help him with it.

Gunnar shook his head, staring out across the river. Then he looked over his
shoulder at Sigurd, and his expression edged toward curiosity and wonder. “You are truly
a god’s son, Sigurd. Sometimes, it is hard for me to know that. Sometimes it’s hard
that”—his eyes dropped to Sigurd’s knee—“that you will always be better than I am. You
will always be greater in everything. Things were different at Regin’s. Somehow, it
didn’t matter there. I guess what I’m trying to say is, I’m sorry for our argument.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I said things I shouldn’t have, and I thought
more, as you knew too well. You know I don’t like all the ways of Burgundy. I won’t lie:
they don’t seem right to me. But what I said…it was wrong, and Burgundy’s flaws are
not of your making. More importantly, I should never have drawn my sword. You were
right that I forget our friendship too easily. It is a shameful thing to do; there is no
defense for it. Besides,” he added bitterly, “you know I have no friends to spare. I never
used to want them, I never used to care about any of that, but…I guess I do.”

“Sigurd, we’ll always be friends. Even into death.”

Gunnar spoke as though this were simple truth, obvious, unquestionable. Sigurd
wanted to believe as easily, but he could not. “Do you really think so?”

Gunnar looked surprised. “How can you doubt it? You are my brother, through
Regin and by choice. What could ever come between us?”

“I don’t know.”
“I can imagine nothing. What should be more valued than friendship? Expect maybe your kin, and as I said, you are that anyway.”

“Perhaps, but what really matters to you more than Burgundy?” challenged Sigurd, testing Gunnar’s statement, wanting to make it true, or to destroy it. “And what should matter more to me than reclaiming my father’s kingdom?”

Gunnar was confused. “Why should that have any affect on our friendship at all?”

“It will part us soon enough, and our friendship will have no power to change anything, and I will have to leave it behind, as though it is nothing. Nothing else can matter to me. Nothing else can have any value.”

“I don’t see why that should be. How does one diminish the other?”

“One makes the other a distraction that cannot be afforded. Gunnar, you know I cannot succeed. I haven’t my father’s strength or even his sword. Odin broke that sword. He must not have meant for it to come to me. Look! I haven’t now even the sword that Regin forged, the one that Hjalprek gave me!”

“I can find you a sword in the treasury. I don’t—”

“How can I believe that Odin has faith in me when he does not give me the sword of my father? Do you not see what it means?”

“Regin said he could fix it. What if he can?”

“It wouldn’t be the same,” said Sigurd stubbornly.

“Many things break and must be repaired. If you leave it broken, you will have only yourself to blame. You said once that your mother has the shards—”

“I said I didn’t know if she had them.”
“But if she does, you must get them one day. You must make something new of that sword.”

Sigurd shook his head. “Even if I do have the sword, even if Regin could reforge it, it will not matter. You know I cannot win back the Volsung lands. It is impossible. I can only hope to die trying. That will be my fate, I think, nothing more. How, then, can I care for anything else, for anyone? All else must be abandoned.”

Reeling a little, confused by the connections Sigurd was making, Gunnar addressed the simplest point. “I don’t see why you should fail. I’ve never even thought that, and I’ve never heard you say it. What makes you say so now?”

“I’ve come to understand something, in my time here in Burgundy, something I think Regin tried to explain to me, and I couldn’t see it then. Now I do. The might of the warrior may be great, but alone he will fail. How can I avenge my father with no army? How can I get to Lygni at all when he’s surrounded by his army? The one man who owes me something is Aelf, and I expect no help from him. I have nothing to call on but my own skill. I may be capable of killing Lygni in combat, but it doesn’t matter if I can’t get to him to do it.”

Now Gunnar looked angry. “Are you trying to insult me? How can you doubt, for a moment, that I will be with you? How can you doubt that I will bring every man Burgundy can spare?”

Gooseflesh rose on Sigurd’s arms. “You would do that?”

“That should have been obvious to you without me saying it. What do you think friendship means to me? I’ve said many times that you are as my brother. Do you think I
don’t mean that? Do you think that just words? Either you have a strange view of friendship or a poor view of me.”

“Gunnar—”

“Make a pledge of blood-brotherhood with me.”

Sigurd drew back a little. “That is a binding pledge. It will make us truly brothers, as though we had been born of the same womb. It will place on us all the obligations of kin, and those are heavy, as I know too well.”

“Why do you hesitate? I don’t. Do you think I don’t feel that binding already? Do you not feel it?”

“It’s only that it’s a very strong vow, one that cannot be broken without the greatest shame.”

“Why should either of us break it? Come, pledge brotherhood with me. Or do you not want me for your brother?”

“I do. You must know that, Gunnar. It’s only…I never thought to have such a tie, to anyone living, I mean. It’s…”

“Frightening?” offered Gunnar, taking the word from Sigurd’s face, the word he would not say. Sigurd looked angry for a moment, and Gunnar laughed, his familiar smile, which had been long absent, returning. “You dive headfirst into the most dangerous of fights, yet you are near to panic at the prospect of having a brother. Oh, Sigurd, there is none like you. Will you pledge with me, or will you not?”

“I will pledge with you. Yes. Let us be brothers in blood.” Gunnar drew his knife from his belt, and Sigurd said in surprise, “Now?”

“Why not? What better time?”
“Perhaps when we return to Burgundy. What of your father? And the battle? We’ve already delayed too long.”

“Burgundy may be destroyed this day. My father may be dead. You must have seen we could not win. If there are survivors, they will return to Burgundy in defeat. It is not a good day for the kingdom. Let’s salvage something of it. Fate swept us down the river and dropped us here. In this place where we’ve come ashore together, let’s make something good that will last beyond death, as nothing else can. Then, afterwards, we can see what this day has made of Burgundy. I don’t yet want to know.”

Gunnar cut the customary neck-ring of turf from the ground. It was not easy, for the soil was loose by the river, the grass sparse. Where he had cut the crescent, he deepened the channel with his knife. Then he and Sigurd kneeled beside it, and together they lifted the neck-ring of turf. Sigurd was uncomfortable with this improvised ceremony; it was missing key elements. It should be done with a spear holding the turf overhead, and there should be witnesses.

Gunnar, still holding up the turf, which was quickly crumbling and dropping soil down his arms, gripped his knife between his knees. He dragged his sword-hand against the blade and squeezed his blood into the hole. The cut was deep and left him wincing. He passed the knife to Sigurd, who followed his example. He, too, cut deep, and the blood spilled into the crescent. He stirred everything together: the earth, his blood, Gunnar’s.

He said, “I call on the gods to witness. I here pledge blood-brotherhood to Gunnar, son of Giuki, king of Burgundy. He will henceforth be my brother, and I will
avenge what wrong is done to him and fight for him and be loyal to him until the end of my life. He will be as my mother’s son.”

Gunnar made the same pledge to Sigurd, then they lowered the neck-ring of turf and laid it over the crescent, sealing their blood and their pledges into the earth. They rose and clasped hands their bloodied hands together.

“Now you are my brother, Sigurd, and I hope you will never doubt it.”

“And you are my brother, Gunnar. May the gods protect our pledge.”

* * *

Though they had been carried some distance from the battle, they were not on the road long before they met the fleeing Burgundians. Once the king’s thanes had gotten him to the horses, a retreat had been ordered. Sigurd and Gunnar had to scramble off the road to let the first rush of panicked Burgundians pass. Behind them, the rest of the army—what remained of it—moved with better organization and more nerve. Several warriors rode at the front, and Gunnar called to one he recognized, asking of his father.

“He lives. The gods be thanked that you do, too. At least we’ve been spared something. Wulfrie!” the man called over his shoulder. “Gunnar and Sigurd are here!”

Wulfrie rode with what remained of the king’s guard. Their formation was defensive, their faces grim and tense. They rode surrounding a wagon. Gunnar did not need to be told that his father lay within. Behind the guard were another forty or fifty men protecting the retreat. When the guard drew closer, Gunnar, followed by Sigurd, walked resolutely to the wagon. Giuki lay on a straw pallet, stripped of his byrnie and mail, his
fleshy face tight with pain. The physician was crouched beside him, tearing the sleeve from his bloody sword-arm.

“Gunnar!” cried Giuki, struggling briefly against the physician as he tried to rise. His breath wheezed and rattled. “Thank the gods! Are you all right?”

“Yes, father, I’m all right,” said Gunnar, walking at the wagon’s pace with his hand on the edge.

“Odin be thanked.” Giuki relaxed visibly. “And Sigurd?”

“He’s here. He’s fine.”

“At least I have some consolation before the end.”

“Don’t speak that way. You will live.”

“For what?” rasped Giuki. “To see Atli destroy what’s left of us? To see him burn Burgundy? So many died today. We have no more than eighty men to bring back to Burgundy and nothing to show for our losses! I may die of shame, if not of these wounds.”

“Calm yourself, father. There are still many men to fight for Burgundy. You live; many of your good thanes live. We’re not destroyed, as might have happened.”

“Not yet,” said Giuki stubbornly, his voice like dry leaves. “But hear me, Gunnar, this will go on. It will go on until nothing remains of Burgundy but an empty hall and empty coffers.”

“You’re overtired. We will not speak of this now. Rest, and let the physician attend you.”

Giuki clearly wanted to argue, but as Gunnar drew away from the wagon, his eyes closed and he lay still, his face grey. Gunnar dropped back to speak with Wulfric.
Wulfric called to two men behind him, and they pressed forward astride Nott and Raudfaxi. The men leaped down and helped Sigurd and Gunnar to mount. The guard, having straggled to a clumsy halt, reformed.

“The Hunalanders are not in pursuit?” asked Gunnar, twisting in the saddle to look behind.

“Not yet,” said Wulfric. “Their own losses were great enough. But I don’t doubt they will harass us and try to destroy what remains of us all the way to Burgundy. I suspect they are reorganizing even now. But with the king wounded, we cannot move at more than this slow pace.”

Despite the fear hanging over the retreating Burgundians, the Hunalanders did not attack that day. But when the Burgundians camped that night, while the king was resting fitfully in his tent with Gunnar and Sigurd deep in exhausted sleep beside him, the men keeping watch cried out a warning as the Hunalanders leaped from the trees. Most of the men on watch, and many of those roused by their cry, were killed before the Hunalanders could be turned back.

The next day Giuki insisted on riding his horse, so that they might move more quickly. He spent the day hunched in the saddle, growing weaker and paler, his breath rattling through his chest. He would not take to the wagon, nor could the Burgundians afford for him to do so. Soon the wagons were abandoned altogether. Arrows came flying from the trees late in the day, and the Burgundian warriors rode out in fury. They caught and killed most of the Hunaland archers. There was no attack that night.

On the last day, when the Burgundians were within a few miles of the forest edge, the Hunalanders moved against them again, attacking with arrows and spears. When the
Burgundian warriors rode after them once more, they killed only one man, and lost three of their own. And so the Burgundian army reached the edge of the forest diminished and disheartened. There were now barely more than sixty men to ride home.

When they reached the camp outside the city, the rest of the army came to see their arrival. As those men watched a fraction of the force return, as they saw their king riding hunched and beaten, their faces grew stiff with shock and fear. That night saw the first deserters. The rest spoke in low voices around their fires long into the night. They spoke of the deserters, and their scorn was mixed with envy. They spoke, too, of the hopelessness of the war and the years of it that might follow.
Chapter 19

Years of war did follow. Those years, though, were not quite as hopeless for Burgundy as many expected, including Atli. Shortly after the Burgundians’ embarrassing defeat in the Dark Forest, he made a mistake, and it cost him. It cost him much of the faith of his own people, and it cost him the despair of Burgundy.

Atli led a force of four hundred men to break through the forest, some hundred miles south of Burgundy. Here, there was a ship-building city ruled by a king who had traded with the Giukings for many years. His was a small kingdom, but his carpenters and craftsmen made fine ships. It was these that Atli wanted.

The Hunalanders raided the city. They killed the king when he came out with his men to fight. When the king’s men saw what the Hunalanders were after, they turned their backs on the fight to disable the ships. They did not have time to disable all of them, but they did damage enough to hamper Atli’s plans.
By the time Atli’s men had control of the city, there were only six warships they could use. There were other crafts, barges and merchant ships, but these would be of little use in a fight. With only six ships, each would carry double the number of men it was meant to hold. The ships would ride low and move slowly. Atli could either take the six and risk this disadvantage, or he could turn back. He would not turn back. What would it matter, losing time on the river, losing maneuverability, when they sailed toward nothing more than feeble Burgundy? He was Atli, son of Budli of Hunaland. No one could defeat him. Nothing could force him from his fate. They called him The Grim, The Awful. He was unstoppable.

As they sailed north down the Rhine, Atli stood at the bow of the largest and finest ship. It was a calm night, moon-soaked, so unlike the grey and stormy day when his father had died. Yet, it made him shiver, even now, to remember that cold, to remember the tepid, wavering light of his father’s chamber, to remember the smell of sickness and death. It was these details that clung to his memory of Budli’s last hours. It was these senses he recalled when he thought of the vow his father had demanded of him: that he would expand the borders of Hunaland, and that he would begin with Burgundy. It had been an easy vow to make, kneeling there by the bed, trying not to breathe the bitter, acrid air. Budli had long been troubled by Burgundy’s prosperity and the fact that no one took it. The Giukings had no deserving of this wealth, he had always said; they were not noble enough. Atli knew that the great regret of his father’s life was that he had accepted peace with the Giukings twenty years ago, that he had kept it all that time. Atli, he had said as he lay dying, was not bound by that oath.
When Budli’s eyes were wide with death, Brynhild had come. She was Atli’s youngest sister, and she had been neither seen nor heard from in many years. Even as Atli was drawing the sheet over his father’s face, a whinny had sounded in the courtyard. Brynhild had come striding into the chamber in her silver byrnie. Atli remembered how warlike, how terrifying she had looked. She had worn a silver helm, and her long, pale braids had swung thick across her back. Though the light had been dim, her silver greaves had gleamed as though the sun shone full on them. Her mouth had been set in an unyielding line, and she had been colder and more beautiful than a mortal woman could ever be. Seeing her had shot a chill into his bones. No living man, he thought, had ever seen such a sight as Brynhild, for she was a Valkyrie, chosen by Odin when she had become a woman. As she had stood beside the bed, staring down with some contempt at their father’s covered form, she had said only, “Odin did not want him, for look how he has died. I’ve asked a favor to take him, and it will cost me. Don’t expect me to do the same again. Find you own way into Valhalla.”

And so Atli stood now in the bow of his ship, dark-eyed, consumed by the need for war, sailing north to Burgundy. The Burgundian river-guards, he knew, would see the ships coming, for Burgundy looked far down the Rhine. He wanted them to see him. The Burgundians would have no choice but to come out on the water. Once the ships were lashed together, once a fighting platform was created, the Hunalanders would slaughter every last Burgundian warrior. If Burgundy still resisted, he would set fire to the harbor and the town. Burgundy would be in his teeth.
Atli, though, did not count on a warning reaching Burgundy ahead of him. He did not expect the Burgundians to have more than a few minutes to prepare. He certainly did not expect them to lay a trap.

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The messenger arrived more than a day before Atli’s ships. He came on foot, in the dark, for he had ridden his last horse to death some miles back. When the guards brought him, clothes torn by branches and brambles, mud-splattered, his hair wind-tangled, into the hall, his eyes were wide with exhaustion and with a lingering fear.

It was Gunnar who received him. Giuki had been taken to his bed as soon as he had been helped down from his horse three weeks ago. The physician said he would live, but his arm would be lame for the rest of his life, and his lungs were weakened. But it was more than pain that kept Giuki in his bed. He was giving up, more certainly every day. It was not easy for the men. Anxiety and hopelessness had strung them tight since the moment, some days ago, that Giuki had first refused to speak of the war.

The messenger refused food or drink until he had spoken. Gunnar motioned him to a seat by the hearth. The man’s hands shook as he told of Atli’s raid and the pillaged ships. He could not look Gunnar in the eye as he described them pulling at the oars, coming north. Gunnar listened without comment, without the least expression, though everyone around him watched for his fear.

When the man had been fed and taken to a private chamber to rest, Gunnar spoke with his father’s thanes.
“It’s little surprise,” he said. “Atli was bound to seize the first opportunity.”

One of the thanes, shoulders hunched with hopelessness, said, “We must take this matter to the king.”

Gunnar’s answer was sharp. “The king is wounded and abed. He should be informed, but I think you will find him unhelpful.”

“Gunnar,” said Wulfric gently, “he’s right. The king must be consulted. What but this could draw him from his despondency? He will see that he’s needed, and he will rise. He must tell us what to do. He is still the king.”

Gunnar inclined his head to this, and he let Wulfric take the message. It would be better for Wulfric to see for himself that the king, even now, would not act. Gunnar had no doubt that such would be the case. He had come to understand his father better in these last months. His father might have fought well on the road when he had been pressed, but he was a coward at heart. He had no stomach for hardship and no courage to fight his own battles. Gunnar knew that glimpsing this coward would be hard on Wulfric, and it would be hard on the men when Wulfric reported it, however the captain might try to soften the truth for them. It was necessary. If the men were to turn to Gunnar, they must do it of their own will.

It was as Gunnar had thought, and the next day anxiety was thick in the hall. As Gunnar sat early with his father’s remaining warriors for the morning meal, he let them worry for a while. He ate his bread with calm, smearing it with rich butter. At last he said to them, “I’ve thought over this matter, and I have a plan.”

Gunnar ordered that ropes, leather aprons, straw, pitch, flat-planed timbers of twenty feet in length, and all the spare lumber that could be found be brought to the
training field. Initially, he was met with puzzled, doubtful looks as he explained to the men Regin’s design for a hurling device. These expressions transformed into excitement when they saw what the device could do.

First, he had them build the base. For each end of it, they fastened together two long wooden beams. The beams were set wide at the bottom and joined at the narrow top. When the pair was made, another beam was set atop the two triangles and fastened. This beam was about ten feet off the ground. Then Gunnar instructed the men in how to attach the ropes to the flat-planed timbers. At one end there were three ropes. At the other, a sling was made with two ropes and a piece of leather apron.

They set up the weapon, loading the sling with a stone. The flat-planed timber was propped against the high beam with the longer end, the sling end, on the ground and the three ropes from the other, shorter end laid out. Nine men were instructed to pull with all their strength and at the same time. When they did so, the flat-planed timber pivoted around the high beam. As the sling swung up in the air, one of the ropes holding the sling closed slipped from its pin. The sling opened, and the stone was hurled through the air. It smashed into the wall at the end of the yard, splintering the wood.

“Well,” said Gunnar, examining the damage to the wall, “it may not be strong enough to break a palisade, but when we’re slinging balls of flaming pitch-soaked straw, it won’t matter. Let’s built more.”

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Late in the day, the Burgundians rowed nine light, maneuverable warships up the Rhine. These pulled barges carrying the hurling devices they had built. When they reach a bend in the river, they anchored the ships in a line, securing a barge between each one. Here the river was somewhat narrowed, and the line of ships spanned nearly half of it. They waited.

Atli had stopped his six ships some distance up the river, waiting out the light. Though he wanted the Burgundians to come out on the river, he did not want them to have time to do more than jump in their ships. If he reached Burgundy as the day darkened, the Burgundians would be at their tables. At dusk, the river-guards would not be able to see as far, and the force that came out to meet him would be rushed, disorganized. The Burgundians, he thought, would be half in their cups. It was with great surprise, then, that he sailed his ships around a bend in the river that evening.

When Atli saw the line of Burgundian ships, he was no more than a hundred yards from it. It was too late to stop. He had to act fast. His ships were traveling three in front, three behind. He ordered them drawn together and lashed. These ships were not designed for impact, but the Burgundian line was thin, flimsy. Spread out like that, they would be easy to cut through. He could not see, in that dim light, what sat between the Burgundian ships.

Aboard one of the Burgundian ships, Gunnar grinned at Sigurd. He had hoped Atli would make this mistake, drawing his ships into one large target. As Atli came within range, Gunnar ordered the pitch balls lighted. As they flared, a hail of arrows came from the Hunalanders. The Burgundians on the ship decks sent back their own volley. Gunnar yelled for the men on the barges to pull.
Atli stood transfixed on the deck of his ship, watching in a kind of daze as the fire-balls arced over the water, reflecting against the Rhine’s dark surface. He recovered only in time to shout for his men to get down. As he flung himself onto the deck, the fire struck. Flames exploded as the balls splattered and rolled across the decks. Though many of the fire-balls fell short or wide into the river, what struck was enough. Flames spread from ship to ship.

Shouting over the screams of men and the roar of fire, Atli ordered the lashings cut. Two of the outside ships, his own included, were able to pull away from the others. The men rowed for shore, skirting the line of Burgundian ships, under a shower of arrows. Frantic in the burning ships, they dragged at their flaming oars. Before they reached the bank, they had to leap into the river or be burned to death. Behind them, the four other ships were also burning fast, already sinking.

Even as the four began to dip under the surface of the water, they moved with the current, still coming toward the Burgundian line. The Burgundians, already drawing anchor and cutting the lashings between the ships and barges, spun their smaller, more maneuverable crafts out of the way just in time as the Hulanders’ ship swept by them to sink.

The river was dotted with Hulanders swimming for shore. The Burgundians shot every arrow they had. Most of the men that they struck, weighted by their armor and their weapons, sank into the Rhine. Some drifted, lifeless, to Burgundy.

One more surprise waited for the Hulanders. The rest of the Burgundian army stood ready along the shore. Not many escaped. Those who did fled south, more disorganized and scattered than they had ever hoped to see the Burgundians.
Though the Burgundians hunted the fleeing Hunalanders over the next few days, they did not catch Atli, the one man they wanted.

They later learned that he had reached Hunaland unharmed. He did not, however, arrive in good grace. Embarrassed and furious, he planned revenge. He would not rest until Burgundy was destroyed, or so he proclaimed to every traveler, every merchant, and every messenger. But that day was not to be soon. Gunnar’s brilliant victory inspired Burgundy to greater hope and fiercer combat. The men of the kingdom, called from their fields and farms, dedicated themselves to the war, and slowly, man by man, Burgundy shaped its warriors.

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The victory on the Rhine not only inspired Burgundy, it earned Gunnar a reputation for cunning and strategy. In the years that followed, that reputation grew. Although Giuki recovered enough from his wounds to leave his chamber, he did not often do so. Gunnar, then, made decisions in his stead. It was Gunnar who sat with the men in the evenings, Gunnar who organized the army, Gunnar whom the men and the people of the city approached with their complaints and their thanks. He did not sit in the king’s chair, nor did he take up the arm-ring of kingship, but as the years passed and he grew to manhood, he did not need these marks to distinguish him.

Gunnar’s was not the only reputation that grew through these years. Sigurd, whose actions in the impossible battle in the Dark Forest did not go unremarked, added more and greater feats to his name. Grown to manhood, he was not as large as many of
the men, though he was tall and strong. What made him greater was that none were as fast, none as certain or daring, none as skilled. He moved like water, smooth, terrifying, and unstoppable. Over the years of battles with Hunaland, he perfected many tactics. He could kill the largest of men with a single thrust of his sword. He would leap and strike it into the muscle above the shoulder blade. Death was immediate. He was unbeatable not only with the sword, but also with spear, axe, or even with no weapon at all. More terrifying than his skill was the look of his face. In battle, his expression, it was said, grew unearthly, rapturous. They said there was an anger in him, but it was hidden, so subtle that you could not see it unless you were looking him full in the face. Few came so close and lived to speak of it. Any enemy at that range would be dead, and the Burgundians stayed out of his way.

By the time he was seventeen, few would face him even in the training yard; those who did could not—and did not—expect to win. When he had first been coming into his skill and strength, the men had been ashamed to be beaten by him; he had still seemed a boy to them. Over time that resentment diminished. He was so far beyond them that it was useless, ridiculous to resent his victories. As they came to love him, then, it was not because he was their companion, for he was never really that, but because he was like a god among them. He was the great Burgundian asset. He was the last of the Volsungs, and, distant, silent though he might be, he was theirs. No other kingdom could claim such a warrior.

Gunnar’s brother and sister also grew up during these years of war. If some said Hogni was dog-like in his devotion to his brother, at least none could doubt his loyalty. If he resented sitting at Gunnar’s left hand while Sigurd sat at Gunnar’s right, he did not
show it. He did not speak ill of his brother and did not suffer others to do so. When he spoke to the army or to the city for Gunnar, people listened as though Gunnar himself were speaking. Hogni, some said, was like an extension of his brother, or a shadow. Though there was some scorn in this judgment, still Hogni was respected. He had fought his first battle at fifteen and had shown courage. He studied combat with Sigurd, who took much time for him. For every man who said Hogni had no will of his own, another said he was a youth of promise and that time would make him a fine man.

Gudrun, unlike so many girls, never grew awkward or coarse in her looks as she became a young woman. She was fine and delicate and generally regarded as the most beautiful girl in Burgundy. She looked much like her mother, and as Grimhild aged, it was Gudrun who filled the eyes of Burgundy’s men. Her temper, though, was not so mild as her mother’s, and she was not so reserved with her thoughts. Though she did learn some decorum through these years, she was ever willful and outspoken. By the time she was fifteen, and Sigurd eighteen, her ambition to wed him was apparent to all. In temperament, then, many thought her more like her father, a similarity that was not often mentioned, for Giuki’s name was rarely spoken.

During these years, as Giuki himself became like a shameful thought, rarely brought into words, he grew greyer and more silent. While the men spoke around the hearth of upcoming battles, boasting of the feats they would accomplish or planning strategy with Gunnar, he would sometimes haunt the edges of the hall, his breath rattling, his arm hanging limp. In the early days, the men had tried to include him, asking him for his advice, asking him to come to the hearth. He would turn away and shuffle back to his chamber. Soon enough, no one spoke to him at all.
When Gunnar would go to him in his chamber, Giuki would often pretend not to see or hear him. The physicians said this was a ruse; the king had no ailment to explain his silence, and it was inconsistent besides, for sometimes he would speak to Gunnar. His silence, then, was deliberate, serving some purpose only Giuki himself could understand. None of Gunnar’s shouting, nor any shaking of his father’s shoulders, could rouse him against his will. But when Giuki did will it, sometimes when Gunnar would come quietly into the chamber, with no anger, with no news, sometimes Giuki would speak. This Gunnar dreaded most of all, for his father would speak only of one thing. He would speak only of the dragon.

More than he hated to hear of Fafnir, Gunnar hated to hear the sound of his father’s voice. It would rattle out suddenly from the dry lips, and it always chilled him, as though a corpse were speaking. When he would go to his father, he would try not to look at him, keeping him in the corner of his eye as he told of Burgundy’s battles, as he described how much fiercer and more warlike Burgundy was becoming. On such days, Giuki would hold his silence to himself as though it were something precious, something powerful.

But sometimes, green eyes staring sharp from the sagging lids, he would look at Gunnar with sudden lucidity, with disgust, and he would speak into Gunnar’s silence, into any uncertainty in Gunnar’s face.

One day, as Giuki sat in his chair by the window, his sword arm hanging lifeless, his voice came rattling at Gunnar: “Nothing you do is of any meaning. Only the hoard matters.”
Gunnar wished he would rest the arm in his lap. It always made him uneasy to see it so limp, the hand curling inward like a claw, powerless yet grasping. He forced his eyes to his father’s face. “Why?” he asked with some desperation, bewildered, as always, by this obsession. “What does it matter now?”

Giuki looked out the window to the river. His back was hunched, contorting his neck. He looked strangely shrunk, twisted. “It is the one thing,” he said, his voice dry and uneven, like the scratching of a bare twig against stone. “There is nothing else.”

“Explain that. Burgundy is greater and better regarded than it has been for generations. At last, Burgundy has warriors. At last, Burgundy is making its way into song. What do we need with the hoard now?”

Giuki turned his eyes back to Gunnar. His drooping face was without expression. “Whose name is spoken most loudly? Yours? Or Sigurd’s? Who will be remembered for his deeds? What is sung of Burgundy except that it is the kingdom for which the Volsung fights? He is not even one of us. Will you have Burgundy distinguished by him? What will Burgundy be when he leaves it? Will you do nothing yourself?”

“You ask a lot, sitting there in your chair, leaving your responsibilities to others.”

“Leave this room. You’re blind and stupid because you don’t yet know. Someday the hoard will get into your blood. Then you will see. Then. Now go away.”

And so the years went. Burgundy fought with Hunaland every fighting season. Some seasons went better than others. One spring, Burgundy was nearly destroyed, its army nearly decimated, when Gunnar led too ambitious an attack. The Burgundians traveled the forest road in full force, alert now, trained. They marched on Hunaland and laid siege to Atli’s city. They damaged much of the city with fire, and they killed many
Hunaland warriors, but ultimately they could not breach the Hunaland defenses, and they were badly damaged when the Hunalanders slipped from their city to bite into the Burgundian flank. The Burgundians, after limping home, never recovered their numbers.

There was one problem Gunnar faced that his father had foreseen. He himself, while he had known it would come, was shocked by the force of it. As Burgundy grew stronger, its men more warlike, its nerve harder, trade slackened. Worse, many of Burgundy’s warriors had once been only farmers. Though they returned to their farms at the end of each fighting season, their farms suffered from their long absences. Soon enough, Burgundy had to import grain and livestock. Feeding the army through the fighting seasons drained the kingdom as nothing else could.

As Burgundy grew poorer, as its numbers declined, it struggled more and more to meet Atli’s larger force. The losses from the disastrous attack on Hunaland were too great. Burgundy began to fail.

One morning late in the fall, when the season’s fighting was over, Gunnar and Sigurd rode out together, to hunt as they had as boys. Gunnar, dressed as usual in a fine tunic, rode Raudfaxi with a proud, straight back. Almost nineteen, his face had lost most of the round boyishness. He was not quite handsome, for he looked too much like his father. His nose was too short, his eyebrows too thin and pale, his beard no better. His fine hair, darker now, more red than orange, he wore gathered at the nape of his neck. The shorter pieces, always escaping, hung about his face and made him look, despite his clothing and his bearing, a little unkempt. Still, he was strong, more heavily muscled than his father had ever been, his neck thicker, his body trimmer.
Beside him, Sigurd rode Nott, his arm crooked to carry Skadi. Though he and Gunnar were of an age, Sigurd looked older, though it might have been only because he was more severe in his expressions. His hair was as blond as it had been in his boyhood, all the colors of gold twisting through it. He wore it long, with braids knotted here and there. His beard had come in thick. Only that he kept short, for it had come in partly red, and he did not like it. Most said he had a wild look to him, not quite human. He dressed well enough, spoke like a noble, but he never seemed quite there, like his mind was always somewhere else. Only those who knew him well, and they were few enough, could close that distance between his speech and his mind.

As they crossed a wide meadow at the edge of the kingdom, passing among sheep cropping up the last of the season’s grass, Sigurd stroked Skadi’s white breast with the back of his finger. “He’s getting old. Do you realize he’s been with me over six years?”

“That long?”

“A Gyrfalcon can live many winters, but I don’t know how old he was when he came to me. I don’t know how long he has left.”

Gunnar’s mind wandered back over the years. “It was strange, wasn’t it, how he came? I can still see all those birds flying over the Heath like they were possessed. I will never forget the sight of Skadi turning from them. It was like he fell out of the sky.”

“It was. He broke from Ragnhild when none of the others could. He was stronger. But why has he stayed with me? Why has he not taken his freedom? He could. I wouldn’t try to stop him. See, look. I bring him out without a hood, without jesses, and he sits here on my arm like he doesn’t even think to leave.”

“Maybe that’s why he stays? Because you don’t make him?”
Sigurd looked unconvinced. “That’s not really the nature of a Gyrfalcon, especially one that has taken his freedom before. I do wish he could talk.”

Gunnar gave him a wry look. “You wish all animals could talk.”

“I think they’d have useful things to say. Doesn’t Skadi look wise to you?”

“He looks half asleep.”

“He’s thinking,” said Sigurd sharply, his expression darkening until he saw the smile tugging at Gunnar’s mouth. His voice turned to annoyance: “Why do you always do that?”

“Do what?” asked Gunnar with mock innocence.

“Make light of what I’m saying.”

Gunnar’s smile started to spread, but he stilled it at a harsh look from Sigurd.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I don’t understand these things you say about animals. What wisdom can Skadi have? He’s a bird. What is his life but hunting and sleeping? I’m sorry, but I see nothing else.”

“The gods have their companion animals: Thor his goats, Freya her cats, Odin his ravens and wolves. Does that not mean anything to you?”

Gunnar struggled for an answer.

“Obviously not. I think there must be something they know—something they understand?—that we don’t.”

“Like what?”

Sigurd looked exasperated. “Well, I don’t know, do I?”

“All right, enough. You’re hurting my head. Do you want to race?”
“You know Nott can’t keep up with Raudfaxi. She’s like a merchant ship: big, strong, and slow.”

“I see. You only want to compete if you know you’ll win.”

“Nonsense,” said Sigurd, and he threw Skadi into the air, digging in his heels as he did. Nott gathered herself and sprang into a thundering gallop.

Grinning, Gunnar let them get a head start, though Raudfaxi fretted after them, too good mannered to pull at the reins but prancing like a colt. Then Gunnar gave the red stallion his head. Raudfaxi charged after Nott. It didn’t take long for him to pass her.

Gunnar drew Raudfaxi to a walk again as they reached the meadow’s low stone wall. Nott came trotting up behind, blowing hard, her steps like hammer blows on the dry, dense ground.

Gunnar said, as Nott coughed, jolting Sigurd in the saddle, “You can’t win even when you cheat.”

“I didn’t lose. Nott did. She’s a good girl, but look at this body. Ridiculous! Someday I will have a faster horse.”

“If I’ve said it once I’ve said it a hundred times: you can have one of Raudfaxi’s colts. That bay three-year-old’s going to be nice.”

“I thought you wanted him for yourself? For when Raudfaxi is too old?”

“I would give him to you. Raudfaxi will have more.”

Moved by Gunnar’s generosity, unsettled by it, for it was a quality he himself did not have, Sigurd didn’t answer at first. Then he said, “You keep him. I will find a horse. Someday, I want to visit my uncle, my mother’s brother, Gripir, who raised Nott. He’s
I’ve got a lot of fine horses. I’m sure some are lighter and faster than this one. I’ll find one there.”

“Why go so far? There are fine horses in the stable here.”

“I know that. It’s just…”

“What? Tell me.”

“Gripir is more than a horse-lord. They say he has foresight.”

Gunnar’s pale brows drew down. “You want to ask him of the future? Why? What do you want to know?”

Sigurd’s face took on the serious, determined look he wore during counsels of war. “We’ve been here in Burgundy a long time, Gunnar. I don’t say I regret it, but…time is passing.”

“You want to take the Volsung lands.”

“That’s never changed. This war drags on. I never thought it would last so long. I always thought I would have my father’s kingdom back by now, or else be dead. I think Odin must have thought so, too, for I’ve not seen him these many years. I told you once that I thought Odin had no faith in me, because he had not given me my father’s sword. I was angry then, and bitter, and did not mean it, but the thought has haunted me all the same. What if it’s true? The sword I carry now is a good blade, but…the sword Gram—Gunnar, it was made by Weland! Without that sword, how can I know that Odin is with me?”

“When we spoke of this once, many years ago, I told you to find the shards and have the sword remade. I say nothing different now. Will you wait for the sword to be given to you? Or will you take it?”
Gunnar’s words cast Sigurd back to the time he first met Odin, when Odin came to him beside the body of his horse Gladung, as he traveled south to Regin. Odin had spoken of fate. He had said the Norns did not favor those who waited for fate to come to them. Such a passive fate was common, unremarkable. Odin had said the Norns would weave a fate to fit the wearer, that they spun a great fate only for those who deserved it. And who could deserve it but those who would seek it?

When Gunnar got no response, he turned back to a simpler point. “But you’re right. The war drags on. It’s many years since we were boys in fosterage.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “You haven’t changed.”

“Why should I?” said Sigurd, joining the game, denying his doubts.

Gunnar laughed. “Truly, though, if you must go, I understand that, little though I think Burgundy can afford the loss. But I know you must see that I cannot come with you, not right now.”

“I did not mean I would leave. I won’t go, Gunnar. Not until this is over.”

“That may be some time yet.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Sigurd. “We have too few men. So many have been killed. Our resources are diminished.”

“You don’t have to tell me how grim things are. The coffers grow lighter every year, and more fields lie fallow.”

“We need a great strategy,” said Sigurd, spitting out the word with distaste. “We cannot win by strength alone. I see now what Regin tried to teach all those years ago. Do you remember how he would make a model of war in the middle of the house? He would
set up baskets and stones, anything, and make them into a battlefield. He would pit us against one another to see if we could figure out how to win.”

“I remember.”

Sigurd shook his head. “I never understood those games very well. They were so dull. But that is what we need now, to win such a game.”

“We have little more to call on than such stones and baskets and scattered grains as Regin used in those games. I don’t see how we’ll do it, Sigurd.” There was desperation, and an edge of fear, in Gunnar’s voice. “I see nothing.”

“I’m sorry, my friend. Neither do I.”

They ranged to the north that day, keeping well away from the Dark Forest at Burgundy’s eastern border. It was dangerous enough for the two of them to ride out without an escort, even in this area; Wulfric had been furious. But Gunnar had said to him, “I’ll be with Sigurd. What could happen?”

When they camped that night, roasting a brace of hares over their fire, Gunnar took his harp from its leather coverings. It was a fine instrument, beautifully carved and strung with gut-strings. He looked at it longingly.

“It seems a long time since I played.”

“What do you mean? You play all the time.”

“Yes, but always in the hall, for the men, and it’s just not the same. Every time I take up my harp in the hall, I think of those golden days when you and I would camp by the Rhine or in the woods around Regin’s house. How free we were then! I didn’t play for a purpose, to inspire the men, or to entertain them. I played only for myself. Do you ever think of that time?”
Sigurd turned the spit. “Sometimes.”

“You don’t miss it?”

“They were good days, in their fashion. And I did love to sit on the shore or in the woods. I loved our hunts. But those days were not perfect; they were dark as well.”

“What do you mean?” asked Gunnar, taken aback.

“All that time I felt I was waiting. There were things I wanted—needed—to do, yet always it was in the future. I was just waiting for my youth to be over. It was in my way. And yet,” Sigurd smiled ironically, “here I am, coming into my nineteenth winter, and still I’ve done nothing.”

“That’s hardly true.”

“I’ve done nothing of what I intended. What if Odin has abandoned me because of it? What if I’ve waited too long? All these battles, and I’ve never seen him. Not a glimpse of the white horse, not a stray flash of an engraved spearhead, not a blind eye beneath any silver helmet. What if he’s given up on me, if I’ve lost his faith? What could be worse than that?”

Gunnar grew uncomfortable, as he always did, when Sigurd spoke of Odin this way, as something tangible, as a person. Sigurd could see the discomfort, despite Gunnar’s effort to conceal it behind a stiff, meaningless nod. He said nothing. It was Gunnar’s problem.

Gunnar rubbed his fingers over his harp’s carvings, staring into the design. He spoke with an effort, willing himself into this conversation. “That you did not see him does not mean he wasn’t there. That is how the gods are. They don’t need to show themselves.”
“Yes but—” Sigurd stopped himself. It was no use arguing with Gunnar about this. Gunnar could never understand. For him, the gods would always be vague, distant, inhuman. Not for the first time, watching Gunnar fingering the harp, he thought how strange it was that someone who could sing so passionately of the gods could so little understand them.

Awkwardly, abruptly, Gunnar shifted the conversation. “Sigurd, it was more than nostalgia that made me suggest this hunt. I need to ask you something in earnest, and I did not want to ask you in the court.”

Sigurd stiffened. He had an idea what Gunnar meant.

“I wanted to talk to you about—you must see that Gudrun—she is a beautiful young woman.”

“I do see that.”

“She is a king’s daughter,” said Gunnar with some formality. “I know she’s hard-headed, but she would be a good wife to you.” When Sigurd did not answer, Gunnar went on, “You have been my brother these many years, first in fosterage, then in blood. If you were to marry Gudrun, you would be my brother through marriage also. Who else could I want for my sister?”

“What does your father say?”

Gunnar’s expression soured. “What does he ever say? You know, for I’ve told you as I would tell no other, that he speaks only of Fafnir. I did ask him of Gudrun—it seemed only right—but he couldn’t be troubled about it.”

Sigurd shook his head. “I cannot understand his obsession. He’s never even seen the dragon.”
Gunnar shuddered slightly at the word ‘dragon’ but said, “I don’t understand either. Before I saw…it…I wanted that treasure. My father filled me with a desire for it. It seemed so grand, so important. What, of all the deeds of all the heroes who ever lived, will be better remembered than the slaying of Fafnir and the taking of that hoard? That inspired me once. But you saw him. It’s impossible. Even you, I think, could not do it. That is the one thought that gives me consolation, that allows me to look away from the task. No one could do it.”

“You really think it cannot be done?”

“You disagree?”

Sigurd shrugged. “Many things have been done that men thought could not be done.”

“Don’t say that, for if it can be done, who should do it but me? It is my family’s treasure. If Fafnir has it, that cannot be helped. If another man has it…how can I tolerate that?”

Sigurd made no answer. He turned the spit, staring at the seared skin of the hares, not looking at Gunnar.

“Let’s not speak of Fafnir. You’ve dragged me off the subject of my sister. That is what I wanted to speak about. Could you not love her?”

“I do love her. I’ve loved her for years, as you know. She’s that imperious red-haired girl who came to shoot her arrows in the training yard with the men. How could I not love that? She’s like a sister to me, as she is to you.”

“A sister. Only that?”

“I never thought beyond it.”
“Don’t tell me that! Everyone has expected the two of you to marry for years. Don’t ask me to believe you’ve never given it thought!”

“All right! I have given it thought. It’s just—”

“What? Is she not good enough for you? She may not be descended from the gods, but she is a king’s daughter! She will be a king’s sister!”

“Gunnar, it’s not that—”

“Don’t tell me it’s not that! You think she’s not good enough!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’ve never said that. I’ve never done anything to even suggest that! Am I to have no say? Am I to do what you want because you want it?”

Gunnar calmed himself with an effort, drove the anger from his face. “No. I didn’t mean that.”

“You know I care for Gudrun. It’s just…” An image rose in Sigurd’s mind, an image of a woman, her breasts rising from the waters of the Rhine, her laughter soft and sparkling. It stirred him. It was that image he saw every time he lay with a woman. It was not Gudrun’s image. How could he explain that to Gunnar? “Don’t ask a promise of me. Why should Gudrun wait for me? I will not marry until I am a king in my own land. Why should she be bound to me for years to come? As soon as this war is over, I will take my father’s land, or I will die trying. The gods alone know how far in the future that may be. And what if I am killed? Gudrun will have waited for nothing and she will then be past the age for marriage. She’s sixteen, Gunnar. She has only a few years before most men will think her too old. She should not wait for me. Do you really want her to waste her youth and her beauty on something that may come to nothing?”
Gunnar’s tight jaw slowly eased, and a breath left him, deflated him like a punctured wineskin. “What you say is true. I will speak to her tomorrow. You break her heart, Sigurd. I hope you know that.”

Sigurd turned the spit again, guilt in his stomach, relief in his chest. “I’m sorry.”

When the rabbits were roasted, they ate by the fire. Gunnar played his harp well into the night. Then they built up the fire, for the evening was cold, and rolled up in their blankets.

Sigurd dreamed. He dreamed of the dragon. It was a fiery dream, filled with reds and golds. The dragon was strong, beautiful, unearthly. In the dream, the dragon was sleeping, but he awoke when Sigurd laid a hand on his face, between the nostrils, on the fine scales. The dragon opened its jewel-like eyes. They caught the color of what was around them, reflecting it back like water, or ice. The dragon did not speak. It reared up its neck; it was arched like a wave, like a swan’s neck.

Sigurd sensed something behind him. He turned to see the open hall: its broken pillars, heaps of treasure. He looked to the crumbling entrance, to the dark hole of the night beyond. There was something there. Something.

Sigurd woke. He lay stiff and wary in his blankets, listening. Gunnar snored softly beside him. The fire was burning low, and the moon was setting, hidden behind the trees. In silence, Sigurd rose. He bunched his blankets to make them look like they covered a man. In the darkness, no one would tell the difference. He crept away from the fire, concealing himself in the pitch-like shadows of the trees.

He waited for some time. Then, out of the woods beyond the camp, a man approached. He was hooded and cloaked, unsurprising in that cold, but it made him
difficult to judge. Sigurd began to rise, his sword ready, but he waited. The man glanced at Gunnar but did not disturb him. A thief, Sigurd thought. He would catch the man in the act. Then he would kill him. But the man did not touch Gunnar’s harp, nor the saddles, nor did he approach Nott and Raudfaxi where they were tied. He crouched over the coals, warming his hands. They were fine hands, elegant. Sigurd moved without sound; he crept over the bracken and deadfall, silent as a wolf. When he was right behind the hunched form, he laid his blade on the man’s shoulder.

“What do you want, stranger?”

The man jerked in surprise, but he did not cry out or scramble away. Then he laughed, a quiet, sly laugh. “Oh, you’re very good.”

Sigurd’s mind spun. He knew that voice. “Regin?”
Chapter 20

While Sigurd built up the fire, Regin watched him in silence. At first he could see nothing but a dark form, moving without sound around the campsite. He could sense something, though, and he knew what it was. Power. Hope and anticipation thrilled through him. Five years he had been waiting for this, to see if the boy who had left his house would become something. Five years he had stilled himself, kept his hopes dim, tried not to think.

As fire began to crackle through the kindling, light shivered over Sigurd. He was not a boy anymore. The planes of his face were still smooth with youth, but they were also hard with work and determination, with conviction. His face hid something, too, a yearning perhaps, or frustration. That he was handsome was irrelevant, but Regin couldn’t help noticing. All Sigurd’s obvious qualities would make him noteworthy in any court, be he king or warrior. But there was something more that set a fire in Regin’s
hopes, something to him that Regin couldn’t quite describe, a perfection, an inhumanness that was cold, strength and ferocity that burned. He was like a sword forged from the finest materials, tempered by inspired hands. Regin wanted to believe that those hands had been his, but he knew his skill, and this was beyond him.

There was one disturbing element. A similarity, a familiarity, troubled Regin. That very inhumanness, that very same ferocity that made Sigurd so important—Regin recognized it. He told himself it was only that he could not look at Sigurd without thinking of what Sigurd must do, of what he had been born to do. Still, looking at Sigurd was like looking at the dragon. Something of Fafnir seemed coiled inside him.

“So,” said Sigurd, rocking back on his haunches as the flames caught in the wood, throwing sparks into the night.

Regin did not want to speak just yet; he wanted to watch. With reluctance, he drew out his words: “You are become a man.”

“And glad of it.”

“You never did have much patience.”

“No.”

Regin watched Sigurd look into the heart of the fire. He waited for Sigurd to speak, to offer more, but nothing came. He had forgotten how self-contained Sigurd could be; he had forgotten that silence. Behind Sigurd’s head, a white shape moved in the dark branches. It was Ragnhild’s falcon, ghostly and watchful. He pulled his eyes from the bird, but it hovered at the edge of his vision. “I hear you’re quite the warrior. News of Burgundy’s war travels far, and all of it contains some tale of the Volsung who fights like a wolf, or a bear, or like Odin himself, depending on the account.”
Sigurd’s eyes were shadowed, a trick of the firelight. What might be in them was more impossible to guess now than it had ever been. His voice, though, held a strain of suspicion, of caniness that Regin did not remember.

“I’ve heard nothing of you. What have you been doing these past five years?”

“This and that. Waiting.”

“And what does that mean?”

Regin shrugged the question away. “I hear there’s trouble in Burgundy.”

“There’s been trouble in Burgundy since Gunnar and I arrived.”

Regin looked over at Gunnar’s still form, the big body powerless in sleep, the hair tousled like a child’s. “It’s fortunate for Gunnar that you are so wary. What if I had been one of Atli’s men?”

“We wouldn’t be talking now. You would be dead.”

“Yes, but if you had not been here?”

“Then Gunnar would not be here. He’s no fool, as you know very well. He wouldn’t ride out with just anyone, nor sleep so soundly.”

“You’re not just anyone.”

“No.”

The hair rose on Regin’s arms at the certainty in Sigurd’s voice. “Tell me of Burgundy’s troubles.”

“They’re simple enough to understand. Too few men. And they’re growing tired of the war. Their farms and trades suffer. They’re becoming as poor as Burgundy itself. And…”

“What?”
“Gunnar disagrees, but I think they’re not tired of fighting so much as they’re
tired of the same challenge, the same enemy season after season.”

“Perhaps it’s time to bring it to an end. You can’t stay here forever, fighting
Gunnar’s war.”

Sigurd huffed. “How can we end it? Burgundy doesn’t have the strength to win. It
doesn’t have the means. It—you have an idea?”

“I always have ideas.”

“Tell me.”

“Not yet,” said Regin, undaunted by the steel in Sigurd’s voice. Sigurd, he could
see, was surprised. Few, apparently, were unmoved by it. “I will tell Gunnar tomorrow,
maybe the next day, after I’ve seen the state of Burgundy and looked at its maps. We’ll
all sit in counsel together. Should we wake him?”

Sigurd’s mouth twitched as his eyes went to Gunnar, chest rising evenly under the
blankets and his wide, pale face relaxed and oblivious. “Let him sleep. He gets little
enough rest these days.”

When Gunnar stretched up from his blankets the next morning, Sigurd and Regin
were still sitting by the fire. They were both as still as Skadi in his tree, waiting for
Gunnar to notice. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Gunnar froze, hands still on his face.

“What the—”

Sigurd laughed. Regin smiled slyly.

“You could’ve woken me!” he reproached Sigurd, throwing the blankets aside.

“And miss that stupid look on your face?”
Gunnar froze again, clearly picturing himself, then laughed good-naturedly and rose from his blankets. Regin rose to meet him. Gunnar held out his hand and clasped Regin’s. “Well, Regin, it’s a surprise, but it’s good to see you.”

“And you,” said Regin. “And you.”

Sigurd bent over the remains of the evening meal, twisting bones from the meat. Gunnar sat to pull on his boots. He shook a small stone from one of them. This he threw at Sigurd, striking him in the neck.

“Did he surprise you, too?”

“I was surprised,” admitted Sigurd, ignoring the red mark blooming on his neck, “but he didn’t sneak up on me.”

“No,” said Regin, “I think Sigurd is too canny for the both of us, Gunnar. He snuck up on me.”

“Figures,” muttered Gunnar as he jammed his heel into his boot.

They rode into the city late in the morning. As they entered the courtyard, where the trees flanking the hall were scattering their leaves across the square stones, Gudrun trotted down the steps to meet them. Her soft shoes made no sound, but her skirts swished with every jerk of her knees against them. She always walked this way, impatient, encumbered. Sigurd watched her. She was very pretty. Her bright auburn hair was soft and fine as corn silk. Once, he had brushed it from her face. They had been in the stable, speaking of horses, leaning on their elbows over a stall gate. Brushing at her hair, he had left a smudge of dirt across her cheek. She had laughed. It was a clean laugh, innocent and young, sweet, and it left behind a funny, crooked smile. When he took a corner of cloth to clean away the smudge, she had laid her hands over his. She had looked at him,
wanting something. Despite that look, she had been still and uncertain when he had kissed her. He had apologized, said he shouldn’t have done it. She had asked him if he remembered their first kiss, when they were children. He did. She had asked nothing more from him then, given him no opportunity to diminish the moment, to make it nothing. It had haunted him since. It had been wrong. She was so young, and she did not know when a kiss meant something and when it did not. She knew nothing of men. He liked her, cared for her, even found her attractive, but it did not mean he really wanted her.

Gunnar had come close to the truth last night. He had been wrong only in assuming that it was a matter of lineage. The truth was that Gudrun could not be enough for him. She could not reach deep enough. Even now, as she came down the steps of the hall, he knew it. She was a pretty king’s daughter, with a bold tongue, nothing more.

“Who have you brought?” she asked Gunnar before she had reached the bottom of the steps.

“My foster-father. And Sigurd’s, naturally. Regin, this is my sister, Gudrun.”

Regin inclined his head, his pale blue eyes never leaving Gudrun’s face.

“Ah, the Counselor,” she challenged. “Have you come to win Burgundy’s war?”

“Gudrun,” protested Gunnar, “don’t be rude.”

“Well? Do we not have some right to expect something? He is your foster-father.”

“I am only a smith, Gudrun, a craftsman. I do not win wars, though I may forge the weapons that do.”
Gudrun puzzled over that for a moment, making nothing of it. Then her eyes caught Sigurd as he swung down from his horse, and she turned to him. “And did you catch anything? Besides your foster-father, I mean.”

“Rabbits.”

“Rabbits. Impressive.”

“We came back early,” Sigurd reminded her, not liking to be teased, and he nodded at Regin in explanation. “Or else we would have brought back a deer. That’s about all you get here. In the north, some men wear bear-shirts to fight, instead of armor. That’s what you get with better game.”

“A bear hide,” said Gudrun with relish. “Maybe you’ll bring me one some day. Or maybe I’ll hunt with you and get one for myself.”

“You need a spear for that. Bow and arrow is not enough.”

“I could learn.”

“Rune,” said Gunnar, “you know that’s not—well—”

She gave him a chilling look. “Come inside. Wulfric’s been wearing holes in the floor with his pacing, and he’s making mother so nervous she can’t follow her pattern.”

* * *

Some days passed before Regin spoke of the war. He listened to the men discuss it, and though they cast him hopeful, expectant looks, he offered nothing. He sat night after night, sipping mead while they worried. He spent day after day walking through the city to the harbor, wandering among the barracks that had been refurbished and expanded.
near the king’s hall. These housed only those who were retained all year, and Regin made an inspection of them and the men, nervous under his gaze, who lived there. He looked down from the watching platform over the city gates, scanning the trampled fields where the army camped during the fighting season. He asked questions about the Dark Forest and the river that ran along the road. He poured over maps of the area. He walked several times past Giuki’s closed chamber door, pausing, listening. It was not until the first, early wind from the north froze the grass one night that Regin moved to speak.

“This war,” he said to Gunnar as he walked with him through the training yard, where the men were practicing with the desperation of coming winter. “I might be able to help you.”

Gunnar did not waste breath on surprise or hope; he said only, “How?”

“You need more men. You will have to buy them.”

“Hired swords?”

“Yes.”

“That will drain the coffers entirely, even to pay them for a season.”

“You need no more time than that. You’re poor enough anyway. Finish this war and you can rebuild.”

“And if we can’t finish it in the next season?”

Regin was silent a moment. “Nothing is without risk. You will need a great strategy.”

“And you can give me that.” It was half question, half statement.

Regin smiled his wolf smile. “Of course.”
Regin’s plan was a complex one, and he was interrupted with many questions and much skepticism as he explained it to Gunnar, Sigurd, and Gunnar’s thanes on a long afternoon that stretched into the darkest hours of night.

Gunnar would have to buy many warriors, three for every ten men he already had. Even with these additional men, his force would be little more than half the size of Atli’s. Gunnar’s thanes argued loudly about that point. Regin only sat back in his chair. He would not argue. They could listen, or they could do things their own way.

Gunnar shouted them to silence. “Hold you tongues! You’ve all had many chances to offer advice. The Counselor will speak now, and you will listen.”

Gunnar, Regin continued when the last grumbler had been stared into silence, would march with six-tenths of his men down the forest road. To the eyes of Atli’s lookouts, who would be scattered through the Dark Forest, it would seem that Gunnar was bringing nearly his entire force, for the presence of the hired warriors would be secret and disguised. Word of Gunnar’s march would soon reach Atli.

But some days ahead of this march, the other four-tenths of the army would have already begun to move, and of their movement Atli must not be aware. Regin laid a vellum map of the Dark Forest on the table. It was a crosshatch of trees and ridges and snaking rivers. He pointed to a narrow line that marked a minor tributary of the Rhine some miles south of the road.

“Why has this never been used?”
Gunnar drew his finger along the line. “It turns south. Here. It goes nowhere but to this lake in the middle of the forest. Why would we use it? What use is that lake?”

“The lake means nothing,” said Regin dismissively. “But look here.” He drew his own finger along the line, stopping it where the river came within a few miles of the road and the other, smaller river that ran along the road. “Do you see?”

Gunnar raised his shoulders helplessly, seeing nothing but the river, seeing nothing of Regin’s mind.

With a flash of his eyes that was both satisfied and impatient, Regin explained. The smaller portion of the army would use this river. It was too far south and the trees too dense to interest Atli’s scouts. With oars, with poles, with harnessed horses walking the bank, or perhaps all three, they would haul barges up the river. It would not be easy, perhaps, but it was not impossible. These barges would carry food and weapons, horses, and men. At the point where this river drew close to the road, the barges would stop. The men would take the food and weapons across the other river and to the road, where they would meet the rest of the army. Atli’s scouts would have already reported that Gunnar’s force came lightly supplied, and Atli would therefore expect to find a weary, poorly armed enemy.

By the time the bulk of the army had been resupplied, Atli would have begun to move. He would bring his own army onto the road to meet Gunnar. Atli, Regin knew, was no fool, and he would take what tactical advantage he could find. Regin pointed to a valley some miles down the road from the resupply point. Atli, he said, would use his greater numbers to drive the Burgundians into this valley and force them to fight with the disadvantage of lower ground. The Burgundians would fight long enough to convince
Atli that they had no secondary plan, to convince him that they had been outsmarted. Then, they would break and scatter as though they had no more will or strength to fight.

Atli would think the Burgundians broken at last. He would press on down the road with his army, to kill the remaining Burgundians and to march on Burgundy itself. It would be his great opportunity. Or so it would seem.

However, when the Burgundians were appearing to scatter, they would in truth be moving to their assigned meeting places. The Burgundian army would reform into several parties. They would not be the only ones. The remaining four-tenths of the army, those who had traveled the river, would be fresh and ready to fight. They would be in their own parties. Each party would have specific instructions about when and where to attack. All the attacks of the first day would be given to the fresh men, providing the others enough time to rest, reorganize, and get into position.

As Atli moved his column down the road, the parties, containing perhaps fifty to one hundred men each, would charge an assigned section of Atli’s column, starting with the rear. By the time word reached the front and Atli moved to check the attack, the attackers would withdraw, having killed maybe twenty or thirty men. Before the column could reform, another party would attack the front or the middle, and Atli would once again have to reorganize to meet the attack. The Burgundians would at times leave the column in peace. Because not many would be killed in any attack and because the attacks would be so brief and seemingly random, it would take Atli some time to realize just how many men he was losing and to realize that the attacks were organized. By the time he put it all together, the Hunalanders would be well into the forest. Atli would have to either push on, and risk having his force whittled down to nothing by the time he reached
Burgundy, or he would have to retreat. If he retreated, as was likely, the Burgundians would continue to harass his column all the way to Hunaland.

“If this works,” said Gunnar wonderingly, “Hunaland could lose nearly a generation of warriors.”

“That’s the idea,” said Regin.

“Atli would not be able to rise again for years and years, and that’s if he even survives.”

“This plan is very complicated,” said Hogni, his lean, freckled face intent on Gunnar. “What if one part doesn’t work? The whole thing could fall apart.”

A line wedged between Wulfric’s brows. “That’s true. And if it doesn’t work, Burgundy will be the one who doesn’t recover. Gunnar, you know that to buy so many warriors would drain us completely. This plan could make a beggar of Burgundy.”

Gunnar, standing with the map in his hands, looked around the circle of men. His voice rang out too loud, carrying more of a command than a question: “And what will Burgundy be after another season or two of war with Hunaland?”

No man answered him. No man shared a look with another. No man shook his head or lowered his eyes. They looked back at Gunnar, unable to argue, unwilling to agree.

Gunnar turned to Sigurd. “Well, Sigurd? You’ve not spoken. What do you say?”

Sigurd’s eyes flicked to Regin, who sat quietly in his chair, out of the argument as though it did not concern him. “I think,” Sigurd began slowly, “that Regin is the Master of Masters, as he has always been known. I think that those who take too little account of him get what they deserve. I think we should be glad he’s on our side.”
Gunnar rolled up the map. “Tomorrow, I will hear everyone’s thoughts. All will be given the chance to speak. But for now”—Gunnar raised a hand to still the stirring of those who had something to say—“I will think on this plan myself. Do the same. But think before you bring your opinions to me.”

Sigurd watched Gunnar stride from the hall, the map in his hand like a sword. He thought for a moment that Gunnar would turn towards his father’s chamber, but he did not. Sigurd looked then for Regin, wanting to see what Regin’s face might reveal, but Regin was gone. The men were still grumbling, arguing in small groups. Sigurd heard his name.

One of the thanes, an older man who had served Giuki, a man Sigurd did not like because he had little wisdom or prowess and therefore little deserving of his position, was leaning toward him with a worried expression. “Well? Sigurd, what do you really think?”

“I think you should do as Gunnar has commanded.” Sigurd rose from his chair and turned a searing eye at the man. “And don’t ever again ask me to change my words behind Gunnar’s back.”

The man lowered his eyes.

“It’s late. Go to your beds. We have all winter to discuss Regin’s plan.”

Late in the night, when Sigurd passed by Gunnar’s chamber, he saw a light flickering under the door. He knocked, heard a grumbled reply, and opened the door. Gunnar squinted up at him. He sat hunched over a stack of parchments on his table, a cup of mead at his elbow and an untouched loaf of bread at the table’s corner. The fire was burning low on the hearth, and the blankets on the bed were undisturbed.

“Ah, Sigurd, still awake. What keeps you up?”
“I walked down to the harbor. I thought I heard something. It was nothing, only water.”

Gunnar looked down blindly at the maps and writings before him. “I’m sure the guards will catch anyone who shouldn’t be in the water. You don’t have to single-handedly guard the whole kingdom.”

Sigurd sat in a chair by the hearth. “The men were not too happy after you left.”

“No doubt you think I should curb them or simply command them, but, as we’ve discussed many times, I have my own way of leading.”

“What’s the matter, Gunnar?”

Gunnar looked up with a retort on his face, but he swallowed it. “I’m sorry. I have no reason to be sharp with you.” He looked down again, pulling the map Regin had used to the top of the pile, studying it.

Sigurd watched him a moment, watched his fingers tap impatiently at the map’s edges, watched him frown in disapproval. “Something bothers you about Regin’s plan. What is it?”

“Nothing. The plan is good. Brilliant. It needs some minor adjustments—Regin doesn’t understand the terrain very well for one thing—but it looks like he’ll save our necks.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? It bothers you that it’s Regin’s plan, not yours.”

Gunnar’s nostril’s flared. “I should have thought of it. It was there all along, the potential for it. Regin has brought us nothing: no men, no weapons, no horses, no gold, no grain. Yet he will make for us a victory out of nothing because he has wisdom.”
“It won’t be out of nothing. The resources are yours. It’s his ideas that are nothing without them.”

Gunnar shrugged this away.

Sigurd did not know what to say. It was unlike Gunnar to sulk, and Sigurd was not used to cheering him. Finally he said, “Don’t forget that Regin has lived a long time. He’s not mortal, Gunnar. He’s seen kingdoms rise and fall. He’s had plenty of opportunities to learn and—”

“I should have gone to him before. He could have helped us to win years ago!”

“But would he have? I doubt it. Regin does things in his own time and in his own way. He could have come here earlier. He didn’t. Why not?”

“I don’t know.” Gunnar shook his head.

A thick silence hung between them. Gunnar, it seemed, had no more to say. But something was bothering Sigurd. He began hesitantly, “Seeing Regin again…it’s strange, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” asked Gunnar absently, his mind and his fingers on the map again.

“You don’t think so? He seems different to me. Maybe it’s just that I’m older. When I was a boy, I was disappointed in him. He was said to be powerful, yet I saw no power. He was said to have great knowledge, yet I never felt he taught me what I needed. I know I learned things from him. I knew he was crafty, but I think I disregarded him. I thought he was less than what people said. But seeing him now…I don’t know whether to trust him.”

Gunnar’s full attention was on Sigurd now. “You think the plan is flawed? A trick even?”
“The plan? Oh. No. The plan is strategy, and if you see no flaws in it, I certainly won’t.”

“Then did you mean what you said in the hall? You support it? Or were you just backing me in front of the men?”

Sigurd gave Gunnar a wry look. “You’re the second man tonight to question my honesty.”

“It’s not that. It’s just that this is very important. And I want to know that you’re behind it. This kind of fight, it’s not you. I’m surprised that you like it.”

“I don’t like it. It’s sly. Not cowardly, perhaps, but it is sly. Still. It may save Burgundy. I guess that’s what matters.” Sigurd gave Gunnar a meaningful look. “But you better put me where there’s the most action.”

Gunnar smiled a little. “I wouldn’t expect you to be anywhere else.”
Chapter 21

Winter came, and the war counsels were long and often contentious. There was too much time to worry. Gunnar listened to all arguments. Sometimes he would refute those arguments; sometimes he made concessions. By midwinter, Regin’s plan had been considered from every angle, and every imagined difficulty had been addressed. Gunnar’s thanes, having made their own contributions, feeling that the plan had been made somewhat their own, at last came behind Gunnar in full support. Then they had only to wait out the snow and the cold.

It was common for the warriors to spend the winter indoors, tending to their gear and weapons, enjoying the company of their wives, eating and drinking, playing games, hearing music, telling stories. But not everyone embraced these winter pleasures. Though Sigurd made some efforts to participate—at Gunnar’s urging—he had little patience for it. He preferred to spend the winter as he spent the summer: training, hunting, and riding.
He also liked to take a boat out on the Rhine. He would disappear for days at a time. He would return with fish in freezing rain or ride in with foxes and deer slung behind Nott’s saddle as the snow dusted over him.

When Sigurd did remain in the city, he would sit in agitation in the hall, making everyone around him nervous. He would clean his weapons and armor with a brisk efficiency and soon his hands would be empty and restless. He was not good at idle conversation, for always he would cast trivialities away and come to the root of any matter.

These visits to the hall usually ended with him rising abruptly from his chair and declaring he would be in the training yard, if any wished to do something useful. Often he was alone there, firing arrows into the targets, the snap of the bowstring beating an ache into his numb fingers, or casting spears and axes and knives. Sometimes others would join him, those who were young and ambitious and wanted to learn, or at least wanted to impress him.

Hogni was the most dedicated of those who trained with Sigurd. Because of this, he was growing into a fine swordsman, better than his peers, better even than Gunnar. Even when the snow was knee-deep, Hogni could often be found in the training yard, blocking a blow or trying to get his own blade past Sigurd’s guard. He was seventeen, strong and agile. In five years, his awe of Sigurd had dimmed enough that he could actually like him. Where others found Sigurd too cold, Hogni saw restraint, discipline and dignity. He sensed, as they did, that Sigurd’s ability came from more than dedication and practice. But where others looked away from that, Hogni did not. He wanted to see.
In previous years, there had been no observers of these winter fights. It was too cold for any to take more than a passing notice on the way to the privies or the barracks. This winter, though, at the edge of the fighting, beyond the action, there was someone. Regin would stand under the eave of the barrack roof or in the lee of the smithy, leaning against the wall, watching. His eyes, cold and pale as the ice around him, were keen. He saw every trick that fooled Sigurd’s opponents, followed the graceful strike and turn of Sigurd’s sword.

 Mostly, Regin was certain, his presence was unknown. He could be nearly invisible when he chose. Yet sometimes he was seen, for he was there so often. Sigurd never commented. Regin did not like to admit how much that relieved him. He did not want to be questioned, for Sigurd was difficult to deceive. He had always been that way, though never to this degree, and Regin began to experience something he had not felt for a long time: Sigurd made him uneasy. Regin had repressed hope for so long, always looking for it, never expecting it—and here it was at last. If something impossible could be done, it could be done by Sigurd. It sent a shiver through Regin, of anticipation, of fear. Soon, he would challenge Sigurd. Soon, Sigurd would bring him what he wanted.

* * *

When the spring thaw was foretold by longer days and warmer winds, the first part of Regin’s plan was set into action. Gunnar sent those he most trusted to be discreet and discerning out onto the snow-packed roads. They traveled north and south and west, giving Atli’s kingdom a wide berth, to bring back men who would fight for money. The
men they brought were rough, loyal only to themselves, and many Burgundians watched their arrival with distaste. These men were clearly accustomed to such as reception, and they took every opportunity to unnerve those who stared. They were loud and coarse. Only when Gunnar threatened to dismiss them without pay did they begin to settle and merge into the rest of the army, which was forming day by day on the melting ground of the fields.

They waited for the spring rains. When these came, they puckered the surface of the Rhine for days on end. Water streamed from the roofs and made the wood-paved roads slick. The pastures were soggy, the ponds full. When it was reported that the rivers from the forest, which fed into the Rhine south of the city, were near to overflowing their banks, Gunnar set Regin’s plan into motion.

Even as Regin had said, so it was. With the waters high, the smaller portion of the army was able to haul the barges up the river. It was not easy. Boulders and sandbars and strong water plagued them every mile. The forest was dense along the banks, and the ground was slippery. There were many times that Regin’s name was cursed. There were many days that the men might have given up had Wulfric not been in command. As it was, Wulfric brooked no argument, no laziness, and no defeat. He had offered himself for this position, for he had not trusted it to any other. He had also suggested, in the cold months of winter, that the men assigned to this duty be men of Burgundy. The task was demanding and important, certainly not something to be trusted to any who cared only for their pay and nothing for the outcome of the war. Wulfric’s words to Gunnar had been wise, for the river proved even more difficult than any had imagined, and Wulfric’s force arrived at the meeting point with little time to spare.
As Regin had predicted, Atli’s lookouts reported the advance of Gunnar’s army. The message came to Atli in the dim, cold hours before dawn one morning. He was roused from his bed to receive the report. The bleariness of his eyes and his irritation at being woken vanished within a few words. He was immediately suspicious, for that was his nature. Also, he knew there was no way for Gunnar to defeat him through a direct attack. That had been proven before, and in a time when Gunnar’s numbers had been greater. Atli took counsel with his thanes, and they tried to find the purpose in Gunnar’s actions.

Vingi, who had defeated Giuki in the battle on the road five years ago, was dismissive. “Gunnar’s a fool, like his father. He cannot win. He places too much faith, perhaps, in his fate and in his Volsung.”

“Gunnar is not a fool,” said Atli.

“Maybe he comes to ask peace?” suggested someone.

Atli waved this idea away. “He knows I would kill him. There are only two possibilities: he plans some trick, or he comes for death. The Burgundians grow weaker each season. I’m sure it’s as obvious to Gunnar as it is to me that their days can be counted. He may be coming to achieve some last honor through death.”

“And if he plans a trick?”

Atli looked thoughtful. “I think it does not matter. Whatever he might plan, his numbers are not great enough. It’s been reported that he’s brought near every man of Burgundy, and that is not near enough. We’ll crush them through sheer force. It doesn’t
matter how clever Gunnar thinks he is, or how clever he might actually be. He’s not been
clever enough in five years. What could be different now? Prepare the army. Burgundy’s
life-thread is about to be cut. We will swallow them.”

Atli rushed his army onto the road. He wanted to reach the Burgundians before
they marched past a certain valley. He knew from his maps and his lookouts that this
valley would give him the high ground. The Burgundians would not be able to get past
him. He would drive them into the valley, and he would fight them until death, surrender,
or retreat. If they fled, he would hound them back to Burgundy. They would be so
weakened, so diminished, they would be unable to defend themselves, their women and
children, or their city.

Atli succeeded in forcing the Burgundians into the valley. The Burgundian army
was better armed and had more horses than his lookouts had led him to believe, but it was
no great matter. The Hunalanders outnumbered the Burgundians two to one. The outcome
was certain.

When the Burgundians did break and run, many more of them escaped than Atli
liked. It was not an organized retreat; it was hastily called, unexpected. They fled,
escaping in all directions, running for their lives. This surprised Atli a little, for the
Burgundians had shown more nerve in the past.

Only the Volsung, obvious not by his size or fine armor but by his skill and
ferocity, still fought. Atli began to move toward him, across the battlefield, shouldering
past his men. Atli’s vision was obscured by his helmet, but when he saw someone run
back for the Volsung, he knew it was Gunnar. He was obvious in his gleaming silver
byrnie and bright tunic. Gunnar grabbed the Volsung’s arm. The Volsung, moving
through instinct, spun and came near to breaking Gunnar’s head with his sword stroke. He stopped himself just in time as Gunnar nearly fell from the expected blow. There was a terse argument. One of Atli’s men tried to take advantage of the distraction and lunged for the Volsung’s exposed torso. The man’s head was tumbling from his shoulders before his arm went slack.

Atli knew he would not reach them in time if they ran, and they were already turning from the fight. He grabbed a fallen spear from the ground. He hurled it towards Gunnar. How the Volsung, with his back turned, sensed that spear, Atli asked himself for years after. The Volsung pushed Gunnar aside and the spear flew between them. But before the Volsung could pull the spear from the ground and send it back, Gunnar was tugging at his arm. They broke to run at last, disappearing into the trees with the rest of Burgundy’s men.

“This cowardice will be sung of for generations,” sneered Vingi. “Look at them. No more courage than rabbits.”

“So it would seem,” said Atli.

“No, we don’t need to. All we need to do is take Burgundy. Get the men on the road.”

As the Hunalanders marched the road, their feet caking with mud, they saw nothing of the Burgundians. With every mile, Atli grew more confident and more satisfied. After all this time, he was close to victory. He would set right the mistake of his father. The Burgundians, he was certain, were broken at last.
It was with great surprise, then, that he received news of an attack on the rearguard some hours later. An agitation swept through the ranks, and it took a good deal of shouting and shifting for word to reach him at all. As the column began to turn, another attack came from the trees, and the center was hit. The Burgundians, after achieving no more than the deaths of some fifty Hunalanders, fled again.

Atli’s thanes agreed that it showed the desperation of the Burgundians. They were defeated, and they knew it. This was all they had left in them. But if they thought such a pathetic effort would win them any glory or any place in Valhalla, they were mistaken. They had lost their chance for valor when they fled the battlefield. Now, they were an annoyance to Atli, nothing more.

These annoyances plagued Atli and his army for days. Sometimes the Burgundians, in bands of sixty or so, would attack from the trees, sometimes from a shallow, hidden spot in the river. Always these attacks were repelled, and the loss to Hunaland was never more than fifty men, sometimes only ten.

The Hunalanders, stretched by the narrow road into a long, thin column, were days down the road before a full count of the losses was made.

“So many?” demanded Atli when the report came to him. “It doesn’t seem possible.”

The commander who brought the news nodded grimly.

After this report, Atli took more account of these attacks, and he began to see that they were more than vain, random efforts at glory or vengeance. They were organized somehow. They were planned. He thought back to the fleeing of the Burgundians from the valley. He thought of the argument between the Volsung and Gunnar and of the
Volsung’s reluctance to leave the fight, and of the fact that he did, which was not like him. Atli began to think that he had missed something. He began to doubt himself.

He pushed on for another day or so, tightening the guard, sending out scouts, warning the men, threatening them. But nothing he did could stop the Burgundian attacks. They were short, fast, and brutal. When a Burgundian was finally captured and tortured, he confessed the presence of the hired swords and he confessed the plan, though he knew nothing of the overall organization. He knew only the orders of his own band. When the man’s ribs had been cut from his backbone and his lungs ripped from his chest cavity, Atli spoke with his thanes. Slowed as they were by their numbers and the mud of the road, Burgundy was still a five-day march. They pressed on for one more day, but after a night attack that left the Hunalanders reeling, Atli had to order the retreat.

By the time Atli reached Hunaland several days later, he had left a trail of bodies behind him. For every Hunalander still alive, at least four were dead. He was ruined. He felt certain of that. For many years he would wish himself dead. For many years he would know himself defeated. He would lock the gates of his kingdom while it decayed around him, preserving what was left, hating himself for clinging to so many broken pieces.

* * *

As the Burgundian army emerged from the Dark Forest, the guards posted there, who had stayed to warn the city and country folk if Regin’s plan failed and Atli, not Gunnar, came down the forest road, shouted to one another when Gunnar was seen at the head of the army. Gunnar’s proud smile told them of victory.
The captain of the guard rode out to meet Gunnar, hauling his horse to a stop with a jittery excitement. His eyes were wide with expectation and disbelief, his hands tight on the reins. “Hunaland is destroyed?”

“Much damaged, at the least. Atli will not trouble us for many years.”

“He lives, then?” The man’s disappointment was clear.

Gunnar’s slow answer showed his own frustration. “I’ve no word of his death. His body has not been seen, and no one claims to have killed him. Still,” Gunnar’s voice changed, reasserting triumph, “we have won, and Burgundy will celebrate tonight, tomorrow, and for many days to come. Send one of your men to the city ahead of us. The people must know of our victory before we arrive. The guard will stay here. If Atli lives, as he must, for the gods themselves seem to protect him, he’s desperate and beaten. I’m sure he’s furious, and I don’t trust him even now.”

When Gunnar led his men into the city, the loud cheering, the energy, the hastily gathered wildflowers still damp from the earth, and the tears in the eyes of so many people told him that victory had not been expected. These things also told him how tense, how despairing his people had been. In that moment, when he led his thanes and commanders and distinguished warriors through the city gates, he swore to himself that he would never again see Burgundy in such danger. Burgundy would retain its warriors; it would continue to be a place of strength and hardiness and valor. And it would recover its wealth. It would be everything. It would be a place of legend, unforgettable. He would make it so.

From the corner of his eye, Gunnar saw Sigurd twisting in his saddle, and he followed Sigurd’s gaze to the watching platform. Regin stood there with the gate-guards,
looking down on the procession of the army. Gunnar tried to catch his eye to nod his thanks, but Regin was not looking at him.

Gunnar heard Gudrun’s voice among the shouting, and he turned to see her pushing through the people to reach him. She laughed, her face bright with joy as she came to Raudfaxi’s side.

“Oh, Gunnar!”

He could think of nothing to say, nothing to signify his feelings. He reached down and gripped her hand and said only, “Yes.”

She patted Raudfaxi’s neck and smiled at Gunnar again, then she stepped around him to Sigurd.

She said, “You’ve come back.”

Sigurd nodded down at her. “Always.”

She reached up her arm to him. He leaned over to grip her elbow and swung her up behind him. Her arms snaked around his waist and she leaned against him.

Gunnar looked away from this, fighting annoyance, at her, at Sigurd, determined to show nothing but confidence and victory on his face.

From Sigurd’s other side, Hogni said, “Well, Gunnar? We cannot fit everyone in the hall to feast and drink.”

“The feast will be taken to the men. We’ll hold our games and give our thanks under the sky so the gods may see. We’ll eat with the warriors of Burgundy. Regin brought us a thought, but they made it a victory.”

The feasting went through the night and into the dawn. Huge fires were made in the fields, and meat was roasted there. Mead and wine, the last of the winter stores, were
brought out in barrels. The people of the city, women and children, the old, those who could not fight, and the folk of the countryside gathered there on the field outside the city gates.

On the third night of feasting, Sigurd walked through the dark swaths between the fires. He had seen something, out of the corner of his eye, something he had not seen for years. He had seen the king, silent and wraithlike, at the edge of the celebrations. Gunnar, he could tell, had not noticed. He had been untroubled, talking with the men, laughing, playing his harp, moving from fire to fire. Sigurd would not disturb him with talk of his father. More than that, he was curious to see the old man. He wanted to see for himself what time had wrought of him.

He felt a prickle at the back of his neck and turned to find Regin some paces behind him. He crossed his arms and waited.

“I don’t know how you do that,” said Regin, closing the space between them. “You’re the only man I know who can sense danger without seeing it.”

“Is that what you are, Regin? Danger?”

“Only to some. You saw him also? Is that why you left pretty Gudrun by the fire?”

“Saw who?”

Regin’s face was obscured by the dark, but enough light spread from the fires to catch in the whites of his eyes, to make them shine. “Gunnar’s father, of course. He looks a little rougher than the last time I was in Burgundy, but I recognized him.”

“What do you want with him? He won’t speak to you. He speaks with no one but Gunnar.”
“Is that so? What’s wrong with him?”

Sigurd stiffened. He could feel Regin’s interest, like a wave of heat. He tried to make his voice casual: “No one can say. His mind is gone. The gods have cursed him.”

“Why?”

“Only he seems to know.”

“Gunnar must know.”

Sigurd grew uncomfortable. Regin’s intensity seemed to cast a spell over him, and he couldn’t answer at first. Then he forced out a sharp reply, “He doesn’t.”

“Ah, Sigurd, you never could lie.”

“Leave Gunnar be. He doesn’t need to be troubled about his father.”

“You reproach me unjustly,” said Regin, though he did not sound offended. “I have no intention of troubling Gunnar. Goodnight, Sigurd. Enjoy the food.”

Regin was gone before Sigurd could say anything more; he seemed simply to melt into the darkness around him. That Regin was after something Sigurd felt certain. He had only once before seen this intensity in him. He had seen it when Regin spoke of his brother. A chill of foreboding went through him.

* * *

Regin moved, patternless, among the bonfires, losing Sigurd, searching for Giuki. There was something he wanted to know, a suspicion he needed confirmed.

He had never stopped wondering what had led Sigurd and Gunnar across the Heath to Fafnir. Ragnhild, he was certain, had had some hand in it, but that was not
enough. She might have given them curiosity, but something had driven them beyond that, all the way across the barren Heath, through the ruined city, into the hall and dragon’s grasp.

Sigurd, as a child, had shown an interest in the Heath, but he had known nothing more than the half-remembered tales that something terrible was there. Besides, it had not been until after Gunnar had arrived that the boys had grown secretive. In the winter after Gunnar’s arrival, there had been a sneakiness in them, an agitation. That was not Sigurd’s nature. Sigurd kept himself hidden, yes, but it was not deliberate; it was not sneaky. Gunnar must have started it. More to the point, Gunnar was the one from the area. These rough facts had been enough to get Regin thinking. He had had much time to think these last few years. He had searched his memory as he would search a pile of parchments, skimming through buried information, looking for a clue.

When he had been forced to flee Fafnir all those centuries ago, after Fafnir had murdered their father and taken the dragon-shape as his true form, Regin had fled north and not looked back for years. It was those years that concerned him now, those years when he had turned his mind away from the Heath and the treasure. What had Burgundy been in those years? What connection, then or later, might there be between the Giukings and the dragon?

A possibility—vague, unexpected, almost impossible—had come to him one day as he had worked in his smithy. He had been folding steel to strengthen it, to find a pattern, and he had realized something. Before the events that had led to Fafnir’s transformation, when Regin had lived in his father’s hall, there had been no Burgundy. That had never struck him as strange before. Kingdoms come and go, and Burgundy had
been born many years after Regin had turned his mind to the north. But where had the Giukings come from? What had they been before they were kings? Peasants who made something more of themselves? Warlords who settled? Ambitious offshoots of another royal line? Or had they been something else? For there was another unanswered question: Where had the Nibelungs, the original owners of the hoard, the dwarves who had made it, where had they gone?

Regin found the mad king at last on the outskirts of the camp, moving away into the dark. He could not see the king clearly, but it was obvious that he walked with discomfort. He was hunched and weak. His right arm was limp and swung awkwardly at his side.

“Where do you go, king?” asked Regin as he drew near.

Giuki jerked as though he had been struck. He lost his balance as he spun towards the question. He fell to the ground. His breath rattled, and he dragged the lifeless arm into his lap.

Regin crouched beside him, wrinkling his nose at the smell of the man’s unwashed body. He was close enough to see that Giuki’s clothes were old and tattered, fine garments once but little more than rags now.

Regin said, “You’ve fallen some since I saw you last, when I came to take your son. He came back a little different, didn’t he? He’s changed your kingdom almost beyond recognition.”

When that was answered by nothing more than a flick of the eyes, Regin tried another attack. He must get Giuki to speak. He demanded, “Why do you cling to life? Gunnar is king here. You’re finished. Let him take up the arm-ring of kingship. It is his
time, not yours.” When that, too, was unanswered, Regin thought for a moment. Then:

“Do you disapprove of Gunnar? Why should you? He’s making Burgundy a reflection of his Volsung friend. Can you not see Sigurd’s influence here? Should you not be pleased with that? What should Burgundy be—what can it be—if not a pale reflection of something greater?”

Giuki was shaking his head. His voice, when he dredged it up, was weak. “And whose fault is that? You did not make Gunnar into what he should be.”

“I cannot make silver into gold. What did you want Gunnar to be?”

Giuki made no answer, grasping at his silence again.

“Gunnar cannot be what he is not. He is not a Volsung. He is not of the gods, as Sigurd is. Gunnar is of the Giukings, and he cannot move beyond that. He cannot be anything but what the Giukings are.” Regin’s words were heavy with meaning. He finished, “Or should I call them something else?”

Giuki seemed to shrink.

“It is so then. The Giukings have another name, an older name.”

“No.” Giuki’s voice was a whisper.

Regin looked at him with disgust and satisfaction. “How have your people grown to men? How have you taken on that semblance?”

“No!”

“You will never have the treasure. There’s nothing in your blood strong enough to take it. I, at least, found the right weapon to wield. You were not so wise, Nibelung.”

Giuki made an inarticulate sound of pain and denial. He scrambled away from Regin, as though Regin would grab him. He heaved to his feet, swaying, and stumbled
through the dark. He was noisy, his feet clumsy. He would have been easy to follow, easy
to stop, but Regin let him go. He neither needed nor wanted anything more of Giuki.

* * *

When Giuki’s absence was discovered the next day, Sigurd approached Regin in
his chamber. Beyond the chamber, the hall was noisy with the search, and Sigurd closed
the door behind him. Regin was mending a tear in his cloak. His fingers were light on the
bone needle, sewing an even, invisible line. Sigurd watched Regin’s hands, thinking of
the skill within them, wondering if Regin could indeed reforge a broken sword.

“Grimhild’s women would do that for you,” he said, taking a chair.

“I’ve done for myself for a long time. I don’t mind it.”

“I’m no judge of it, but I’m sure women would find you handsome enough. You
have land. Why do not take a wife?”

“I did once.” Regin’s stitching did not pause.

Sigurd was rocked back. All his ideas of Regin spun. “Really?”

“She was very beautiful. But she grew old and she died.”

“You sound very cold.”

Regin gave a careless shrug. “It was long ago. Only hatred can last forever. Love
fades.”

“You’ve never loved anyone since?”

“No.”
Sigurd tried to imagine the years of Regin’s life, but such time was unreal to him. He could catch a glimpse of it, nothing more. “I didn’t come in here to speak of love,” he said roughly. “There’s something more pressing.”

“The disappearing king?”

“I never found him last night. Did you?”

“I saw him head back to the city. Did you say nothing to Gunnar? I’m surprised. I thought you would inform him.”

Sigurd shifted with guilt. “I didn’t. And he was not pleased when I told him this morning.”

“If you told him the king was outside the city last night, why are they bothering to search the hall?”

“I think they’re hoping for a simple solution.”

“I think they should be glad, Gunnar especially. It’s high time he took the kingship.”

Sigurd rubbed at his beard, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“Oh come, Sigurd. You know it’s true. Gunnar will be a far better king than his father.”

“That is so. But why do you assume Giuki won’t be found?”

“Call it hope.”

“If you want to hope for something, hope that they find Giuki and that he’s dead. Only that will give Gunnar a clean coronation.”

“Either way,” said Regin, “Gunnar will be king. What do the circumstances matter?”
“It matters to Gunnar, or else he would have made himself king already.”

“I suppose. Perhaps that’s why Gunnar is the best of his kin.” He paused, then added, “As much as that can say.”

Sigurd straightened in the chair, tensed as though to spring. “Do you insult him?”

“Not in the least.”

“Then what do you mean ‘as much as that can say’? Explain yourself.”

Regin ignored Sigurd’s anger. “I mean that it seems that Gunnar has overcome the weakness of his kin.”

Anger now mingled with wariness, Sigurd demanded, “And what is that?”

Regin made no answer. He set the last stitch into his cloak and examined his work.

“You know,” said Sigurd with sudden understanding.

“Know what?”

“You know about the Giukings.”

“Of course. Gunnar told you? I’m surprised.”

“He told me some things. Of the Giukings. You told me something of the Nibelungs. What Gunnar would not say became obvious after…after you spoke of your brother.”

“Gunnar has not acknowledged it then? That his ancestors were dwarves?”

Sigurd looked away. “It doesn’t matter. Gunnar is what he is apart from that.”

“Oh, really? Does your Volsung heritage, your ancestry through Odin, mean nothing to you? Do you really expect that Gunnar’s heritage, that the taint of Nibelung blood means nothing to him? It meant something to his father.”
“Gunnar is beyond that.”

“Is he?” said Regin with disbelief and challenge. “So he doesn’t want the hoard? Doesn’t care about it at all?”

“He knows it can’t be taken.”

“Does he now. And do you know that?”

Sigurd’s jaw clenched. “I don’t wish to speak of this.”

“Why? Because you want it?”

“I care nothing for the treasure.”

“I believe that’s true. But I think you do care for something else. Glory. And challenge. The man who slays the dragon will be remembered forever.”

Sigurd would not discuss this point; instead, he cast an accusation: “He’s your brother.”

Regin said sharply, “He did not remember that when he cast me out and left me to beg.”

“He—”

“The slayer of Fafnir will live in legend. He will touch something immortal. He will have a moment of absolute perfection.”

The hair rose on Sigurd’s arms, but he said, “I have more important things to do. I have my father to think of.”

“Will you do only one thing with your life? Revenge is common, so is war, so is kingship. They’re hardly matters of legend. Is that all you’ll ask of yourself?”

“Regin, I will not speak of this.” Sigurd moved to his feet, his pulse beating visibly in his neck.
Regin made no response. He watched the fury tightening Sigurd’s body, the power that had no release. Sigurd was breathing as though he were in pain. His hand was moving to his sword. Regin’s eyes followed the hand with the first flicker of worry. Sigurd’s fist clenched and he turned abruptly away. He strode to the door and flung it open. It crashed against the wall.

Regin sat listening to the receding footsteps as they struck the floor, sat staring at the juddering door until it was still. He knew he was right, but something he had not expected was beginning to trouble him. To watch Sigurd, to see that intensity—it gripped him. At moments, he did not even know whether he was keener to see Fafnir’s death, or to see Sigurd’s hand behind the blow.

* * *

When the king was not found in the hall or the city, riders searched for him throughout the countryside. After seven days, the search was abandoned. After much prodding from his thanes, after enduring the expectant looks of his people, Gunnar agreed to hold the king-making ceremony.

It was the second such ceremony Sigurd had attended; Aelf’s had been the first. All was much the same: the sacrifice of animals, the blood that was splattered throughout the temple and over the people, the pledges of fealty. Sigurd made no pledge. His pledge had already been made, years ago on the bank of a river. He would make no other promise to Gunnar. After all, he would be a king himself one day, perhaps someday soon. He could not subject himself to Gunnar. Gunnar understood that. He had asked nothing,
had seemed to expect nothing. In fact, Gunnar himself had suggested Sigurd head north after the feasting. Gudrun had not been pleased, but Sigurd could do nothing about that. He had other responsibilities.

On the morning Sigurd was to leave, Regin came to him, dressed for travel.

Regin said, “We go the same direction. Ride with me.”

Sigurd had avoided him since their last conversation. There was something in Regin’s eyes—an understanding—that he did not like. Still, he could not bring himself to refuse.
Chapter 22

Sigurd and Regin spoke little on the ride north. Ten days of travel brought them to Regin’s house. Sigurd did not want to stop there, or so he told himself. He wanted to ride on, past the bridge and the house, to part ways with Regin, to continue north and see what support he might draw from Denmark. But he did not speak, did not argue or question, when Regin turned to the bridge.

As Nott clopped hollowly over the planks behind Regin’s horse, Sigurd cursed himself for not turning away miles ago. He knew why Regin wanted him to come here, knew what Regin wanted. He should not give him the chance to ask again. He should turn away, now, before it was too late. But he followed Regin up the hill, followed him to the stable where they left their horses, followed him inside the house.

That first night, Sigurd avoided Regin’s eyes and withdrew early to his bed, and nothing of importance was spoken. The next day began much the same. It was planting
time, and there was a great deal to do. Sigurd spent the daylight hours helping in the fields. He was bored, abrupt in both speech and action. The work reminded him of the long, tedious days he had spent in these fields as a boy. It made him jittery to restrict his movements, to drag the earth again and again over the seeds, to be so gentle and so consistent.

Regin showed no such impatience. He walked the fields with a bag of seeds, scattering the grains into the furrows with a loose, relaxed hand. At one point, Sigurd demanded of him whether he did not find farming tedious.

“It must be done,” was all Regin would give him.

The evening meal was served to them by a girl some two or three winters younger than Sigurd. She was simply dressed, a girl from a village or farm. She had a common, pretty face, which she kept lowered and still. Most of her hair was pulled into braids, but some of it hung like bunched wheat around her face, obscuring her. Sigurd had thought nothing of her the night before; he had grown accustomed to servants in Gunnar’s hall and had begun to take little notice of them. But this girl, for all her shyness, caught his attention now.

A hunk of fresh bread in one hand and his trencher of stew in the other, he watched as she handed Regin his own trencher. Her still face was intent on Regin. He said, “Thank you, Anrid,” and a smile trembled across the girl’s lips.

She turned to the fire, shifting the half-eaten logs with an iron rod. She stirred the pot of stew.

“Anrid,” said Regin gently, “thank you. You may go.”
She started a little at the words and withdrew the dripping ladle. Her fingers shivered slightly as she set the ladle on the hearthstones. Head bowed, she walked briskly from the hall.

When she was gone, Sigurd said, “No one ever served you here when I was a boy. Except, of course, well…” Sigurd did not want to bring Ragnhild’s name into words, but Regin heard it anyway, and his face stiffened.

“Anrid keeps the house,” said Regin.

“She’s very…quiet.”

“Life has been hard for her. But she’s not always so quiet as this. I think she’s afraid of you.”

“Of me? And she’s not of you? The wizard?”

“She didn’t know at first who I was. I found her on the roadside. She had been hurt, attacked, I think, by outlaws or travelers. I brought her back here. When she learned my name, she was frightened for a moment, but then she would not rest if I left the room. Afterwards, she wouldn’t leave.”

“Rescuer,” said Sigurd, dipping his bread into the stew. “That’s a new role for you. You left me on the roadside.”

“So you are still sour about that.”

“I never was.”

Regin raised an eyebrow in question but shrugged as though it did not matter. He said, “You didn’t need my help or my protection. As I recall, you killed two outlaws after I left you.”
At Regin’s words, Sigurd had a flash of those two men, sprawled on the ground before the inn, drunk and helpless, bleeding out their lives. All the men he had killed in Burgundy’s war, all those deaths, and he was haunted by none of them. It was the outlaws who sometimes came to him in sleep. Their faces he could no longer remember, but their bodies he could still see. An image of the fat one, of his slack belly and stained clothes, of him looming, began to rise. Sigurd shut it from his mind, threw a door closed against it. His voice cut suddenly through the silence. “No, I did not need your help.”

Regin watched him, not responding.

Wanting to discomfit Regin in turn, Sigurd remarked, “It’s quiet here without Ragnhild’s birds. When the owl sat up there”—he nodded towards the rafters—“there was rarely true silence. You could hear him moving. You always knew he was there. Skadi’s not like that. He knows the value of silence. Did you notice he sits now where he once did? On the roof peak?” Sigurd felt a moment of smugness as Regin’s hand stilled on his spoon, but then he wished he had not spoken. He’d given Regin an opening.

“I did see. I have not missed the birds. Or her. She, I think, is still with Fafnir. She always had a strong connection to him.”

Sigurd almost asked, “Why?” but did not let the word leave his mouth.

Regin seemed to hear the unspoken question, or to see it in Sigurd’s face. He said, “She is drawn to power. She was always that way.”

That raised another question for Sigurd, one he could not keep silent, and he spoke it like a challenge: “Then why did she leave him? Why was she here with you?”
“She was here when you arrived. But at that time, she had not been here long. She had been with Fafnir. She had been with him, I believe, since he murdered our father. Centuries. You could still see him in her eyes, like he was part of her.”

Regin had not answered the question, which made Sigurd suspicious. There was something more to this. “Then why was she here? Why did she come to you?”

“She did not come here for me.”

A chill swept through Sigurd, a warning, that went to the roots of his hair. “What do you mean?”

Regin looked at him as though he should already have the answer. “She came here because of you.”

Sigurd’s trencher nearly slid from his knee. He grabbed it before it fell, splattering stew into the rushes.

“It was not obvious to you?”

“Of course not. Did she say so?”

“Not exactly. But, Sigurd, think. Ragnhild sees the future.”

“You said once that she does not see clearly.”

“That’s true. What she sees is dim, confusing, difficult to understand. But for all that, she sees more than you or I. She came here not long before you arrived, only a few weeks before I left for Denmark. She may not have expected you, for I doubt she could have seen that clearly, but she obviously knew that someone was coming, someone who was important to her for some reason. She must have known that something was beginning, something to do with Fafnir, for she cares about nothing else. She came here to see.”
Sigurd’s voice was intent: “Then what did she see?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then what makes you believe?”

“Do you remember when I told you of Fafnir? Of my family and the treasure?”

“Of course,” said Sigurd impatiently.

“I told you that Ragnhild had seen a great destiny for my brother. That she saw him surrounded by death. She may not have known what that meant, but she was right. Her vision may be clouded, but it should not be dismissed.”

Sigurd was half out of his chair. “That’s not what you told Gunnar! Ragnhild said to Fafnir—I will never forget it—she said that she had seen Gunnar’s fate. You told Gunnar not to trust her.”

Regin looked easy in his chair. He ate some of his stew before answering. “You make trust too simple. I do not trust Ragnhild to give a straightforward answer. That does not mean that I dismiss her. She came here expecting something. That cannot be denied, for she would not have come here otherwise. As soon as she arrived here, I knew something was coming. It was her arrival, as much as Hjalprek’s funeral, that drove me north to Denmark to find you. I was guessing, but I was right. Ragnhild may not have known what she would find here, and I did not know for certain at the time that I was bringing was what she was seeking, but I trust now and trusted then that she knew she would find something of value here, something important to her and her interests. What she found—what I brought—was you.”

“Why should she take notice of me?” asked Sigurd, unable to stop himself, knowing what answer he would get.
“As I think you well know, she saw, or felt, or sensed that you would have some part in the fate of my brother.”

Sigurd was shaking his head. “Gunnar was here, too. It was for him she saw a fate. What makes you so certain she noticed me at all?”

“One important reason: Gunnar cannot do it. I don’t know what she saw for him, but it doesn’t matter. I know it was you she wanted to see—”

“How?”

“Because! You are the one of the gods! Do you really think that Gunnar’s fate will be greater than yours? Do you really think that he can hope to challenge Fafnir? Well? Answer me!”

The answer came hard and resentful, inevitable: “No.”

“What Ragnhild did not understand was you yourself. She sensed power in you—I am certain of that—but she was not wise. She was not wary. She saw that you mattered but not why. I see why. Do you not know it? Will you deny it? You will kill Fafnir.”

“I will not!”

“Why would you hide from such a fate? Why would you reject it? To kill Fafnir will be to make yourself immortal.”

“You know why, Regin.”

“Because of Gunnar? As you yourself admit, he will not take the hoard. He does not have that strength. Will you be held back by his weakness?”

“It is not that simple.”

“It is that simple.”
Sigurd fell into silence. He would not look at Regin, but he knew those eyes, pale and piercing, were on him. He looked down at his hands, which were clenched on the trencher and spoon. He felt ridiculous gripping them like that, like weapons, and he set them roughly on the hearthstones. A sick feeling was in his gut. It was the feeling he got whenever Gunnar called a retreat, whenever he was forced to leave a fight. Regin was defeating him. He wanted to believe that Regin was simply more skilled with words, nothing more. But there was more. Regin just might be right. Yet Sigurd could not let him see that. He could not walk away or give in. He would not accept defeat.

He raised his eyes to Regin and asked, “Why do you hate Fafnir so much? Is it the hoard? Gold? With your skill, you could have all the gold you want. You could set yourself up in a king’s hall again. You could be the greatest smith since Weland. I’ve seen your skill. And I’ve never seen its equal.”

“Is that what I should be? A smith?”

“It’s what you are.”

“No. No, it is not. I am a king’s son, Sigurd. As you are. Would you be content to earn your living from steel—a paid warrior—when you come from something more? I once asked you whether you would be content as one of Aelf’s thanes, as anyone’s thane. Do you remember what you said? You said no.”

Regin had turned the argument again, and Sigurd struggled for an answer.

While Sigurd floundered, Regin said, “You take your obligation to avenge your father very seriously. Should I not do the same? Your father actually died in battle. Mine was murdered. Should I not avenge him? Is that not my duty?”
Here Sigurd could fight. He shot back, a little smugly, “You cannot avenge him. Not without earning yourself a greater shame. To kill your brother would bring on you immeasurable dishonor.”

“I have no intention of killing him.”

“But you want me to. Then your obligation of revenge would come against me.”

“You can pay me wergild,” said Regin offhandedly. “A portion of the hoard, which would be yours by right of conquest.”

“Then it is the hoard you want.”

“If you want to think that I cannot stop you.”

There was a rare edge in Regin’s voice, a hint of emotion that Sigurd recognized. It took him back to his earliest days with Regin, when they had traveled south together. They had been confronted on the road by a man who had wanted their money. Regin had scared him with talk of Hel, the goddess of shameful death. Regin claimed to have seen her once, claimed that she was coming for that man. Later, when Sigurd had asked of Hel, asked if Regin had really seen her, Regin had said he saw her in a dream. In the dream, she had been coming for someone he hated above all others. It had been years since Sigurd had thought of that moment, but it came back to him now at the tight fury, the pain, and the hatred in Regin’s voice.

Sigurd said, understanding now, “You do want him dead. Why do you hate him so much? Is it his power? Is it that he’s greater than you?”

“Does it matter?”
For the first time, Sigurd knew he had the better of Regin. He would expose him at last, see him for what he was. “Yes, it matters. And if you don’t tell me, I will never speak of this again. I will walk away from it.”

Regin was silent for a long time, still and furious as a hunted boar backed into the bushes. Then he rose roughly from his chair. He strode from the hearth. Sigurd thought he would leave the hall, but he turned from the shadowed edges and strode back again toward the light. He turned again to follow this same path: away from Sigurd and back. At last he stopped. He sat in his chair, tense, rigid.

He said, “You know most of the story. I have told you.”

“You have told me this: Loki killed your brother, Otter, not recognizing him as a man in otter-shape. When your father learned of this, he bound Loki and Odin, who was with him, in his hall. Loki offered wergild, a huge treasure. Loki brought the treasure to pay for his murder of Otter. Fafnir then killed your father for this gold. That does not explain why you have held so much hatred. You want the hoard; I see that whether you admit it or not. Perhaps you want to avenge your father—”

“Of course I want to avenge him.”

“—but there’s more to it.”

“When did you get so canny?”

“What shame is on you, Regin? You told me that only hatred lasts forever. I think it is only shame that lasts forever. I think it is shame that makes hatred.”

“Words of wisdom from the warrior?”

“Tell me the rest.”

“Fafnir murdered our father. That’s the end of the story.”
“All right. Have it your way.” Sigurd rose from his chair. Without another look at Regin, he turned away. He walked the path Regin had taken, a path of crushed rushes. But he did not turn back at the shadows. He opened the door into the night and left Regin behind him.

* * *

Sigurd sat for many cold hours at the top of the slope that ran down to the river. He looked across the valley, ghostly pale under the moon. The valley faded to black at the edges, and he could see nothing of the Heath beyond it. He knew, though, what the Heath must look like now. It glittered, dead yet dangerous, otherworldly. He remembered walking across it with Gunnar, how the moonlight had picked at it, how the stones had shimmered.

He wondered what was wrong with him that he had tried to drive Regin to speak of Fafnir. He did not want to hear. He did not want any of it. But the argument had confused him. He no longer felt certain of his own reasons. He could not even quite remember what he had said.

Skadi came down from the roof. He perched on Sigurd’s knee, silent and thoughtful. Sigurd stroked the falcon’s broad white breast with the back of his finger.

He did not know at what point Regin joined him. Suddenly, he found Regin beside him, sitting in the damp spring grass, looking down across the valley with him. Regin’s hair and beard were so black and his clothes so dark that his skin seemed to shine. Like the Heath, he looked a little otherworldly himself. For a moment, Sigurd had
the sense of Regin that he had had as a boy: that Regin was full of fate. For a moment, he wanted to believe him, to trust him, to abandon everything else.

When Regin spoke at last, his voice seemed to come from a distance. His eyes were unfocused, as though he had nothing in him but his story. He began: “As our father grew obsessed with the hoard, he would not move from it. He would hardly leave the treasury. Fafnir was so angry. Furious. He wanted his share. Always Hreidmar had been attentive to him. Always, he had given Fafnir his due and shown him favor. But not with the hoard. Hreidmar meant to keep it for himself. When this was obvious to Fafnir, and Fafnir murdered him—right there in the treasury—something happened. Fafnir changed. For years, I thought that he had changed somehow, at some point, before the murder, that it was his change that led to the murder. But I realized eventually that the real change came after. The potential for murder had always been within him.

“When Fafnir struck his sword into our father’s back, his scream of fury brought Hreidmar’s thanes running. But when they saw what had happened, none would raise hand or steel against Fafnir. There was some confusion—Fafnir was perhaps the new king—but they were afraid of him also. Many of them were loyal and would have been willing to die for Hreidmar in battle or defense, but all lived uncomfortably with the knowledge of Fafnir’s other form. Their hesitation did not serve them well, or the kingdom.

“For some days, Fafnir brooded over the treasure, as our father had. But there was something different in his brooding. Often when I passed by the treasury—he had barred the door and allowed no one to enter after our father’s body had been removed—I would hear Fafnir weeping. Sometimes, too, I would hear him speaking, though he was alone.
The only semblance of life in that chamber was Otter’s gilded skin, standing in the corner among the other treasures.

“When Fafnir finally emerged from the treasury, he came with red-rimmed eyes, and his face was haggard. He went into the hall for the morning meal and was served in silence. None knew what to say or do. At last he spoke. He turned to me and said, ‘What has happened?’ And I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He began to weep. I said, ‘You know what has happened.’ I began to say, ‘You murdered our father,’ but he cut me off. ‘No,’ he said. Now I was angry. He would deny his deed? To me, who had seen it? I rose from my chair and said, ‘You have murdered our father and brought much evil on yourself and this kingdom. Neither the treasure nor the land is rightfully yours. You have put yourself outside.’ Fafnir sprang from his chair. He drove me to the ground with the weight of his body. His hands clenched my throat. He might have killed me then, but someone shouted from behind: ‘Do not make it worse!’ Fafnir let go of my throat and rose, shaking with fury.

“As he turned to see who spoke, he transformed. Never before had he taken the dragon-shape in the hall. The people ran screaming, terrified, though they had all seen the dragon before, in the sky. Their screams echoed around the stone hall. Fafnir lashed out at those who fled, striking them down with fire and claw. I scrambled out of his way, crept among the tables and the bodies to the entrance. Before I escaped onto the ledge, I looked back. Save for Ragnhild, who stood wide-eyed along the wall, Fafnir had massacred everyone inside, down to the last child. When all was silent again, he turned his huge body, staring around at the dead. Then he screamed and slithered toward the entrance. Whether he saw me, I do not know. He made no sign. Without pausing, he leapt
from the ledge, screaming still, twisting into the sky. The people in the city below began
to run in terror, fleeing through the streets. Fafnir plunged down into the city. He began
to tear it apart, smashing the buildings with his tail, blowing fire through the streets and
alleys. I do not know if he killed everyone, but he killed enough. When the city was
destroyed, he took to the air again, flying over the countryside, raining fire. I lost sight of
him, but I learned later that he had burned the river valley—this river valley—had burned
all the farmland.”

Here Regin paused. He seemed to come out of his story. He rubbed unconsciously
at the hard knot of bone on the bridge of his nose. His fingers strayed to his mouth,
covering it. When he dropped his hand, he took up the story again.

“It was near to evening when I saw him in the sky again. I had not left the ledge. I
was overcome. He landed beside me. He backed into the hall, squeezing through the
archway. I could not see him. After some time, I said, ‘What have you done?’ Eventually
he answered me: ‘I am the dragon.’ I said, ‘You’ve ruined us,’ and he said again, ‘I am
the dragon.’”

Regin paused again, swallowing hard. He still sat cross-legged, his elbows
digging into his knees. He had not moved, but there was there was no stillness in him. He
was like the rock on the mountainside when the soil has eroded, a boulder waiting to fall.
When his voice came again, it came with urgency, his words chasing one another.

“We spoke no more through the night. Neither of us moved. But when the sun
rose, he said, ‘You have to leave.’ I asked him where I was supposed to go, what I was
supposed to do. He did not care. I told him he must at least give me some portion of
wealth, or else I would be destitute. He began to growl, and the tip of his snout edged into
the daylight. His lip rose, and the curve of his teeth was not two paces from me. I scrambled back. I fled down the slope. I ran through the town, still smoldering, stinking with death. I didn’t stop running until I reached the forest. I fled north, starving as I traveled. My clothes became rags. I was filthy. My hair was knotted and coarse. I didn’t stop—I scarcely slept, barely breathed—until I reached Denmark. There I lay like a beggar on the floor of the king’s hall.

“For several hundred years, while I worked as the king’s smith there in Denmark, never aging, I heard rumors of the Heath and of Fafnir. It was said he killed all who passed near him on the Rhine, killed any who approached the Heath at all. Always he was adding to the hoard, stealing the treasures of merchants and kings. Sometimes he would venture far from his lair, killing and stealing. He was, as he had said, the dragon. I wonder sometimes if he was ever really anything else.”

Regin fell silent then, and he and Sigurd both stared out across the river valley.

At last Sigurd said, “You’ve lost much.”

“You are fortunate, Sigurd, to have so much power in you. My father had power, Fafnir has it; I know what it looks like. You will always have the strength to fight. You will never know what it is to be powerless; you will never understand that. You have no idea what life is without that power. I do. How could I stand against Fafnir? How could anyone? Except you. You are the only one I’ve seen, in all my long life, who could challenge Fafnir. You are the only one.”

“Why do the gods not punish him?”

“I think the gods do not care,” said Regin bitterly. “I think they have forgotten.”

“That cannot be.”
“Well, one thing is certain: they do not act for us. We must act, Sigurd. We must each do what we are capable of doing. How else should we live?”

Sigurd did not answer. He would not admit the truth of Regin’s words. He could not, for they led inevitably to another truth.

After a time, he heard Regin rise beside him, heard his footsteps over the grass, heard the opening and closing of the door to the house. Sigurd sat, still as Skadi on his knee, still as the lifeless remains of houses and walls, half buried by time, in the river valley. His mind was almost as still, denying thought. But beneath thought, in some place deeper, something was moving toward a grim certainty.

* * *

In the morning, Sigurd looked for Regin. He went to the fields, where the men were continuing to plant. They had not seen him. He went to the dairy, where he found Anrid straining curd. He asked her of Regin.

Her answer was quiet, her mouth obscured by the hair that hid her face. He could not understand. He wavered uncertainly between asking again and leaving her alone.

She said, louder, “The smithy.”

He gave her an awkward, rough, “Thanks,” and hurried from the dairy.

He hesitated at the rough opening in the hill. He had never been inside. Regin had forbidden it. As a boy, he had sometimes been tempted, especially when Regin had been away, but he had not cared enough to push thought into action. Now, standing at the mouth, considering how cave-like the smithy was, thinking of the dim earthiness of it, he
halted. This was Regin’s, a place he kept to himself. Sigurd did not know if he wanted to enter. He almost turned away, but he felt the cowardice in that. Setting his jaw, a hand on his sword hilt, he passed into the cave.

The bones of the hill were naked here, rough edges of rock jutting from the walls. The floor was packed earth. Braziers shivered light over the stones and the floor; they flickered against a thin silver mirror, whose beaten surface scattered light everywhere. The forge and its bellows stood to one side, dark and empty. A heavy, sturdy worktable crouched under the mirror’s light. Regin sat there, a file motionless in one hand, a half-sharpened knife in the other. He was staring at Sigurd, and Sigurd did not know if it was anger in his face, or just surprise.

“You were not in the fields,” explained Sigurd.

The words broke Regin’s stare. He tested the knife’s edge with his finger. “I have no patience for farm work today.”

Sigurd approached the table, but there was only one stool, and Regin was sitting on it. Sigurd leaned against the cave’s rough wall. “I’m leaving today. I must continue north.”

“And you will do what? You cannot take the Volsung lands alone. You’ve learned that, I think.”

“I only mean to see what aid I can get from Denmark. If it’s not enough, which it will not be, I will have to make other plans. Gunnar will help me, but Burgundy needs some time to recover first.”

“And so what will you do with yourself? Sit in Denmark? Talk about the weather with Aelf?”
Sigurd would not do that. He had come to something different in the night. Sitting long on the slope, he had fallen into an uneasy sleep and had woken restless. The moon had set and all had been dark, yet he had crossed the bridge and walked though the river valley, finding the old road with his feet. As the sky had faded, he had made a decision. He would not go to Denmark, not yet. He said to Regin, reluctant, as though it were an admission, “I will go first to my mother’s brother, Gripir.”

“Because he has foresight?”

“You know of him?”

Regin gave Sigurd an impatient look. “You want knowledge of the future. You want him to tell you what you should do. Why do you look for that? You don’t need to know the future to know what you will do. You have that answer inside yourself, if you would only admit it.”

“You think it is very simple, but it’s not.”

“You are the only one who’s making it complicated.”

Sigurd ignored this. “I must speak to Gripir. And not just about things that concern you. I have more to think of than that. But there is one more thing. I need something from you.”

Regin waited, expressionless.

Sigurd began cautiously, “You said once that you could reforge Gram, my father’s sword. Is that true?”

Regin hesitated, but his answer was firm: “Yes.”

“Will you do it?”
Regin was still for a long time, then he set the file and knife on the table. “Be clear with me. Why do you want to speak to your uncle? What do you hope to gain?”

Sigurd tried to shrug off the question, but Regin froze him with his pale stare. Sigurd struggled for an answer and came to only one word: “Certainty.”

“You will travel all that way and waste all that time to hear him, a stranger to you, say what you already know?”

“Do not mistake your convictions for mine.”

Regin demanded, “Is it only Gunnar that troubles you?”

Sigurd gave him the doubt, the problem that had woken him on the slope: “He is my foster-brother, my blood-brother.”

“And you would cast away your fate for that?”

“You do not know my fate, Regin.”

“But I do know something of foreknowledge. Don’t forget that it runs in my blood as well. I can promise you this: it will not help you.”

Sigurd gave him a stubborn silence.

“What do you think Odin would say to you?”

Sigurd’s answer was angry, “He can speak any time he likes. I’ve not asked him for silence. Now answer my question: will you reforge the sword?”

Regin looked thoughtful. He fingered the file on the table, spun it, watched it until it juddered to stillness. “A sword like that is not meant for ordinary tasks. Do you think Odin’s great ambition for it is that it be used in another battle, one that will be forgotten in three generations? A sword like that is meant to do more. If I reforge it for you, you must make me a promise. You must use it to kill Fafnir.”
“I will make no such promise.”

Regin’s hand gripped the file. “Why do you refuse? I can see in your eyes, in every line of your body that you want to do it!”

Sigurd crossed his arms. He looked away from Regin, denying it.

Regin pointed at him with the file. “If you do not do it, you will come to the end of your life old, decrepit, and ashamed.”

Sigurd’s voice was dangerous: “Do not pretend to know me.”

“I do know you.”

“And I know you, Regin, better than you think. You would have me kill Fafnir, let me believe I acted for myself, but all along I would be acting for you. You will not determine my actions. I will not act because of you.”

Regin looked a little surprised. Then he said, an apology in his voice, “You’re right. You must make your own decision. You must act for yourself.”

“That is the only way I will act.”

“What use then, to go to Gripir? Do you not go to ask him what to do?”

“That is not why I go.”

“What other use is knowledge of the future?”

“I told you. I want certainty. When I decide on my actions, I want to know they are right.”

“I do not think Gripir can give you the certainty you seek. You can find that in yourself. But go to him, if that’s what you want. I can be patient.”

* * *
Sigurd left by midday. Skadi flew down from his perch at the roof’s peak, alighting on Sigurd’s arm. For the second time in his life, Sigurd took a long look at the house’s strange design, at the curling of the iron bracings, at the carved figures along the roof. Where Skadi had perched was the curve of the dragon’s tail. The figure was upside down, its face plummeting into the earth. It made the hair rise along the back of his neck.

As he turned Nott to follow the river away from Regin’s, he could not stop himself from looking back once more. Smoke was rising from the nostril of the smithy, a thin line of it that disappeared high on the wind.
Chapter 23

Gripir, like his father before him, was known as the Island King. His kingdom, the island of Baltia, lay in the East Sea, known sometimes as the Sea Belt, and it was a rich place, ridged by high white cliffs and crowned with trees. The wealth of Baltia was in its great black horses and in amber. Winter storms would throw amber from the sea up onto Baltia’s shores, and the people would gather it in the spring. The dull nuggets would be polished to a shine, to reveal what color of honey they might contain. Amber was found in all but the poorest houses in Baltia, as beads, or in amulets and musical instruments, or in the hilt of a sword.

Sigurd found passage on a merchant ship, though it cost him all the silver pieces he carried. The merchant wanted also the gold-inlaid knife belt that Gunnar had given him, but Sigurd had only to look a deadly threat at the man for him to laugh uncomfortably and claim he spoke in jest.
The ship was heavy with furs and livestock, and Nott was corralled with the goats. Sigurd rowed with men when the winds were weak, for he could not sit idle in the ship. The men stared at him when he first took up an oar. He was conspicuous among them, dressed in his fine orange tunic over a red shirt, a short red cloak fastened with a bronze brooch at one shoulder. His weapons were clearly those of a noble. He carried not only the short knife in his fine belt but also a stout sword and a sturdy, elegant bow. All these things were gifts from Gunnar, for his fighting and his friendship. The other men in the ship wore loose, undyed linen clothing, and not one of them carried a sword. Their knives were unadorned and strapped to their bodies with rough, plain leather. The first man Sigurd sat beside edged away from him on the oar bench. Sigurd said nothing to put him at ease, gave him no hint of a smile, hardly even looked at him. But when it was clear that Sigurd meant only to row, the man settled into his rhythm again.

The first evening, the merchant approached Sigurd where he stood in the fore of the ship, looking out across the darkening waters, and pressed him for his name. When Sigurd spoke it, there were some gasps from the men near enough to hear, and a whisper ran through the ship.

“Why did you not say so?” the merchant asked. “There are many who say that the great champion of the Burgundians will be king in the Volsung lands one day. It is said that King Lygni grows anxious. Had you told me your name this morning, I wouldn’t have charged you passage.”

Sigurd’s voice cut at the merchant: “Do not call Lygni ‘king’ in my hearing.”

The merchant stammered his apology and invited Sigurd to share his meal in the rough square shelter near the fore-stem. Though the merchant pressed him for tales of the
Burgundian war and wanted to know what business he had with his uncle, he got none of
the entertainment he sought. Sigurd’s answers were abrupt and vague, and when he told
the merchant finally to mind his own business, the man stuttered to an uneasy silence. He
did not ask Sigurd to join him again.

The ship came into the harbor on a calm day in early summer. The harbor city
was wide and bright, the houses in good repair. It was not a large city, not even half the
size of Burgundy, but it had clearly not seen Burgundy’s hardships either. The hall could
be seen beyond the houses. It looked like all the other buildings, though larger and more
brightly painted.

As the ship’s crew maneuvered the craft to ease up to the dock, Sigurd thought
how his father would have sailed into this same harbor over twenty years ago, when he
came to ask for Hiordis in marriage. It was a strange feeling, for he had never before been
anywhere his father had been. It made him think of the Volsung hall and how he had
never seen it, how had never seen with his eyes the great tree, the Branstock, that grew in
the middle. It was in the trunk of that tree that Odin had lodged the sword, from the tree
that Sigmund had taken it. Sigurd closed his eyes at the thought of that moment, to see it
in his mind. What a powerful feeling it must have been, to draw that sword from the
Branstock. When the sword came loose in his hand, after so many had failed to take it,
Sigmund must have felt such anticipation, such certainty. He must have known that Odin
was with him. He must have known that the Norns would favor him, that he would
become legend.

A man, clothed in a deep blue coat over a yellow tunic, stood on the dock as the
merchant ship approached. He was flanked by two warriors with hands on their sword
hilts, and Sigurd was certain the man must be Gripir. He was light-haired, handsome, a little fine in the face but sturdy enough. He looked like Hiordis, or at least as Sigurd remembered her. It had been a long time, he realized suddenly, since he had seen her.

As Sigurd came down from the ship, Skadi on his arm and Nott following, the wooden ramp sagging under her weight, the man watched with a careful eye.

“Gripir?” said Sigurd as he drew near.

Gripir inclined his head, but his eyes did not leave Sigurd’s face. It was a look Sigurd knew well, of being weighed and judged, as though the worth of him could be found in his face.

Gripir said, “Good-day, Sigurd. I see you’ve brought my mare with you.”

Sigurd stroked her nose. “She’s served me well. Do you greet every merchant ship that comes into your harbor?”

A smile flickered across Gripir’s mouth. “No.”

“You knew I was coming?”

The smile flickered again, twitching a stiffness from Gripir’s lips, like the smile was something unfamiliar. “I knew you would come soon and on a day of bright light. We’ve had a week of clouds, and yet, today, here is the sun. And here are you.”

Sigurd paused at the look of knowing on Gripir’s face. It was a strange look, confident, certain, but with something more under it. If Sigurd had not seen it so many times at the end of his sword, he might not have known it, for it was subtle, so well woven into the confidence that it was nearly invisible. Fear. It stopped Sigurd a moment, but then he moved forward again and clasped hands with Gripir. His uncle’s skin was
cold. But for his strength, it felt like death was coursing through him, and Sigurd took his hand back before it was polite. Gripir did not seem to notice.

He went to Nott. “You’ve taken good care of her. She’s fit and healthy, obedient. She came off the ship without fuss and seems no worse for the voyage. Your mother told me you had a way with horses.”

“You’ve spoken with her?”

“She’s been here once or twice since your boyhood. But come. Let’s not stand here on the dock, under the eyes of so many.”

They traveled toward the hall at the city’s edge. Beyond it, fields and farmland stretched to the forest. There was no palisade. When Sigurd remarked on this, Gripir shrugged.

“What need have we for defense? The harbor is the only way in.”

“Still, you are wealthy. That must be a temptation to many. Someone could find a way.”

“We are few here. Besides, Baltia is a long way to travel to steal amber and horses.”

“Perhaps. But men who are desperate—or bored—may not always be discouraged by that.”

“Every kingdom will fall eventually,” said Gripir. “Nothing is without end, not even the gods.”

“You will not fight?”

Gripir’s handsome face slanted toward Sigurd. “Do you fight what is inevitable?”
“What else can you do?” demanded Sigurd. “Even the gods will fight at the ending of the world, though they are doomed.”

Gripir’s steps slowed, and his face turned to the ground. The sun shone bright on his blond hair, but his face was half shadowed. His voice rolled out like sudden thunder, as though from a deep place: “And so you will die in glory to join them in Valhalla, in the halls of the dead, to swell Odin’s army of slain warriors, those who will fight with him at Ragnarok, when he will die and they will die, and all will go into darkness.”

The gooseflesh rose on Sigurd’s arms and legs. There was a knowing in those words, a certainty, yet he could not accept the sound of them. “Some say that a few of the gods will survive, or be reborn, to start a new world.”

Gripir’s frown was framed by lines too deep for his age. “Some say that. But is that knowledge? Or just hope?”

“You are the one who sees the future. What do you say?”

Gripir’s frown eased and a breath left him that dropped his shoulders some inches. He said, “Your mother told me you are direct. She said once that you had no patience for the boys your age, that you would move so quickly beyond them in thought and action that they were left reeling and resentful. I think she knew you well. Look! The sun has not moved in the sky since you stepped onto the dock, we are just now reaching my hall, just now stepping into the courtyard, the reins are still in your hand, and already we are speaking of the end of all things and how that fate should be met. I think I will enjoy having you here, my sister-son.”

Sigurd did not want to let his question go, for Gripir had not answered him, but the horse-boys were waiting to take his reins, the falconer to take Skadi, and servants
were standing in the doorway of the hall. Swallowing his question, he followed Gripir across the stone-laid courtyard, up the steps, and past the carved pillars painted bright with blue and green and yellow.

Once Sigurd had washed and eaten, Gripir took him to the fields. The grass was lush from the spring rains and the bright clear days of summer. The big black horses of Baltia dotted the fields. Foals, their coats still new and wavy, grazed beside their huge mothers or chased and bit one another in play. Among the dark coats mingled other colors: chestnut, bay, brown, white.

When Sigurd remarked on this variety, Gripir said, “There is purpose for the others. I would rather sell them, and most cannot afford what I would ask for one of my blacks anyway.”

“You value them so much?”

“They are huge and unstoppable, like death. But they are beautiful, too, and that is worth something.”

Gripir led him to Nott’s dam and clapped his hands behind her. She trotted several paces, her new foal cantering at her side. The mare’s knees lifted high, and she struck out her hooves in a sharp beat.

“That looks familiar,” said Sigurd.

“Perfect, isn’t she? When Nott was born, she had that very same trot, right from the first day. I said to my horse-master, this one is fit for a king. Have you bred her?”

“No. There have been too many years of war. She’s had to work.”

When they had walked several miles around the pastures and discussed the qualities of many horses, Gripir sat in the shade of a broad, leafy tree. He leaned against
the trunk and closed his eyes. Sigurd looked down at him, not knowing whether to leave him, for Gripir had a quiet, private look about him. Then Gripir’s eyes opened a little, and he looked at Sigurd expectantly. Sigurd sat beside him with crossed legs, elbows on his knees, looking out at the horses.

Eyes closed again, Gripir said, “I cannot believe you traveled all this way to see my horses. What has brought you here?”

“You don’t know?”

“I know you have questions, but I don’t need foresight to see that. I can see them in your face. I could likely guess what those questions are, for many men ask them.”

“You sound like you disapprove. Is it wrong to ask? You know what will come. Why shouldn’t other men?”

Gripir looked like he had many answers to that question, but he said only,

“Nothing is as simple as men would like.”

“That’s why I’ve come here. My mother told me, when I was a child, that you are wise. She said you are not a warrior—”

The corner of Gripir’s mouth lifted, and he said, “She was ever warlike, your mother. And she struggled to respect those who were not. She was not content to live the life of her forbearers, quiet on this island. She always wanted something more. She found that when your father came here.”

Sigurd’s heart began to beat painfully; he could feel it in his throat. Except for his mother and for Odin, neither of whom would give him what he wanted, he had never spoken with any who had known his father. “What was he like?”
“Much like you. He was broader, and his expression was unfailingly grim. But he was older than you, when I met him, and he had tasted more of the bitterness of life. I know you’ve spent many years at war, but your father had spent a lifetime. He had lost almost everything he had ever possessed. I see you will protest, and, yes, he had his kingdom and his wealth and his famous sword. But none of those things had made him content, I can tell you that. He had known too many endings and too much pain. He had spent half his life seeking revenge for the murder of his father and of his brothers, and that was not the end of it. There was more death and more vengeance, years of it. That did not die with him, for revenge, it seems, is your inheritance as well.”

Gripir shook his head and went on, “I wish I could tell you more of him, but he was here only a short time, and it was many years ago. I myself was about your age. It is only your mother whom I truly knew, if anyone ever knew her.” Gripir’s eyes sharpened as he looked at Sigurd. They searched his face, looked deeper. “I see her in you also, though I doubt many would recognize it. You have something of her silence. You could never tell what she was thinking, unless she wanted you to know. Your father was not like that. He hid nothing. He liked to tell stories, his own stories, grim as they were, and he could fill up a room just by sitting in a corner of it. It was impossible to overlook him, even for a moment.” Gripir looked thoughtful, his brows drawing down, his hands straying over his chin and jaw, then he said, “He frightened many, but you, I think, are more dangerous. Your enemies will be dead before they know how much they should fear you.”

“You’ve known me but a few hours. You can tell so much?”
Gripir looked away, out across the fields to the horizon. There were crow’s feet around his eyes, and he looked very old, though Sigurd knew he could not be much more than forty.

Sigurd’s voice came hard and impatient: “You have seen. You know something of my future.”

“I cast the rune-bones when I had news of your birth. I read something in them. And some knowledge has come to me through the years.”

“What? What did you see?”

Gripir looked back at Sigurd, and his eyes were narrow with some deep pain.

“Why do you want to know your future? How will it serve you?”

“A decision is before me.” Sigurd swallowed hard, but he felt truth rise, irrepressible. It spilled from him in words he could not have given to Regin: “I do not know what to do.”

Gripir looked sympathetic. “That is the condition of existence. To make decisions.”

“If that is so, why do some men have foreknowledge? Why did Odin seek it at the fountain of memory? Why did he give up one of his eyes for it? It must be worth something.”

Gripir shook his head helplessly, and a sigh broke from him. “Your questions are difficult. I cannot answer you, I’m sorry. But I can remind you that the knowledge Odin found when he gave up his eye was the knowledge of his own death and the deaths of all the gods. Think of that! What he came to know, above all else, was that he would die.
There is nothing else to know. There is no other direction.” Gripir’s eyes glittered, bright with unshed tears.

Sigurd was driven to silence by Gripir’s words and by his strange suffering. He looked away from Gripir, traced his fingers through the grass, broke a few tender blades. He bruised them between his thumb and fingers and let them fall. Finally he said, “You see nothing but death. That is what foresight has given you?”

“I do see other things, but I cannot escape the fact that all those other things lead somehow, relentlessly, to death.”

“But death is not to be feared. You are afraid of it. That is why you are so troubled. I am not afraid.”

“You know nothing of death, Sigurd.”

“I’ve seen it. I trust it.”

“You have never felt it. How can you know what it is?”

There was silence for a time, for Sigurd could not answer Gripir’s question in words, though he felt an answer within him. He searched for that, but he found instead a sudden suspicion. He said, cautiously, but with a hard edge beneath his voice, “You have seen my death.”

“I have.”

Sigurd had not come to ask of death. He had not looked so far ahead. Faced with the possibility of knowing, he hesitated, tempted to ask. Then he shook his head.

Gripir said, “You don’t want to know?”

“You sound surprised.”

“All men want to know. It is all they ever ask me.”
“That is because they fear death. I told you, I do not.”

Gripir rocked forward away from the tree. “Then why did you come here? What else could you want to know?”

“I told you already. I have a problem, a decision to make. I don’t know what to do.”

Gripir sat back again, confusion lingering in his face. “You must trust yourself. Do what you feel is right.”

“Both courses of action feel right, in their own ways. And somehow they both feel wrong. Do I betray my friend—my brother—by taking something he wants even though he is not strong enough to take it for himself? Do I betray myself by holding back? Which is worse? And how do I know I act for myself when others seek to turn my mind this way or that?”

“Even if I can help you, I can only tell you what you will do. I cannot tell you what is right to do.”

“You cannot see the consequences?”

“Even if I see something of the consequences of what you will do, I can see nothing of the consequences of what you won’t do. The future has but one path. In knowing, you accept or deny its truth. It is indifferent to what is right.”

Sigurd frowned. “When I told Regin I would come to you and he asked me why, I said: for certainty, and he said that you could not give me that. I did not believe him.”

“You are angry with him. But Regin is wiser than you might think. Do not forget how long he’s lived. Do not forget what he is.”

“He seeks to manipulate me. I will not be moved by him.”
“That does not mean that what he says is wrong or that what he wants you to do is wrong.”

“Then I should do what he says?”

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know. Is that what you see?”

“I don’t know what he wants you to do.”

“Then what are we talking about?” demanded Sigurd. “If you don’t know, your words have no meaning. They are empty.”

“They are not empty.”

“Will you not give me a simple answer?”

“Sigurd, I cannot. There is no simple answer. What I have seen for you is unclear. The only thing I can see clearly is death, for that is the only thing that is simple and certain for any. Perhaps Odin sees more, but I do not.”

“So you cannot tell me anything?”

Gripir looked away. “Not today.”

Sigurd gritted his teeth. “Then I’ve traveled all this way for nothing. I’ve wasted all this time.”

“Maybe. But maybe not. Perhaps if I know you better, I will know how to answer you. Abide here with me. Be a guest in my hall.”

“What use to make me wait? If you do not know, you do not know. Why should I waste more time?”

“Because time, perhaps, is what you need, time away from Regin, time away from Burgundy. Be patient. The world will wait for you.”
When Gripir had asked him to say, Sigurd had imagined a week or two, a month at most. The first few days, he waited impatiently for Gripir to answer him, to tell him something of value. He ate with him in the hall, watching him over his edge of his drinking-horn, and went with him among the horses, haunting his shadow. Gripir took no notice of Sigurd’s impatience. He would ask Sigurd of Burgundy and of his youth with Regin, drawing out conversation from him like thread from a drop spindle.

When they walked among the horses, as they did every day, often the horse-master would join them. Gripir and the horse-master would speak for hours about bloodlines and what to expect next spring from the year’s breeding, conversations that had the well-worn feel of having been much repeated. Often they would halt and handle the new foals, teaching them to be led, to stand tied, to allow their feet to be lifted. Sometimes they would watch the younger men work the three- and four-year olds.

Sigurd’s mind tended to wander as the talk of bloodlines wore on, but when they watched the horse-breaking, he would lean against the paddock fence with the older men, judging the wisdom and skill of the horsemen. While many of them were fine enough riders, they treated each horse the same. They seemed to see no difference between any of them, no need to adjust their methods.

When Gripir asked him if he would like to try a young mare that had thrown two men already, he ducked through the fence. The horse stood quivering beside a groom who had the reins clenched tight. Sigurd took the reins and nodded the boy away. The mare’s neck was tense, her ears pricked forward, her eye fixed on Sigurd. She sidled
away from him when he reached out to her. He dropped his hand and waited for curiosity to overcome her fear. When she stepped toward him, nostrils flaring as she took his measure, he waited. Soon she was sniffing his clothes and his hair, and he stroked her neck. When she was standing quietly, he asked her to walk forward with him, to stop, to back up, to turn. Gripir and the horse-master looked on with some confusion.

When Sigurd turned to mount at last, the horse-master called out to him, “Don’t let her get away with anything! She’ll try it!"

Sigurd looked over his shoulder. “I don’t think you understand this horse. She’s afraid, and it’s easiest to fight. You are all giving her what she wants.”

Sigurd turned away from the horse-master, not waiting for his reply. He gathered the reins, moved as quietly as possible, putting his foot in the stirrup, his hands on the saddle. As he pulled himself up and over, the mare sidled and pranced. He sat calmly until she stilled. Then Sigurd let her walk around the pen. When her neck softened and her ears came forward, he asked her to trot. She bucked, but Sigurd sat deep in the saddle and drove her forward. Several times she tried to unseat him, and each time he calmly drove her forward. When Sigurd was not thrown, she trotted forward with a nervous obedience. When she had trotted twice around the pen without bucking, Sigurd praised her and drew her to a stop. He dismounted, stroking her neck, and she put her nose nervously into his shoulder.

“She’ll never make a warhorse,” said Sigurd as he handed the reins back to the groom and walked toward Gripir and the horse-master, “but she’s not without value. She has a nice gait. Maybe a carthorse? Or a lady’s mount in time.”
“That was all fine and good,” said the horse-master gruffly, “but we’ll see what
she does with someone else tomorrow.”

“There will be no one else tomorrow. I will ride her.”

Gripir gave a satisfied nod. “Good.”

And so the summer passed. Sigurd worked each day with the mare and with many
of the other young horses. As more gathered at the paddock fence to watch him, he
became a reluctant teacher, answering questions in his terse way, drawing out more
words when he was pressed. Some days he rode out alone through the wooded hills of
Baltia. He would take Nott or the nervous mare or another who needed the experience.
He would ride miles and miles across the island, hunting or just watching the light change
as it filtered through the trees.

When the light spoke of summer’s end and the cold winds came from the north,
his impatience returned, and he approached Gripir again about his future.

They were walking from the pastures back to the hall. Gripir squinted up into the
sky. “Winter’s coming.”

“Yes, I know. That’s why I’m asking you to answer my questions, or to tell me
with certainty that you do not know. I cannot wait here forever.”

“If you are to leave before winter, you must go soon. Where will you spend the
cold months if not here? Will you go to Denmark?”

A muscle tightened in Sigurd’s jaw. He looked away from Gripir, out over the
herds cropping up the last of the summer grass. “That is where I would go. But I don’t
wish to stay in Aelf’s court for the winter. I was a child there. There is nothing for me
now.”
“Then stay here a while longer. You can leave on the first spring ship.”

Sigurd’s voice sharpened to a sword-edge: “Why do you delay? Why will you not answer my questions?”


“Give me something.”

“I am giving you something, you just don’t see it. Peace is uncommon, more so for you than most.” Gripir’s voice dropped as he said, “You will never have it again, not like this.”

These words stopped Sigurd on his path. Gripir stopped also, and he looked at Sigurd with a solemn expression. Sigurd felt his eyes widen; Gripir did know something. Gripir looked away at last, dropping the knowledge in his eyes to the ground, and he moved on toward the hall. Sigurd followed him, silent now, asking no questions.

Fall cooled to winter, and Sigurd remained with Gripir. Each day was much the same. Sigurd rarely drew his sword from its scabbard. There were times it hung forgotten at his side, times it felt awkward, times it seemed to reproach him for idleness.

In time, he realized that he enjoyed Gripir’s company. At first, he had felt obligated to disapprove of a man—a king—so peaceful. He had been reminded, in the first days, of Giuki, but the similarities were so dim, the differences so great, that there was nothing to bind the two. Gripir had conviction. He was deliberate in his ways, and he had no delusions about them. It was strange to Sigurd to see a man so removed from the ways of war, a man who wanted to be that way and felt no shame in it.

Most of all, Sigurd liked that Gripir could be silent. He spoke only when words were needed, and he spoke always with meaning. Often, he did not speak at all.
Sometimes he would stare into the hearth-fire, or into nothingness. Sometimes Sigurd asked him what he saw, but Gripir would never answer. He would shake his head or bow it, the fine lines around his eyes deep with sorrow. Sometimes, holding all that knowledge silent within himself, he was frightening.

* * *

When midwinter had passed and the days were lengthening, Sigurd awoke. He could no longer sit still in the hall. He began to dream of Fafnir, red dreams full of light and shadow. He dreamed Regin at the edges, dreamed Gunnar at his elbow. He dreamed of his father’s sword, pulled it broken from his scabbard. In the mornings, he would go out into the cold, winter-wet fields to train again with bow and spear and sword.

One day, Gripir came to him as he sighted his target. He heard Gripir moving through the wet snow, knew it was him by the weary, resigned footsteps.

Sigurd said to him, not turning, not lowering his bow, “I hope you come to tell me what I want to know.”

“How did you know it was me?”

Sigurd let the arrow fly into the heart of the target, then turned. “There were some things of use that Regin taught me. One was to always be aware of what is around you.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You haven’t answered mine.”

Gripir sighed in frustration, and his face showed the closest thing to anger Sigurd had seen in him. “How can I answer your question when you tell me so little? All these
months, and you have never said what decision it is you have to make. How can I help you when I don’t know what you need?”

“I didn’t come here for advice. I could get that elsewhere, and I could never do what another told me to anyway. That is why I came to you. I only want to know what you have seen me doing. If I know that, I can act with certainty.”

“How so? You still will not know if your decision is right.”

“But I will know that I am acting for myself, making the decision that it is in me to make.”

“You trust me so much? How do you know I can correctly interpret what I have seen?”

I sudden uncertainty passed over Sigurd, and his hands tightened on the bow, but he said, “Will you not tell me?”

Gripir’s jaw hardened and he did not answer at first. Then he said, “I will. Walk with me.”

They walked through the pasture, the snow slushy beneath their boots and the air bringing blood to their cheeks. They passed through the far fences and into the woods. They were well into the trees, where the light was dim and grey, before Gripir spoke.

“When I cast the rune-bones at your birth, they showed me death all around you. They showed glory as well, and victory. I felt the rejoicing of wolves and ravens and eagles, those who would be fed by the deaths of the many men you would slay. I knew you would be a great warrior, though that could have been guessed by your lineage.

“But the rune-bones showed me something more. They spoke of fire, and they spoke of terror. I did not know what that meant, and I still don’t. Some time ago,
however, when you were a child, I saw a monstrous face. I was sitting at the hearth-fire late in the night, and I saw you first, a man grown, then that face twisted out of the flames around you. Its scream was silent, but I could still hear the fury and the hatred. I might have seen more, but I was afraid, and I turned away from it.”

“What was the face? Was it...a beast?”

“It was a man’s face, mostly, but beneath the skin there was something more terrible.”

“A man?” said Sigurd, disappointed.

“I think so. He seemed so.”

“And I? What was I, in that moment?”

“Power. Death.” Gripir shuddered. “You were near as terrifying as the other.”

“Nothing else?”

“No.”

“Is that all?”

Gripir took several steps, his boots splashing the wet snow. “No. Last winter, I had a premonition of your arrival, but there was something coming behind, something in your shadow.”

“Something behind me?”

“You don’t understand,” said Gripir sharply. “As the sun moves to setting, as a man looks into the coming dark, his shadow falls beneath his feet. It lies before him.”

A chill swept through Sigurd. He hesitated, dreading the one word he feared would follow him, the word that would undo him, then he asked, “What is this danger?”
Gripir was shaking his head, as though he himself would disbelieve what he had seen. “I…it is love.”

“Love?” said Sigurd, taken aback. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is that all you have to tell me? Is this all you know?”

“I have tried to warn you so many times. I have tried to explain to you that to know the future is to know nothing. You may say that it is my poor skill in seeing, and that may be so. But it is all I have to give you. All I can say with any certainty is that you, like all men, are moving toward your own destruction. Every step you take, every decision, leads you there.”

They walked in silence for a time, then Sigurd said, “I cannot be afraid of your vision. I told you once that I was not afraid of death. I know you doubted me then, and you may doubt me now, but I know the truth of my words. You may speak always with hesitation because what you see is unclear. But what I see is not unclear. I do not look into the dark, as you do, nor do I want to. You think you have given me grave news. You have held it back, held it in all these months. But I tell you one thing: you need not have worried that your vision would shake me. I came here for certainty. I may not yet know what I will do, but I do know one thing, and that is that what I do will be right. I know this because there is one thing you did not see in my future, one thing you did not see in my shadow, and that is shame. It is that which I feared to find.”

Gripir looked like a man reaching a conclusion he had not expected, an answer that would reshape his question. He said, his voice picking out the words cautiously, “You are not like other men.”
“I am not. Like most, you cannot see me, not fully. Do you know what troubles me? The one man who sees me most clearly, whether I like it or not, is that one man I do not want to trust, the one man I do not want to listen to.”

“You speak of Regin.”

“What is he? Sometimes he seems inhuman, and I know he wants me only to serve his purpose. I sometimes suspect that is all he ever wanted from me. But sometimes I do see a humanness in him. Sometimes I almost think he cares for me.”

“Many things can be true at once.”

“Maybe. But one thing is always more true than another. Perhaps that is why the gods judge us by our actions and not our thoughts.”

“Perhaps. I have no doubt you can fathom the minds of the gods better than I.”

“No. Them I cannot understand.”

The lines framing Gripir’s mouth deepened. “You are bitter.”

“Should I not be? Where is Odin? Why does he not help me? With a word from him, I would know what to do.”

“Perhaps that is why he does not speak? Perhaps he is waiting for you to decide without him. As you said, the gods judge us by our actions. If they are not our own, how can they have any meaning?”

Sigurd fell to silence under the weight of this new question. They walked on for a time, then Gripir stopped. He held his arm back the way they had come, a look of resignation on his face. Sigurd followed the gesture, and they walked, feet wet and numb, back to the hall, which was wakening to the coming spring.
Chapter 24

While spring was coming late to Sigurd, the cold receding north each day, spring was already full in the south. In Burgundy, the snow had been gone for weeks, melting into fields ready to be plowed and planted. But though they were ready, most would lie fallow. There was too little seed. There were not enough men. To make matters worse, the winter had been hard. Ice had damaged many buildings, fences, and roads. Sharp winds had howled against home and hall, and the people of Burgundy had huddled by their fires for months on end, waiting for spring to deliver them.

When spring brought only hunger, they came to Gunnar for help, heaping on him tales of loss and hardship. He listened. He spent days in the treasury, dividing the last of his kingdom’s gold and treasures into piles, sorting and resorting. He wrote letters to kings with whom Burgundy had once had strong trade relations, begging for aid, but they, too, had grown poor from lost trade.
The ice-damaged buildings received only the most necessary repairs, and so the city took on a worn and desolate look. What grain Burgundy had was soon planted. What gold it could spare was soon spent on more grain and on livestock.

Gunnar worked in the fields with his people when he could, urging them to be hopeful, to work hard, to see a better future. With Gunnar among them, they did see some hope, and they worked for it, but as soon as Gunnar withdrew to the hall to deal with other matters, the sky dimmed for them and the earth was once again unyielding.

It was on a day that Gunnar kneeled on the bare floor of the treasury, moving the last coins again and again, that an old possibility returned to him. He held a gold coin to the light from the high window, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger, the dirt of Burgundy’s fields, still on his hands, smearing the warm sides.

A sudden commotion outside the chamber drew his mind from the gold. When a heavy, impatient knock came at the door, Gunnar’s fist clenched on the coin, and he called out a brusque invitation.

The door juddered inward, and one of the hall-guards staggered through the doorway under the weight of a man, filthy and ragged, a man with grey hair still laced with red, a man whose sword-arm hung limp.

“Sire,” said the guard, “I—he—well, he came to the door—I—”

Gunnar surged to his feet, stumbling a little as the blood rushed through his numb legs. “Put him down.”

The guard looked confused. There was no chair, no cushion.
“Anywhere!” shouted Gunnar, and the guard eased Giuki to the floor. The guard stood there for a moment, uncertain, then he backed quickly from the treasury, snapping the door shut behind him.

Gunnar stared down at his father, who was lying as the guard had left him, crooked on his left side, his right hand curled like a claw, like it was gripping something, though the hand had been useless for years. His belly was shrunken, the skin loose like an empty sail. His clothes were tatters, shreds of cloth, and his feet, where the toes showed through his boots, were black with frostbite.

Gunnar was still as a wolf, still as a hare. Then Giuki muttered something, Gunnar’s name perhaps, and Gunnar crouched hesitantly at his side, not touching him.

Giuki turned his face to Gunnar. The face had no more color than the hair, splotches of red showing some vestige of life in the grey skin. His cheeks, once so firm and round, were slack, his eyes foggy. He said, his voice barely more than a whisper, “I saw it.”

Gunnar drew back a little, his skull prickling. “Saw what?”

Giuki’s breath rattled though his words: “She said, the old woman, she said you would take it. She told me. She knew. She had a vision. Of truth. Of the future.”

“Do you mean Ragnhild?”

“It was beautiful. Gold everywhere. Jewels. Swords. Armor. A golden otter.” The foggy eyes looked for Gunnar. “You did not tell me it was so beautiful.”

Gunnar nearly touched his father with his next question. He leaned over him, brought his face low. He demanded, “But where was…the other? Was he not there?”
Giuki’s voice rasped, the words grating against one another: “Out on the Heath, she said. I didn’t see—I didn’t see him.”

“But how did you get past him? How did he not see you?”

Giuki was gasping now, the air whistling through his throat as through a cave. His words came piecemeal, broken by the labor of breathing. “She gave…she gave me…something…To show…you. To…prove…to you.” Giuki fought for the last words: “She said. She had seen.”

“What? What did she see?” Gunnar gripped his father’s shoulders now, shaking him, lifting him from the ground.

Giuki choked on a word, sucked it back into his throat, then the breath eased from his body. His eyes, wide and unmoving, stared through Gunnar, beyond him, and he grew heavy in Gunnar’s arms. Gunnar eased him to the floor. Then he jerked his hands back from the frail body, distorted by cold and starvation, by desire. After a moment, he drew a hand over the blind eyes.

He rocked back from his father’s body, kneeling before it as he had kneeled before the empty coffers. Then he saw something, a glint of gold in the curled hand as it loosened with death. He pried the brittle fingers open, shuddering at the prick of the claw-like nails. Lying on the shriveled palm was a gleaming, glittering coin.

Fingers trembling, he took the coin from his father’s hand, held it in the shaft of light that bled through the narrow window. It was bright as sunfire. It was smooth and perfectly round, unearthly. He felt a power from it seep through his hand, down his sword-arm. He sensed then the forgotten weight in his other hand. He flattened his palm,
mottled red and white from being clenched. In this hand he held the worn, earth-grimed coin from his treasury. He let it fall to the floor.

* * *

Something very different fell to the floor of Gripir’s hall. It was the horse-master’s cup of mead, and it shattered against the hard stones.

“Surely, sire,” began the horse-master, red-faced, bending to retrieve the pieces of his cup.

“Do not presume to question me, my friend,” said Gripir, laying a hand on the horse-master’s sleeve. “Sigurd will have any horse he desires, be it my own or yours. The choice is his, whatever he wants.”

Sigurd inclined his head. “That is very generous, uncle, when you have no need to be. Nott—”

“She’s served you well enough and will make a fine broodmare here.” Gripir’s lips twitched into something at once like a smile and like a frown. “I’d like her back, since she’s not right for you. You need something…faster and smarter for what lies before you.”

Sigurd hesitated over that, looking for something more in Gripir’s eyes, behind the crow’s feet that hinted at meaning. “I hope you will not take it amiss if I do not choose one of your black horses.”
“You know I have others. Might I suggest you begin your search among the young prospective studs in the far eastern pasture, where the river runs deepest? You’ve seen them. They’re a wild lot, mostly unbroken, but I think you’ll find one to suit you.”

Sigurd went that very day to the eastern pasture, where the young stallions were playing and fighting. They bit and kicked. They chased one another, tossing up great clods of earth. Sigurd remembered several promising horses from this herd, one of the great blacks with finer bone and more speed, a tall chestnut, a bay with white socks. He looked for them now within the chaos of moving color, holding his hand above his eyes to block the sun. He walked some paces into the pasture as the horses ran to the river, where they stopped to graze the bank for a few restless moments.

Something caught his eye. A shimmer of grey. Like mist clinging impossibly to form under the afternoon sun. Sigurd squinted. No. He had been mistaken. It was one of the horses. Yet he remembered no greys from this herd.

The grey trotted around the others, circling them as though they were mares. Even from a distance, the high, lofty trot was obvious. The others raised their heads, all attention on the grey. Now Sigurd was certain: the grey was an outsider.

The black trotted to meet him, to confront him and place him in the order. They circled, drew close, teeth to one another’s haunches. They turned and twisted to bite at each other’s legs. They screamed and reared, ears laid back, striking each other with their hooves, biting. When they came down, the black spun to kick the grey, but the grey twisted away from him, catching only a glancing blow. He returned his own kicks, striking the black hard in the barrel with both hind hooves. The grey spun back to face his enemy. He reared and came down on the black’s withers, biting hard into his neck.
black screamed and pulled away, tried to bite back, but the grey turned and kicked him in the chest and the neck. The black ran. The grey chased after him for a moment, then turned to face another.

Several fights followed, some that involved multiple horses, but always the grey put them down. He circled the herd again, and they fled from him, charging back across the pasture in Sigurd’s direction. Now Sigurd could see the grey better. His sides were dappled, his legs dark as charred wood. His neck was high, chest broad, his bone heavy. His face was flecked with blood. His ears were laid back so far they disappeared into his dark mane. Many hooves were aimed at his head, blows that came as he drew near to bite and drive the herd.

Sigurd began to back away, but the herd swung away from him and galloped back across the field. He watched for a moment, then turned toward the fence. He stopped.

A man was standing there, leaning on the top rail, the brim of his floppy hat slouching low over his eyes. He had a solemn mouth that sagged with age and old worries. His braided beard was long and white, bright against his blue robes, and a grey cloak hung behind him. A raven sat on his shoulder. Another perched nearby on a fence post.

Sigurd’s heart pounded, and the world seemed to go still and silent, to recede. Odin looked up at him, his one eye hidden under the shadow of the hat. Sigurd walked to the fence, his steps slow with caution. He ducked through the rails and leaned against the fence beside Odin. The raven on Odin’s shoulder gave a soft caw and resettled its wings.

Sigurd said, “I’m choosing a horse.”
Odin nodded, the wide brim of his hat dipping low over his eye. “And how will you choose?” His voice was slow, deliberate.

“Spirit. Strength. Intelligence.”

“And what of obedience? And loyalty?” Odin looked thoughtful. “Spirit alone is little more than pride and independence. Strength and intelligence can serve many purposes, not all of them worthy.”

Sigurd puzzled over these words for a moment, but what was clear surfaced above them. “The grey is the best. It’s obvious.”

“How so?”

“He wins.”

“But will that make him a good companion? A trustworthy one? How do you know he will fight for you?”

Sigurd struggled for an answer, but his mind felt hazy, his thoughts indistinct. He shook that away, hardened himself. “You clearly have an answer. How would you decide?”

Odin looked out at the herd, considering, weighing his question. “When your enemies have landed on your shore, how do you judge your hearth-companions?”

“Readiness for battle.”

“Of course.”

Sigurd did not look at Odin, though he could feel him at his side, could sense the power of him. He had so much to ask, so many questions. All these years he had longed for Odin’s presence, for some sign of him, and now all he could say was, “And how does one judge that in a horse? I must ride him—”
“Then you will be judging only his obedience.”

“Did you not say that obedience was important?”

“I did. But you may have obedience. And you may have courage. And you may have loyalty. But those things must all exist together, in one heart, in one action. Separate, they have little meaning and less use.”

“And how do I see all those things at once?”

“You’ve already answered that question yourself. You must see if he is battle-ready. Don’t look so impatient. I will explain myself.”

“I hope so.”

“You are quick to anger, Sigurd. Only wisdom can temper that.” Odin then explained they would put the young stallions in an adjoining pasture, one with no water. They would be left there until his return.

“When will that be?” asked Sigurd. “And what will we do then?”

Odin was slow to answer. He stroked the wings of the raven perched beside him. “Show me you can wait,” he said, and Sigurd lowered his eyes to the rail under his hands, his knuckles white with impatience, and his chest aching with a dull shame.

They went behind the herd, which had settled to grazing again, and drove them toward the gate into the other pasture. Sigurd ran after the horses at his end, chasing stragglers back to the herd. Odin walked. The horses under his direction did not stray, drawn, it seemed, to his command.

Sigurd was winded by the time the last had bolted through the gate. He threw the gate closed and swung the latch into its housing. When he turned to look for Odin, he was gone, and all that echoed of him was the faint, far off cry of a raven.
Sigurd spent the following day watching the horses, especially the grey, waiting for Odin’s return. The herd grew agitated from confinement and thirst, and their violence made him uncertain. What he was meant to judge here he could not imagine. The day after was worse, as one fool tried to jump the fence and hung himself up, cutting his stifle.

The horse-master became fierce at that and began to insist the horses be released to water. He and Sigurd were standing in the stable beside the injured horse, Sigurd bathing the wound with cold water. When Sigurd refused but would offer no explanation, the horse-master began to shout. He reminded Sigurd that the horses did not belong to him, and Gripir, as though summoned by the sound of his name, came into the stable.

“Sire,” pleaded the horse-master, “tell him he cannot do this! Look what’s happened!” He gestured to the gash in the horse’s stifle, where the skin hung in a flap and the muscle was torn.

“Can it not be stitched?” asked Gripir.

“I will stitch it when the swelling’s down,” said Sigurd. “I’m sorry for his injury; it was not my intent. But it cannot be helped. The horses cannot be moved.”

“Why?” demanded the horse-master. “For what possible reason are you keeping them there without water? I thought you cared for the beasts.”

Sigurd grew uncomfortable at that, and he admitted, “It was not my idea.”

“Oh? And whose was it then? I cannot imagine that our good king—”

“It was not my idea either,” said Gripir. “Sigurd? Will you not explain yourself? Why was this necessary?”
“I’m sorry,” said Sigurd again, though his neck was stiff, his head held back a little in refusal. “But the horses must stay where they are.” He gave Gripir a look of meaning, a dark pooling of his eyes, and ended, “Odin wills it.”

“What does that—” The horse-master cut himself off as he looked at Sigurd, at the unearthliness of Odin echoing in him. The horse-master grew suddenly quiet and cautious, and with muttered and suspicious oaths, he walked off. He said no more to Sigurd for the rest of the day and cast uneasy looks at him from across the hall that evening.

When Sigurd had nearly lost his trust in Odin’s promise to return, there he was in the damp morning, cloaked in grey and blue, standing by the fence with his ravens, a battle-horn slung over his shoulder. The wide-brimmed hat was gone, and the silver helmet Sigurd remembered was in its place. The light was dim, and night’s darkness still hung in the empty eye socket and in the deep crevices of Odin’s face. The one eye, blue-grey, buried under the heavy white brow, was impassive; yet something would glint from it now and then, the fury that would break the world.

Sigurd had stopped some paces from him, unable to move his feet, unable to move his eyes. There was something here he wanted, something he wanted to take into himself, to be, to know. He could feel it in his heartbeat as he looked at Odin, could feel it in the stillness of the air, in the meaninglessness of everything else that dropped away so quickly.

“It’s time,” said Odin.

Sigurd’s feet moved again, the moment lost but something lingering in him, a longing. He went to the fence, looked away from Odin, out over the paddock. The ground
was churned, pitted and slippery with mud, but the horses—even the grey—stood now with hanging heads, their bellies sucked up from thirst.

Odin said, “A challenge anyone can meet is little worth the effort.”

Sigurd did not allow himself to look at Odin. “I hope you will make some sense of this for me.”

“I hope you will see the sense of it. You must have had some faith. You persisted.”

“I have faith,” said Sigurd, suddenly angry at the word, feeling in it the long months and years he had watched for Odin, hoped for him. “I just don’t understand.”

“You speak of something more. Say it.”

Sigurd hesitated then said, feeling childish even as the words came from him, “Why have I not seen you?”

Odin’s answer was sharp: “It is not I who must show myself to you. It is you who must show yourself to me.”

“Have I not done that? All those battles—”

“I never said you hadn’t.”

“Then why are you here now? Why not before? What is different?”

Odin leaned against the fence. He sighed, and it was like a wind tumbling through a mountain pass. The ravens squawked in agitation, hopping down from his shoulders, hopping up again. “From the great stone seat in Asgard I watch all the worlds. Everything comes to me through thought and memory; in a raven’s cry, I hear it all.” He added, “Most men do not see me until death.”
“But I have seen you before. And I see you now. So it is different. What I want to know is: what brings you?”

Odin’s voice rumbled out like stone shaken from the mountain by that breath of wind: “Do not try to fathom me, Sigurd. You will never find the bottom.”

Sigurd could not think in response to that, could not answer, and he said only, “You are just as I remembered.”

Odin took one of the ravens from his shoulder, held it before him. It gripped his fingers, tilted its head to look at him from a gleaming black eye. “I do not change. Men change, and then they may think that I have changed, but they are wrong. Most men move far from what they are, and by death they are something else entirely. Life changes them. They cannot withstand it.” Odin brought the raven back to his shoulder, and it settled there, turned to stone. “But that is enough of this talk. There will be time for it someday, when you enter the halls of the dead.”

Sigurd had little time to consider Odin’s words of death, to feel the promise in them, for Odin moved from thought to action as though they were indivisible. He slung the battle-horn from his shoulder and handed it to Sigurd.

“This was your father’s. I found it on the battlefield where he died and saved it for you. It had been his father’s, and so on back. Take it now, for you will need it.”

The horn was pale with age, heavy with gold. Sigurd turned it over in his hands. Never had he touched anything of Sigmund’s. A sudden, painful longing seized him. There was something else of his father’s that should be his. A flash of silver dazzled his eyes, and he looked up, startled, expecting that sword, but it was only Odin’s helmet, catching the morning sun.
Odin instructed him to enter the adjoining pasture and cross to the other side of the river. When he was in position, Odin would open the gate and drive the horses down to the water. As they reached it, Sigurd would wind the horn.

When Sigurd reached the riverbank, there was no easy crossing in sight. The river was six meters wide here, far wider than he had remembered it. He removed his boots. Holding them above the water with the battle-horn, he waded out. He soon could not touch the bottom and was exhausted with cold before he reached the far bank.

He barely had time to scramble away from the river’s edge, dripping and shivering, before the horses came galloping across the pasture. As Odin had commanded, he waited until they reached the water, until they had lowered their noses to drink. Then, chest still heaving from the shock of cold water, Sigurd raised the horn to his lips. It was deep and ancient-sounding. It was his father’s voice in war, and even in that brief moment he felt it was the sound of him speaking.

Most of the horses raised their heads in surprise then set their lips quickly to the water, sucking hard. But not the grey.

He trotted the bank, tossing his head. Sigurd winded the horn again, and the grey let out a piercing whinny. He plunged into the river. He swam the cold waters, his dark eyes full of purpose. When his feet found the shallows again, he charged towards Sigurd, water flying from him. He moved as though he felt no drag of thirst, no shock of cold, as though nothing mattered but reaching that sound. He was like water itself, roused to fury.

“His name is Greyfell,” said Odin from behind Sigurd. “Hush,” he said to the horse, raising his hand. Greyfell stopped, swung his head from side to side, pawed. “Hush,” Odin repeated, and the horse quieted, snorting resignation.
Sigurd looked at Odin. “You knew, and so did I, that he would be the one. What was the point of testing him? And the others? It wasn’t necessary.”

Odin’s white brows drew down, and the lines of his face seamed deeper. “Those are dangerous words, more dangerous than you know. If there were no need to measure and judge, what would life be used for? I may think I know what is in your heart, or what is in the heart of another man, but without action, how can it be certain? And how can you become what you are if you are not tested?” Odin stroked Greyfell’s water-dark neck. “Like you, he must be given his chance to prove himself.”

Sigurd felt the horn heavy in his hand, felt the same weight in his heart. “And what will my chance be?”

“You have a great strength in you, Sigurd. Don’t lose it. Don’t hold yourself back. Keep making yourself into what you are—become what you are. Make it real.”

Sigurd wanted to know what was behind these words, to ask how, to be certain, but something stopped him, something in Odin’s grim face, something in his own gut. Instead he turned to the horse, set his hand to the grey face, looked into the dark eyes. Greyfell looked back with a directness unnatural in a horse. Sigurd traced a hand over the strong cheek, down the arched neck. He felt in Greyfell a tremble of cold, something deep down, held in check. Sigurd stilled his own shivering.

He said, “He’s beautiful. Where did he come from?”

“Can you not guess?”

Sigurd shook his head, disbelieving, but he said, “He’s must be of the kin of Sleipnir. No mortal horse could be as he is.”

Odin’s answer was a command: “Keep him well, Sigurd, and he will keep you.”
Sigurd dropped to his knees, shivering hard now, unable to stop. He bowed his head. “You favor me beyond my deserving, after my doubt, after my anger. I have nothing to offer you in return.”

Odin laid a hand on Sigurd’s shoulder, a hand as heavy as the battle-horn. “You have your life. It is that which I will take in the end, as I take it from all men.”

The weight of Odin’s hand vanished. Sigurd did not open his eyes for some time. He did not want to find Odin gone.

* * *

Gripir was waiting at the stable when Sigurd returned astride Greyfell. Gripir was smiling, the first real smile Sigurd had seen from him.

As Greyfell drew to a smart stop before Gripir, Sigurd looked down at his uncle. “You knew.”

Gripir reached out a hesitant hand to the grey nose. “I saw this horse in a vision many years ago. I did not know how or why he would pass through my life, but I began to have some suspicions. He’s of Sleipnir, isn’t he? Odin’s own battle-stallion, descended from Loki.”

“His name is Greyfell.”

Gripir’s hand was trembling. “Odin has blessed you. I’ve never seen such a gift given to any man.”

“Except my father. Odin gave him the sword Gram.”

“Something that is also yours by right.”
Sigurd’s eyes burned hot as a forge-fire. “Yes. It is mine.”

“There’s a ship that leaves in the morning. It sails for Denmark. Will you be on it?”

“You don’t know?”

“I’ll have your things prepared.”

* * *

Gunnar did not take the road through the Heath. Alone, he rode through the forest that bordered it, keeping it in sight to know the way. Raudfaxi was calm, as Gunnar was calm. The forest, too, was turning to silence. The nearer he drew to the crumbled city and the hall, the quieter it grew, the fewer signs of life he encountered. But he had expected this. He had been here before.

The last time he had ridden through these woods, he had been defeated, his leg broken, fear rushing through him. Even alone, unobserved, he felt his cheeks warm with shame at the memory. Sigurd had not been frightened. This time, neither was Gunnar.

Now, with the promise of Ragnhild’s vision within him, he knew what Sigurd felt when he rode to meet his enemy. Invulnerable. Unstoppable. It was a confidence born of the knowing, deep down, that you are moving toward fate. Never had Gunnar experienced this. Every victory had come as a relief. Every plan had been doubted. He had never envied that confidence in Sigurd, not much, because he had never understood it, never felt it. He had known it was Sigurd’s alone. But now, he knew what it was to trust himself.
When he glimpsed the city through the trees, he had a moment of fear, an extra beat of his heart that made Raudfaxi’s head come up. He stilled himself. There was nothing to fear when victory was guarded by fate.

He left Raudfaxi in the woods, tethered near the river. He did not look across the river to the city, to the cliff face beyond it. He did not look for the dark hole in that face, the place where all light disappeared, the place he was going.

He found the boat where he, Sigurd, and Regin had left it, drawn far up onto the riverbank. The boat was weatherworn, and Gunnar stepped into it cautiously, expecting it to break beneath him. He did not want to enter those waters, where he had nearly drowned. If Sigurd had not been there, he would have died. But, then, if Sigurd had not been there, nor would he have been. He felt a heat returning to his cheeks, but he ignored it. This was his time, his victory, not Sigurd’s.

He left the boat on the other bank and strode into the city. It was strange to see it in the daylight, so broken. He could not remember any explanation Regin had offered of the destruction. It would have been good to ask, he thought now. For a moment, he knew it was Fafnir who had done this, but he turned his thoughts from that power.

It was a long walk through the rubble-strewn streets. Buildings lay heaped in his path. More than once, avoiding the fallen stones, he lost his way. It was impossible not to think about all that stone. Burgundy was built of wood. So was every other kingdom in his knowing. He would not let the question form into words, but in the dark recesses of his mind, he wanted to know, as he had had wanted to know as a boy, what power could move so much stone. It could not be human.
At last he came to the wide path cut into the cliff face, the path that led to the hall high above the city, cut into the cliff. He stopped at the bottom.

He brushed the dust from his clothes, a fine white dust from the broken city. He straightened his tunic under the byrnie. It was his finest, a deep green, heavily embroidered cloth. His byrnie was boiled leather with silver laid into it. He took off his silver helmet, swept back his hair. He felt a sudden coolness as the spring breeze met his sweaty forehead. He put the helmet back on, tightened the throat strap. He checked his sword in its sheath, adjusted its hang, tightened his belt. When he realized he was fidgeting with his gear, he laid his hand against the leather pouch that held the gleaming coin. He set his foot to the slope.

The climb was long and treacherous. Deep crevices were gouged into the path, and Gunnar had to leap over some of these. Broken stone lay here as it lay in the city, and he was winded by the time he drew near the wide black hole of the entrance.

The afternoon light lay across the ledge, lay across the face of the archway, whose carved stones were broken, the entrance widened beyond its original, human dimensions. No light passed inside.

A shiver, a doubt, shook Gunnar. He stood on the ledge, before the dark archway, frozen. He saw in his mind an image of the dragon, remembered the size and the power. He felt himself drawing back. He almost took a step away. Then he shut the dragon from his mind. He had Ragnhild’s vision. He had the coin under his byrnie. He drew his sword and stepped through the archway.
Chapter 25

The hall was black. Like a deep place where the earth made its jewels and hid them. Gunnar breathed darkness. It wrapped around him, bled through him.

His steps were silent, but his heart was not. It beat a hard, steady rhythm. The rhythm, though, was not set by him but by something else. There was a breathing in the darkness, almost below hearing. It was long and deep, and Gunnar’s heart gave five beats as the air was sucked away from him, five again as it came back, washing him with an oily, sulfurous smell. He walked toward that breathing, walked so long he thought he must soon stumble into it. In the dark, that breathing almost seemed that it could be bodiless, thoughtless as a tide, nothing but air. But Gunnar knew, even felt in his bones, that it was not.

He thought he should have brought a torch, thought again that he was glad he had not. He did not yet want to see. And so he set his feet carefully, remembering the treasure
he had once startled into sound and what it had awoken. As his feet touched nothing but the bare ground, he wondered at that treasure. It had been scattered. He should have touched it by now, a cup or a ring. Still, he knew it was here. The coin was heavy in its pouch, yearning towards something. It seemed to call out to the hoard, to draw Gunnar to it. He had only to reach out and take it.

There was a sweep of air over Gunnar’s head. Suddenly the breathing stopped. Gunnar was still blind with darkness, but he felt a movement, felt something rise up before him.

“Sister,” grated the voice of the dragon, too close to Gunnar, “the owl says someone is here.”

Gunnar was frozen, thoughtless. His fist was clenched on his sword, holding it before him like a ship’s prow.

Ragnhild’s voice scratched against the dark, “The Nibelung has come.”

“What!”

Fire streamed through the air. The dragon was illuminated, his face lit by his own flame, the tongue blood red and the fangs, framing fire, like the stony teeth of a cave’s roof. The red and gold of his scales caught and reflected the light. His eyes, narrowed to slits, flashed gleaming jewels.

The flame extinguished as suddenly as it had come, and the hall was black again. Gunnar’s sword trembled in his hand, shaking him to movement, telling him to run. He had no thought, in that instant, of what he had come for.

Fire seared the air again. It swept around the cave like a whip. It caught on a single point, burned there even after Fafnir had bitten off the flame in his jaws. The point
of light was a torch, fire that Ragnhild had captured, and she set it into a brazier. The
golden brazier flamed to life. Light splashed over its sides, onto the grimed floor and over
the tattered figure of Ragnhild, hunched behind it like a crone at her cauldron.

Fafnir snarled at her.

“I, too, would see,” she said then added, a little snappish, “it won’t hurt you.”

She carried the torch to another brazier and another, hobbling between them. The
dragon watched her, eyes wincing at the light. He did not look at Gunnar. Gunnar did not
look at him. Ragnhild’s movement and the spreading of flame was mesmerizing, surreal.
The light shimmered toward the rough surface of the far wall, showing crumbled
passageways that twisted away from the hall. It caught in the colors of age-tattered
tapestries. It lay in gleaming swathes on the grimy, oiled floor where the dragon had slept
for centuries. It glittered over the dragon’s clawed feet and thick haunches, over his
leathery wings and spiked tail, which was curled around the base of a treasure heap.

The dragon in the corner of his eye, Gunnar stared at the hoard. Gathered into a
tight pile, it was a heap of gold and silver. Coins and cups. Rings and mail. The red-gold
otter. Every treasure known to king or warrior. It was everything.

A snarl from Fafnir jerked Gunnar’s eyes from the gold, but it was Ragnhild,
settling to stillness behind one of the braziers, who winced. Then Fafnir, tail still wrapped
around the treasure, stretched to meet him, and Gunnar brought his eyes fully to the
dragon at last. It was the face he remembered, the face he had tried to push beyond
memory, to forget. Yet now, in one look, it was as though not a day had passed. He was a
boy again, standing in the dragon’s hall, without purpose, without hope.
The dragon was smiling. It was a twist of his reptile lips, a gleam of teeth. Gunnar felt the blood drain from his face as from a wound. It left him weak, the sword wavering in his hand. But as his hand began to drop and the breath went out of him, he felt the weight and solidity of the pouch under his byrnie. He put the dragon again into the corner of his eye, made him no more than a shape. The vision of success came back to him, wavered in his mind. He grabbed it, held it with all that was in him. It was a certainty. It had been seen. Fafnir did not matter; he could not withstand fate. Gunnar set his jaw and raised the sword again.

“You were right, sister,” said Fafnir, tilting his head to see Gunnar better. “It is the Nibelung.”

“Do not call me that!” shouted Gunnar, louder than he had intended, and the words rang beyond to the braziers’ light, into darkness.

Fafnir chuckled, a dry sucking in his throat. “This is more nerve than you showed before. Last time, you let your Volsung friend speak. Last time, it was his sword that was drawn. Where is he now for you to hide behind?”

“You need not concern yourself with him, monster! It is I who will kill you. I will avenge my kinsmen and take this hoard.”

Now Fafnir’s laugh was full. It echoed off the ceiling, bounced back from the walls. “Oh! Oh!” Fafnir rocked back on his haunches, pressed a claw to his belly, a mockery—or a memory—of a human gesture. “Oh, Nibelung!”

Fafnir dropped to the ground again, leaning on his forelegs like a stalking wolf, his wings shuddering above him. The laughter was gone from his face. His nostrils were
flared, his eyes narrow. “You are here for one reason, and that is to return the coin my sister so foolishly gave to your father. Give it to me!”

Gunnar stepped back, raising the sword over his head. “No! You will die on this sword! You are a slithering serpent, an abomination, a curse on men, and I—I—will send you into death!”

“Oh, really?”

“I will cut out your eyes!”

“All right.” The dragon lowered himself to the ground, bearded chin between his claws, like a dog waiting. “Come on then, if you mean it.”

Hatred flared in Gunnar at the smugness of the dragon, at the shamelessness. He would do it. He would kill this thing. He charged forward with a scream of fury. His sword was certain in his hand.

The dragon did not move. He watched Gunnar, as though curious. When Gunnar was just steps from his face, as he was bringing his sword down to strike, Fafnir raised a single claw. He flicked Gunnar’s sword from his hands. Gunnar was yanked from his feet, and the sword spun through the air. It clattered into the shadows.

Gunnar lay sprawled before the dragon. Then he groped for his sword, fingers patting and sifting through the dust and grime of the floor, sliding and crawling by inches as though the dragon would not notice his movement.

Fafnir watched. He was motionless in his crouch, low to the ground. There was humor in his jeweled eyes, a satisfaction deeper than anger.
When Gunnar’s fingers found his sword-hilt, he snatched it up and sprang to his feet. His breath came hard, heaving his byrnie. In Gunnar’s eyes was a gleam of resentment, boiling to fury.

“You wretch! Too long have you hidden from men! Too long has that cowardice protected you! No more! By this sword—”

Fafnir had drawn the air into himself, rearing his head back. He let it out at Gunnar now, toppling him with a burst of breath, a stinking, acrid wind black with smoke and ash. Gunnar fell again, but this time his sword was tight in his hand. He rose, coughing, hacking the smoke from his lungs.

“You—monster—” he choked. “You!” A fit of coughing seized him and he doubled over, the sword across his knees. When he straightened, eyes tearing, he fought hard for air, drawing it into one last challenge, and rasped as loud as he could, “No more words!”

“Finished already?” said Fafnir. “Is that all the shouting match you can take? Is that the last of your clever insults? I’m surprised at you, dwarf. It’s been some centuries since one of your kinsmen came here to amuse me, but as I recall they managed a few more words than that before I twisted the limbs from them.”

With a yell, Gunnar charged the dragon. For the second time in his life, he was overtaken by battle-fury. But there was something different in it now. That first time, as a boy, in the disaster on the forest road, he had been ecstatic, abandoning all else to violence, breathing the fight. Now, he was shaking with shame and desperation.

Strangling the sword-hilt with both hands, he swung wildly, hurtling towards the dragon.
Fafnir deepened his crouch. He drew back a clawed hand, waiting. When Gunnar was nearly under him, the claw struck out like a snake. Fafnir caught the sword blade between his scaled fingers and lifted it, Gunnar dangling from the hilt. Fafnir rose onto his haunches. He held the sword before him while Gunnar twisted madly, trying to wrench the blade free.

“Unhand me!” demanded Gunnar. “Fight me!”

Fafnir’s thin, reptilian lips stretched away from his teeth. He raised Gunnar over his head, high into the darkness. Several birds that had been hidden in the crevices of the stony roof fluttered away noisily. Fafnir raised his other claw and tickled at Gunnar’s feet. Gunnar screamed his frustration. He jerked again at the sword, mindless of the deadly drop to the floor.

Fafnir lowered him a little and turned back to the treasure heap, Gunnar swinging with the movement. Fafnir lumbered toward the circle of light, where Ragnhild stood unmoving. Fafnir settled onto his haunches beside the hoard, folding his wings behind him. His spiked tail circled around the hoard again, quivering in the light.

Ragnhild, too, sat down, not touching the treasure, not even near it. Her eyes darted now and then to Gunnar, but they returned always to the dragon’s face.

Fafnir’s eyes, bright and glittering in the firelight, were fixed on Gunnar. He watched curiously, puzzled, as Gunnar wrenched and twisted at the lodged sword, a word escaping him from time to time. The words were echoes of his earlier challenge, but they were faint and distorted. When Gunnar’s arms shivered with fatigue, as his voice drifted to silence and his eyelids began to droop, Fafnir shook him gently as though some last amusement could be jostled from him. Gunnar began to tremble, then to shake. His face
twisted, and he squeezed his eyes shut. A gasp broke from him, then a sob. Tears streaked his cheeks, leaving tracks in the soot that coated his face and dulled the silver shine of his helmet.

As Gunnar shook on the sword, the curiosity in Fafnir’s face dissolved into triumph, and satisfaction settled deep into his eyes. He lowered Gunnar to the ground, well clear of the hoard, into a pool of light from one of the braziers. Gunnar lay crumpled, sword still in his grip, the blade scratching against the floor like a bare twig shaken by wind.

Fafnir looked at Ragnhild. “That’s the last of him, I think.”

Ragnhild hobbled over to Gunnar, a hand clutching pain in her side. She leaned near to him, her hair trailing over his shoulder. She reached a bony hand to his throat, tugged the leather thong free. The pouch slid from under Gunnar’s byrnie, and she raised it to the light.

Fafnir snatched it from her hand. He fumbled with the small pouch in his huge claws, trying to rend the leather. The pouch slipped from his grip and he snarled, bending to retrieve it. Ragnhild picked it up from under him. A growl rumbled from his throat.

“Peace, brother,” said Ragnhild, and she shook the coin from the pouch.

Fafnir reached out an expectant claw, and Ragnhild laid the coin into his scaly grip. Fafnir brought it close to his nostrils. He sniffed.

“Smells like dwarves,” he said with disgust then set the coin carefully into the treasure heap.

* * *
Gunnar did not dream. He lay in sleep, in a stupor, heavy and senseless on the floor of the dragon cave. When he roused, he felt the cold of the floor, saw the glimmer of light, the glint of gold. In that first moment, he did not know where he was. He shifted toward the gold. But what came into his vision, what stood between him and the gleaming, was a huge scaled foot. The foot was longer than Gunnar’s body, the claws spread like an eagle’s as it drops on its prey. The scales were red and gold and copper, tarnished bluish-green in places, grimed in the webbing between toes. A weight settled in Gunnar’s chest.

“Brother,” said Ragnhild, “he wakes.”

Fafnir, who had been resting beside the hoard, opened his eyes a little. “I’m tired.”

“You are unaccustomed to exercise.”

Fafnir shivered his tail, the spikes vibrating, and a few coins spilled from under it. Ragnhild fell silent.

Stiff with cold, Gunnar struggled to a sitting position, dragging his sword with him. Fafnir chuckled. Gunnar’s eyes darted to him then dropped again. He unclenched his hands and the sword rattled to the ground. He stared down at his knees, head hanging.

“He looks glum, sister. Are you glum, dwarf?”

Gunnar stirred a little at the word. His voice broke from him, “Why do you not just kill me?”

“I still might.”

“Then do it. Have some honor in this fight.”

“Honor!”
Gunnar raised his head a little. “Do you not know the word? I suppose you don’t.
How else could you have killed your own father? And your people.”
Fafnir snarled. He loomed over Gunnar, burying him in shadow. Before Gunnar
could stop himself, he shrank from the dragon. Fafnir settled back, his thin lips smug.
“Well, Ragnhild? What do we do with him?”
“I don’t know, brother.”
“Don’t know! You spared his life once. For what?”
“It was a sense, brother. I see no more.”
Gunnar raised his eyes to Ragnhild. She was a ghost, a grey whisper in the
wavering light. Her clothes had lost all their color. They were as grey as her hair and just
as ragged. She wore no shoes, no cloak. But something made her real, almost human. She
was uncomfortable, hunched and thin, her back crooked with pain. A weal ran down her
face, a fresh scar of fire from forehead to chin.
“Why do you serve him?”
Ragnhild’s eyes strayed to Gunnar, but she did not answer.
“Will you let him murder you also?” demanded Gunnar, his voice ringing too
loud.
“She gave your father the coin!” protested Fafnir, his own voice echoing over
Gunnar’s, startling Ragnhild’s birds from their hidden perches. “Day after day she said,
‘Go onto the Heath.’ Day after day, ‘Your blood is cold, brother. Go warm yourself in the
sun.’ Well! Why did she want me away from the treasure? To give my coin to a
Nibelung!”
Fafnir sat back a little. A puff of smoke burst from his nostrils.
Gunnar’s next question was pained, resentful, “Why did you do it?”

Fafnir broke in, “Do you think I did not ask her? I asked with fire and claw. If she will give nothing to me, she will certainly give nothing to you.”

“Come on, witch, speak!” shouted Gunnar. “What has made you the betrayer of men? Why should you will against me?”

Ragnhild edged toward the fire. “Brother, will you let him speak so in your hall?”

“Hall!” objected Gunnar. “This?”

“Silence!” boomed Fafnir, his voice bounding to the rough walls and back again.

“I am the king here! I will ask the questions!”

Fafnir’s words faded. Gunnar and Ragnhild sat hunched in their patches of shadowy light. The birds had settled again. One, a small falcon, perched on Ragnhild’s shoulder. Fafnir crouched by the treasure heap. When his voice came again, it was sudden and loud, snapping at Gunnar like a lash.

“Where is my brother?”

Gunnar started, and Fafnir shouted the question again.

“His home, I expect.”

“Squatting in the river valley, is he? What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know,” said Gunnar without interest. “I haven’t seen him in nearly a year.”

“You don’t know! What about that other boy? I haven’t forgotten!”

Gunnar snapped, “I’m not going to answer your questions.”

Fafnir growled and loomed over Gunnar, his lip curling to reveal a long curve of tooth. Gunnar looked up slowly. His heart began to knock in his chest, but he did not
allow himself to shrink from the dragon again. It would be better this way. There was no
going back. He would not die cowering.

“Do it,” he whispered into the dragon’s shadow.

Fafnir’s muscles bunched, and Gunnar stilled himself, his mind and body. When the claw came sweeping toward him he did not blink, did not cringe.

The claw bumped his chest. He was knocked back into the brazier and lay sprawled against its iron leg. The fire shook above him. He stared into that shivering but saw only the darkness beyond it. A tear leaked from his eye, slid into his helmet. He pulled the helmet from his head, let it roll away from him with a bump and ping of silver. Fafnir, sitting back by his treasure, laughed.

“Sister, I have not enjoyed myself so much in centuries! I feel so alive!”

Ragnhild’s voice was eager, “That’s good, brother. That’s good.”

“Why, I feel like a young dragon again!”

“You are so mighty. Greater than any other. You are so beautiful, brother.”

“I am, aren’t I?”

Ragnhild shuffled closer to Fafnir. She laid a hand on the curve of his hip. She whispered, “He Who Surrounds With His Arms.”

Fafnir reached a claw down to her, and she stroked it. The dragon’s voice softened, and he said, “I’m sorry I hurt you. But you shouldn’t have given my coin to that filthy thief.”

“I know, brother, I know. But you got it back, as I knew you would.”

Fafnir’s tail strayed to the top of the heap, searched among the coins and rings and cups. “It’s all here. Every piece.”
“And so should it be.”

“Yes. It is mine.” The tail curled around the red-gold otter and drew it, with a slide and clatter of gold, to Fafnir’s side. “Otter looks pleased, doesn’t he?”

“Oh, very pleased.”

“Family,” said the dragon, “is important. Don’t you think Father would have been pleased to see how much greater the hoard is now? It was half this size in his day!”

“You have indeed gathered much wealth for this family.”

Fafnir trailed a claw through the gold. “I suppose it’s been some years since I added much.”

“Many years.”

“Yes, well,” snapped Fafnir, “call it what you will.”

“Still,” amended Ragnhild, “Father would be so proud of you. You were always his favorite.”

“And justly so!”

“The Counselor was ever sly.” Ragnhild stroked the dragon’s side, her fingers light on the scales. “He did not have your greatness.”

“Not a bit of it.”

“But it’s no worry. He’ll get what he deserves.” Ragnhild’s eyes, pale as Regin’s, were intent on the dragon’s face. “I have seen it.”

“He may live forever at that!” chuckled Fafnir. Then he shouted, “Dwarf!” When Gunnar, lying nearly insensible against the brazier, did not respond, he cried again, “Dwarf!” and scooped Gunnar up in his claw. He laid Gunnar on the treasure heap.
Gunnar roused a little at the unexpected touch of gold against his back and legs. A word was struggling in his throat, a question. The dragon was leaning near him with a grin on his face.

The dragon said, “Here’s a funny thing. Oh, it’s too good! Even someone as squat as you can surely appreciate it. Did my brother ever tell you what fate our sister saw for him? Well?”

Gunnar watched the quivering nostrils, the sparkle of a green and blue eye.

“She said to him once,” Fafnir went on when Gunnar did not respond, “she said that his life-taker would be someone he loved.” Fafnir chuckled again. “Oh, what a fine day it is! Oh, my sister! This is too good! Did you hear me dwarf? Answer!” Fafnir slammed a fist into the heap near Gunnar.

Gunnar jerked. His question, the word he had wanted to say, finally shook loose from his throat: “Why?”

“Who cares? Imagine it! Come on, dwarf, sit up!” Fafnir jostled Gunnar, and Gunnar slid halfway down the treasure heap.

Gunnar covered his face with his hands.

“Sister,” said Fafnir, looking down to Ragnhild at his side, “he doesn’t look very pleased.”

Gunnar’s shoulders began to shake. “Just kill me, just kill me,” he muttered though his fingers. “I cannot bear it!”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll do that,” said the dragon, and Gunnar burst into tears.

“There, there. Stand up! Be strong! You can bear it, dwarf. You are a hardy folk!” Fafnir
sat back, shaking with laughter. His tail slipped away from the treasure to slap the ground behind him, sending the sound pulsing through the hall.

“What’s this?” said Fafnir suddenly, groping with his tail. He drew the tail toward his body, curled around something that rolled and clattered with a high, clean sound. Gunnar’s helmet. He snatched it up between two claws, holding it like a man might hold a pearl. “Very fine!” He rubbed it against his chest, polishing the soot from it. He added it to the hoard.

“Now, dwarf, get off my treasure! I’ll never get the smell out!”

When Gunnar did not move, Fafnir flicked him from the heap with a claw. Gunnar fell to his knees on the floor, gold streaming behind him.

“What will you do with him, brother?” asked Ragnhild.

“I don’t know. He can’t stay here, not with that stink on him. This is my place.”

“Then you will kill him?”

“I think it would be more fun to chase him out the door. Then I will sort this treasure—there’s a new addition, after all, and think about tomorrow.”

“You are brilliant, fire-wyrm, as always.”

Fafnir shivered his wings, settled them behind him. “Now, dwarf, it’s time for you to go home.”

Gunnar, still on his knees, shook his head.

“Oh, yes,” said Fafnir, and he gave Gunnar a nudge. Gunnar fell to his side. Fafnir grunted and a puff of smoke shot from his nostrils. He gripped Gunnar around his byrnie and lumbered across the hall with him.
“No, no,” murmured Gunnar, “no, don’t.” He twisted weakly in the dragon’s grip, blind in the blackness beyond the light of the braziers.

The dragon thrust him through the dark hole of the archway, laid him on the night-cold stone ledge. Above Gunnar was a slender moon, and the dark sky glittered with stars. He stared upward in confusion.

“Go on, dwarf!” shouted the dragon’s voice, very near, startling him. “There’s nothing for you here!”

When Gunnar did not move, a claw came from the cave and shoved him down the slope. Gunnar tumbled over the rubble, his body banging and scraping against stone. He rolled instinctively to his feet, caught himself against the cliff face. He leaned there, panting, then continued his stumbling descent. When he had gone some paces, a burst of fire leaped into the dark, searing the air behind him. He jerked in surprise, and a rough, grating laugh shuddered from the hall. Head hanging, Gunnar stumbled on, the stars glittering above him and the dragon’s laughter echoing behind.
Chapter 26

Denmark looked much as Sigurd remembered it: bright lakes reflecting the sky, bogs and marshes full of shy birds, clear streams, open woods. But he had forgotten the wildness that lay beneath all that. Where Burgundy was farms and fields, a place of cultivation, Denmark was old and feral.

Greyfell traveled tirelessly, and Sigurd soon found himself on the king’s road. But as he drew within a few miles of the stronghold, he guided Greyfell off the wide, rutted track, into the woods. It was not fear that made him delay—he was certain of that—but he did not want to ride, just yet, into Aelf’s courtyard.

As he rode through the rain-soaked underbrush, Greyfell fretted and Skadi shifted restlessly on his arm. He threw the falcon into the air. He watched with longing the white flight of the bird, the huge spread of his wings above the budding branches. When he lost sight of Skadi and turned his eyes to the woods, he found some of the deer trails he
remembered. He wandered along them to the streams where he had set his snares as a boy. It was strange to see these places he had once loved. How had he been content here, where there was nothing for him?

As Greyfell set his lips to the clear flow of water, Sigurd heard a movement, far off. Greyfell’s head lifted, water dripping from his chin, and his ears pricked toward the sound. It was too heavy and noisy for a deer, too deliberate for a boar.

“It’s probably just one of the king’s thanes,” he said to Greyfell, but he loosened his sword in its sheath and strung his bow.

Greyfell’s hooves were almost silent over the leaves and twigs and fallen branches, and it was easy for Sigurd to cut around the other horseman, just beyond sight, and hide behind a bush to wait.

The man was thickened with age, but he rode with a straight back and carried the weapons of a warrior. Above the grey beard his expression was serious, determined, unhappy. Even after nearly ten years, he was unmistakable.

Sigurd nudged Greyfell into the open and rode up behind the man. Greyfell set his feet in time with the other horse and made himself all but silent. Sigurd felt a laugh rising from his belly, shaking his chest.

The other horse’s ears pricked at some hint of sound, and the animal jerked and spun. The rider swung in the saddle, grabbing mane. Red-faced, still righting himself, the man brought up his spear.

“Name yourself! What do you mean sneaking about the king’s woods? I could have your head!”
A smile stretched over Sigurd’s face, almost hiding his eyes. “And I could have
had yours, old friend.”

A shout was on the man’s lips, then his bushy grey brows eased, and a look of
disbelief came into his face. “Who—”

“Freod,” Sigurd reproached him, his smile easing, “have I changed so much that
you do not know me?”

Freod’s look of distrust softened until tears came into his eyes. “I had begun to
doubt that I would see you again in this life.”

Sigurd swallowed a lump in his throat. “Now, will you lower that spear, old
man?”

Freod looked at the spear as though he did not know what it was doing in his
hand. He laughed a little and swung its point upward. As Freod dismounted, Sigurd
leaped down and went to him. They embraced, both laughing. Then Freod, hands on
Sigurd’s shoulders, leaned back from him.

“You look the very son of Odin. But this”—he brushed a thumb along Sigurd’s
jaw, over his short beard—“where did that red come from?”

Sigurd’s laugh was embarrassed, and he pulled back from Freod, rubbing at the
red-gold beard. “It’s terrible, isn’t it? Maybe Burgundy bled into me a little.”

Freod threw an arm around Sigurd’s shoulders and drew him along to walk with
the horses. “By the gods, it’s good to see you!”

“Why are you alone out here?” asked Sigurd. “If I had been an outlaw, I could
have killed you. You should be wary.”
Freod’s arm dropped. “I am wary, but you move with the silence of the sun. Where did you learn such stealth?”

“Regin was a good teacher, I guess. And then I had many years to practice, in Burgundy’s war.”

“Regin,” said Freod with disapproval.

“Much good has come of that fosterage,” said Sigurd, reluctant with the truth, frowning at his own words.

When a questioning look brought no more from Sigurd, Freod said, “Men have been hunting the king’s game. I’m out here looking for those thieves.” He smiled a little.

“I thought you were one.”

“But why alone? You could be killed.”

“That’s not as easy as you might think, even these days. I doubt there are any thieves in these woods with your silence.”

“Perhaps not.”

Freod’s chin lifted. “Besides, once I need help with so small a matter as riding through woods I’ve known most my life, I should be dead. Pray to Odin it is so.” He added sharply, “I will not be useless.”

Sigurd laid a hand briefly on Freod’s shoulder then said, “Tell me the news of Denmark. How fares my mother?”

“She is well. She waits for you. It would have been a kindness, Sigurd, to have sent her word of yourself from time to time.”

“Do you think? What could I have told her? News of Burgundy’s wars must have reached here. She would have known I was alive.”
Freod shook his head, sighing. “You will have children some day, then you will understand. You do not know what it is to fear the loss of your own sons.”

All of Freod’s sons were dead. The last had died when Sigurd was very young, and Freod rarely spoke of them. Sigurd did not even know their names. “Well,” he said. “She will see me now. That will have to be enough.”

Freod started to shake his head again but stopped himself. “As for other news, Denmark fares well enough. Many men are at the border, holding the Northern Jutes behind the fjord. But, then, that’s nothing new. Gar is there. He’ll be sickened to have missed you. He’s grown up, you know. Not quite such an obnoxious whelp as he was at your age.”

“Come, Freod, Gar was always a good man.”

“I know, I know. And he has a much better sense of…dignity and reserve than he used to. I do not complain of him. Anyway, we prepare for spring. We’ll take the ships east this year, look to the islands for timber and game. There’s little more to say than that. So what brings you, Sigurd? We heard you had left Burgundy. We’ve expected you this year past. Where have you been? Why do you come now?”

“I’ve been in Baltia, with my mother’s brother.”

“With Gripir? The horse-lord?”

Sigurd fingered his reins. “He’s a strange man. I did not know what to make of him.”

“And was it he who gave you this fine horse? Or is this a war-prize?”

Sigurd laid a hand on Greyfell’s arched neck. “Greyfell was given to me in Baltia, yes. But not by Gripir.”
“Then who—” Freod’s eyes went wide as he looked more closely at the horse, at the muscled body and dark, intent eye.

“He is no mere horse,” said Sigurd.

Seeing something deepen in Sigurd’s expression, Freod looked hard into his eyes, trying to follow that strangeness to its core. But Freod could see only so far, like a man peering into the deep blue from his boat; eventually, it is nothing but mystery. Was this the boy he had known? Before Hjalprek had died, he had called Freod to his bed. He had told him to watch Sigurd for him, to be his eyes and to bring news to Valhalla. That boy, Hjalprek had said, would shake the world.

A shiver went through Freod as he watched Sigurd now, grown to manhood, walking beside his ghostly horse, a beautiful golden horn hanging at his back, like something out of legend. When a flap of white wings caught Freod’s eye, he watched, hair rising on the back of his neck, as a huge bird came to Sigurd’s arm.

“The bird of kings,” he whispered.

* * * * *

Sigurd and Freod rode into the stronghold at midday. Men and women came from their work to see who rode such a fine grey horse down their wood-paved road. None guessed who was among them, though later, when they knew, they would tell stories of the Volsung boy who had been so loved by the old king.

When Sigurd and Freod drew into the courtyard, horse-boys came for their reins, and the boy who stood before Greyfell hesitated.
“He will go with you,” said Sigurd. “But take off his saddle and bridle and turn him loose. He’ll not suffer a stall.”

The boy nodded and put a cautious hand to Greyfell’s reins. Sigurd watched the retreating grey haunches with a dull ache in his chest. This was the first time he had been apart from Greyfell.

Freod nudged him, and Sigurd looked to the hall, where Aelf, dark hair now mottled with grey, was coming down the steps. Sigurd wondered where Aelf had come by his elegance. It could not have come from his father, who had been a big, coarse man. Aelf, even at forty, had a slim waist, and he wore his fine clothes like they made him something. He had always been that way, but there was more to him now, a confidence, a coolness beyond the simple arrogance Sigurd remembered.

“And what did you find in the woods today, Freod?” said Aelf.

“One of our own, come back to us.”

Aelf’s eyes narrowed a little. “Can it be? Sigurd the Volsung, famous champion of Burgundy, visits his humble roots? I almost didn’t recognize you, boy. The stories say you are tall as an oak and strong as a mad bull. But then, I have never put much faith in stories.”

Aelf was down the steps now, and Sigurd approached him slowly. “Aelf. You, too, are much changed. But I would know you anywhere.”

Aelf’s lip twitched, but he held out a hand, which Sigurd grasped.

“That is a fine bird on your wrist,” said Aelf. “But he wears no hood, no jesses. Is that wise?”

“Skadi needs none.”
Sigurd flung the falcon into the air, and they watched the white bird fly to the roof of the hall, where he perched on the carved figures.

“Come,” said Aelf, turning from the bird, as though its strange behavior did not interest him. “No doubt your mother will want to lay her own eyes on you. My words, I’m sure, would be insufficient.”

Sigurd followed Aelf into the hall, which looked much the same: hung with antlers, paneled with oak. The floor was strewn with rushes, and the only sound to be heard was their feet rustling through them, for those few in the hall had fallen silent to watch. Sigurd knew enough of courtesy from Gunnar’s hall to know he should be announced, but he let it go. He could see Aelf looking back from the corner of his eye. Aelf, perhaps, expected him to stop and complain, to become indignant, and he could hear Freod grumbling from behind. But such ceremony meant nothing to Sigurd.

Aelf led him to the back of the hall, where it branched off to private chambers. Sigurd knew this way well, knew without doubt the door that shielded his mother from the hall and the men. Voices could be heard on the other side. As Aelf knocked at the door and called brusquely, Sigurd felt a sudden, unexpected turning in his stomach.

Sigurd recognized his mother’s maid, Asta, when she opened the door. Asta looked through rheumy eyes at Aelf, then quickly beyond him to Sigurd. Her breath caught, and she called uncertainly for Hiordis.

Hiordis came to the door with an impatient swish of skirts. Sigurd watched, unable to speak, as she leaned out. Her face had grown severe, much of her beauty hidden in sharp lines—the jut of cheekbone, the clean cut of jaw. A streak of grey threaded away from her temple. Echoing Asta, her eyes went first to Aelf but swept beyond him, even as
he was speaking, to Sigurd. The hard lines of her face seemed to dissolve, to blur into brief beauty. She stared for a moment, then cried out, pushing past Aelf.

“Sigurd!”

“Mother,” he said and put his arms around her, awkward with her small body, and with this unfamiliar affection.

She leaned back from his chest and brushed the tangled hair from his face with both hands. “My beautiful boy. As beautiful as I remember, only better. Oh, you are perfect.”

Color rose in Sigurd’s cheeks. “You are well?”

Hiordis laughed a little, stroking his cheek with cool fingers. “Is that all you have to say after so many years? Did you never think of your poor mother, who has waited for you to come?”

Sigurd stiffened, wishing she would take back her hands. Where was the reserve—the pride—he remembered, that he had seen not moments ago? His voice came sharper than he intended: “For what? You must know I cannot stay.”

Her eyes saddened. “Yes. I know that.” She dropped her hands.

“Come, Freod,” said Aelf, turning away. “I won’t stand here like a crow on a fence post.”

Sigurd felt an unexpected drop of his heart as they retreated. Aelf, at least, he knew how to handle.

“Ah, Sigurd, you are so like him.”

“Who?” he demanded, his mind still on Aelf.

“Your father, of course.”
Sigurd’s breath caught in his throat. He had never heard such words from her. Always she had been unmoved by his questions. Would she speak now? What would he ask? He was about to demand something of her, anything, but she spoke again before he could call up the words.

“I know why you’re here.” Her voice was cool again. “I always knew you would come for it. I did not expect you to wait so long.”

“You reproach me? When you would never even say that you had it?”

“I do not reproach you. The years have been long for me. That is all. And…I did not see that it would be the one thing that would bring you back to me.”

Sigurd looked down at her, at the thin stretch of skin over her jaw, at the sharp bones under her eyes, wondering what her life had been like. He felt suddenly guilty, as though he were responsible. “What makes you so unhappy? Does Aelf not treat you as a husband should?”

Hiordis stiffened. She looked again like his last memory of her, as he had ridden away with Regin. “He does. It is I who do not treat him as a wife should. I have no delusions about that. But let us not speak of Aelf. Come sit with me. Eat. Drink. Tell me of your life.”

Sigurd spent some hours with his mother. He sat near her loom while she wove. He drank Aelf’s strong mead and answered her questions of Regin and Gunnar, of her brother, of Burgundy. But it was Gudrun who interested her the most.

“Is she pretty?”

“She is. Quite beautiful, actually. She’s…a little wild. She does not like women’s things. She wants to ride and hunt. I think she would fight in the wars if Gunnar let her.”
Sigurd smiled at a memory. “She told me once that she had always wished to be a Valkyrie, that there was no other honor possible for a woman.”

“I would think you’d approve of her ambitions.”

“I do. Gunnar does not, but I think it’s good. Why should she sit always sewing and weaving?” He reddened as his attention caught on his mother, casting the shuttle through her threads.

Hiordis paused and fingered the shuttle. “I thought my life would have some of that, married to your father. And it did. It just didn’t last long enough. Now I must resign myself to this.” She drew the shuttle through the loom again, her movements slower now.

“But Gudrun. Will you marry her?”

“I am not in a position to marry now. And she will have to find a husband soon.”

“If she does not?”

“I don’t know.”

“You say she’s pretty. I can see you have an affection for her. She’s the sister of your friend and foster-brother. Why do you hesitate?”

Sigurd fell still under her gaze, then he shrugged.

“Tell me.”

“I—it is not enough.”

“What more do you want?”

Sigurd shook his head. “I don’t know. Something. More than a child’s dreams, which will never be real.”

Hiordis paused in her weaving, sitting back on the stool. She straightened some threads on the loom. “I understand.”
“You do?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. I married Sigmund, son of Volsung, son of Rerir, son of Sigi, son of Odin, didn’t I?”

Gooseflesh rose on Sigurd’s arms at her words, at her voice.

“But,” she said, sharp and human again, “that did not lead to what I expected. Then again, I still have you. And seeing you here, a man, seeing you like I imagined your father in his prime, well…it takes me back to those days, even if only for a moment.”

By the time of the evening meal, Sigurd was a little drunk from the mead. This was unusual for him, and he was surprised to find himself laughing at the bawdy riddles and songs of the skald. He was also surprised to find himself listening to the men boast of their battles, to find himself speaking of Burgundy and Gunnar, and of Regin’s war-winning strategy.

Aelf’s cheeks were as flushed as Sigurd’s, and he shouted, “Strategy! That does not sound like the Volsung we hear so much about! What of riding alone against twenty Hunalanders? What about the siege of the Hunaland fortress, when they say you hacked at the gates yourself with nothing more than a woodman’s axe? Don’t tell me you care so much for thinking!”

Sigurd found himself sobering. He said, his voice low, “And which of your deeds are known beyond Denmark?”

The men stuttered to an uneasy silence, broken only by the sound of a stifled cough and the shifting of someone’s chair in the rushes. Aelf looked at Sigurd across the fire, his eyes reflecting flame.
“Sigurd,” reproached Freod, “you are drunk. Aelf, he’s drunk. Don’t let him offend you.”

Aelf said, his cheeks now flushed with more than mead, “You think yourself so high. But where is your kingdom? Where is your hall? You travel alone. With a horse and a bird. Do not expect me to be impressed. I am not my father.”

“No,” said Sigurd, “you are not.”

Aelf’s lip curled back from his teeth, and he took a long drink from his gold-heavy horn. He rose and let the horn clatter into his chair. “I’m going to bed. The company tonight is not to my taste.”

As Aelf staggered away from the hearth and disappeared into the dark hallway, Freod laid a hand on Sigurd’s sleeve. “Why must you provoke him? I would have you stay awhile. I would not have you leave in anger.”

“I will not stay.”

“Sigurd. You must see it is hard for him.”

“He’s a—” Sigurd cut himself off, shook his head. “He’s not worth it.”

“He’s not so bad, really. Better than anyone expected. You are unfair. The kingdom has prospered.”

“On what strength? My father’s wealth? What do think bought that fine blade you wear? What do think Aelf traded for the silk on his back? No,” said Sigurd, laying a hand over Freod’s as he started to unbuckle his scabbard. “That’s not what I meant. Besides, I don’t want money, not even my own.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Something far more valuable.”
The lines deepened around Freod’s mouth. “What?”

“Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t concern you.”

“You concern me, Sigurd. What are you after?”

Sigurd flicked the last of his mead into the fire. “The Volsung lands, of course. What have I always been after? Now leave it. I have no more to say.”

* * *

It was midday before Sigurd went to find Aelf. He had been watching Greyfell in the fields. More than a few hours away from him and Sigurd would grow restless. Near that horse, he could feel it, a prickling of his scalp, a falling away of everything else.

When he turned from the sight of Greyfell, a weight settled in his stomach again. He thought of not asking. He could just speak to his mother, demand the sword, ride away. But he had learned enough of sense not to do that.

He found Aelf in the stable, unsaddling his horse from a morning’s ride. It surprised him to see Aelf at such a task. He had horse-boys in every corner.

Aelf, his expression guarded, looked up over the horse’s back as Sigurd approached. Sigurd laid a hand on the horse’s brown nose, rubbed his knuckles over the forehead.

“I’m surprised you deign to touch him,” said Aelf. “Freod is telling everyone that your grey horse was a gift from Odin. Will you lower yourself to deal with mortals?”

Sigurd raised his eyes to Aelf. “You know, there is one thing that’s better, now that your father is dead.”
“And what is that?”

“We no longer have to pretend to respect one another. It’s better this way, don’t you think?”

Aelf considered that, frowning, then pulled the saddle from the horse’s back and slung it onto the stall rail. “What do you want, Sigurd? I do not believe that you’re here just to see your mother.”

“I do want something.” Sigurd tightened his lips and dropped his hands from the horse’s face. “I need something from you. Odin knows I’ve asked little enough. And you know that you have a debt to me.” Aelf said nothing, and Sigurd went on, “I need men, lots of them.”

“Every man in Denmark won’t be enough to take the Volsung lands. You know as well as I do what they say about that hall. It’s set high on a bluff, within a palisade, behind the town. It’s impregnable. The only reason your father was killed was because he came out to fight when Lygni burned the town. Lygni will not make that mistake. He can sit in the hall for months. A siege would be long and pointless. Everyone would be killed.”

“You cannot refuse my request.”

“Yes, I can. Even if I wanted to give you half my kingdom, I could not. I do not have the men to spare.”

“Then give me my father’s wealth, and I will buy the men I need.”

Aelf’s cheeks reddened above his neat beard. “That money came with your mother. It was mine to use.”
Though Aelf’s words did not surprise him, Sigurd felt himself grow hot, felt his hands clench at his sides. “No, it wasn’t. It was your responsibility to ward it. It was never yours, and you know it. You have spent it all? Is that what you call kingship? Where is the wealth you have won? Or is all your success someone else’s?”

The red was seeping down Aelf’s neck. “You are insolent, as always.”

Sigurd’s voice flattened, growing softer as he spoke, “You will give me that wealth, or you will give me men. Or I will kill you.”

Aelf’s hands froze on the horse’s withers. Fear passed over his face, bleaching the red from it, then he said, “How dare you? I am your stepfather. Would you bring that shame on yourself?”

“It would be justice. You have stolen from me.”

Aelf’s mouth turned down with disgust. “What did my father see in you? What made him hold you so high?”

“Your father was a great man. If he had little patience for you, that is not my fault. Do not change the subject. Think of your honor, Aelf. You must have some sense of it, for your men seem to respect you well enough.”

Aelf’s pulse throbbed visibly in his neck. “I will give you forty men—”

“That is not enough.”

“I will give you forty men, which is all I can spare. Denmark has its own problems. You see how low our numbers are. The hall is half empty. Most are in the north and cannot be called back now. If you would wait a year or two—”

“I will not wait.”

“Then you can blame yourself for your own failure! Forty men, Sigurd, no more.”
“And ships? Horses?”

Aelf grimaced. “Yes.”

A muscle bulged in Sigurd’s jaw. “My father’s wealth was far greater than forty men and a couple of ships. But I will be content.”

“I will owe nothing more to you.”

Sigurd bit off his words: “You will still owe. But I will not ask.”

“I hope,” said Aelf, his dark eyes aimed at Sigurd like an arrow’s point, “that some day you will feel the regret I have felt ever since I found your mother, pregnant with you, on the Volsung shore. I hope some day you will know what it is to have everything destroyed by one moment.”

Sigurd turned away, said over his shoulder, “I’ll be back by early summer. Those men had better be waiting for me.”

* * *

Sigurd was still trembling with anger when he found his mother at her loom. She looked up, startled.

“Sigurd, what—”

“Why did you marry that man?”

Hiordis looked to her women. “Leave us.”

Asta and the others collected their sewing and knitting as Sigurd paced, making tracks in the rushes. They hurried from the room, and Asta closed the door behind the last of them.
Hiordis said, “It was not my idea.”

Sigurd laughed sourly. “Whose was it then?”

“It was Odin’s.”

“Odin’s? That cannot—”

“He uses us each for his own purposes. Don’t forget that, Sigurd.”

“But why? What purpose—”

Hiordis was shaking her head. “I don’t know. But I can guess easily enough that it wasn’t for my benefit. There was some purpose, I suppose, for you to be here.”

“So I can attack Lygni with a bare forty men at my side? What is that purpose?”

“Forty men? Sigurd, no! You will never do it. Sigurd! I know that place. It cannot be taken like that!”

Sigurd stopped suddenly, frozen in his pacing. How could he have been so stupid? Here, right before him, was the only person living who could tell him of the Volsung stronghold.

“Tell me what you know.”

“It cannot be sieged.”

“So Aelf said. There must be another way.”

Hiordis hesitated. “Must you do this?”

“You ask me that?”

Hiordis fingered the tight threads of her loom, staring into the weave as though it held some inscrutable wisdom. Then she sighed and looked up at Sigurd. “All right. There is a way in. A hidden path. It leads up the bluff, through the trees, to a tunnel and a secret door. But it will be dangerous. Lygni must have discovered it by now.”
“Go on.”

Hiordis described the path and the tunnel, described the overhead door, explained the storeroom into which it opened, explained how to get to the stone steps of the hall. She told Sigurd of the town and its palisade, of the watching platforms and the system of beacons. When she had no more to say, she stared into the loom again, regret already on her face.

“I do not know,” she said, “whether I have just helped to save your life or to end it. Do not be killed, Sigurd. How could I bear it?”

Sigurd’s face was harsh with certainty. “I will not be killed. Odin will not allow it. Why else would he have given me Greyfell? Why else would you still have that sword? It all must come to something.”

“That will be little comfort to me while I wait.”

“It will have to do. Now. Where is the sword?”

Hiordis led Sigurd from the room, through the hall, across the courtyard. They passed through the town, where they retrieved a spade from the stable, and through the gates. They walked into the woods, not speaking. Sigurd carried the spade, the breath catching in his throat as he watched for his mother to point the way, to kneel down, to show him what he wanted. But she made no sign, walking forever, it seemed, with her straight back and stiff neck.

When a deer trail led them to a cool, grassy clearing, Hiordis stopped. A huge, weathered boulder, marked with a shallow rune, waited in the clearing. Sigurd walked past his mother, crossing the clearing with slow steps, like it was a holy place. He
crouched by the stone, ran his fingers over the crudely cut rune. He imagined his mother here, twenty years ago, breaking that rune into the rock’s face.

“Why death?” he asked her. “Why does that mark the way?”

Hiordis’s voice was barely audible. “There is no other way.”

“So your brother would say. Do you really think that’s true?”

He heard her come up behind him, felt her kneel at his side.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe. I’ve never seen anything but death within reach of that blade.”

“That’s why I want it.” Sigurd rose and set the spade’s tip to the earth.

When the hole was knee deep, the spade thumped against a wooden box. Sigurd cast the spade aside and knelt by the hole, pushing the moist earth away with his hands. The chest was heavy, and he strained a little to lift it from where it rested. His mother, he thought, was stronger than she looked.

He brushed the earth from the lid of the pine chest. His fingers tingled at the touch of the cool, smooth wood. His heart pounded. The ocean seemed to fill his ears. Fingers trembling, he lifted the lid. The chest opened with reluctance, its earth-filled hinges slowly yielding. In the bottom of the chest lay a long, narrow bundle of blue-dyed wool. He lifted this out, laid it on the ground. He unwrapped the wool, drawing it away with care.

There, in the forest, under the trees and the sky, lying broken in its sheath, was the sword. He touched the golden pommel, which was the head of a wolf, the guard that was two ravens. The leather of the grip was worn and dry, but Sigurd wrapped his hand around it, felt that his father’s hand had been there. He drew the broken sword from the
scabbard, held the fragment before him. It was light, unbalanced, incomplete. Still, there was a power in it, and Sigurd ran his finger up the blade, which gleamed faintly with a blue radiance, like it held the sky. Runes were etched into the blade, and he turned his head to make them out. *Victory is without*— The sword broke off. Sigurd laid it down and picked up the scabbard. A few shards fell into his hands, cutting him, then a long piece slid through the fleece lining. He drew the point free, held it gleaming in the sun. He looked for the last word. *Death.*

Hiordis drew near, touched her fingers to the word. “You see?” she said. “There is nothing else at the edge of this sword.”

“That isn’t true. It says—”

“I know what it says.”

“But you do not see what matters. My name is in this sword. So is my father’s.”


Sigurd looked into his mother’s eyes, bright with unshed tears. For a moment, he understood her, saw her despair, knew what she had lost. He said, “I hope you will see it again, before the end.”

She smiled a little, sadly. “So do I.”

Sigurd slid the shards back into the sheath and rose. He held out a hand for his mother. “Come. I can’t stay here in the woods forever. I have things to do.”
As Sigurd and Hiordis left the place the sword had been buried, left the stone proclaiming death over the empty earth, a raven cawed from the trees and rose into the sky.

* * *

Sigurd took his stiff leave of Aelf early the next morning. His mother stood at Aelf’s side, and she was the stern, proud woman he remembered. As before, when he had ridden away with Regin, she did not cry. She hardly looked at him.

Freod rode with him for some miles, Greyfell fretting all the while at the slow pace and Skadi clenching his arm.

Looking down the road, Freod spoke abruptly, “You go to Burgundy?”

“I will see if Gunnar can spare any men. And…I must speak with Regin.”

Freod stiffened. “What do you need from him?”

Sigurd’s hand strayed to the bundle behind his saddle. He had shown it to no one and would not show it now. “Do not concern yourself. I’ll return by the end of summer with what Burgundy can offer. Then I will sail for the Volsung shore.”

“I’ll send word to Gar in the north. He would never forgive me if he missed his chance to fight with you.”

“I would be glad to have him at my side.”

“He won’t be the only one there.”

“Freod—”
“Aelf will be pleased to see the back of me, I think. I am the last of the old warriors still living, the last of Hjalprek’s close companions. That has always bothered him. But more importantly, it’s time. How many more chances will I get to die in battle? How long before stiff knees and cramped hands keep me huddled by the hearth? And most of all, who would I rather die fighting for than the boy my king loved above his own?”

Sigurd swallowed hard and gave a curt nod. “I will see you in a few months, then. It’ll be an honor to fight with you, my old friend.”

Eyes fixed ahead, Sigurd threw Skadi into the air and kicked Greyfell to a canter.
Chapter 27

Greyfell thundered south, churning the spring-wet road with his sharp hooves. Two days into the journey, Sigurd drew him to a sudden halt. Something stirred in his memory. Here—somewhere—he had fled from the outlaws who had captured him as a boy.

Greyfell chewed at the bit, but Sigurd looked to the sky. Its blue had faded, and the scattered clouds were tinged pink. The last ferry across the Elbe would have docked by now. They could stay the night in the woods or at the inn by the river. He gritted his teeth at the choice. Much as he hated the thought of sleeping within reach of memory, he hated more the thought of company and questions. He traveled another hour, until the night-black river came into sight, then turned Greyfell from the road.

Before the moon was high, his blankets were twisted around him like ropes, and he stared into the dark. He could feel the heat in his face and neck, in his whole body. He
willed his mind to emptiness, but images came to him. The short man with bad teeth and a matted beard, crouching near with his bow in hand. Himself, tied to the saddle. The fat one, a huge shape in the dark, touching his hair.

He sat up, drew his knees to his chest, scowled into the dark. Something touched his head. He jerked, and his hand went to his knife. Greyfell’s nose dropped over his shoulder.

“Oh,” said Sigurd, stroking the horse’s smooth cheek.

With the moonlight filtering through the budding branches, Greyfell’s face shone bright against Sigurd’s chest. Like another ghost-pale horse. He saw again, for a moment, the shimmer of that horse through the trees. He saw also a grim face, the jut of nose, the deep pool of darkness in an empty eye socket. His breath caught; his body tingled. But the image drew away as quickly as it has come, and Sigurd was alone in the woods again, shivering with memory.

He returned to the road before dawn and was waiting at the dock before the ferryman even emerged from his hut on the far bank.

Two days on the other side of the Elbe, he awoke in the night to hear movement in the underbrush. He drew his long knife from under his leg. He could hear Greyfell shifting at the edge of the clearing, and Skadi had left his perch to shelter in a tree. Sigurd listened for the movement that had woken him. Footsteps. Human.

He gripped the knife.

The steps were hesitant, sneaking. They drew nearer. Sigurd lay motionless on his blanket. The steps crept toward the pile of gear behind his head.
Sigurd sprang from the ground. The thief cried out with surprise and tried to scramble away. Sigurd was on him in two strides, his knife sweeping down before the man could scream. Sigurd slashed his throat, blinking as warm blood flecked his face.

Chest heaving, he rose from the body. He rubbed his sleeve across his face. He wiped the blade against the man’s clothes and slid the knife into its sheath. Grabbing the man’s arms, he dragged him away from the clearing.

He left the body in the woods, washed his hands in a stream, returned to his camp. He lay sleepless for a time, his hands jittery against his chest. He almost asked himself if that had been right, but it was obvious what the man had wanted.

He was not troubled again on his ride south. He slept soundly at night and thought no more of anyone he had killed.

* * *

Regin sat at his workbench, hunched over the sword hilt he was wrapping. He pulled the leather strip tight, laid it smooth. When it was done, he held up the sword to the mirror’s uneven light. The balance was perfect, the edge keen. He lowered the sword. Frowning, he flung it across the cave, watched it spark against the rough stone wall. It clattered to the ground, ringing. He rested his face on his arms with a sigh. He should be helping his men with the planting. Cold rose from the floor, drifted like fog from the rough walls and the roof. He felt dead with it.

He dreamed of fire. He dreamed Sigurd stepping from it, unburned, a bluish sword in his hand. Sigurd’s eyes were not his own. They were jewel-like, glittering blue
and green, flecked with fire. The blue-tinged sword hummed in his hand. Sigurd opened his mouth. To speak? To breath fire?

Regin woke to the sound of his name. It boomed from outside the cave, and in that first second his heart pounded with fear. He thought it was the dragon’s voice. Then he recognized it. Sigurd. He started up from the bench, knocking the stool to the floor.

He stumbled to the mouth of the cave, wincing at the morning light. Sigurd stood not four paces from him. He looked different. It was not the blood-soaked sleeve, not the tangled hair or the mud-heavy cloak. His whole body was tensed, primed for anything. His eyes seemed to burn with the fire of Regin’s dream. But it was more than fire. There was something else in him, glimmering on the surface yet remote, unreachable. It looked like madness.

Sigurd’s hands were clenched on a long, narrow bundle. Regin’s breath caught; his body rocked toward the sword. Sigurd drew it back, closer to himself. His hands clamped harder, as though he would meld it together with cold strength.

“You can do this?” demanded Sigurd.

Regin did not raise his eyes from the bundle. “I said I could, didn’t I?”

Sigurd did not move.

Regin felt himself shifting, edging toward Sigurd’s hands and what they held. He knew then that he would reforge that blade, agreement or none. He wanted it, to touch it, to feel its ancient power. But some part of his mind forced sense to his lips. “You understand what this means, what I require? I will make a weapon for you. You will use it for me.”
Sigurd’s knuckles whitened further. “I will watch.”

Regin recoiled. “No.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

Regin raised his eyes slowly to Sigurd’s face. “I work alone. You know that.”

Sigurd waited.

Regin dropped his eyes again. “Fine.” He held out his hand.

Sigurd hesitated. Then he moved, like a boulder stirred from its resting place, breaking from stillness with as much reluctance. He passed the bundle to Regin.

Through the thick wool, Regin could feel the hard sides of the scabbard. His fingers strayed to the end, to the cold, intricate pommel. His scalp prickled. He turned to the cave mouth.

He laid the bundle on the workbench, carefully pulled away the wrapping. The scabbard was beautiful. Its carved wood needed oiling, but it had a rich red tone, and the gold laid into it gleamed even in the dim light of the cave. The golden wolf-head of the pommel shone as bright.

As he drew the blade from its fleece lining, the faint blue tinge of the sword made his hand tremble.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

“What’s impossible?”

He started at Sigurd’s voice. Frowning at the intrusion, he said, “Nothing.”

As Regin examined all the fragments of the sword, he could see they would not be easy to join. The blade was broken in the middle, shattered, where they said Odin’s hand had grabbed it.
It took most of the afternoon to grind the edges of the fragments for welding. They did not easily yield to the grindstone. Unnatural, thought Regin. Sigurd sat silent on the stool by the workbench. Mostly Regin did not notice him, but sometimes he could feel Sigurd’s attention on his work, and he would have to grit his teeth and ignore it.

Night had descended outside the cave by the time Regin set a fire in the forge. He pumped the bellows, watching the flames burst and vanish, burst and vanish. When the coals were raging, he released the bellows, and the flames were soon as hot, as elusive, as dragon’s breath. Smoke billowed from the forge, and Regin bound it into a column and sent it floating along the roof of the cave. At the mouth, it spilled upward, rising beyond his control.

He stood before the forge, letting the heat burn through his body. He pumped the bellows again.

“Why so hot?”

Regin jerked at the sound of Sigurd’s voice. He said, his own voice sharp and cold as the shards of the sword. “Do not speak.”

He heated the fragments white hot, until they were almost melting. This took a long time, for the sword was as loath to yield itself to fire as to the grindstone. He held the first two pieces to the anvil with tongs, flicked the scale from them, beat them into one with his hammer.

Piece by piece the sword went together. Near morning, when Regin plunged the blade, one last time, into the barrel of cool oil, his arms shook with exhaustion. And yet, all through the next day he labored, filing the edges to smoothness, rubbing them bright with tannic acid, etching the runes to wholeness where the mending had obscured them.
At last, with the sun shining into the cave, with his stomach cramped by hunger and his whole body weak, he ran a finger down the blade. It hummed at the touch. The seams were barely visible.

Sigurd was at his side, leaning near to see. Regin shifted away from him. He felt Sigurd tense then still himself.

With a sigh, Regin offered up the sword.

Sigurd tested its balance, frowning, unsatisfied. Regin wanted to demand some explanation, for he knew the balance was right, but he had to step back quickly to avoid the sword’s edge as Sigurd cut through the air. Regin withdrew to the wall, watching, spellbound, as the blade swung and arced, twisted and curved, leaving behind it a faint, barely visible trail of blue. Spinning, slashing, Sigurd moved toward the anvil.

As the sword arced upward, poised, for a second, high in the air, Regin cried out, “No!”

Sigurd brought the blade screaming down. It struck the anvil with a ring, and with the sickening snap of metal.

Regin rushed toward the sword. He stopped, panting, at the anvil. He glanced at the gouge in its dense surface, then his eyes fell on the dim, broken end of the sword lying on the ground. A hum still vibrated from it.

“What have you done?” he whispered, shaking his head.

Sigurd’s brow was furrowed, his eyes blazing. He laid the sword on the anvil.

“You said you could fix it.”

Regin huffed, “No sword can withstand—”
Sigurd’s eyes cut into Regin. He said, “You must do better,” and he turned to the cave mouth.

Regin stared after him from some time, even when he had disappeared around the hillside.

* * *

Regin awoke curled on the floor of the smithy. It was dark again, but the forge still burned, bleeding some light onto the floor and the anvil, where the broken sword lay quiet. He rose stiffly, stretching his back. He was dizzy with hunger and fell against the table. He stumbled to the cave mouth.

“I’ve brought you some food.”

Regin jumped. “Anrid. You scared me, girl.”

She came to him, a mere shape in the dark, timid, hunched. “I’m sorry.”

Regin felt for her face, tipped up her chin with a finger. “What is it? Why are you frightened?”

“That man. The golden one. He’s in the house.”

“Sigurd? You have nothing to fear from him, child.”

She pulled her chin away, angled her face down again. “I know. But he—”

“You have nothing to fear.”

She nodded and passed a wooden trencher into his hands. “It’s not hot anymore.”

“It was kind of you, Anrid.”
She raised her face, leaned toward him. Her kiss was so light it was little more than a warm breath. Then she hurried away into the dark. Heart pounding suddenly, Regin looked for her shape, hoping she would return, but she was gone.

Later, the empty trencher on his knee, he stared into the dying light of the forge fire. The sword was always at the edge of his awareness, but he kept his eyes on the forge’s glow, where he could think. It was near morning before he rose from his stool and pumped heat into the coals again.

It took the hottest fire he had ever created to melt the sword. His face was burning, his hands flaming even through the leather gloves as he pumped the bellows, as the forge burned hotter and hotter.

When at last the blade was melted into the stone bowl, he tipped the bowl over the billet molds, holding his breath at the brilliant, gleaming stream of molten metal. He waited the long hours in the cave until the metal was solid again. Then he broke the molds with his hammer and lifted from the rubble the long, rough bars, which had fallen completely silent, ready to be made into something new.

Humming into the bars his own tune in a low voice, he twisted two of them together, folded them again and again, ground them pure. The third bar, too, he folded and ground, then he bound it around the edges of the two. He heated them until they glowed red-gold, beat them against the anvil until every seam, until even the pattern of twisting and folding disappeared. With every hammer blow, he thought of the dragon, of his treachery and malice, of his deadliness. He saw the dragon’s flame in the sword’s glowing, caught the glitter of his eyes as the sparks flew.
He slept again in the cave. Ate the food Anrid left at the mouth. Rose again to beat the sword.

When the blade had its shape, he began to file it, grinding the edges against his stone, leaning on the unyielding blade with all his strength. By the time he was done, the sword’s edges were keener than any he had made in his long life. When he tested it against his thumb, the slight pressure cut near to the bone. He cursed and tore a strip from his tunic to wrap the wound.

He considered melting down the hilt also, remaking the ravens and the wolf into something more. But as he fingered the pieces, the cold of them burned his hands, and he dropped them again to the table, looking over his shoulder to the cave mouth, as though Odin might be standing there.

He made a new grip for the sword, a hollowed tube of wood that he carved with his own twisting design. Here, at least, he could form the dragon, defeated. When the grip was carved and stained, he fitted it onto the sword’s rough end, behind the ravens of the guard and new spacers of leather and horn. He secured the wolf-head pommel to the end.

He lifted the sword to the light, his eyes wide at its blue shimmer. Something was missing. The runes. He laid the sword on the table, rested his chin in his hand.

He considered many inscriptions, but each one he tried the blade rejected. He could not even scratch its surface. He thought of the original words. He would have to use them. But not, perhaps, in the same way.

* * *

500
For days, smoke had risen from the cave’s mouth. For days, Sigurd had sat restless in the house, wandered through the fields, looked out over the river valley. More than once he had gone to the cave, thinking to enter, but something always stopped him. He would stand there, listening to the ring of metal, leaning towards it. Then he would walk away, watching his feet to keep them silent.

When the smoke had been gone for some time, he approached again. He hesitated outside the dark opening then stepped into the gloom.

The forge still burned faintly, and the braziers were lit, their light shimmering against the silver mirror’s beaten surface. Regin sat hunched on his stool. Sigurd caught the silver-blue gleam of the sword. He stopped.

Regin set down a tool, sniffed, held the sword high. Sigurd watched the smooth, brilliant flash of the blade. The edges were so sharp they seemed to narrow into nothingness. He stepped toward the sword.

Sigurd tilted his head to read the runes, for he could tell at once they were different. “Victory,” he read aloud, “is death. You’ve changed it.”

“No, really.” Regin’s voice was rough with disuse. He rose from the stool, the sword still in his hand. His eyes were bloodshot, his dark hair lank, his skin grey as though with illness. He sighed, with relief perhaps, or regret. Palms flat under the blade and the pommel, he held out the sword.

Sigurd’s hand curled around the grip. He lifted the sword, and it rose up as though of its own will. He turned from Regin. He swung the sword, listened to its hum, deeper now, darker. As he cut the air, that hum was the only sound. The edges were so sharp, so perfect, that not even a whisper sounded from the air as it swirled away from them.
Sigurd carried the blade to the anvil. He heard Regin draw a sharp breath behind him as he lifted the sword high over his head. It whined there, ready. He brought it sweeping down. With an echoing ring, the anvil split in two.

Sigurd stared down at the huge, dark blocks of steel, at the blade still ringing between them. He lifted the sword, looked up its silvery blue length. It was not even scratched. He turned back to Regin, who was leaning against the table, breathing hard.

“You are truly the Master of Masters.” Sigurd inclined his head. “Thank you, Regin.”

Regin’s pale eyes were wide and piercing, the color, Sigurd realized suddenly, of the sword. “Do not forget—”

“I know my obligations. And their order. You will have to wait.”

Regin’s jaw clenched, but he reached for the scabbard. Holding it out to Sigurd, he said, “Now, sheath it. It's too beautiful.”

Sigurd slid the blade into the scabbard, and it fell silent.

Regin laid a hand on his shoulder, something he had never done. “There will be not a man who doesn’t tremble before you.”

“You do not tremble.”

“Well,” Regin smiled a little, “the world is full of fools.”
Chapter 28

When Sigurd rode into Gunnar’s courtyard, it was Hogni who came out to meet him. Hogni’s freckled face, which had grown serious and intent through the years of war, was expressionless with trouble.

Sigurd lifted Skadi and let him fly to the roof, then swung down from Greyfell.

Hogni came to Greyfell’s head. “Gunnar told me you were after a horse. You found a fine one.”

“Hogni, what’s happened here? The fences along the road look like patchwork. Hardly anything’s been planted. Where is Gunnar?”

Hogni looked him briefly in the face, then lowered his eyes. “You never wasted time on courtesy.”

Sigurd almost grabbed Hogni’s tunic but stilled his hand, and his voice. “What’s happened?”

503
“It was a hard winter.” Hogni’s voice was stiff, his face now clearly hiding something. Then he looked over his shoulder and back to Sigurd with a shadow of his usual earnestness. He whispered, “Something is wrong, Sigurd. With Gunnar.”

“Where is he?”

“Inside.”

When Hogni led Sigurd through the hall, it was almost empty. Not unusual during the spring months, and he had heard swords ringing in the training yard, but no fire burned in the hearth, no meat roasted for the evening meal. The air hung cool and damp, like a hand on the throat.

The door to Gunnar’s chamber was closed. Hogni raised a fist to knock, but Sigurd laid a hand on his arm and nodded him away.

“I’ll be in the training yard,” whispered Hogni, already turning back.

Sigurd called Gunnar’s name through the door, but there was no answer. He called louder, but still nothing. Then he eased the door open and stepped into the cold room. Gunnar was sitting by the window, staring out. The wooden shutters were open, and the morning light lay across his face. Dark rings hung under his eyes. His dark copper hair, normally pulled together at the nape, hung limp along his face.

Sigurd went to the hearth, where half-burned logs lay black. He added some kindling from the pile, took up the flint, struck fire into the logs. At the first lick of flame, Gunnar turned his head.

“Sigurd,” he said.

Sigurd straightened from the hearth and looked hard at Gunnar. “What’s going on?”
“What do you mean?” Gunnar’s voice was dead.

“Don’t lie to me.”

Gunnar turned his face away. “How was your uncle?”

“Gunnar.” Sigurd strode towards him but stopped a pace away. “Why aren’t you training with the men? Why aren’t the fields planted? The city looks a shambles. Were you attacked?”

Gunnar’s brows twitched together, but he said, “Winter left us…diminished.”

Sigurd frowned. “It’s not like you to crumble under hardship. Why do you hide in here?”

“What should I do?” Gunnar’s face twisted. “What could I possibly do?”

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t.” Gunnar stared out the window. “What should I say? That Regin may have helped us win the war, but that we might better have died with some honor?”

“I’ve never seen you like this.”

Gunnar’s back was hunched. He had lost weight, and his tunic needed washing. In that eerie, dead voice, he said, “What does it matter?”

Sigurd’s hands moved restlessly, uncertain; he stillled them on his sword hilt. “Are you ill?”

“No.” At last Gunnar sounded insulted. Eyes hard under heavy lids, he looked up at Sigurd. “Do you know what they’re calling my father? The Generous.” Gunnar laughed sourly. “Because his kingdom was prosperous. Mine is poor. What do you think they call me?”
“Leader in Battle. And if they do not remember that, then they are fools, and undeserving.”

“Leader in Battle,” echoed Gunnar, as though it meant nothing to him.

“That is all you need to be. All any king need be.”

Gunnar’s eyes went to the window again. “I’m not sure your people will agree with you.”

Sigurd came to the window and leaned against it, staring out with Gunnar. “We’ll see soon enough.”

“Oh?” Gunnar looked up at Sigurd, his bloodshot eyes more alive. “How did you fare with Aelf? Will he support you?”

“He promised forty men.”

“Forty!”

Sigurd nodded. “Forty.”

Gunnar’s brow furrowed, and he was silent for a long time. Then he said, “I will come with you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

Gunnar’s voice was firmer, “I will come.”

“Gunnar, no. I expected, after a year, that Burgundy would be better, not worse. You can’t leave, nor any of your men. I can see that. I’ll make do.”

“You mean you’ll go after Lygni with forty men? You’ll all be killed.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then you have a plan?”

“Not yet.”
Gunnar laughed harshly.

Sigurd’s hand gripped the sword pommel. “I trust Odin. I trust my fate.”

“Fate.” Gunnar’s mouth twisted. “Will you put your faith in such a word?”

With a flash of anger, Sigurd stared down at Gunnar, wanting to strike him, to pull him from his chair, to make him himself again.

“I suppose,” Gunnar went on, “that you can trust it. But don’t ask me to. I’ll need some time to gather the men, to see who will come north with us. We’ll sail—”

Sigurd’s voice was harder now. “Gunnar. Be reasonable. You cannot come with me, not now.”

“I can do whatever I want! Besides, did I not promise to help you? Do you remember this?” Gunnar raised his palm to show the thin scar of blood-brotherhood.

Sigurd lowered his eyes. “When we spoke of this last, it was clear that you would come only if Burgundy was recovered.”

“By all the gods in Asgard!” Gunnar rose from his chair, letting it topple back, and leaned out the window. “Why don’t you let me make my own decision! It’s not for you to say how Burgundy should be managed.”

“Gunnar, that’s not—”

Laughing sourly again, Gunnar said, “I do not think my absence will affect it so greatly.”

Sigurd was silent for a moment, watching some dark thought harden Gunnar’s face, like metal cooling. “You may not return.”

Gunnar shrugged.

“I thought you would not leave your kingdom. It’s not your way.”
Gunnar pushed back from the window ledge. Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned his back against the frame and stared Sigurd in the eye. “What do you know of my way?”

Sigurd met his stare. “Enough to recognize it. What is this, Gunnar?”

“What do you care? You have never wanted to be a king who minds the harvest and listens to the complaints of merchants. You are warrior, Sigurd. Why are you asking me these questions? Tell me, of your own thinking, why should I stay here?”

Sigurd tapped his fingers on his sword hilt, frowning. Then he inclined his head. “Do it, then. Call the men. If I can, I’ll send you home rich.”

Gunnar straightened, standing free of the window frame. He combed back the hair from his face. “I’ll see how many I can gather. Ten I’m sure. Maybe thirty.” He strode to his table and pulled a piece of parchment toward himself. “Now. Let’s work on a plan.”

* * *

By the end of the day, more than twenty men were chosen to sail north on the Rhine with Sigurd and Gunnar. More would have come, but Wulfric had shouted sense into the discussion. The kingdom could not afford to lose all its warriors. Burgundy was not safe from conquest, and didn’t Gunnar want a kingdom to return to? At that, Gunnar had risen from his seat, breathing hard, and many had expected a fight, but Gunnar had sat again under Wulfric’s calm gaze and inclined his head.

Hogni refused to be left behind, despite Gunnar’s insistence that he should stay to manage the kingdom.
“Where is your sense of duty?” Gunnar demanded of him.

The men grew quiet. Hogni’s cheeks flamed. His lips clamped on a retort.

Sigurd laid a hand on Gunnar’s sleeve. “Let him come. Why do you treat him this way?”

“Someone must stay! Fine. Wulfric, the duty must be yours.”

Wulfric looked unhappy, but he bowed his head. “I will do it.”

It was late before the discussion closed and the men at last went to their beds. As Sigurd rose from his seat, Gudrun, whom he had seen hovering at the edges of the discussion, silent, waiting, caught his arm.

“Will you walk with me?” she asked.

Sigurd followed her to the door and down the steps. The moon was bright and full on the cobbled courtyard.

They walked side by side without speaking, then Sigurd said abruptly, “How is your mother?”

“She’s well,” answered Gudrun with a start, “she’s been happier, I think, since my father died.”

Sigurd stopped. “Since your father died?”

“Did Gunnar not say? He returned early in the spring. No one spoke with him but Gunnar. He died very soon.”

Sigurd’s brow wrinkled. “Strange.”

“Yes. He came back looking like the poorest of men. His feet were blackened with frost. When I asked Gunnar what our father had said, his answer was vague. Perhaps our father was beyond sense. It was a relief, really, to have it over. To know. Especially
for mother. He was not gentle, even with her. She’s been worried, though. About Gunnar. Since he returned. He’s been different.”

“Returned? Where was he?”

“He didn’t say? He left here the day after our father died. He didn’t even wait for the funeral. No one understood it. He said he was going to see Regin. He would not explain himself.”

“Regin? Regin said nothing of Gunnar’s visit. Why would he go to Regin?”

“I don’t know. But when he came back, his clothes were torn and filthy. He had lost his helmet and sword. He said he was attacked by outlaws on his journey. That was little surprise. He should not have refused Hogni’s company. But that is not why I wanted to speak with you.” She laid a hand on his arm. “Sigurd, I know I’m not as pretty as some, but that, I hope, is not everything.”

Sigurd’s mind reeled, listening to her words, still thinking of Gunnar’s actions. At last he smoothed the pain from her forehead with his thumb, let his fingers trail through her hair. “Gudrun, you are beautiful.”

She searched his face. “Then why can you not love me?”

“You know I care for you.”

Her jaw hardened and she looked, briefly, like her brothers. “That is not the same.”

“Why do you not just find a husband? I’m leaving again in a few days. I’ll not return here for a long time, maybe never.”

Her head tilted back. “I will wait.”

“Gudrun—”
She leaned toward him, and he felt the heat of her body, the press of her firm breasts. She laid a hand at his hip, and his breath caught.

“You want me,” she said, her hand drifting lower. “I want you.”

He leaned down to kiss her, and she rose onto her toes. He fumbled with her dress, lifting it, and touched her between her legs. She gasped and drew back, then her hands went to his sword-belt. She began to unbuckle the scabbard. He pulled away, his hands clenching over the buckle.

“We should not do this,” he said, breathing hard.

She dropped her hands and her eyes. “I do not please you.”

He stroked her hair away from her face, kissed her cheek, pulled her close again. She was trembling. “We just must not. I am leaving. I can be nothing for you.”

“You are everything for me. I said I would wait. I will.”

“You are very young, Gudrun. You’ll find another man.”

She twisted out of his arms. “No,” she whispered. “I will not.” Then she turned and ran across the courtyard and into the hall.

*       *       *

As soon as supplies, weapons, and men could be readied, the war band set sail on the Rhine. They would travel the river, sail around Denmark, then wait on Denmark’s eastern shore while Sigurd rode to Aelf to collect the forty promised men and sailed with them to the sea.
They traveled in one long, low-sided ship with a huge blue and white sail and a curling bow. Greyfell, Raudfaxi, and Hogni’s horse were corralled near the mast. The men’s round wooden shields hung along the sides of the ships, painted red for war. With the late spring current and with twenty-eight strong men rowing, they sped north.

On the second morning, they drew near the hills that shielded the river from the Glittering Heath. Sigurd had been watching the hills since first light, uncertain of the Heath’s exact location in relation to the Rhine. More than once he heard a grunt of frustration from the men around him as he lost the rhythm of the oar stroke. Gunnar, he noticed, was also looking to the east.

Near midday, he saw it. In the distance, on a rocky ledge that jutted from the trees, red and gold glinted. His breath caught, and he rowed harder.

They traveled almost another mile before Gunnar saw that glinting. His hands froze on his oar. The sound of the ocean filled his ears. He rose from his bench and stumbled past the men, clumsy over the benches, to the ship’s bow. He leaned around the rising curve of the bow and squinted up the Rhine. It could not be.

Gunnar felt something behind him. Still clinging to the bow, he jerked around. Sigurd looked ahead to the gold on the rock, eyes on fire.

“What is it?” shouted one of the men.

Gunnar craned his neck to see the men on the benches, oars frozen mid-stroke.

“Quiet!” hissed Gunnar.

Sigurd laid a hand on Gunnar’s arm. “Show them your courage. The dragon will see us, whether we will it or not.”
Gunnar’s heart pounded. He saw himself in the cave, ragged on the floor. He saw the laughing face of the monster. He felt suddenly drained, as though Sigurd’s hand on his arm had drawn all the strength from him.

Sigurd turned to the men. “Secure your oars. Draw your swords.” Sigurd pointed toward the rock. “Look ahead. We face an unexpected enemy. His name is Fafnir, and he is the Terror of Old, the Dragon, the Great Destroyer of the Glittering Heath.”

The men turned to one another, some scrambling back, some pointing to the rock, some dumb with shock.

“Why do we not row for shore?” shouted Hogni. “How can we fight like this, on the water?”

“We would not make it. Look! He moves. He has seen us. Will you die with your back to him? You came for war! Show me!”

Hogni rose from his bench, drawing his sword. The men rose around him.

Sigurd turned to the hills again. The river had carried them close enough to make out the wings beating high over the red-gold body at the edge of the outcropping. The dragon launched into the air.

As he drew near, bobbing, unsteady, his wings sweeping laboriously at his sides, the men gasped. More than one sword clattered to the bottom of the boat.

But near the bow, standing on the foremost bench, Sigurd drew his sword. It sprang ringing from his scabbard, its eerie sound silencing all around it. The silver-blue blade flashed in the sun.

“Fafnir!”
The dragon faltered, and one wing dipped to the water’s surface. He steadied himself with an effort, raking his huge body higher. When Fafnir was nearly on top of the ship, he twisted and brought his powerful haunches forward. Men screamed as the curved talons swung toward the ship.

Leaping for the talons, Sigurd swung his sword, but Fafnir spread his wings wide, pausing, and Sigurd missed. As Sigurd tumbled to the deck, he fell into Gunnar, who stood like a wood-carved figure. As Sigurd and Gunnar hit the base of the bow with a thump and clatter, Fafnir snapped off its curved end, rending it to splinters in the air.

“Steady!” Hogni yelled to the men as the horses snorted and pranced in their corral and the falcon flew from the mast.

The dragon wheeled beside the ship. He opened his jaws wide. Fire burst from his throat, catching on the side of the ship and the shields that hung there. Then, flying low to the water, he spread his front claws as though he would grab the ship.

Hurtling over men and benches and oars, Sigurd looked to the dragon’s face. Time slowed for him as his body moved without thought. He could see the gleaming curve of teeth. He could see the beautiful, fine scales of red and gold that fanned upwards from the dragon’s lips, sweeping around the hooked nostrils and along the bony ridge of his nose to the glittering eyes. The eyes were what he had remembered best, flashing all the colors of jewels that lay hidden in the earth. Sigurd’s heart swelled painfully in his chest as the dragon drew close, as he gripped the side of the ship in his talons. Euphoric, Sigurd dove toward the dragon and brought his sword down on a glinting claw.
With a scream, Fafnir twisted into the air. Blood splattered the ship. Fafnir tumbled and fell halfway into the water. He rose from it with an effort, churning the water with his wings. The ship rocked.

When Fafnir pulled himself into the air again, he withdrew, roaring, and hovered unsteadily.

Arms raised, sword gleaming blue, Sigurd called to him: “Fight!”

Fafnir blew fire, searing the sail and mast, then he turned and flew over the hills.

Men rose from where they had fallen. Some stood still and useless; others grabbed buckets to scoop water and throw it onto the smoking sail and the flames eating the ship’s sides and all their shields.

Sigurd stared after the dragon until water sloshed against his legs. Then he sheathed his sword and began to help. As he hauled water from the river, he saw Gunnar from the corner of his eye, standing by the broken bow, looking to the hills.

Gunnar did not feel Sigurd’s eyes on him, and he did not think of the burning ship even as the charred smell reached his nose. He had only memory. He saw the dragon before him, as he often did, a huge shape of gold and red, a glitter. He heard the dragon’s laugh echoing in the dark hall. He heard, in that sound, what he was, and he couldn’t move. When Hogni came to him and stood at his shoulder, he hardly knew it.

“Are you all right?”

Gunnar started and looked, half blind, over his shoulder.

Hogni’s brow furrowed. “Gunnar?”

“Did you see it?”

“See what?”
Gunnar whispered, “The dragon.”

“Of course I saw it. Gunnar, are you all right? Are you hurt?” Hogni turned Gunnar’s shoulder and felt at his chest and stomach.

Gunnar brushed Hogni’s hand away. “Don’t.”

“What’s the matter?”

Gunnar squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again on Hogni’s face. His brother was already pulling back. With the dragon still at the edge of his vision, with his brother’s doubt falling like a weight in his chest, he turned back to the broken bow, planting his hands on either side of it. “Leave me.”

Hogni backed away. He did not know what else to do. A wary eye still on Gunnar, he went to Sigurd, who was looking over the damage. Shaking Gunnar from his mind, Hogni lifted a burned shield from the ship’s edge and tossed it into the water.

“Will it hold?”

Sigurd blew out his cheeks. “Not all the way to Denmark. We need to stop and make repairs.”

Hogni looked over his shoulder to the hills. “We can’t stop here.”

“We should.”

“Sigurd, no.” He dropped his voice to a whisper, “Look how the men are shaken. We’ll stop later, when we must.”

Sigurd, too, looked to the hills. He sighed. “You’re right. We should go on, out of the shadow of these hills.”

Hogni shivered. He hesitated with his question, wanting to know, knowing the answer would be beyond him. He raised his eyes to Sigurd, searching his face for
something reachable, something he could recognize. He asked, “Where did you get that sword? What is all this?”

When Sigurd looked at him there was very little of Burgundy’s silent champion in his eyes; he had gone beyond that. “It was my father’s.”

Hogni lowered his eyes, whispering, “But that sword was broken. Everyone knows that.”

Sigurd’s voice was low and hard, “There is a good reason that Odin willed I should be fostered with the Master of Masters.”

Hogni shook his head, overwhelmed. Then a gleam of gold caught his eye and he reached for the dragon’s claw, which lay in the bottom of the ship, untouched. He picked it up. A hand span of finger was attached, and the fine, hard scales were sticky with the dragon’s blood. The claw was longer than his forearm. He felt men looking at him, at the claw. He felt Sigurd at his side. Hogni bowed his head.

“I have thought sometimes that I could be like you.” He hefted the claw, his arm straining. “Now I see myself for a fool.”

Sigurd said, his voice low, “We can only be what we are. Do not be ashamed, Hogni. You are more to Burgundy than you imagine.”

Hogni raised the claw. He cried out, “Do you see whom you follow to war?”

A shout rose from the ship.

“Sit to your oars, men,” commanded Sigurd. “We have somewhere to be.”
Chapter 29

When they reached the eastern coast of Denmark, the fire-blackened ship tight again with pitch and rough-hewn patches of new wood, they landed at a river mouth. Leaving the men on the beach to rest and ready themselves, Sigurd and Greyfell traced the river to Aelf’s stronghold. Two ships sat ready on the bank, loaded with supplies. Sigurd spared a thought for Hjalprek, seeing briefly the flames of the funeral ship on this riverbank, remembering an old man who had known the value of a warrior. He nudged Greyfell to a canter. They flew to the gates, where the guards nodded them through.

Outside the hall, Sigurd met with one of Aelf’s men coming from the stable. Aelf, the man said, was in the north and would not soon return. The man lowered his eyes, as though afraid Sigurd might be offended by Aelf’s absence. In truth, Sigurd was relieved, though he tried not to show it.

“But Queen Hiordis is here,” said the man. “Shall I take you to her?”
“No,” said Sigurd after a moment’s hesitation. “Give her my regards. She will understand. Now. What of my men?”

He nodded toward the practice yard. “Training, young lord. To be ready for the Volsung.”

Sigurd thanked him and strode, Greyfell at his side, to the yard. At the edge of the trampled grass, he watched his men. Aelf had not stinted in quality at least. But then, there was little else in Denmark. Hjalprek had seen to that, and it would take more than one generation to destroy it. Swords rang with heavy blows, and men threw each other to the ground. Arrows and spears pierced the straw-stuffed targets at the yard’s far end.

Among the spearmen, a lanky man of thirty caught Sigurd’s eye. Gar. With a laugh at the man beside him, whose spear had struck outside the center circle of the target, Gar cast his into the red heart. Sigurd grinned and unlash ed his own spear from Greyfell’s saddle. He walked along the edge of the yard until he found a spot with a clear view of Gar’s target, which Gar was approaching to retrieve his weapon. Sigurd hefted his spear, set himself, and hurled the spear clear across the yard, over the men’s heads. Many eyes caught it, and half the men were watching its flight by the time the spear sailed into the target’s red center, not a finger-span from Gar’s. Silence fell in the yard.

Gar, a foot from the target, his hand snatched back, looked over his shoulder in anger and surprise.

“Well, Gar?” called Sigurd. “Can you beat that?”

Gar’s face broke into a smile, and he started across the yard. “You damned fool! You might have killed me!”

Returning the smile, Sigurd met him halfway. “You’d like to think so.”
Laughing, Gar threw his arms around Sigurd. “By the gods!” He clapped Sigurd on the back. “You’re solid as an oak.”

Freod strode toward them, shouting to the men, “What do you think, Danes? Will you follow the Volsung?”

The men raised their weapons with a shout.

“Then we sail at once!” yelled Sigurd. “Collect your gear and meet me at the river!”

* * *

With the entire force of nearly seventy men gathered on the Danish coast, Sigurd held counsel with the commanders. Cargo space had not been wasted on tables or chairs, so they sat on the ground within the tent, a lone brazier flickering light over their discussion.

Face waxy-pale, voice flat, Gunnar explained the plan he and Sigurd had devised in Burgundy. Gunnar had been this way since the dragon’s attack, much as he had been when Sigurd had first come to him in his chamber two weeks ago. For days now, Gunnar’s back had been hunched like an old man’s. Sometimes he would look to the sky, sighing as though he wanted something from it. In his sleep he would mutter and toss, and once, when Sigurd woke him from his dreams, Gunnar had bolted upright, out of breath, shaking as though he had seen Hel herself. Even then, he would answer no question and had only stalked off into the night and not returned until morning.
Now, as Gunnar described the Volsung coast and countryside, Sigurd could see the other men stiffening. They needed Gunnar’s confidence, his strength. They needed him to command, not report. Sigurd had thought to let Gunnar manage all this. Men followed him; they believed him. But the men gathered here were beginning to doubt.

When Freod interrupted Gunnar with a question about the secret entryway into the stronghold, Sigurd glanced at Gunnar’s dull eyes and answered for him, “The tunnel begins some three hundred feet down the wooded slope from the stronghold. There’s a hidden path through the trees to the tunnel entrance. The tunnel is tall and wide enough for men but not horses. We’ll leave them at the trailhead.”

“But, Sigurd,” said Hogni, gesturing helplessly at the parchment map Sigurd and Gunnar had sketched, “if the path is hidden how will we find it?”

“A dead tree marks the start of the path. Hiordis said it was huge and stripped of all its bark.”

Hogni bit his lip, and at first it seemed he would not speak, but then he looked around to the questions on men’s faces and forced his eyes to Sigurd’s. “A dead tree in a forest? At night? If it’s even still there after twenty years. Sigurd, I don’t see—”

Sigurd looked at him steadily. “Odin will have to be with us.”

Hogni was shaking his head hopelessly, and many eyes around him were downcast.

Sigurd felt himself grow angry, and Hogni, glancing up at the tension, shrank back from him. Sigurd’s voice was hard when he said, “Don’t forget that this kingdom was built by Odin’s son, Sigi, my grandfather’s grandfather. Do you think Odin wants it in Lygni’s hands? Everything I am, everything I have, is for Odin, because of him. When
he came to me as a boy”—even Gunnar looked up in surprise at this—“he told me of the kingdom’s founding. He made me know what my life was and what it was for. He made me see what the Norns want from a man, what will make them weave a fate to be remembered. More than this, Odin gave into my family a sword, that which I now carry, remade so to cleave even an anvil clean in two. Odin gave to me a horse descended from the gods, as I am, for Greyfell is a son of Sleipnir, son of Loki. Would all this be for nothing?”

When Sigurd fell silent, the weight of his words and the memory of his voice hung in the air. Freod, Gar, and the other Danish commanders looked to their knees. They were not used to him. Gunnar’s jaw was tight, and for the first time in days, he seemed to truly see Sigurd beside him.

Hogni swallowed hard and raised his eyes, shining with belief. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to doubt you.”

Sigurd accepted the apology with a nod, then said, his voice returning to normal, “The tunnel comes out in a storeroom near the hall. We will have to be silent and trust to fate that we’ll emerge unnoticed. We must be silent, too, as we pass the barracks and other outbuildings that lie between the storeroom and the hall. We must get into the hall without raising an alarm. We don’t have the numbers to take the hall by force. We must be stealthy.”

Silence fell again, and many questions still weighed down the men’s faces. After a time, eyes cast down to the map, Freod said, “There seem a great many chances for us to be noticed, if there are guards all around the town and on the coast.”
Sigurd lowered his voice and stared around at the men, “Any who joined me thinking they came for easy victory had best leave now. Many will die before this is over, maybe each of you. But there is glory here, if you fight with me. What do you want? Life? You are in the wrong place. I never promised that to anyone.”

“Sigurd,” said Freod more sternly, though his eyes were still not quite on Sigurd’s face. “You are unjust. You know me better.”

“Then why do you question me?”

Freod reddened, and he looked at a loss for words.

Gunnar laid a hand on Sigurd’s arm and said, “Freod, forgive him. He never had any manners.”

Freod’s expression eased, a smile teasing his mouth. “That’s true enough.”

Sigurd took a breath and said stiffly, “Yes. Gunnar is right. I’m sorry. But don’t question me. Men, you can trust to fate, and follow me, and know that Valhalla awaits you, and ask for nothing else, or you can choose another leader and another war. I will have none with me who does not look for death.”

“That is why we’re here, Sigurd,” said Hogni. “We simply want to win also.”

Sigurd’s eyes burned. “We will.”

The next day was spent in organizing the men and waiting for the light to fade. By midmorning, there was little to do, and the men amused themselves with contests and games, dozing from time to time, and talking. From the Burgundians, word spread of the dragon, and the claw was passed from man to man. The eyes of any who held it drifted to Sigurd, where he wandered through the camp, checking weapons and armor. Sigurd did not come near the claw, did not seem to notice it, but, once, Hogni caught his eyes on it.
Though the story of the dragon’s attack and the sight of the claw spread awe among the men, it also made them wary. After all, Sigurd did not boast, which would have been natural. He did not recount the attack to any, and none approached him with questions. The men did not understand. Hogni looked to Gunnar to see if he noticed the tension, but Gunnar only sat at the edge of camp, watching the tide. Knowing something must be done, Hogni called to Sigurd across the camp and challenged him to fight.

Within a few blows, Hogni was on the ground, the blue-tinged sword whining toward his throat. Hogni gasped at the cold prick of metal, but Sigurd smiled above him, and lifted the blade. As he helped Hogni to his feet, men gathered to see the sword. Sigurd frowned as they drew near and began to pull the sword back to himself, but Hogni grunted at him, and he checked the motion.

“Let them see,” whispered Hogni.

Sigurd shot Hogni a look of annoyance, but Hogni only nodded. Sigurd raised the sword into the air; it hummed above his head, catching the fading light of the sun.

* * *

They approached the coast when the moon had set and the sky was nearly as black as the town and the stronghold beyond it. The town sat in a bay between two headlands, and the pale wood of the palisade curving behind it could be seen, glowing faintly under the stars. The palisade reached to the sea at both ends, interrupted at intervals by guarded gateways, all barred for the night. Rising from the water was another palisade, though its pitch-darkened wood showed as little more than a sweep of shadow.
There was a single break in the wall for the passage of ships; the town offered no other access by sea.

Each of the headlands that formed the bay was crowned with buildings. On the smaller, closer headland stood the tower of the coastguard. His duty was to watch for ships and to warn the town and the king if any should approach the empty beach that stretched away from his tower. Landing would be easy, but the coastguard, if alert, would light the beacon atop the tower, signaling the guards of the king’s fortress on the other, higher headland. Standing in the bow of the Burgundian ship, Sigurd stared in the direction of that far headland, but from such a distance, through the night, nothing could be seen of the fortress or its hall but dark shapes.

They landed far down the beach, near, though they did not know it, to where Aelf had landed and met Hiordis, some twenty years ago. They crossed the beach to the forest that lay behind and traveled under the cover of trees to the coastguard’s headland. Leaving Greyfell with the bulk of the force, Sigurd led a party of six men across the open ground to the tower. Sigurd held his breath, watching for the flaring of the beacon, listening for the shout of alarm. But the only sounds coming from the top were conversation and the occasional laugh.

The tower was a huge, square mound of stones. A ladder leaned against one side, and two horses were tethered beside it. Sigurd went to the horses to quiet them while Hogni strung his bow and drew two arrows from his quiver. Hogni started up the ladder. The rest of the men stood back from the tower, their own bows ready and aimed in case Hogni could not kill both.
Hogni prayed for silence. He could not fail in this, not after nearly begging Sigurd for the opportunity. He had to know—to be certain—that he was worth something, as Sigurd had said. He readied his bow and peered over the edge of the tower. The guards were rolling dice. Hogni stepped up another rung. And another. He was still too far down. His arm was restricted by the ladder; his shot would be spoiled. He took one last step. The ladder creaked, and the guards’ heads whipped around. Hogni shot the first man before he could raise his spear. The second grabbed the waiting torch and made to throw it onto the oil-soaked pile of wood. But he fell back, an arrow in his throat, the torch still flaring in his hand. Hogni jumped onto the platform. He went to the guard with the torch, twisting it from his clenched fist. He set the torch back in its housing then rolled the bodies from the tower.

Shaking a little, Hogni descended the ladder. He had done it. He hoped Sigurd had not seen how close it had been. When Hogni stepped from the ladder, Sigurd clapped him on the back.

“Well done.”

Hogni could see only the shape of Sigurd’s face in the dark, but he could imagine the steady blue eyes and hard jaw, and it was enough to draw the truth from him. “It was close.”

“No matter. Any victory not won by a hair’s breadth is too small a challenge.” There was a shadow of laughter in Sigurd’s voice, and Hogni thought Sigurd might be mocking him. But then Sigurd said, “Come. Let’s go have some more close calls. If my head is not nearly cloven tonight, I’ll be disappointed.”

“You tempt the Norns, Sigurd.”
Sigurd heard the warning in Hogni’s voice but did not respond to it. Hogni would learn, someday, what fate could mean, what daring was. At least, he seemed to have that potential. And if he did not, well, some things could never be taught.

Sigurd signaled the men to take the tower’s ladder, which they would need in the tunnel. Then he and the others moved back to the trees where the rest waited. Sigurd swung into Greyfell’s saddle, lifting Skadi from the pommel, and led the men through the forest. They would stay under the cover of trees until the woods gave way to the broad pastures that Hiordis said lay beyond. With the moon down, there was a greater danger of being heard than seen by the guards keeping watch from the platforms over each of the town’s barred gates, and so they would move through the countryside.

As they left the dark forest border, they began to move across the farming and grazing land behind the town. It was here, Hiordis had said, that Sigmund’s last battle had been fought. The land was quiet now; cattle and sheep dozed in their pastures, and the rows of crops held the promise of harvest. And yet, in that darkness, Sigurd could imagine thatched farmhouses burning, fences broken and trampled. He moved as through a dream, wondering where, exactly, his father had died. He imagined an old man, still strong, bringing a silver-blue sword down in a streaming arc. He imagined that blade caught by an unearthly hand, saw it burst. He saw his father’s grim eyes, knowing death.

Sigurd shivered. For a heart’s beat he distrusted the sword at his side, and his hand hesitated over the hilt. Then he gripped it hard and drew the sword. It slid from the scabbard without sound, but it gleamed in the air as though it caught the light of each faint star. Skadi hopped onto his shoulder, away from the blade. Sigurd heard the mounted men around him shifting.
“What is it?” demanded Gar, his own sword hissing from its sheath.

Sigurd returned Gram to his scabbard with reluctance. “Nothing.”

“Then, by Tyr’s right hand, don’t do that. That sword…it puts a man on edge.”

Hogni chuckled.

“What?” hissed Gar.

“Puts a man on edge?” said Hogni.

A quiet, nervous laugh spread among those in hearing distance.

“All right, all right,” muttered Gar. “You know what I meant.”

Sigurd looked for the dark outlines of trees that marked a river winding through the farmland.

“Do you see it?” whispered Freod from behind. “I can’t see anything but Greyfell’s hind end.”

“We need to angle right,” said Sigurd, seeing the line of trees and the break in them that his mother had said marked the easiest crossing.

The river was indeed shallow there, the water quiet, and the men following the horses came through with little more trouble than wet feet. Beyond the river, they passed through more farmland before coming to the main road that told them they were nearly there. When Greyfell’s hooves beat a dull thud over the road’s packed earth, Sigurd’s heart pounded. He could see, as a dark shape high on the slope ahead, the king’s hall. Not only that, but he could see, glimmering faintly under the stars, the branches of a tree.

“The Branstock,” he whispered.

“What?” came Gunnar’s voice beside him.
“Do you see? It’s the tree. The Branstock that grows in the king’s hall. The tree from which my father drew this sword.”

“I don’t see it.” Gunnar’s voice was flat. “Everything is too dark.”

Sigurd frowned. What was wrong with Gunnar? Even Gripir, overcome by death, had not been so cold.

Beyond the road, the trees started again, and soon the ground began to rise. Sigurd looked for the dead tree. He could not see it. Almost, he began to worry. Then Skadi lifted from his arm. He strained to follow the movement of the white falcon, almost losing him in the dark. The bird landed. Narrowing his eyes, Sigurd could see where he perched. High in the naked branches of a dead tree.

“Sigurd,” said Hogni worriedly.

“Follow me,” said Sigurd. “I see the way.”

The wood grew denser, and Sigurd lost sight of the falcon, but Greyfell walked with such certainty that he did not interfere with the horse’s steps. Then the trunk of the tree came into sight, a line of paleness in the dark.

Sigurd dismounted. “We’ll leave the horses here. I trust no beast but Greyfell to be silent on the path.”

The path was narrow and winding, and yet it was clear enough for all the men to walk with ease. This worried Sigurd. After twenty years, it should be littered with deadfall. The trees should be encroaching, their branches stringing it. Either Odin’s hand was here, easing their travel, or else Lygni had discovered this secret.

When they were nearly up the slope, with the sharp pales of the fortress’s palisade peaking at intervals through the treetops, the path ended at a heap of boulders. Sigurd felt
around these to the tunnel’s opening. At the dark mouth, he paused. This was it. The way in. He thought briefly that he should gather the men tight, offer some words of confidence. That was what Gunnar would do. Or what he would have done, once. But Sigurd was impatient to move. More than that, he almost wished—almost—that he were alone.

“Well, Sigurd?” came Hogni’s voice in the dark.

“It’s here.”

Though Sigurd had to duck through the opening, the roof stretched to a foot over his head once inside. The stone was rough against his fingertips. A torch flared behind him. He reached back his hand and Gar passed it to him. Wincing at the light, he looked around at the smooth ground, at the walls and roof of rough-hewn stone. There were no brackets for torches, no caches of supplies. This tunnel had one purpose: escape.

The men walked side by side behind Sigurd. No sound came from their feet, none escaped their lips. The ground rose. The tunnel bent here and there. But soon, almost before they were ready, the tunnel ended. Overhead lay a wooden door. There was no ladder and no latch.

Sigurd drew Gram from his scabbard. He slid the blade into the crack between the door and the stone ceiling. He found the latch with the blade’s edge. With a quick, hard jerk he cut through the latch, then motioned for the ladder. When the ladder was ready behind him, he ground the torch against the floor. The tunnel went black.

“Steady men,” came Freod’s voice in a whisper, “everything depends on silence. If we can’t get to the hall unnoticed, we must try to withdraw, as agreed. Right, Sigurd?”

Sigurd hesitated, then, “Right.”
Feeling for the door overhead, he eased it open several inches and drew the ladder upright, using it to push the door further open. Then, sword in hand, he set his feet to the rungs and began to climb.

Shouldering the door, Sigurd hauled himself onto the floor of the storeroom. It was almost as black here as it had been in the tunnel. The faint glimmer of the sword had dimmed to little more than a line of mist. Feeling around, he discovered sacks of grain and root vegetables. He was easing the door the rest of the way, intending to lean it against one of the sacks, when the hinges creaked. Some paces away there was a rustling and a snort.

Dropping the door open, Sigurd strode toward the noise. As the guard rose from his stool, Sigurd swung Gram, slicing the man’s throat before he had gathered the wits to yell. As the man fell back into his stool, head dropping to his chest, Hogni came up behind Sigurd.

“What happened?”

“A guard.”

“A guard? Why would there be a guard in the storeroom?”

Hogni’s questions were echoed by the men behind him as they emerged into the dark room.

“Quiet!” hissed Sigurd, and silence fell again.

“Sigurd,” reasoned Freod, “they are expecting something. Where there is one guard, there will be others. Perhaps we should go back.”

Sigurd’s pulse pounded in his temple. “What did you expect? That we would trot over to the hall, slip through a window and kill the snake in his bed? The guard is dead. If
we go back, he’ll be discovered by morning and this door will have ten times the men guarding it. We might as well sail back to Denmark.”

Freod sighed. “All right. Fine. Gar, I want you up here with Sigurd. Men, any guard we meet must not be allowed to scream.”

They edged toward the storeroom door. Sigurd pressed an ear to it. Silence. He swung the door open. Two spear tips lunged for his throat. He swept Gram upwards, knocking the spears aside, but one of them caught his shoulder, tearing a gash. He cleaved the man’s head with Gram, and Gar’s spear thrust past him to stab the other through the neck.

“Sigurd,” came Freod’s warning voice.

Freod was right. The guards had obviously heard them inside. If the guards had any sense, they had sent someone to raise an alarm. Chances were, their presence was known. But Sigurd was not going back. He moved away from the storeroom.

His warning ignored, Freod brusquely ordered five men to guard the door, to protect their escape route.

Sigurd led the men around many buildings, avoiding the main road. They met no other guard. Maybe they had been lucky. Maybe Odin’s hand was here after all. Then, coming around a wide building, the dark shape of the hall swinging into view, a shout of challenge rose before him.

“Swords!” Sigurd shouted over his shoulder, even as the first of Lygni’s men charged.

It was a confusing fight, too dark to really see who was on which side. Only the first blows were clear, when Sigurd cut through the men before him. After that, not sure
who stood at his side, he swung only at shapes that approached him, hoping he struck his enemies.

For every man Sigurd killed, two more seemed to take his place. With each blow, he saw his chance at Lygni beaten to nothing. They would never get through.

“Retreat!” he called furiously. “Fall back!”

The withdrawal to the storeroom was ugly. Lygni’s men pressed them hard and tried to swing around behind. Only speed and the narrow passages between buildings prevented Lygni’s main force from cutting them off. Some, Lygni’s fastest runners, did come in behind. They were killed, but not without some loss to Sigurd’s men.

At the storeroom door, two of Sigurd’s guards were dead, the other three struggling against a small band of Lygni’s men. That band was soon cut down by the retreat, and Sigurd’s men streamed through the storeroom door, though many did not make it.

Stabbing back through the doorway to clear it, several men threw the door shut and bolted it. A tense argument followed, and four were chosen to stay behind in the storeroom, to hold off Lygni’s force as long as possible.

Sigurd spared them a farewell and his thanks then hurried to the door of the tunnel, helping the men down, guarding the flank. He leaped into the tunnel behind the last man and followed the band in their dangerous, blind stumble. Like breaking water’s surface, they emerged onto the slope and fled down the hill. So far, none followed.

Because only a few of Sigurd’s men had horses, their flight was slowed to a running pace. It seemed to go on forever. Men who flagged were hauled up behind the
saddles. Some horses did not carry their original riders. One of these was Hogni’s. But Sigurd could not think about that now.

Darkness pressed in on the fleeing party as they followed the curve of the town’s palisade, all thought of secrecy gone. Arrows flew at random from the watch platforms above. At last, they reached the forest and pressed hard to the beach.

Sigurd yelled to the men guarding the ship. They might have only moments to get in the water, for Lygni’s horsemen could not be far behind.

They loaded the horses into the ships, but before all the men could climb aboard, Lygni’s men broke from the trees, hailing arrows. Several of Sigurd’s men fell into the water. An arm’s reach from Sigurd, one man caught a spear in his back and tumbled over the rail. At last, every living man was hauled into the ships. Scrambling, they set to their oars and pulled away from the beach.
Chapter 30

They rowed hard and fast from the coast. The shouts of Lygni’s men and the screams of their own seemed to hang over the three ships as they sailed close together, cutting the water in silence. Sigurd, pulling oar in one of the Danish ships, knew they would soon have to find a place to hide and reorganize. Most of the benches in this ship held only one man instead of two; the others could be little better, maybe worse. They would need to consolidate men and gear before any further action could be taken. When the town and its headlands were well hidden in the dark, Sigurd housed his oar and rose from the bench.

“Freod,” he called to the grey head, barely visible, some rows before him.

Frored’s voice came back surprised, “Sigurd? I didn’t even know you were on this ship.”

“Get to the bow.”
Standing with Freod in the sharp wedge of deck, Sigurd said in a low voice, “My mother described a chain of islands, some ten miles northeast of the Volsung coast. There, we can tighten up our resources. Lygni’s men could be in their ships already. If they’re not now, they certainly will be by dawn. I don’t want to meet them on the water.”

“Sigurd, we should head west, back to the Danish coast where we can discuss our next course of action in safety. Do you think Lygni won’t know to search those islands, if they offer cover?”

Sigurd dropped his voice further, “And once we’re safe and the men seven miles from their own beds, who will want to come east again? How many? Ten? Five? I’ve spent enough years at war to know what most men are made of.” When Freod made no answer, Sigurd went on, “If you don’t stand with me now—”

“I stand with you,” snapped Freod, then his voice softened, “but old men need time to think.”

“There is no time. Now light a torch, and we’ll draw the others to us and tell them our plan.”

When the ships were tight alongside one another, their bows bumping in the dark, the first question came from Gunnar, “Where is my brother?”

By the light of Freod’s torch, Sigurd could see the fear in Gunnar’s eyes. “I’m afraid—I think—he didn’t make it into the tunnel. I do not remember him in the storeroom.”

Gunnar’s hands clenched on the rail of the Burgundian ship, and he swayed forward as though seasick.

“I’m sorry, Gunnar.”
Gunnar drew away from the rail and the light. “Let’s just get ashore.”

It took half the remaining night for them to find the islands, and in the end it was luck that finally brought them to shore when some stray starlight glinted on a pale beach. As Sigurd leaped from the ship, he felt the sharp pull of the gash in his shoulder and wondered how many were hurt.

They drew the ships onto the beach and helped the injured down. Five men badly wounded, three of whom would be dead by morning. Most of the remaining thirty bore some hurt also. Sigurd bent over one man, a Dane, tearing the tough linen of the man’s trousers to expose the arrow shaft standing in his leg. The arrow was clear of bone, but the steel head was still buried in flesh.

From behind came Gar’s voice. “Fire, Sigurd, or no?”

Sigurd knew what Gar was asking. Without fire, there would be no water to boil bandages. Without clean bandages, some wounds, ones that might not have been deadly, would kill. But a fire would give away their position more surely than anything. And yet, if Lygni guessed where they had gone, it would not matter. If he did not guess, it was unlikely his men would come out this far to search before daylight. Sigurd gritted his teeth. He hated making decisions like this; that was Gunnar’s business. He heard Gar shifting in the sand and finally said, “Fire for bandages, and make it quick. Do only what’s necessary.”

As Gar retreated, leaving Sigurd feeling harassed, annoyed, he turned back to the Dane. “What’s your name?”

“Biarni, son of Abiorn, my lord.” He sounded young, Hogni’s age.
Sigurd rubbed at his beard. “And what’s your ambition, Biarni? What will you claim from life?”

Biarni struggled up onto an elbow. “Only what every man wants. I would die in battle. But…”

“But not now?”

Biarni did not answer at first, and Sigurd guessed he was blushing. Then Biarni said, “It’s only that I have not done enough. How will I please my father, coming to Valhalla with only four battles to my name? Would he not be ashamed of me?”

The boy’s voice was earnest, pained. Sigurd wanted to see his face, to know him. He said, “No. No, I cannot imagine that he would be ashamed of you.”

“He spoke of you, my father did.”

“I remember him. He was a fine warrior and a loyal thane, and King Hjalprek loved him. I think I saw you once. You lived with your uncle, to the west, on the coast.”

“When I was a child, yes. I did not come to the hall until after you had gone to fosterage. But my father. He said I should watch for you, and when the time came, I should follow.” Biarni’s voice dropped and he added, “There would be no shame, he said, in leaving King Aelf if it were to pledge to you. Would you take me, lord?”

Sigurd felt a constriction deep in his throat. This boy did not doubt, even here at the edge, where most saw only defeat. But before he could answer steadily, Biarni spoke again, saying, “You do not know me well enough. I understand. But you will see. I will prove myself first. And then I will ask you. My father always said I was too impatient.”
“There’s nothing wrong with impatience, Biarni. Most men wait too long. For
everything. But lie back now. The bandages are coming. We’ll speak of this later, if we
take the kingdom.”

“We will take it.”

“Lie back.”

When a man stood behind him with clean bandages, Sigurd found the arrow in
Biarni’s leg again. He gave it a hard jab. Biarni bit back a cry as the steel tip punched
clear through his leg. Sigurd snapped off the arrowhead and jerked the shaft out clean. As
he bathed the wound and wrapped it, he could feel Biarni shaking, but the boy made no
further sound. Most could not have stayed silent.

Sigurd rose. “Rest, Biarni. Your father will have to keep waiting.”

Sigurd went to the water’s edge to watch for any signs of ships while the fire
burned under the iron pot. They could not take the tunnel again. That was obvious.
Neither could they sail into the harbor. They could swim, perhaps, but though that might
get them into the town, it would not get them into the hall. There was only one other
possibility.

The fire went out behind Sigurd. He turned away from the water and went to
gather the commanders.

They stood in a circle away from the men, some of whom still tended the
wounded, some of whom were transferring gear into the two best ships. Gar, Sigurd
could now see, was hunching slightly over a wound in his side. One of the Danish
commanders was missing, and a Burgundian captain had been among the worst wounded.
Still, it wasn’t bad.
“I have an idea,” said Sigurd into the tense silence of the circle. “It will take courage.”

“What is it?” asked Freod warily.

“The headland on which the hall sits is a high bluff. It’s steep and rocky, and the rocks may be loose. At the top is a stone wall, but it’s not high, perhaps four feet. None has ever climbed the slope, nor scaled the wall. Guards will be at the wall, looking out to sea. But if we give them no reason to look down, they won’t.”

“Sigurd,” said Gar incredulously, “you’re suggesting we climb the bluff?”

“The hall sits back close to that wall. If we can get over the wall and kill the guards without being noticed, we can likely get into the hall. With so few men, that is our only hope.”

“A forlorn hope,” muttered someone.

“I said it would take courage.”

“Yes, but…”

“If it has never been done,” said Gunnar, his voice seeming to come from far away, “is it possible?”

“If I thought it were not, I would not have suggested it. Of anyone, Gunnar, you know that a daring plan, when all seems lost, can save a kingdom.”

Gunnar, most of his face lost in darkness, only the edge of it limned with starlight, looked toward Sigurd with desperation, wanting to believe.

“I don’t know,” said Gar, shaking his head. “We need more men. So many are wounded. Even if we do get over the wall and kill Lygni, how can we hope to overcome those who will fight to avenge him? There could be hundreds.”
“Something will work,” insisted Sigurd.

“Why not come back another time?” suggested a Danish captain. “Next summer. As Gar said, with more men.”

“Freod?” said Sigurd in challenge.

Freod, too, was shaking his head. He did not answer.

“Are you decided in this?” Sigurd demanded of the circle. “Before I even spoke, you were committed to flight?”

“You judge us too harshly, Sigurd,” said Gar.

“It is not my judgment that need worry you. It is Odin who measures a man.” Sigurd knew that was unfair, but it was also true, and he would not take it back. He turned from the circle and stalked into the dark.

* * *

Gunnar sat at the water’s edge. Behind him, the men grew restless. The stars had shifted, the east was lightening, and still Sigurd had not returned. A decision needed to be made, and that could not be done, not without shame, while Sigurd was gone.

Sigurd seemed so certain of his plan. How could he dare so much, when there was so little reason for hope? Gunnar had dared once, but the Norns, apparently, had been unimpressed. Even now, he had come for death or glory and found neither. What offence had he given to be punished this way? And now his brother was gone. He had not wanted Hogni to come. Why had he given up that argument so easily? Hogni would have obeyed him, if he had commanded him to stay. And now what could be done? Only one thing
was certain: he could not go back. Not like this. He rose from the sand and headed across the beach to the tree line where Sigurd had disappeared.

He found Sigurd just beyond the beach, sitting under a pine, in the cold dimness before dawn. Gunnar sat beside him. The scent of the tree was strong, but something else hung in the air that Gunnar could not identify, not a smell exactly, but troubling. Beside him, Sigurd sat tense, primed. He was still angry. He looked older than Gunnar remembered, his face leaner, harder. Gunnar realized then that he had not looked at Sigurd, not really seen him, in a long time.

Finally, Gunnar said, “Men must be allowed to voice their doubts. They will have them, whether they speak or not, and it is better if they speak to you, rather than each other. You have to listen to them. You must give them some acknowledgement. If you don’t, the men will think you do not care for them, or respect them, and they will be wary.”

“They know I respect them.”

Gunnar shook his head. “You must show them. They think you look down on them, when you act that way.”

Sigurd sighed loudly and laid his head back against the tree trunk. “You know I’m not good at this.”

“They want to follow you, Sigurd. But they must feel that you really want them to. Otherwise, doubt will get the better of them, even if they are good men.”

“I don’t know how to do that. I don’t know how to speak to them.”

Now it was Gunnar’s turn to sigh.
Sigurd looked at Gunnar. His eyes were pleading, but his voice was hard: “You do it.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Gunnar. You can make them see. This is the only way. It may always be the only way, whether today or next summer.”

“Not next summer,” said Gunnar sharply. “I won’t wait.”

“You want to do it?”

Gunnar stared Sigurd in the eye, challenging him. “Did you see Hogni killed?”

“No.”

“Then I will not wait.”

“Gunnar, if he’s alive—if—he may not be the same. They will torture him. You’ve seen some men after that.”

Gunnar was expressionless. “I will not leave him.”

“No,” admitted Sigurd. “Nor will I. Not even if the men do not follow.”

“You would go alone? You would be killed.”

“Odin is with me.”

Gunnar laughed sourly. “After all this disaster, you can still think so?”

“I know so.” Sigurd nodded upward to the branches of the pine, where the first light of dawn was falling. A huge, night-black raven tilted its head, looking down at Gunnar with a shining eye.

Gunnar’s breath caught, and he had to stop himself from scrambling to his feet. He did not have to ask Sigurd how he knew that raven was more than an ordinary bird; he could feel it in his bones.
As Gunnar followed Sigurd from the tree line, across the beach to the men, he kept a wary eye on the raven circling overhead. As the discussion began again and the commanders shook their heads, some followed Gunnar’s eye.

“Herald of war,” whispered Gar.

“It comes for death,” said a Danish captain. “Our own?”

The raven dropped from the sky, and the men stepped back with a gasp. The raven landed on Sigurd’s shoulder, and he said, “I don’t think so.”

While the men stared in wonder at Sigurd and the raven, Gunnar stepped forward. “It’s dangerous, yes; no one denies that. But here is a chance at something great. Will you sail home? Or will you follow Odin’s son?”

“I can force no one to go,” said Sigurd. “I will not. I will go alone if I must, somehow. Were you to leave me on this beach, as I know you would not, I would still find a way. But I would have you with me, any who is willing. I would have my friends at my side.”

Gar was looking down in shame. “I’m sorry, Sigurd, I shouldn’t have—of course I will come.”

“Don’t be ashamed. You think of tactics, strategy, advantage, and that is good in you. Time and fate have shown me to value those things, and Odin knows I forget them too easily. And yet, sometimes, daring is more important than all that. Sometimes, you have to follow nothing more than a raven’s wing, and trust in it.”

Freod’s face was shining. “Almost, Sigurd, you begin to sound like a king. I will go.”

And so, too, did the others pledge themselves, under the eye of the raven.
They moved the men into the two Danish ships. The Burgundian ship, too large and dismal with its smoke-blackened sides, was left behind with the men who had died in the night. Those men were buried with haste and too little ceremony, but there was no time.

The two ships set sail as the sun rose red in the east. The men might have feared this sign of carnage coming, but with Odin’s raven clutching the bow, they rowed hard and no longer looked down in defeat and hopelessness.

They rowed from island to island, hiding their ships, not knowing where Lygni’s men might look for them. They could not be seen. They could not afford to lose any more in battle, and they needed secrecy. They did not see Lygni’s ships that day, but they were restless on the water, waiting for night.

Sigurd stood in the bow as the sun finally dropped in the west, as the waves faded from pink to blue to black. The moon was up; the thick crescent had been hanging in the sky all afternoon, deepening from the faintest white to bright gold. It gilded the waters now, as the sun had touched them. They would need this light to climb the bluff, and they would have to hope they were hidden under a black wing.

Sigurd looked to the raven on the bow and said in a low voice, “Which are you? Thought? Or memory? Which is with us tonight?”

The raven hopped around to face Sigurd, tilting its head, and the moonlight gleamed on its face, sparked its eye. The raven opened its beak, and a rough, scratching noise issued from its throat. Sigurd shook his head in frustration, hearing nothing but a bird’s voice.
The raven startled him by lifting suddenly from the bow, flying high against the moon. Sigurd followed its dark movement until he lost it in the night. When he dropped his eyes from the sky, they fell on another dark shape in the distance. The bluff. And the hall that crowned it.
Chapter 31

They landed on a beach some miles from the Volsung fortress. Hidden behind a huge arm of rock, their ships would not be seen here, at least not from the bluff, not in the night. Any who could not climb were left to guard the ships, or to flee if the band did not return.

As the men gathered their weapons and gear from the ships, Sigurd went to Greyfell in the corral. The stallion fretted behind the wooden gate, pawing through the straw to gouge the deck. Sigurd laid a hand on the tense neck.

“How can you come with me? You cannot climb.” Greyfell snorted and bit at Sigurd’s byrnie. Sigurd pushed his nose away, but Greyfell thrust it back into the crook of Sigurd’s arm. “If I am killed, Odin will take you. He would never leave you here, among men. But stop fretting. I will be back, and you’ll have missed but one fight. This isn’t the last.”
Sigurd stepped away from the corral gate. As he turned, Greyfell stamped, and Sigurd heard the creak of wood. He swung back to the horse. “Have some dignity!” Greyfell snorted and shook his head, the dark mane flying, but he quieted, and Sigurd followed the last of the men from the ship.

Only eight were left behind, but many of the twenty-four who followed Sigurd across the rocky beach moved with pain. Sigurd dropped back to speak with one who limped badly.

“Biarni,” he said, “you should have stayed at the ship.”

Biarni, whose shoulders had been drooping, straightened. “I would rather die. How could I stay behind, after the raven? Would you?”

“No. But you are not me, Biarni.”

“I didn’t mean that.” Biarni sounded embarrassed.

“Please go back. You can fight for me another time.”

The moonlight shone on Biarni’s forehead and high cheekbones. During the day, Sigurd had seen the passion of his face, the way his eyes, though pinched with pain, had watched the setting sun as though the gods would ride from it. Biarni said, “I will go only if you command me.”

“No,” sighed Sigurd. “I would not do that.”

When they reached the bluff, the steep, scree-covered slope rose above them like a cliff, and the water boomed against it. The moon dappled its face, gleaming on the wet stones, leaving the crevices black. Standing there at the foot, staring up the slope, Sigurd thought of another cliff, one he had seen only once but remembered well. He smiled grimly. This dragon, at least, would not be able to fly from him.
At Sigurd’s side, Gunnar also stared up the bluff. He kept his eyes on the stone wall at the top. He could do this. For Hogni, he would reach that wall, one stone at a time. Around him, the men began to climb. Gunnar took a deep breath and found his first grip on the stones.

The climb was harder than Gunnar could have imagined. Many stones were loose, many slick from the spray. The tide had been a point of debate. With the tide high, the climb would be more perilous. But without that tide, every shift of rock, every scrape, every gasp, might be heard at the top. In the end, Sigurd’s decision had been undisputed; nothing mattered but silence.

Gunnar’s boots and trousers were soon wet from the spray, his hands stiff with cold, his legs trembling from the strain. He would reach a little higher, get a fingerhold on a stone, test its stability. He would haul himself up, arms shaking, to the next one, wedging his toes into the bluff. One great danger was falling stones, and Gunnar was grateful to be near the front of the band. By the time the climbers were halfway to the top, at least two men had fallen. Gunnar had seen one slip. Another had been struck by a dislodged stone.

Gunnar could see Sigurd ten feet above, not moving. He could not decide whether that worried him or gave him relief. If even Sigurd found this climb so arduous, there was no shame in his own straining. On the other hand, if Sigurd could not do, how could any other hope to? At last, Sigurd reached out and pulled himself higher.

To his left, Gunnar could see that Gar was struggling, hunched and cringing at every pull. Gunnar did not think Sigurd knew how bad Gar’s wound was, for Gar should
not have come. He had taken a spear in the side, and though it was bandaged tight, Gunnar could see the dark stain spreading down Gar’s leg.

Gunnar had lost sight of the old Danish commander some time ago. He hoped Freod had not fallen, but he had to look to his own efforts. He pulled a shaking hand from where it gripped the bluff near his throat and reached for the next stone.

It seemed to take hours to reach the top. More than once, Sigurd had wondered if the bluff were some trick of the gods, for it had not looked so high. More than once, he had come near to falling when his foot or hand had slipped, or when a rock broke loose from the bluff. He hoped no stone of his had struck anyone.

When the base of the stone wall was within reach of his fingers, Sigurd stopped to wait for the others. Slowly, most of the climbers joined him. He counted eighteen. Looking down, he could see several still on the bluff, but they were too far. The band could not wait so long, for it was almost as tiring to cling to the bluff as to climb it. Sigurd motioned the men to take the wall. This was the greatest challenge yet, for the wall was smooth and even less forgiving than the steep face of the bluff.

Sigurd found purchase on a small lip of stone, and with a final effort, he leaped for the edge of the wall. He caught it by his fingertips. Feeling his muscles would burst or his fingers snap, he hauled himself up and swung a leg over. He paused, panting, then pulled himself the rest of the way, tumbling to the grass on the other side.

Looking around for the guards, he saw one dozing not three feet away. Another stood at the end of the wall. Still shaking from exertion, Sigurd drew his short knife from his belt and crept along the wall. He grabbed the guard from behind, a hand over the man’s mouth, and slit his throat. He laid the guard on the wall, face on elbow, to make
him look asleep. He began to creep along the wall to the other guard, praying for silence, staying tight within the wall’s shadow.

When Sigurd was halfway to the other guard, the man called out to the prostrate form on the wall. “Arni! Wake up, you oaf!”

When Arni did not move, the guard muttered something under his breath and started in Sigurd’s direction. Sigurd froze. As the man drew near, Sigurd slid Gram from his scabbard. The blade was silent, its glow dimmed to shadow. Sigurd breathed relief; he had not known whether to trust the sword to stealth. When the guard was only a stride away, Sigurd leaped from his crouch. He punched Gram through the underside of the man’s jaw. The blade flashed silvery blue as it struck out the top of the man’s skull but fell dim again as Sigurd drew it free.

Sigurd stared around him, straining for the faintest sounds of alarm or approach. When he was certain of secrecy, he rose and returned to where he had left his men. Peering over the wall, he could not see them at first. Then a shadow spoke, startling him.

“Sigurd!” came Gar’s harsh whisper.

“Hold on,” returned Sigurd. “I’ll lower the rope.”

“I’m sorry, Sigurd. We could not do it. One man fell trying the wall. No one has the strength.”

“Hold on,” said Sigurd again, uncoiling the rope that hung at his waist. He tied the rope around himself and lowered its end over the wall. Bracing hard, he whispered, “Ready!”

Weight dragged at the rope. It jerked and swayed, and Sigurd gritted his teeth against the pull. At last, Gar’s hand, scraped and dirty, appeared at the wall’s edge. When
Gar had a steady hold, Sigurd reached out and hauled him over the wall. Gar fell with a grunt, clutching his side, and dragged himself out of the way. One by one, Sigurd helped the remaining seventeen over the wall. Gunnar came, and Biarni, collapsing as though his leg had no bone.

When all the men were up, most leaning against the wall in exhaustion, Sigurd crouched by Gar. “Freod is missing.”

Gar shook his head and said, in short, hard breaths, “He did not fall. He went back. He saw, early on, that he wouldn’t make it.”

Relief eased Sigurd’s chest. “Odin be praised. I should not have let him begin.”

“It was his choice.”

Sigurd bowed his head, then he saw the dark stain seeping from under Gar’s hand. He pulled Gar’s hand away and shifted the soaked bandages. He squeezed his eyes shut briefly and opened them again on the wound. “Why did you not stay on the ship with the other wounded? Why did you not say something?”

Gar pushed Sigurd’s hand away and said stubbornly, “It was my choice.”

“Gar, you must stay here. You cannot fight. This will kill you.”

Gar’s head tilted back, and he stared into the sky. He was silent for a time then said, “Sigurd, do you remember when you were a boy and you were breaking a young colt that threw you through the fence and split the back of your head?”

Sigurd frowned in puzzlement. “I remember.”

“I said to you, ‘What do you want to die riding a horse for? Don’t you know there are better ways?’ Do you remember?”

“Yes,” said Sigurd cautiously.
“And do you remember what you said to me? You said, standing there with your hand clamped to the back of your head and the horse-master in a panic, you said, ‘I do know.’ You said, ‘I’ll die as my father did. In battle, when Odin commands it.’ Most boys would have cried from the pain. But you were angry. You thought I had insulted you. Do you remember that?” Gar’s eyes searched Sigurd’s face; they burned with fever, or memory.

“I do,” said Sigurd, still uncertain of Gar’s point.

Gar grabbed the edge of Sigurd’s byrnie. “I knew then that I would fight for you one day. That I would die fighting for you. I felt it in my bones as surely as if Odin had stood behind me. Don’t leave me here, Sigurd, to die on this wall.”

Sigurd swallowed hard and laid his hand over his eyes. When he dropped his hand, he said, his voice uneven, “Then get up,” and he helped Gar to his feet. He drew Gar into a short, hard embrace and turned from him to rouse the others.

When all the men were ready on their feet, Sigurd looked, finally, to the hall. Unlike the single pitched roof of most halls, the Volsung hall had many wide roofs joined under a towering central one. The moonlight gilded the roof’s edges and washed down the walls. It caught also on the strange, branching shape that rose from the center roof, reaching into the night sky. A breeze rustled the Branstock’s leaves. Sigurd shivered at the beauty of it and started forward.

The wooden walls of the hall sat atop a high stone platform, a porch that seemed to run along every side. They stayed below this porch, for there were doors and windows along the hall, and Sigurd did not trust them, even in darkness.
Very little movement could be seen within the fortress. Guards stood on the high watching platforms along the fortress’s palisade, looking out. The outbuildings were dark and silent. When they reached the end of the hall’s long side, the huge stone steps leading to the front doors in sight, Sigurd motioned a halt. Voices could be heard coming from the porch.

“You think so?” said one man.

“You were there. You saw the sword as well as any, or so you told Gedda. You know the stories of that sword, though the king won’t hear them. Why, the tree still bears the scar from where Odin struck it!”

“Lower your voice! Do you want to be locked up with the others?”

“I’m just saying—”

“What you’re saying is treason. And if I hear another word of it, I’ll tell the king. Besides, you saw their numbers. What can they possibly hope to accomplish?”

Silence followed this last question, and Sigurd motioned Gunnar to his side. His whisper was barely audible, and Gunnar had to lean close to hear. Sigurd said, “I will take the farther one. But the one nearest, capture him, make him silent. He may be of use.”

Sigurd and Gunnar pulled themselves up onto the stone ledge, rolling into the shadows. They crept onto the porch behind the guards, who leaned against the columns with their spears in loose grips. When Gunnar was in position, tensed behind the guard with his knife ready, Sigurd nodded, hoping Gunnar could see his signal in such deep shadow. Sigurd grabbed the guard before him, clamping a hand over the man’s mouth,
and stabbed his knife into the joining of neck and shoulder. The man gurgled and fell. Sigurd caught him and eased the body to the porch.

Gunnar had a hand over the other guard’s mouth and a knife to his throat. The man was motionless, and moonlight caught the whites of his eyes. Sigurd went to face him, drawing Gram as he approached.

“Do you know this sword?” whispered Sigurd.

The man gave a constricted nod.

“Then you know who I am.”

Another nod.

“We could just kill you and go in and kill your king, but I think you might help us. Am I right?”

A nod.

“If you lie, you will die with shame. I will see to it. You will help us?”

When the man nodded again, Sigurd motioned Gunnar to let him speak. Gunnar dropped his hand to the man’s shoulder but kept the blade at his throat.

“Why would you betray your king?” demanded Sigurd. “Answer well, or you’ll die where you stand.”

“Someone of us,” said the man nervously, “have waited twenty years for our king, and I would never betray him. You. Volsung.”

“There are others who would fight for me? Here?”

“Yes,” said the man eagerly. “Many. But they are under lock and guard, for the king—I mean Lygni—refused to trust any who ever fought under your father. They are held in the barracks, there.”
“And why are you not among them? Why does Lygni trust you at his door?”

“He did not remember me, lord. I was only a young boy when Lygni came here. But your father was kind to me once, when I broke my arm working in his stable. I have not forgotten.”

“And you feel no shame in turning from Lygni?”

The man’s eyes lowered. “There is nothing I can do in this without shame. Not fight Lygni. Not fight you. Not run. I can only choose what seems best of these evils.”

That gave Sigurd pause, and he fingered Gram’s edge. “What is your name?”

“Toli, my lord.”

“Well, Toli, you seem a wise man. You will stay here and wait until we return.”

“Sigurd!” hissed Gunnar. “You will trust him? If you leave him here, he could betray us!”

Sigurd’s voice was flat, “You will stay with him.”

“But my brother. I must—”

“How can you hope to save him, even if you find him, if we do not win first?”

Gunnar grunted frustration but nodded Sigurd away.

Sigurd descended the stone steps, Gram still in his hand, glowing faintly. The men crouched along the porch fell in behind. They hurried in silence, through the shadows, to the thatch-roofed longhouse Toli had indicated. It stood behind the other barracks, facing away from the hall.

Sigurd halted the men behind the building’s edge and peered around. Five guards. He signaled for eight men with bows. The eight nocked their arrows and stepped around...
the corner. As they fired, Sigurd led the others forward, cutting throats even as the guards fell.

Hoping this was no trap, Sigurd slid the bar from the door and swung it open. He took a deep breath. Holding Gram before him, he stepped through the doorway into darkness and silence. Barely visible, men slept rolled in blankets on the raised platforms along the walls and even on the low floor. The hearth glowed faintly, and the smells of cooking hung in the air. The smell of bodies, too, was strong, for the room held twice what it should have, and the windows were barred. Tensing for a possible fight, Sigurd called out, “Wake!”

The room came alive. Men rolled from their blankets. There were scrapes of knives, sounds of stumbling. Several men rushed toward Sigurd. He raised Gram higher. The sword blazed with a clear, cold light, like Odin’s eye shining from the bottom of the fountain of memory.

The men were already slowing when a voice boomed from the back, “Halt!”

Under the strange light of the sword, Sigurd watched the men fall to uncertain stillness, their faces full of confusion and wonder. He said to them, “I am Sigurd, son of Sigmund, son of Volsung, son of Rerir, son of Sigi, son of Odin. Who is your lord?”

The men, some hundred and fifty, fell to their knees, heads bowing.

Sigurd said, “Who called the halt? Let him come forward and be known.”

A man rose from among the kneelers. His tunic was unbelted, his feet unshod, his face puffy with sleep, and yet he had an unmistakable dignity. The men scooted out of his way as he passed. As he drew near, Sigurd could see that his beard was grey, his hair faded red. Deep lines surrounded his eyes, and his mouth was grim. He dropped to his
knees before Sigurd and said in a strong, clear voice, “I am Tryggir, son of Tryggi, my lord. I have waited for you for a very long time.”

“I know the name. You served my father.”

“I did. And I’ve dreamed of that sword for twenty years. I saw it burst.”

“Then tell me, Tryggir, son of Tryggi, why did you become Lygni’s man? Why did you not die to avenge my father after he fell?” Sigurd expected Tryggir’s head to drop in shame, for him to make excuses, but he raised his head and looked Sigurd in the eye.

“I wanted to. Oh, how I wanted to. But Odin came to me on the battlefield, and he told me I must bear a great burden. He told me I must live and I must wait. He told me I would see the Volsung sword again, that it would be whole. He said I must wait for it.”

Tryggir’s chin lifted further. “And I have. And I have kept the memory of the Volsungs alive, in these men who are faithful.”

“And you trust these men? Every one of them?”

“Every one. Some are men of your father’s who pledged faith to Lygni with me. Some are sons of your father’s warriors. It took many years for Lygni to trust us. Though, as you can see, he was never quite sure. There were some we did not trust, but they lie dead already.” Tryggir nodded to a blanketed pile.

“You took a great risk. Had I not returned, how would you have explained that to Lygni?”

“I knew you would return. And we had to be ready.”

“And I am grateful, to you and to Odin. This is the time for which you have waited. Rise, Tryggir, and ready your men. Lygni falls tonight, and a Volsung will sit again under the Branstock.”
Chapter 32

Despite the great fortune of finding these loyal men, nothing was yet easy. There were some knives among them, but all swords, spears, axes, bows, shields, and armor had been taken. These, said Tryggir, likely lay in the armory. Before so many could move across the fortress grounds to the armory, the guards on the watching platforms would have to be silenced. If Sigurd’s force were seen before armed and the alarm raised, their numbers would count for little. Lygni had yet well over two hundred.

Sigurd and his two best bowmen slipped from the barracks into the shadows. They spread among the buildings, each moving toward one of the watching platforms. Only Sigurd was visible, standing in the middle of the main road behind the gates. He hoped each of his bowmen could see him; they needed to fire as one, or else the first falling guard could alert the others. One arrow ready on his borrowed bow, another waiting in his bowstring grip, Sigurd watched the two guards over the main gate, waiting
until he was certain each of his men had had time to reach his position. Then he drew the bow hard against his cheek and let the arrow fly for the first guard’s neck. Even as the first arrow was in the air, he set the next against the bow and sent it straight through the face of the second guard as he turned to watch the first fall.

Sigurd looked along the curving line of the sharply pointed palisade. On each platform guards lay unmoving. Sigurd hurried to his platform’s ladder and climbed to the top to make sure of his work. High on the platform, the guards dead at his feet, he looked behind to the fortress. All lay quiet.

There were many buildings, more than he had thought. Five longhouses with thatched roofs stood near to the hall and the training yard: the barracks. Stables, workshops, and other houses lay scattered throughout the fortress. Moonlight hinted at carvings on the beams and posts of the buildings; it shone bright on the horse and wolf heads jutting from the ends of each roof. Most of the roads among the buildings were paved with wooden planks, cutting like dark trails through the fortress, but the main road, laid with smooth stone, leading from under Sigurd’s feet to the hall, gleamed in the moonlight. Sigurd’s eyes flew along this road to the stone steps, great, squared blocks, that rose to the porch. He could just make out Gunnar and Toli’s half-hidden forms.

Something at the roof’s peak caught Sigurd’s eye, a flash of white under the moon. He narrowed his eyes, shivering as he made out the shape. There, gripping the wooden figure that jutted from the roof, was the white falcon.

When Sigurd and the bowmen returned to the barracks, the men filed out the door, hurrying in a silent stream to the armory, a large building that stood just beyond the barracks, at the edge of the training yard. The door was unguarded, and several of
Tryggir’s men slipped inside. Four stood at the door, passing weapons and armor from those in the armory to those waiting outside.

Sigurd and his small band stood back from the larger group, watching the doors of the other barracks. Soon, half the men were armed, and it seemed there would be no unexpected trouble. But then, even as Sigurd grinned at Gunnar coming down from the porch, one of the barrack doors creaked. Sigurd’s head twitched back to the door as a man, disheveled and fumbling with the front of his trousers, stepped into the open. Arrows flew at him from four bows, and he was falling before he even opened his mouth. But he did not fall forward. He fell back, through the doorway, crashing to the floor.

Sigurd’s men stood frozen a moment, then the distribution of weapons doubled in speed. Swords were tossed into waiting hands, shields hurled through the air.

Within the barracks, the stirring began slowly, but then muffled shouts could be heard, and soon men began pouring through the doorway, yelling for blood, charging, half-clothed, toward Sigurd’s line. They slowed in their charge as they saw how many stood behind Sigurd, but it was too late to stop. They crashed into combat.

Sigurd slashed and stabbed, Gram flashing silver. He ducked a blow from a battleaxe and hacked the wielder’s neck as the man lifted the heavy weapon for a second swing. When a sword came sweeping at his head, Sigurd blocked the blow with Gram. The other sword shattered on impact. The man just had time to show surprise before Sigurd split his head from the top. Beside him, Sigurd caught a glimpse of Gunnar striking a sword from a man’s hand, breaking the wrist. Gar, he could not find in the chaos.
In those first moments, for the first blows, the fight was unbalanced. Sigurd’s men were armored and more prepared, and their numbers were greater. But when the sounds of fighting roused the rest of Lygni’s men from the barracks, things began to turn. Most of those men took the time to throw on their byrnies and helmets, to pull on their boots. And though they fought with the sloppiness of surprise, they now outnumbered Sigurd’s men.

Sigurd and Tryggir had discussed this possibility. They had decided that if battle began before they got into the hall, Sigurd would lead any who could disentangle themselves from the fight and take the hall. What mattered most was killing the king. That would change everything.

Sigurd yelled for the men to follow if they could and worked his way to the edge of the fight. He ran for the hall without looking back to see who joined him. But as he came to the foot of the steps, he slid to a stop. The massive hall doors were swinging open. A dozen men, thanes by their fine armor and weapons, charged out in fury. Three spears came flying. Shielding himself with Gram, Sigurd twisted out the way. One spear grazed the front of his byrnie, another was knocked aside by Gram. The last flew wide to kill the man behind him.

As the thanes came leaping down the steps, Sigurd set himself, drawing Gram back. As they lunged for him and the others who had come behind, Sigurd swept Gram across the charge. The blade sliced byrnie and bone. Two of the thanes toppled onto the road. The rest fell upon Sigurd’s men with heavy downward blows. Sigurd ducked from one such blow, but the man bore him to the ground with his weight.
Sigurd fell hard to the stone road. The man who had tackled him rolled from the impact to his feet. He brought his blade down before Sigurd could rise. Sigurd deflected the blow with Gram’s hand guard, but the blade sliced the underside of his forearm. Before the man could recover his stance and his weapon, Sigurd rolled onto the blade, wrenching it from the man’s grip, and thrust Gram into the man’s gut below the edge of his byrnie.

Sigurd surged to his feet even as the man fell. The fight around him had grown chaotic. More of his own men had joined him, but many of Lygni’s had followed. In the confusion, Sigurd ducked through the hacking and fought his way to the steps. He took them two at a time. At the top, he paused to look back. He could see no one meeting Lygni’s description, no one protected as a king would be. Lygni must still be inside. Sigurd turned from the fight to the massive doorway. With a deep breath, he passed through.

The hall was dim, the fires in its two huge hearths burning low in the summer night. Sigurd’s eye sensed a pattern in the light and dark stones of the floor but swept beyond them to the tree. Only the base was illuminated, the low light of the hearth dimpling over the bark. The rest of the tree was lost in darkness, towering into the rafters where it disappeared through the roof. It would take three men with outstretched arms to encircle that tree. The gooseflesh rose on his arms, but he tore his eyes away. Only one thing mattered now.

Sigurd heard movement behind him and spun, Gram raised, to see Gunnar fly through the doorway.

“Sigurd! My brother! Have you seen—do you know—?”
Sigurd shook his head. “I go after Lygni.”

Gunnar’s eyes were wide with desperation and hope. “Toli says that Hogni lives! That he’s kept in a room here. He said—”

“Find him.” Sigurd turned from Gunnar, staring to the back of the hall. “I must kill this man who thinks he is king.”

“He’ll be guarded,” said Gunnar, not knowing, even as he said it, which one he meant.

Sigurd’s gaze still burned to the back of the hall. “We have different purposes right now. See to yours. I will see to mine.”

Gunnar felt a flash of anger. They should work together. He might need Sigurd. Surely it would not be so much to ask that he delay his revenge a few moments? But this was unfair, Gunnar knew. The king must be killed or captured to end this fight. He had a heartbeat’s doubt, thinking maybe it was he who should help Sigurd. But Sigurd had that look in his eye: death straining outwards. He would need no help. Gunnar sped off across the hall.

Gunnar noticed little around him. He watched for movement, caught a fleeting impression of the huge tree, a sense of something dark and dangerous. But he did not pause. Nothing mattered right now except finding Hogni. Gunnar turned into the passageway Toli had described. Halfway down, beside the light of a small brazier, two guards stood beside a heavy door. They had an uncertain look, as though they were not sure whether to keep guarding the door or leave it to join the battle. But when they heard Gunnar’s footsteps, they whipped their spears into the air, all uncertainty gone from their faces.
Gunnar let out a yell and charged down the passageway. The guards braced with their spears. Gunnar swung his sword in an arc to knock the spears aside and lashed out hard to strike the first guard with his fist. The guards were surprised and unbalanced for a moment, and the one who had been struck stumbled back. But they recovered quickly, lunging for Gunnar as he raised his sword between them. One grabbed Gunnar around the neck, not letting go even when Gunnar flailed at him with sword and fist. The other brought his spear around. As he stabbed for Gunnar’s torso, Gunnar kicked him hard in the gut. The man hunched around the blow, and Gunnar twisted from the grip of the other guard. As the guard grabbed for him again, Gunnar swung his sword. The blow was weakened by the shortened range, but it still caught the man across the chest. He fell back.

As Gunnar turned to face the man he had kicked, a sharp pain flared in his side. He yelled, almost falling, but made a last wild sweep with his sword. He felt the contact before he saw what it did, but the guard fell to the ground, a huge gash across his face.

Gunnar turned again. The other guard was struggling to rise, a hand held over his chest, using his spear more for support than protection. He looked at Gunnar with fear as Gunnar drew his sword back, but he did not move or beg mercy. Gunnar swung for his throat, not even stepping from the spray as the man jerked on his knees and fell.

Gunnar turned to stand over the guard with the ruined face. Before the man could clear the blood from his eyes, before he could see death coming, Gunnar turned his sword in his hand. With a grimace, he brought the point down. The guard gave a strangled scream as the blade struck through his byrnie and breast.
Gunnar wrenched his sword free and sagged against the wall, clutching his side. After a steadying breath he dropped his hand. Blood dripped from his fingers. He turned to the heavy door. Lifting the bar, he pushed it open. The room was utterly black.

“Hogni? Hogni, where are you?”

“Gunnar?” came a weak voice from the edge of the darkness. “Is that you?”

“Hogni!” Gunnar rushed toward his brother’s voice. He fumbled through the dark, stumbling over something on the floor. At Hogni’s grunt, Gunnar dropped to his knees.

“Can you stand?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Come. I’ll help you to the door.” Gunnar’s heart thundered in his chest. He wanted to see his brother. He needed to see.

Gunnar groped for Hogni’s shoulders and helped him to a sitting position. Hogni was breathing raggedly. Gunnar hauled him to his feet, and they stood in the darkness, leaning against one another. Hogni was trembling. Gunnar held him uncertainly. Now, when it came to it, he wasn’t sure he wanted to see after all. But he pulled on Hogni at last, drawing him to the door.

Hogni’s weight was heavy against him, and Gunnar drew an uneven breath as they emerged into the dim passageway. When he finally looked to his brother, he cried out. Hogni’s sword arm ended in a bloody stump, the hand hacked off at the wrist.

“Don’t, Gunnar,” said Hogni in a shaky voice. “Don’t.”

Gunnar felt his body beginning to tremble, and he ripped his eyes from the stump. He looked to Hogni’s face, bloody, bruised, one eye swollen shut and the other narrow
with pain. Hogni had been stripped to his tunic, which was ragged and stained, and he
was hunching around some pain in his torso.

Gunnar’s jaw clenched. “Can you move at all?”

“A little. Get me away from that room.”

* * *

As Sigurd passed under the tree, Gunnar’s footsteps fading, he looked to the back
of the hall. There, on a raised platform, was the king’s seat, tall and empty. It was flanked
by two braziers, and their dim light flickered along the edges of weapons hanging on the
wall behind. A thought flashed through his mind: his father had sat here. But he put that
aside. He could think on it later.

He stepped into the main passageway, the wide, well lit one that could only lead
to the king’s chambers. Near the end, a door stood open.

As Sigurd drew near the door he heard voices from inside the room. He paid them
little attention until one, deep and commanding, spoke above the others: “When the time
comes, only one thing matters. Show me your courage.”

“We may yet defeat them,” said someone.

The deep voice came back heavy with scorn, “Don’t be a fool.”

Sigurd stepped into the doorway. The room burned bright from the hearth and
several braziers. In the center, by the hearth, two men stood strapping armor onto another.
The two were finely dressed, byrnies gleaming gold at the edges, silver hilts showing
above fine scabbards. But it was the man who stood between them that drew his eye.
Lygni’s body was thick with old muscle. His face, marred by a wide, shiny scar that ran down his cheek into his greying beard, was stern, cold, and undaunted. Lygni’s eyes shifted to Sigurd before either of the other two noticed him. There was no anger in those eyes, only coldness.

When the other men followed Lygni’s gaze, they cried out in surprise and whipped their swords from their scabbards. With furious yells, they charged toward Sigurd. As the first blade flashed for Sigurd’s head, he caught it against Gram’s hand guard, at the same time twisting away from the second. He kept twisting, ducking low, until Gram drew free of the first blade. In the same movement, he swept Gram around to cut across the man’s torso and up to catch the other’s jaw. Before the men even had a chance to waver, Sigurd whipped Gram back across their throats.

Lygni had not moved during the fight. He had not grabbed his sword from where it lay on the hearth’s edge. He had not thrown on his helmet. His face, too, was unmoved, though his eyes flicked down to one of the men at Sigurd’s feet.

“Why do you hide in here?” demanded Sigurd. “Why are you not out with your men?”

Lygni drew the laces tight on one of his leather arm-guards. “A king must look like a warrior, when the Valkyries come for him.”

“Are you resigned then?”

Lygni looked up from his laces. “I’ve been resigned to this day for twenty years, ever since I heard of your birth. Son of Sigmund.”

Sigurd’s brows drew down. “You will not fight?”
Now Lygni looked angry. “Of course I will fight. But how can I live, when all the world speaks of your skill? And what have I to live for, when my son lies dead at your feet?”

Sigurd’s eyes darted down to the still, bloodied face.

Lygni’s voice was cold again when he said, “I have always known he would die. I knew you would not let him live, to come for you, when you are an old man, as you have come for me. But I do wish you had waited a while yet. I would rather not die in this chamber. I would have met you on the battlefield.”

“You took too long.”

Lygni frowned and reached toward the hearth. Sigurd tensed, but Lygni only picked up his other arm-guard. He drew it on and worked at the laces.

Sigurd stared at Lygni, not knowing what to do. In that suspended moment, as Gram dimmed, seeming to wait, Sigurd’s indecision settled to a question. “How did you know we would come? How did you know to guard the tunnel?”

Lygni almost smiled, still looking down at his laces. “That tunnel has been guarded since word came that Burgundy’s war was over. Besides, I knew you were gathering men. You never hid your intentions. And I knew you would try the tunnel. Sometime. No doubt it’s how your mother escaped. Strange thought, isn’t it? Had she not, you would have been born here.”

“And murdered at the breast?”

Lygni’s head cocked a little. “Maybe.”
Still unbalanced by Lygni’s calm and by the waiting, Sigurd returned to the one thing that was clear to him. “That could never have been. This place is not yours. It has always been mine. Always. And you will leave this world in shame for having taken it.”

“Do you think so? How would your father have died, if not for my hand? And what would you be, without it?” Lygni reached at last for his sword, drawing it slowly from the scabbard. “But, come. Let us finish this. I would see my son again, in Valhalla. And I will wait for you there, where we might know one another better.”

Sigurd stepped over the bodies at his feet. He raised Gram before him, the blade brightening, gleaming silver and gold as it caught the firelight. The sword began to whine as Sigurd and Lygni drew close. They circled one another, Sigurd staring into this face he had longed for all his life, Lygni staring back cold and determined.

At last Lygni’s face stretched to a yell and he raised his sword higher. He brought it down at Sigurd. Sigurd deflected the blow. Lygni tried to recover his stance, to raise the sword again, but he was too slow. Sigurd struck the sword from his hands. As it clattered to the floor, Lygni raised his eyes to Sigurd, stared hard as Sigurd swept Gram around again, as Gram bit through his neck. Lygni’s head toppled from his shoulders. His body fell.

Sigurd’s chest was heaving, his jaw set in a hard line. All the times he had imagined this moment. All the times he had thought of killing this man. He had never pictured this.

He cleaned Gram against Lygni’s tunic and bent to retrieve the head, grabbing it by the hair. The eyes held the same stare. Sigurd looked away from them.
He moved through the passageway, growing hot with anger. He wanted more. He did not know what more he wanted, but he knew—he felt, deep in his gut—that this was not enough.

As he emerged into the hall, he heard voices coming from another passageway. He moved toward the sound, sword already rising. Then, stumbling into the hall, came Gunnar and Hogni. Hogni. Even from the distance Sigurd could see the missing hand, the battered body. His breath caught, and a chill swept through him. He hurried across the hall.

Slowing before he reached them, shaking his head, Sigurd muttered, “Oh, my friend.”

Hogni looked at him from the slit of an eye. “It is done?”

“It is done.”

Gunnar’s face was pasty white, his lips clamped shut.

Sigurd’s hand, holding Lygni’s head, twitched. “I must…I must try to end this.”

“Go,” said Gunnar. “We will wait here.”

Sigurd nodded. He turned from them and strode for the hall door.

Sigurd stepped out onto the porch. In the moonlight, spears and swords still flashed, though the fight was slowing. It was difficult to see who was winning, difficult to know who fought for him. He raised Gram high. The sword hummed, whining louder and louder until it made his ears ache. Slowly, the fighting straggled to a stop, and all faces turned to Sigurd. He raised Lygni’s head.

“Jame Sigurd! Your king is dead! By Odin’s sword! By his will! Lay down your weapons!”
Spellbound, no one moved.

“Lay down your weapons!”

Unevenly, little by little, swords and spears, knives, axes, and shields clattered to the ground.
Conclusion

Lygni’s men had surrendered under the force of Sigurd’s sword, but decisions needed to be made: not all those men could be trusted. From dawn’s first light, Sigurd sat with his commanders in the hall. The Branstock reared above them to the high roof. It obsessed the eyes of the Danes and Burgundians. From time to time, someone’s fingers would stray towards the dark wound Odin had made with the sword Gram. But always the fingers would be snatched back before touching the rough bark or the wound. The men would shudder, lower their eyes, walk away. It was too much for them.

Sigurd was always relieved to see their hands drop. He did not know why he felt that way, but his breath would catch whenever any approached the tree. He himself had touched it, late in the night when the hall was dim and quiet. As soon as his fingers had brushed the bark, strangely warm as his mother had once said, his scalp had prickled, and the gooseflesh had risen all over his body.
As the discussions wended on, Sigurd grew impatient. There was only one just way to handle Lygni’s men. If Gunnar had been here, rather than at Hogni’s sickbed, he would caution Sigurd to wait and listen. But Sigurd was tired of that. Already, as he had sat here listening, the wary servants had cleaned the blood from the king’s chamber and washed the stained porch and road.

Sigurd raised his voice, “I will offer combat to any who desires it. One to one. They will have their chance to avenge their lord, and I will see who might stand against me.”

This brought murmurs and head shakes.

“I can tell you some not to trust,” said Tryggir, leaning forward in his chair. “They could be executed. Or exiled. Why give them opportunity?”

“Not execution,” said Sigurd. “Where is the honor in that? If they are so loyal to their lord, they deserve to die as warriors, fighting for him. I’ve no doubt many regret, even as they sit under lock and guard, that they gave up their arms. I don’t fear them.”

In the end, though the commanders were not convinced and not happy, Sigurd stared them into acceptance.

Several of Lygni’s men took the offer of combat, most of them thanes and relatives. One by one, Sigurd killed them in the training yard, under the eyes of his new men. This method did work some good. Those who came forward to fight might have been dangerous in exile, if they were willing to die for revenge. Of Lygni’s other men, as the reports of Sigurd’s victories followed each fight, many came to respect him, both for his might and his justice. Those who swore oaths to him were freed. Some of them, dishonest or cunning, tried to flee the fortress or to kill Sigurd when opportunity came.
Such men died in great pain. Their ruined bodies were displayed to speak a warning until they began to stink.

Also in these first days were the funerals. When it came time to burn Gar, Sigurd stood by the pyre, the torch flaming in his hand. Gar’s face, bruised from battle, had the blue tinge of death. But despite his bruises, no further wound had been found on his body when they had washed it. That first wound had killed him; he had just made it wait awhile. It had been a good death, Sigurd told himself. And yet, when he had found Gar’s body that first night, crumpled at the foot of the stone steps, guilt had seized him, and it squeezed him still. He had not seen Gar fall, had not known his last moment. When he finally thrust the torch into the tinder, as the people grew restless behind him, he hardened his jaw. As Gar had said, it had been his choice.

The dead were celebrated with what feasting the fortress could offer. In the hall, pigs roasting on the spits, the men drank to the fallen. They spoke of days past and days to come. They hailed their new lord.

“Well, Sigurd,” said Freod, settling into a chair beside him, “Gar was a good man. I wasn’t always patient with him. He was, after all, arrogant. And obnoxious.” Freod’s affectionate smile faded. “But he was a true warrior.”

Sigurd raised his mead-horn with Freod. He drank deeply, though he barely tasted the spiced honey. Turning the gilded horn in his hand, he looked blindly at its intricate design. “Death is different, isn’t it, when it’s a friend?”

“You must banish such thoughts. He was a good man. Leave it there.”

Sigurd looked up to Freod. “I’m glad, at least, not to be drinking to your death. I thought you had fallen, when you didn’t come over the wall.”
Freod’s cheeks, already flushed with mead, reddened further. “Must you remind me of that? How will I live down the shame? To go back,” he said in disgust, “like a child.”

“I thank Odin for that turn. I have need of you, now more than ever. I need your wisdom. I need your help. There is so much to do. I—” He broke off, shaking his head.

“You’ll rule well, Sigurd.” Freod’s voice softened and he lowered it so only Sigurd could hear, “You’ll be fine.”

Sigurd’s head jerked up. “You don’t mean you would leave me?”

“No! You know I would stay with you. All these good Danes will. Look at young Biarni. He can hardly breathe for being across the hearth from you. Do you think he would return to Denmark? You have good men here, and they’ll not abandon you. No king ever ruled alone, despite how things may look.”

Embarrassed by Freod’s comforting words, Sigurd hid behind his mead-horn. Then he set it down too hard and rose roughly from his chair. “Gunnar still crouches at Hogni’s side. I must draw him away, for his own good.”

Freod shut him mouth on something and nodded. “He worries for his brother.”

“Yes, but the physician says Hogni will live. Gunnar should not be so downcast.”

“But without his hand…”

Sigurd looked a challenge at Freod. “Tyr lost his sword hand, and he is yet the god of war.”

“But everyone can live up to the gods, Sigurd. Do not be surprised if Hogni despairs. That is why Gunnar worries.”
“Hogni is strong. Gunnar has never realized how much so. He will see now. Hogni will show him.”

Freod inclined his head, though doubt lingered on his face.

Sigurd wound through the hall, stopping when men called his name, speaking with them when they approached, finding things to say of their bravery, nodding his thanks as they praised his. When he finally reached the passageway, he sped on before any could call him back.

As he neared the chamber, a girl emerged from it. She looked to be fourteen and had the shy look of all the servants. Gunnar’s servants never looked like this, nor did Aelf’s, at least not that Sigurd could remember. Perhaps Lygni had been a hard master. Perhaps they feared an uncertain future. Sigurd stopped the girl with a question.

“How does he fare?”

She lowered her eyes. “He sleeps now, my lord, though he burns hot. I have only brought broth and wine, as the physician commanded.”

“How does he fare?” said Sigurd awkwardly and moved past her. She hurried away. As Sigurd reached for the door, he felt a twinge of guilt. Perhaps he should have asked her name. Gunnar always seemed to know the names of his servants. But it was too late now. Maybe next time.

Sigurd eased the door open. Only the hearth burned, making a blaze of light in the middle of the room, leaving the edges dark. The sharp smell of poultices hung in the air. The physician, a small, tough old man, nodded to Sigurd from his corner seat. Gunnar sat on a stool, hunching to the edge of the bed, his head hanging low. Hogni lay unmoving
under the blankets, though his sword arm, its end thick with bandages, lay above. His cheeks were red with fever, his face and neck shiny with sweat.

Gunnar’s head jerked up when Sigurd crossed the floor. He watched Sigurd through pinched and bleary eyes.

Sigurd sat on the heavy wooden chest at the foot of the bed. “Will you not come to the hall? Your Burgundians look for you.”

Gunnar’s face turned to the bed again. “You speak to them.”

Sigurd glanced at Hogni then back to Gunnar. “You can do nothing for him. The physician will tend him. Come to the feast. You must honor the dead.”

Gunnar was muttering something inaudible. When his words came clear, they were, “If I had known…if I had known.” His eyes squeezed shut. “What wouldn’t I give for the gift of foresight?”

“You would not have come?”

Gunnar shrugged.

Sigurd hesitated, then said, “This is the price of war sometimes.”

Gunnar’s head snapped up. “Do not lecture me! When you are not the one who’s paid!”

“I will, in the end. All men do.”

“How could you? When Odin shields you at every turn? When the Norns themselves conspire to give you everything?”

Hogni stirred on the bed, murmuring. Sigurd and Gunnar both looked to him, their breath caught. When Hogni fell still again, Gunnar sighed. He stared at his hands, rolling the edge of the blanket between his fingers.
“I’m sorry, Sigurd. I didn’t mean that.”

“I think you did. But it’s all right, Gunnar. There is some truth in your words. But you know I would pay the price. You know that.”

“And how would you feel when you rose from your bed weeks later, your sword-arm ruined, all your ambitions for yourself destroyed? How would you feel about your brother, who had led you to that?”

“It is not your fault, Gunnar, and if you would stir yourself from your misery for one moment, you would see that. Hogni is no child to sit among the women. He is no farmer to walk behind a plow. He is a warrior.”

Gunnar’s jaw was tight. “He was. And what will he be now?”

“He will be the same. If you would but see him as he is, you would know that. He is not your shadow, Gunnar. He is his own man.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Only that you should give him a chance to prove his resilience. I’ve fought at his side, trained with him for years, hunted with him through the woods of Burgundy. I love him also. You will smother him with your fear.”

Gunnar shook his head, rubbed hard at his face. “I was not prepared for this. I did not think of him. I thought only of myself. What kind of king am I, to do that? What kind of man?”

“You are my brother and my friend. I trust you as I trust no other. And when I die, I want no one else at my side.”
With a grimace, Gunnar rose from his stool. Sigurd stood from the chest. He embraced Gunnar hard, then drew back from him. “Now will you come out of this room?”

Gunnar looked back to the bed, his eyes on Hogni’s flushed face.

The physician spoke from his corner, startling them both. “Sire, I assure you I will send word if there is any change.”

Finally, Gunnar nodded. “All right. Thank you, Dusi.” He followed Sigurd from the room.

The funeral feast went long into the night. Mead-horns and cups were raised again and again, and the roasted pigs were shaved to bone. In the deepest hours, Sigurd led the men in the battle-dance. Those too injured to dance beat weapons against their shields, singing for the dead, while the others leaped among the upturned spears. When Sigurd drew off his tunic for the dance, Freod frowned at the bandages on his arm and shoulder and said perhaps he should not participate. Sigurd only laughed and shook off his boots.

Tilting his head to see better, Biarni asked, “What are those scars from?” He squinted at the pale, ragged, curving stripes around Sigurd’s side. “Why, they look like claw marks!”

Sigurd’s eyes flicked to Gunnar, as they always did when someone asked this question. He gave Biarni the same answer he had given others: “I got these from asking too many questions that were none of my business.” The hard look that followed drove Biarni to silence. He would not ask again; no one ever had.

When the men at last dispersed to their beds and pallets, Sigurd withdrew to the king’s chamber. He could still see fine lines of blood in the space between floor stones,
despite the repeated scrubblings. Other signs of Lygni had been more easily removed. All of Lygni’s clothes were gone. These Sigurd had gifted to his warriors, along with many of the rings, weapons, armor, and jewelry found in the treasury or taken from Lygni’s dead.

He went to the window and leaned out. He could see the ocean from here; this chamber lay at the back of the hall, looking out over the wall. The moon was down and the waves black, barely discernable under the stars. But he could hear them, far below, beating against the bluff. How often had his father stood here, leaning on this window ledge? He could not get over the strangeness of being in this place. All his life, his father had been a story, not quite real. And yet he had lived here, stood at this window, slept in this bed.

Some of the servants were old enough to have served his father, and they had helped him to identify his father’s belongings. A few pieces of Sigmund’s armor stood in the corner. A tooled belt, its design softened by age and oil, lay on the table. When he had found a pair of lady’s brooches in the chamber and had shown them to one of the old servants, the man said they had belonged to Lygni’s wife before she died. But before that, the man added, his eyes drifting back with memory, he had seen them on Queen Hiordis. The brooches lay now with Sigmund’s belongings. He would give them back to his mother when she came for the king-making ceremony.

At last, Sigurd undressed and lay in his father’s bed. He still could not get comfortable here. It was strange enough to imagine his father sleeping in this spot. When he thought of Lygni here also, he would rise from the bed, restless. As soon as there was opportunity, he would have a new mattress brought in. But there were more important
things to think about now. He lay awake, thinking of those things until the night bled pale and the sun crept over the horizon.

* * *

Summer was waning before the king-making ceremony was held. Gunnar had advised Sigurd to wait until things settled, to give the people a chance to accept him. Freod and Tryggir, though surprised by the suggestion, had agreed it couldn’t hurt. And so Sigurd had ridden out on Greyfell, his men behind him, day after day, to speak with the people. The farmers and townsfolk had been wary at first, shocked by the sudden change in kingship. After all, there had been no war.

Guided by Gunnar, Sigurd had asked after their livelihoods. He listened to disputes and complaints, these spoken only after great hesitation and with much discomfort. He was a stranger to these people, and they did not yet know his tolerances and attitudes. He resolved what issues he could and promised to deal with others in the future. No one objected to his decisions. Sigurd also helped where possible, repairing a fence, ordering his men to smooth out a street or to pull a wagon from the mud. He had helped with such things in Burgundy, for that was Gunnar’s way, but he found it awkward to order them done or to speak directly to farmers and merchants. Sometimes Gunnar would step in, and the farmer or merchant would turn to Gunnar with relief, speaking more freely.

Over the weeks, the people settled back to their routines. There were still crops and animals to tend, whoever was king. They no longer froze like hunted deer, heads
bowed stiffly, when Sigurd rode by. Many even began to nod with ease and respect when they saw him.

Within the fortress and the hall things were more complicated. Tryggir told Sigurd what the men were accustomed to, how Lygni had managed the place. Tryggir spoke of training and supplies, horses, winter stores, craftsmen, potential enemies, potential allies, improved defenses, and trade routes. Sigurd looked on the men in the training yard with envy. One day, as he drifted near, thinking to join them, he was called back to deal with a surprised looking traveling skald. The man had come to the court expecting to beg audience with Lygni and shifted uneasily before Sigurd.

Finally, the day of the ceremony drew near. Late one afternoon, as Sigurd was riding along the edge of the farmland with his men, the coastguard came galloping toward him. A Danish ship was approaching the harbor. Sigurd grimaced and turned his men to the town.

He was waiting on the dock when Hiordis and Aelf appeared at the bow of the ship. As the ship drew alongside the dock and Hiordis stepped out, the harsh lines of her face dissolved into a wide smile.

“Here you are,” she said, leaning toward him.

He embraced her. “It is done.”

She stepped back from him and looked up to the fortress. “Somehow, I never quite expected to return to this place. It looks…much the same.”

Aelf stepped forward, extending his hand. Sigurd clasped it. “I must admit some surprise,” said Aelf, then added grudgingly, “Well done, Sigurd.”
Sigurd looked hard at Aelf. “Odin spared me some men, or it would not have been possible. Not with so few.”

Aelf smiled tightly. “Then Odin be praised.”

On the day of the king-making, Sigurd found Hiordis in her chamber, sitting on a stool while her women braided her hair.

“You look as fine as ever your father did,” she said, admiring his embroidered tunic and the torque around his neck.

“I’ve brought you something.” Sigurd held out the pair of brooches.

Hiordis’s breath caught when she saw them. She rose from her stool, her hair pulling from the hands of her women as she reached for the heavy gold ornaments.

“Where—how—oh, Sigurd!”

“You remember them?”

She rubbed her thumbs over the horse and wolf patterns. When she looked up her eyes were filled with tears. “Your father gave these to me. On our wedding.” She clasped them to her breast. “Thank you. Thank you, son of Sigmund.”

Sigurd’s scalp prickled. She had never called him that. He swallowed hard. “I’ll leave you to prepare.” He kissed her cheek. “You look beautiful, mother.”

* * * *

The ceremony took place in a grove, sacred to the gods, down the hill from the fortress. The trees ringing the grassy clearing were old and wizened. Their branches mingled high above to close the ring, and the sun flooded in from their center. An altar
stone stood in the middle of this light. On the altar had been laid the blood-bowl, the blood-twig, the knife, and the arm-ring of the king.

Only the highest ranks came into the grove for the ceremony. Everyone else waited beyond, along the road that lay beside the wood, stretching all the way to the fortress. Those within the grove stood silent in their fine clothes, a hush over them as Sigurd stepped to the altar. Gripping the arm-ring, he swore his oaths of kingship, speaking the formal words in a carrying voice. Then, one by one, the men knelt before him, laying their hands on the arm-ring, pledging themselves.

When the young bull and the rams were brought forward, Sigurd took up the knife. He cut each throat, catching the blood in the bowl. Dipping the twig, he flicked the blood over the people and the altar, over himself and onto the trees, sealing the oaths and his kingship.

At last, Sigurd led the gathered company from the grove. His mother walked at his side, Aelf at hers, his most trusted men—Freod, Tryggir, Gunnar, and Hogni, still weak and pale but refusing to miss the ceremony—behind him. Sigurd had not wanted Gunnar to walk there. It wasn’t right, he had said. Gunnar, too, was a king, and he should not walk behind like one of Sigurd’s men. Gunnar had brushed this away. How many times, he had argued, had Sigurd walked behind him?

When the company emerged from the wood, the waiting people cheered and clapped their hands. Sigurd did not know if they were truly glad or if their smiles came more in anticipation of the feast they would share. He still did not trust them.

Sigurd led the procession to the fortress, through the wide gates of the palisade, and to the hall. Tables stood in the training yard, where the people of the town would eat.
Already baskets of bread, casks of watered wine, and platters of vegetables stood on the tables. The smells of roasting meat drifted from the open doors of the hall and from the cooking fires at the yard’s edge. Skadi let out his falcon cry from the roof’s peak as Sigurd passed into the hall.

The feasting was loud and long. Sigurd sat under the Branstock, the men ringing out from him, and listened to the skald. One story he did not expect. The skald called for silence, then thumbed his six-stringed harp.

It was not the first song of Sigurd he had sung that night, but it was the first that told of the dragon. He sang of Fafnir’s attack on the Rhine, of the fear that gripped men when the dragon swooped near, of Sigurd standing to face him, of the claw that Sigurd struck from Fafnir’s scaly grip. He sang of the dragon’s scream and of its flight over the hills.

When the song ended, the men and women in the hall raised a shout of praise. Sigurd sat unmoving, staring at the skald, whose smile was faltering.

“How do you know this story?” asked Sigurd, caught between amazement and suspicion.

Hogni leaned toward him, wincing at the shift of his arm. “I told him, Sigurd. I asked him to make it a song. It’s good, don’t you think? Considering he only had two days to work on it.”

“Yes,” Sigurd decided. “It’s good.” He nodded to the skald, and the man breathed relief.

Hogni smiled at Sigurd, a weak smile that strained his grey, pinched face. Sigurd gripped Hogni’s knee to thank him for his strength and fortitude.
Sigurd tired of the feasting and the company long before he could leave it. In Burgundy, he had always been able to escape when he wanted; sometimes he had skipped the feasts altogether. It wore on him, the smiling, the idle conversation.

At last, when the moon was falling in the west, Sigurd took his leave. He paused at his chamber door but walked on. He eased open a different door, one that led onto the stone porch and out to the wall. With a sigh of relief he passed into the cool night air.

He sat on the stone wall, one leg pulled under him, and looked across the sea. Even from low in the west the full moon cast a golden light on the waves. He tried to think of nothing, to only see the sea’s gilding, to feel the pulse of the ocean.

He was stirred from his stillness when something moved through the air, a dark shape. For the briefest moment, he thought: Fafnir. But then he could see what it was. A raven. And it was not alone. The world seemed to fall away as he followed the flight of the two birds, sensing more than seeing them. They swept toward the wall, winging toward a figure Sigurd had not noticed. He leaped to his feet. Odin stepped toward him as the ravens settled on his shoulders. Sigurd fell to his knees, head bowed. “You gave me my kingdom. Thank you.”

A heavy hand touched his shoulder, and the deep voice rumbled out above him, “I did not give it to you. I would not do that. I only helped a little.”

Sigurd nodded to accept this and rose as the weight of Odin’s hand lifted. He stood beside Odin then, looking out with him over the wall.

After a time, Odin said, “Something troubles you.”
Sigurd shook his head, not in denial but in dismay. It took him a while to find the words, to admit them. “It’s not me,” he said, gesturing behind him. “This. I can tell already.”

Odin’s face was unreadable, the closed eyelid like the earth’s surface, saying that nothing and everything lay beneath. When he spoke his voice was graver than usual, “Your father wanted nothing but his kingdom. He was king in the deepest way. But you. You are not like him, for all that it may seem so to others.”

Sigurd bowed his head, shame flooding from his heart all the way to his limbs. He had suspected this.

“You, I believe,” Odin went on, “are more like my son.”

Odin’s words were too huge for Sigurd to take in. They swirled around him as his eyes burned out across the dark sea. He shook his head. “I feel…that there are things beyond this. Things greater.”

“You speak of the dragon.”

Sigurd’s heart leaped at the word. “Is it wrong?”

“In what sense?”

Sigurd blew out his cheeks, shaking his head again. “I don’t know.”

Odin said slowly, seeming to draw the words for some deep place, “Even I do not know all things. It is you who must become what you are. Then you can show me.”

The night waned. The moon was swallowed in the west, and utter dark fell over the sea. Sigurd did not know when Odin left him. He stood there until dawn, until the light returned, watching for the horizon to show him, once again, the world’s edge.

END


