

VIKING SAGA



MARK COAKLEY

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Translated By Mark Coakley

70,000 words

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Translator's Note

Written in Old Norse by an unknown Icelandic author in the 14th century, Viking Saga describes events that supposedly occurred many centuries earlier, starting in the year 792.

Although many of the events described in Viking Saga are mentioned in other Norse sagas (i.e. Snorri Sturulson's Lives of the Kings of Norway) or have been confirmed by archaeology, there persists an academic debate as to how much, if any, of Viking Saga is historical fact. The debate began in 1837, when Professor Bethel of Oxford first translated Viking Saga into English, making it accessible to a world-wide audience for the first time. In the opinion of this translator, Viking Saga accurately reflects Norway's earliest history, though certain elements (i.e. scenes dealing with magic and the supernatural) are probably fictional. Regardless, most readers are less interested in its historical precision than its old-fashioned literary value.

In that respect, there is simply no debate. Viking Saga is an astonishing and great work of art, crammed with exciting scenes and descriptions of lyrical beauty, along with flashes of authentic folk-wisdom and exquisite comedy. Although not as famous as the so-called "classic" sagas (such as Njal's Saga, Egil's Saga and The Saga of the Volsungs), Viking Saga is an outstanding example of medieval story-telling. It is my personal favourite, and deserves a much wider audience.

I am honoured to translate this work for contemporary readers; the last English translation was made back in 1933, by Professor Winsome of the University of Los Angeles. Now it is time to introduce Halfdan the Black and his world to a new generation. I would like to thank the publishers, and my secretary, and of course my family, for their patience during the lengthy process of translation.

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1: PARENTAGE

There was a man called Halfdan the Black, who lived and died long ago, when the folk of Norway were still ruled by many small kingdoms, and folk still followed the old customs, believing in Odin, Tor, Freya and other old gods. Halfdan grew up in the small farming-town of Os, in the kingdom of Fjordane. He was fathered by Gødrød the Toothy and mothered by an outlander woman called Aasa.

As a young man, Gødrød had killed a few other local young men, for no reason other than boredom; as punishment for these wrongs, the Fjordane Assembly had sentenced Gødrød to three years as an outlaw. Forced into exile, Gødrød rode east across the mountains. After twelve years in the east -- when nobody in Os knew if he was still alive, and few even thought about him much anymore -- Gødrød had returned home with a surprising woman.

Aasa had very dark skin. Nobody in Os could remember ever seeing a person like her before. Aasa's hair was completely black, tightly curled, and formed a soft ball around her head. She said that she was from Nubia, a place far to the south that nobody here had ever heard of. All of the gossip-loving folk in Os wanted to know their story. How had they met? Briefly, this is what happened. Aasa's first husband had travelled with Aasa from Nubia to Constantinople, where he was a diplomat to the Roman Empress. Gødrød had also lived in Constantinople then. He had learned to speak Greek and to pretend to worship Christ; these qualities, and his skill with spear and ax, had earned him a job in Constantinople as a bodyguard for the Empress Irene. Gødrød and Aasa were often at the palace at the same time. Aasa's odd-looking and darkly beautiful face -- so different from Roman women, and from the pale and pointy-nosed girls he remembered from Os -- appealed to him. He spied on her, learning that Aasa was lonely and that her husband preferred boys. When Gødrød approached her, Aasa agreed.

They kept their love secret from everybody in Constantinople.

Until, long later, she became pregnant. Gødrød and Aasa knew that it would be impossible to hide her unfaithfulness when her belly started to bulge, as Aasa's first husband had not touched her in a long time. So Gødrød and Aasa stole as many treasures from the Empress and from Aasa's first husband as they could quickly get their hands on, fleeing Constantinople on horseback by night, to the west. Gødrød had spent the early years of his exile in Russia, and was able arrange a wedding in a Russian Christian church. The fugitives continued west on horseback, her belly growing bigger and bigger. After many adventures, including losing their horses and treasure to bandits in Lithuania, Gødrød guided his huge-bellied wife over Norway's eastern mountains and into the kingdom of Fjordane and to his home-town of Os.

There was born the hero of this saga.

Aasa became very sick in the long, dark winter of Halfdan's second year. She coughed and coughed. When her coughing finally ended, she was placed in the communal grave near Os.

Gødrød, able to bear his sadness only with strong mead, drank and drank. When his drinking finally ended, he was held in chains for manslaughter, and could not remember why he had axed two of his friends to shreds during a drinking-fest in a mountainside shepherd's hut. As Gødrød was too poor to afford to pay compensation to

the families of the victims, the Fjordane Assembly outlawed him again, this time for seven years.

Before his second exile, Gødrød placed his son in the foster-care of Gødrød's sister and brother-in-law.

Gødrød rode again to the east, across the mountains, never to return. He plays no more part in this saga. Nobody knows what happened to him.

2: HALFDAN INTRODUCED

Halfdan was a difficult child to raise. He spoke little, and his few words were usually rude. He delighted in disobeying rules and fighting.

His odd looks always attracted attention. Nobody in Fjordane had ever seen folk with Aasa's and Halfdan's curly hair and skin much darker than theirs. (In Os, visiting Swedes were rare, Danes and Finns were seen as wildly exotic, and only a few had heard of King Charlemagne.)

Often, folk would think that Halfdan had been covered with paint as a prank. More than once, when Halfdan was a young child, an adult grabbed him to rub snow or water on Halfdan's skin, trying to wipe off the brown paint.

He was soon nicknamed "Halfdan the Black," for the obvious reason, and also because the word "black" in Old Norse also meant "wicked". Folk in Os said, "He is going to grow up to be a blood-stained criminal like his father."

But as Halfdan grew into a young man, his Uncle Harald taught him to use his anger and violence for good ends. Halfdan grew a passion for listening to and composing spontaneous poetry. He would often laze away long winter nights by the fire, making up poems in his head. Even when very young, he would use that oldest of arts to express the feelings swirling inside his orphaned heart. When Halfdan chanted one of his rhyming and alliterating poems, to a family-member or one of his few friends, Halfdan's heart would sometimes empty of its fury and pain, for a while.

Uncle Harald told him to forget about becoming a farmer or shepherd or fisherman. Halfdan was told to try to become a professional fighter for the King of Fjordane, "so that instead of pointlessly killing folk around here and being exiled for it like your father, you can kill folk for the government and be a famous hero."

3: A FULL BLADDER

Halfdan the Black stepped out of King Lambi's hall. It was night. He had to piss. On the flat-stone path in front of him, a few guard-dogs were lying together. One dog was now sniffing at the early-fall wind. The dogs knew Halfdan's smell and ignored him. Halfdan turned and walked towards a row of out-houses on the east side of the big building. The hall was a hulking rectangle of oak boards nailed to thick oak beams holding up a high roof. The hall was the biggest building in the town of Eid, which was the biggest town in the kingdom of Fjordane. It stood aloof from Eid's other buildings. Its sloping roof was covered with tall clumps of grass and dying, droopy summer-flowers. It was surrounded by rich soil farmed by King Lambi.

Halfdan was now twenty-seven years old, and had lived in the hall as one of the King's fighters for eleven years. His face and body were covered with scars. His black hair hung in tangled curls from the top of his head; it was cut short, almost to the skin, on the back and sides of his head. In his hair and thick beard, there were a few thin strands of grey. He had one chipped front tooth. As was then customary in Norway on festive or formal occasions, for both men and women, Halfdan had smeared blue paint around both of his eyes.

A "T"-shaped Tor-idol of clay hung from a string around his muscle-thick neck. He wore a long-sleeved grey linen shirt that hung almost to his knees, tied at his waist by a belt of reindeer-leather. The belt-buckle was made of silver, twisted into the shape of a bug-eyed, cat-like beast with hands that gripped itself. A sword dangled from the belt, its oiled iron blade hiding in a sheath of cloth-wrapped oak-wood.

The well-used weapon swung forward and back beside the wool cloth of his right pant-leg as he walked.

A bit drunk, from a long night of feasting and boozing with visitors from the neighbouring kingdoms of Sogn and Førde, Halfdan looked up at the brooding snow-topped mountain-range overhead, and at the clear sky filled with sharp silver stars and a honey-yellow moon. Halfdan stopped walking, staring up. He lifted a hand as if to reach up and pull down some of the glittering stars.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

Halfdan walked past a row of carved and painted masks of the gods hanging on the outside hall-wall, the grimacing faces of Odin, Tor, Freyir, Baldur, Loki and others; some of whose names are now forgotten. Halfdan went to the corner of the hall and turned left again and went fast towards a row of woven-wicker huts down-wind of the hall. To his right and across a grassy space was the high wooden wall that surrounded Eid. On the other side of the town-wall was a ragged line of shadowy trees that stretched up the dark mountain-face.

Halfdan went in an out-house. A smell of beery piss and puke rose from the hole in the ground by his cow-leather shoes. He yawned and aimed himself and soon felt better.

As he was walking back towards the hall's front door, Halfdan again noticed the guard-dogs on the path of flat stones that led towards the rest of the town.

The dogs were now eating something. Halfdan was surprised. Before his piss, the dogs had been resting on the ground and one had been sniffing the night-wind.

Where had the food come from?

Halfdan, suspicious, stopped walking.

He was staring at the dogs and about to go over to them to see what they were eating when something hit him in the lower part of his belly. It hit him hard and punched his breath out.

Halfdan gasped and looked down. A wood arrow-shaft with grey guide-feathers was now sticking straight out of his belly.

He gasped, "Tor!"

His legs went weak and he fell backwards. He landed on his back on the cold lumpy ground. Arrow-shot in the gut. He knew he was dying. A bad way to end. It would be painful and slow.

4: THE HALL

As Halfdan lay stunned on the bumpy, grassy ground -- preparing himself to die for a reason he did not know, the pain of the arrow reaching deeper and deeper into his guts -- he turned his head sideways to look at the shadowy outer wall of King Lambi's hall.

This place had been the center of his life, ever since leaving the small, dull town of Os at sixteen. The first time Halfdan had seen the building from the outside, its size and solid construction had greatly impressed him. And the first day he had seen it from the inside, escorted there (when it was empty) by his nervous-looking Uncle Harald, Halfdan's mouth had dropped open in amazement. "Tor!" Halfdan had never seen a place like it before.

It had seemed to be a single large room (though he learned later that the King and his Queens had a separate sleeping-room at the back). The room was so big! Halfdan had known entire families in Os who had fed themselves on farmland smaller than this! Some parts of the wood walls were undecorated, with bronze shield-hooks. Elsewhere, brightly-coloured wool tapestries hung on the walls, showing vivid scenes of men and gods feasting and in battle. Furs hung on the walls too: the grey skins of wolves, the larger brown skins of reindeer and moose and boar-pig, and the huge yellow-white pelts of the legendary northern bear. The bestial faces of these hunting-trophies snarled at the high ceiling.

Halfdan saw other faces too: there were small shelves on the thick oak beams holding up the roof, and on each shelf was resting the dried head of a man. Some looked like they had sat there for a long time. Messy, brittle-looking hair and beards dangled from the wrinkled, shrivelled grey skin of the lifeless and grimacing heads. Swollen blackish eyes bulged out of some heads; the eye-lids of others squinted or were completely shut. The top of each head was gone, and Halfdan could see the unlit tips of candles sticking up from the inside of each skull.

A single long fireplace stretched from one end of the hall to the other. Two rows of long tables went along both sides of the fireplace; dozens of chairs were stacked by the long inner walls. At the far end of the room was a raised platform, which held up a table running perpendicular to the rest, with tall, fancily-painted chairs behind it. In front of this king-table stood a bronze idol of a boar-pig, the size of a real boar-pig, that glittered faintly in the sunlight beaming in through small, high windows.

Straw and wildflowers were strewn across the dirt floor, giving off a nice, fresh smell.

Uncle Harald said, "When Lambi is in town, there are lots of folk hanging around in the evening here. The King and his fighters, the Queens and their serving-girls, local nobles, clerks, poets and too many slaves to count."

Harald had known this because, long before this time, he had once enjoyed a victory-feast here, as a reward from the previous king for brave military service in the Third Great Swedish War.

"When will King Lambi come back to Eid?" Halfdan asked.

Harald said, "Whenever he finishes visiting his other properties around the kingdom. He owns more farms than anybody else, all along the fjord, and he likes to

check each of them regularly, to get some dirt on his hands and keep his local managers honest. And the business of ruling also pulls him all over the kingdom: taking gifts of silver from some nobles to keep them from getting too rich, giving silver to other nobles to keep them from getting too ambitious, and hearing reports from his spies. When he is done all that, he will be back."

"And then he will accept me as one of his fighters?"

Harald said, "He should. It has been arranged. My bag of silver-bits will get you in. But as I told you, getting accepted is not the hard part. Once you are in the hall, you have to prove yourself, or you'll be sent away."

"I will prove myself. No matter what I have to do."

"I know you will," Harald said. "You're good with a weapon and even better with a poem, and that's what Lambi looks for in a man." Harald placed a hand on Halfdan's shoulder. "You were born with strong luck. We are proud of the man you have become. Fate has something special planned for you."

A few days later, the king-ship had returned to the Eid docks, and things had gone as Harald had predicted. A clerk had taken the bag of silver, in front of witnesses. Harald and Halfdan had been told to report to the hall that night.

When darkness finally came, and Halfdan (wearing new clothes, and with fresh blue paint smeared around his eyes) went inside the hall for the second time, it was full of many different kinds of folk, as his uncle had described. Dozens of shields hung from the walls behind the tables. The candles sticking out of the man-heads on the shelves were burning and they, along with the cooking-fire in the middle of the room, filled the room with warm orange light. Many shaven-headed slaves were cleaning up after dinner or carrying beer buckets from table to table. The air smelled of male bodies and roasted meat. Men sat at tables in front of clay plates covered with bones and other dinner-waste. These men held silver-decorated drinking-horns and were talking and laughing until the two visitors from Os walked in. Then, all went quiet. Everybody stared at Halfdan. Usually he did not mind being stared at; he was used to it; most folk in Os had always viewed him as a freak. But now the staring eyes of this crowd of big-town folk made him more nervous.

On the raised platform at the far end of the hall, a man was sitting on the highest chair in the middle of the table. Unlike at the other tables, a few finely-dressed women were sitting up here. When the man in the middle of this table stood, Halfdan knew that this had to be King Lambi. The man was tall and thick-shouldered and fifty-seven years old.

Halfdan stopped and stared.

"Come," Harald said. "This is not a time to be timid."

As he walked with his uncle deeper into the hall, between the long tables towards the far end, Halfdan saw more of the man who many poets called the strongest and the wisest of all Norse kings.

Purple paint circled each of King Lambi's eyes. His beard and hair were thick and yellow, with some grey twisting through his long, braided beard. The king wore a full-length gown of shiny red silk -- a magic kind of imported cloth that only a king or the richest of nobles could afford. King Lambi's belt, glittering with bits of honey-yellow amber, held a sword that was almost as long as his leg. The sword-handle was of plain, well-used leather; it had obviously been chosen less for display than for use.

King Lambi then spoke, in a booming deep voice, saying, "Is this the boy who wants to fight for me?"

Harald said, "Yes, my lord. This is my nephew, Halfdan son of Gødrød, and he is the best young fighter in the town of Os. He will serve you well."

King Lambi said, "Why is your nephew's face so black?"

Harald said, "His mother was an outlander, and passed on her looks to him."

"Can it even speak Norse?"

"He can, my lord. Perfectly. In fact, he is an excellent poet."

King Lambi leaned forward and placed both of his fists on the table-top and said to Halfdan, "Then tell me a poem, troll-faced boy. Make one up about why I should hire you."

Harald glanced at Halfdan, taking a step backwards.

After a long pause, Halfdan said:

My lord is famous for
Feeding crows with unlucky foes
Blood-steaming battlefields
Gave birth to your worthy rule

All have heard of your riches
How you spread it around
Your fighters wear fancy clothes
With such fine treats to eat

Halfdan gestured with one hand towards the feasting-tables surrounding him, and there was some laughter from the men sitting in the chairs.

More confident, Halfdan glared at King Lambi and shouted:

Since youth I yearned to serve
You, and join your war-ship's crew!
I knew that I needed
To serve you, or serve nothing!

After a pause, Halfdan said lamely, "The end."

There was some clapping, and a few hoots. The men at the tables had all heard better poems, but also many much worse. Most were impressed to hear it from someone so young and so odd-looking.

King Lambi was still standing behind his table on the platform. He seemed to be nodding slightly in approval. Finally he said, "If you can fight as well as you rhyme and alliterate, you may be worthy. Come back tomorrow at noon, alone."

Halfdan walked out of the hall with a big grin across his face.

The next day, again wearing newly-bought clothes and fresh blue paint smeared around his eyes, Halfdan showed up at the hall for the hall-joining ritual. The king and some others waited for him outside the hall, standing in a group on a field. They all wore fancy clothes and face-paint too. King Lambi was wearing a long white linen gown.

A grey stallion was tied to a stake in the ground.

King Lambi said, "Halfdan son of Gødrød. Kneel in front of the horse."

When Halfdan had done so, King Lambi said, "Do you choose to join my bodyguard, knowing that you can never leave my service, except by your death or by my command?"

"I do," Halfdan said.

He was distracted for moment by the buzzing sound of a hornet flying past his head, then he forced himself to concentrate on what the king was saying.

"Do you vow to protect me from all foes, both inside and outside Fjordane?"

"Yes."

"If I am struck down, do you vow to take revenge on my killer, even if he is of your family?"

"I do."

"And will you accept the greatest suffering and the greatest shame known to man or gods, if you should ever break your vows made here today?"

"I do."

King Lambi said, "Then let us see if the gods approve." A man in priests' clothing gave King Lambi a wide, bronze-bladed knife. King Lambi held the horse's head with one hand and, with the other, cut its throat.

As Halfdan knelt in front of the startled beast, the hurt sprayed and drenched him in hot, sticky blood. It went onto his eyes and blinded him. He had to hold his breath to keep the reeking gore out of his nose.

A low, bubbling groan from the dying horse. It reared up to its back legs. It raised its big front hooves and started kicking wildly over the blood-soaked head of the unmoving young man kneeling on red-drenched grass.

Halfdan did not flinch. His knew that his good luck would not let him be struck by any of the random hoof-swipes, and he was right.

When the horse stopped kicking, and fell down dead, the group of men cheered.

"The gods approve!" shouted the priest who had brought the knife.

"Stand up, Halfdan the Black," King Lambi said. "Get yourself cleaned up. Your new life starts now."

Halfdan finally allowed himself to move; he stood. A slave handed him a bucket of water, then put a big wood box at his feet. Halfdan took off all his bloody clothes and washed his body clean with a cloth dipped in the bucket. When the last of the horse-blood was off him, Halfdan opened the lid of the box. He saw with joy that it was full of fancy-looking new clothes. Fine wool pants and thick wool socks and a puffy-sleeved white shirt made of the same linen as the gown King Lambi now wore. In the box there was also a pair of shiny cow-leather shoes and a pig-leather belt. On one end of the belt was a silver belt-buckle shaped, as described earlier, like an unnatural-looking beast with gripping hands.

"My first gift to you," King Lambi had said.

That night in the hall, Halfdan drank horn after horn of mead and beer, feasted on horse-steak and listened awe-struck to King Lambi singing sad old songs and playing a silver harp.

5: RUNNING AWAY

Eleven years later -- lying on his back on the cold ground in the shadow of King Lambi's hall, not far from where he had undergone the joining-ritual -- Halfdan realized that he was not dying from the arrow after all. He was getting his breath back, and the pain in his gut was getting less strong. Arrow-shots to the belly were known to be extremely painful, not like this. Such hurts were usually accompanied by the smell of shit leaking from a torn-open large intestine. There was no shit-smell now.

Then what had happened?

Halfdan moved a hand to the arrow-shaft and touched it. No jolt of pain. He touched the thin piece of ash-wood with his hand and tried to move it. It was stuck solidly into something, but not him.

He raised his head to look. The belt-buckle. The arrow had stuck into the soft silver of his belt-buckle -- the long-ago gift from King Lambi. It had saved his life. The barbed iron tip of the arrow had stuck into one of the paws of the decorative beast-shape.

So lucky!

He yanked the arrow-tip out of the belt buckle and glanced at it. Just a normal-looking arrow, the sort that could be used for either hunting or war. He tossed it aside.

His skin under the belt-buckle felt sore but unbroken.

Halfdan rolled over and onto his hands and knees, still breathing heavily. He looked around the darkness. Who had shot him? He could not see anybody. The dogs were still eating whatever they had found.

What was going on?

He had to go inside to warn King Lambi.

He pushed himself to his feet and, unsteady from both the arrow-impact and the horns of booze drunk earlier, drew out his sword. His heart was pounding with near-panic. Looking all around for the unfriendly archer, he staggered quickly to the front of the hall. He had to warn them.

With his free hand, he yanked at the handle of the heavy oak door. It should have easily swung open on its greased iron hinges. It had always done so before. But now the door would not open. It was somehow jammed shut. He heaved back with all his strength, tugging at the handle. No use.

The wall-masks of the gods glared blankly past him.

Halfdan was very confused.

Had someone inside barred the door shut?

Why?

Halfdan raised his sword and banged its handle hard onto the thick oak-wood door-planks. He yelled, "Open! Open the door! Someone out here just tried to kill me! Open! Help!"

He stopped banging and yelling for a moment to listen through the door. Had he woken up anybody? Was that a scraping sound coming through the wood, or just his imagination?

Halfdan raised his sword-handle again and was about to bang on the door again when he heard a sound of a bow-string behind him. Halfdan flinched, just as an arrow stabbed into the door, a finger's-length away from his head.

He turned around. A crowd of armed men wearing war-helmets, fifty or sixty at least, were running towards him in a battle-line. Some were being dragged forward by chains attached to big, excited-looking war-dogs. These arriving dogs started barking, which made the hall guard-dogs start barking back. The night filled with barking and growling as the two groups of dogs ran madly at each other.

"Tor's balls!" Halfdan shouted.

Most of the men running towards Halfdan were carrying shields in one hand and a spear or an ax or a sword in the other hand; a few of them were archers.

A bow-string twanged from their direction, and another grey-feathered arrow bit into the door between his legs, a small distance under Halfdan's crotch.

Helpless fear pounded in his chest and neck. Hard to breathe. He had been in many battles, but this was different. He was alone, without a leader giving commands, his thinking slowed by all the beer he had guzzled inside the hall -- Halfdan was not at all ready for this!

An army was running at him from the front; the door to the hall behind him would not open.

There was nothing he could do for those inside.

He would die if he stayed here.

He heard the sound of an archer shooting at him again and ducked. Again the arrow missed. Without a thought, forgetting to check the back door to the hall, Halfdan turned and ran. Back towards the out-houses.

Iron-tipped arrows spat hissing over his shoulders.

He raced past a row of smelly wicker huts and across King Lambi's farm-field, which was covered with barley-stubble from the recent harvest, and towards the town wall. It was made of sharpened pine-logs, held upright and together by iron nails and thick pine-wood cross-beams. He tossed his sword over it and leaped high to grab the top of the fence and threw a foot on a cross-beam and hurled himself over.

He landed on his feet on the ground on the other side, rolling his body onto the ground at the moment of impact, then bouncing quickly up. From the direction of the hall, he heard, mixed with the noises of dogs fighting dogs, the indistinct yelling of men. He could not make out any of their words, but they did not sound friendly.

Who were they?

He was standing near an oak-tree with thick, low branches. He grabbed a branch and pulled himself high enough up to see over the top of the town wall.

King Lambi's hall was surrounded by dozens of helmet-wearing strangers and their snarling war-dogs. And a group of five or six dogs was running towards the part of the fence Halfdan had climbed over, followed by a larger number of the mysterious fighters. One of them pointed at where Halfdan hung from the tree branch. Halfdan's head and the top of his body could be seen from inside the fence. Halfdan heard the man shout, "Look! He's hiding up that tree! Lift the dogs over the fence and they'll trap him up there!"

Halfdan dropped back to the ground, now completely panic-filled, and ran away from the fence, towards the line of trees at the base of the mountain-range in front of him. Despite the light of stars and moon, it was too dark to see the ground well, and he often stumbled. He ran towards some raspberry bushes, tried to jump over them, but one of his feet tripped into a thick branch-loop and he flung forwards and down into the mass of

spiky berry-branches. His falling face slid along a thorn-covered branch, ripping skin from his beard-covered cheek and one of his ears. He dropped his sword and peeled the gripping thorns off his face. Blood and raspberry-juice dripped onto his white linen shirt. One of his shoes had fallen off.

Behind him, he heard the deep baying of dogs. They sounded like they were on this side of the wall. He had to get away from their fast, heavy bodies and terrible teeth. He stumbled away in the light of moon and stars. He ran past some big chunks of granite-stone that had, ages ago, rolled down from the mountain. He ran around the boulders and scattered bushes and trees and came to a mud-banked stream. As he jumped over the thin flow of water and used both hands to scramble up the chilly, slippery mud of the other side, Halfdan realized something.

He had forgotten his sword and one shoe in the raspberry bushes.

Halfdan hissed, "Fool!" and slapped his forehead.

How could he fight off dogs or armed fighters with empty hands?

He couldn't.

If they caught him, they would easily kill him.

"Fool!" he said again.

The dogs were still barking somewhere in the darkness behind him, and seemed to be getting louder.

He ran.

The ground was now sloping upwards. This was the lowest part of the mountain that brooded over Eid. The birch and pine and occasional oak trees grew closer together here, and the chunks of rock strewn between the tree-trunks were covered with green moss.

Inside the forest, he stopped to listen behind him. Heard the barking dogs -- getting closer?

He looked at his feet. His right one was covered by an untied cow-leather shoe. His left foot was bare. He bent to tie the strings on his right shoe with trembling fingers. Each clumsy knot he tried to make fell apart.

"Tor's balls! Forget it!"

He kicked off the single shoe and ran barefoot into the forest. He followed a rock-strewn trail that twisted up-mountain through the rocks and trees and clumps of low bushes. The dark around him and the confusion inside made it hard to move fast up the mountain-base. His bare feet slipped in the cold gravelly mud of the trail and scraped on small rocks.

He felt an old, familiar pain in one knee (years ago, he had twisted it while jumping off a war-ship to raid a town with King Lambi); it throbbed more and more as he ran.

Breathing hard, he passed under the thick moss-covered branches of a fallen tree and tripped over some tangled roots twisting out of the ground. He ran through piles of rocks from long-ago avalanches. Sometimes he saw patches of clear starry sky overhead through the dim branches overhead.

His face still stung and bled from the thorns of that raspberry bush.

Once he blundered off the trail and felt his feet and ankles burning from the acid licks of stinging nettles.

A short while after, he turned a twist in the trail and his bare foot slipped in some mud. His foot slid off the trail and into a knee-high ant-hill of dry pine-needles. A smell of vinegar rose from the broken-open mound, and the bugs swarmed onto him and bit at his skin until he rubbed them off with a hand.

Now he did not hear the dogs barking anymore.

The forest trail zig-zagged in the shape of a lightning-bolt. He followed it up and up. His legs and back muscles ached from the exertion. Blood pounded in his neck and head. His knee hurt worse with every frantic step.

He had to rest. He stopped on top of rock ledge and put his hands for support onto the rough trunk of a pine-tree. There he rested, in a patch of moonlight and starlight, breathing harshly, staring at the pebbles and little plants around his feet.

Who was attacking the hall?

What was happening to his king and all his friends?

Why?

No sound of barking now. But the dogs must still be after him, running as a pack through the forest, their open mouths full of floppy red tongues and wet white fangs.

Run!

As he started going again, his foot painfully kicked a loose, fist-sized rock. It bounced up to hit a skull-sized rock with a loud, sharp bang!

Behind and below him, the dogs heard the noise and started barking again.

They sounded closer.

He needed some kind of weapon. As Halfdan scrambled up the dark and slippery mountainside, he picked up a broken birch-branch the length of his arm. Then he bent to snatch up a fist-sized rock.

Again, Halfdan slipped on the trail-mud. He fell onto a man-sized pine-tree, one that would be perfect for decorating at a Yule feast. Would he ever enjoy a Yule feast again? He pushed himself away from the half-broken tree, hands now covered with sticky pine-sap and bits of bark and dry needles.

The mountain trail let up to a small waterfall pouring from a rock-crack overhead into a small pool, which was drained by a rocky stream running downhill. The dark waterfall was sided by steep granite cliffs. In the dim light, Halfdan could barely see the hand-paintings that covered these cliffs. He had been to this place a few times before, for religious rituals with all the folk of Eid, and remembered how impressive the cliffs had looked in daylight. The rocks were covered with big, brightly-coloured paintings of wild beasts, war-ships, bolts of lightning and dozens of man-figures with huge, erect penises. Near the cliff-top, over all the other pictures, was the largest of the painted pictures -- depicting the yellow-flamed sun.

The trail got steeper as it went past the tinkling waterfall and twisted around giant boulders towards a steep, jagged-rock cliff-face. The trail went up a natural ramp along the side of the cliff. As Halfdan limped up this narrow path, with a steep drop to his right, he heard the sounds of snarling close behind him.

Halfdan turned and saw two big, grey-furred war-dogs burst out of the forest shadows after him. The loped up past the waterfall and onto the narrow cliff path and up after him.

There was no point in running anymore. Halfdan threw the fist-sized rock at the first dog. It hit the dog's chest and bounced away. The beast seemed not to notice and

jumped at Halfdan, its open mouth drooling. Halfdan swung the heavy birch-branch at its open mouth full of spiky yellow teeth. The club knocked the dog sideways off the path. It fell, barking, down to the chunks of rocks below.

The other dog leapt at him. Halfdan swung the stick at it and missed. The dog bit onto Halfdan's sore knee, clamped its teeth tight, shaking its strong neck to rip away a piece of Halfdan's flesh.

Halfdan stumbled back, trying to get a hard strike with the birch-branch on the dogs thick, squirming back. The war-dog tugged hard at his knee, growling deep in its throat.

"No," Halfdan groaned. He toppled backwards. As he fell, the dog let go of his knee and lunged forward towards the soft brown skin of Halfdan's exposed throat. Just before the teeth reached their target, Halfdan punched his right fist into the side of the dog's thick neck, while twisting frantically to one side.

Together, man and dog rolled off the trail and fell down the cliff. As he fell, Halfdan pulled the snapping, kicking beast to his body and twisted in the air so that the dog was below him.

The dog landed on the hard rocks, and Halfdan landed on the soft dog.

The impact knocked almost all the air out of Halfdan's body; for a moment his eyes saw only swirling blackness, and he felt his mind drifting away, towards something like sleep.

He lay on the motionless dog, gasping for breath, trying not to pass out completely. Finally, sight returned to his eyes, and he saw the dog's head resting right beside his own. It was dead.

Halfdan slowly got to his feet. His body was full of pain. He was hurt in many body-parts. His belly was still sore from the arrow hitting his belt-buckle; his face had been scraped by a thorny raspberry branch; his shoeless feet were battered by trail-rocks; the nasty-looking dog-bite on his knee was pouring out blood; his legs and chest were torn by the dog's claws; and his ribs were broken, or at least very bruised, from falling off the cliff onto the dog. He desperately needed to rest.

A man's deep voice nearby in the forest yelled, "This way! He's over here!"

Halfdan scowled, then ran back towards the cliff and staggered unsteadily back up the narrow path. There was a flat area at the top, a little ledge strewn with gravel and small rocks. He found three bigger rocks, each the size of a man's skull. He picked up each of these, placed them near the edge of the ledge, and crouched. Only the top of his head could be seen from below as he peeked down and waited.

Soon, five armed strangers walked fast out of the forest shadows and along the trail. They strode in single-file past the sacred waterfall. In the dim light, Halfdan could see that the men were all big and yellow-bearded. Four of them carried spears and shields. These men wore helmets and leather body-armour. The tallest man walked in front, without a helmet or shield or body-armour. He carried a long-handled and wide-bladed ax in both hands. He wore a black bear-fur over his shoulders. He looked like a berserker -- a rare kind of fighter with no fear, no mercy, and notorious strength.

Halfdan's unknown foes walked past the waterfall and the cliff covered with religious art, to where the trail started to get narrower and steeper.

One of the four regular fighters pointed ahead and said, "Look. The dogs."

Hiding above, Halfdan watched the group move closer.

"They're both dead," one regular fighter said.

Another said, "Really? How?"

"He must have killed them."

"Killed two dogs after losing his sword? How? Tor's thundering balls -- what kind of man are we after?"

"Shut up," the berserker said. "Come on. Do your job. He is near."

They walked past the two dead dogs, four of the men looking reluctant, and started going single-file up the narrow cliff-side path.

When they were half-way to the top, Halfdan stood up and, with both hands, he lifted one of the skull-sized rocks up over his head. The foes were right under him. They heard him move and looked up. Four of them flinched when they saw Halfdan's dark-skinned face, saw his shredded and blood-soaked clothes, saw him hurling a big piece of mountain-rock down at them, and they heard him grunt.

The thrown rock hit the helmetless head of the berserker in front.

Apparently unhurt, the berserker looked up at Halfdan with a sneer of contempt. After bouncing from the berserker's head, the rock fell down to land near the dead dogs with a sharp click-sound. The berserker did not move. Then his eyes rolled up in his head and the ax dropped from his suddenly-limp hands. The berserker collapsed. He sprawled awkwardly on the rock path, motionless except for one oddly-twitching leg.

The four other fighters saw Halfdan quickly bend down, then stand again, raising another big stone overhead.

"A troll!" wailed one of the remaining foes.

Halfdan grunted with the effort of throwing it down at the fighter standing farthest up the trail. It missed, flying over all of their helmets and bouncing with a loud bang! off a boulder below them, then flying towards the sacred waterfall and splashing into its pool of water.

Halfdan bent to pick up his last rock. After that, he would have nothing left to throw down at them but his exhausted and blood-smeared body.

But the four fighters had seen enough. Cowering under their round shields, they started backing away, shuffling down the cliff-side path and scrambling across the rock-strewn bottom. They all ran away, past the dim waterfall and fast into the shadowy line of trees. They were gone.

Halfdan dropped the big rock to one side. He stepped a bit back from the edge of the cliff, slowly sat down. He could not run anymore. He could barely think or remember why he was there. So he lay on his back on the hard, bare rock of the high ledge -- his confused mind spinning and swirling, pain stabbing all over his body -- until he passed out.

6: ALCUIN WRITES TO TETTA *

Translator's Note: Chapters marked with an asterix () are not part of the original Old Norse manuscript of Viking Saga. These extraneous chapters consist mainly of correspondence between Abbess Tetta (the head of England's Lindisfarne nunnery [destroyed by Vikings on June 8, 793]) and Bishop Alcuin (an English missionary in Germany, and Tetta's spiritual advisor).*

June 1, Year of Our Lord 792

To the wise virgin and best-loved lady, the Abbess Tetta, and all of the other sisters in Christ on the Blessed island of Lindisfarne:

Alcuin, a most unworthy servant of God, the Bishop and Legate of the Roman Church to Germany, sends you his heartfelt greetings in Christ.

I am ever-mindful of your most sweet friendship, with which you most kindly received me long ago with all joy. I have never forgotten those summer days in York, when you and I and your brother worked side-by-side on Holy projects there; I always remember the wisdom of your mind, the gentle music of your endless prayers, and your obvious purity. Greatly as I then was glad in your presence, so greatly do I now suffer in your absence.

I *beg* my gracious lady not to be offended by my lateness in sending a personal letter to you, in reply to your last learned letter, which I received long ago. This delay was owing to my great preoccupation with the restoration of the churches burned by the pagan Germans still infesting our parishes and cloisters. Despite our educational efforts, and the military support of King Charlemagne, the misguided pagans of Germany have recently pillaged and burned more than thirty churches. It was this disaster, not forgetfulness or change of feelings, which delayed my writing to you sooner.

Despite the local unrest, God has recently also brought good fortune to our Holy Mission. The pagan German petty-king Rothbod, who once dared to hold myself as a captive when I tried to bring Holy Truth to his blighted province, is dead. I am told that while this dissolute man-fiend sat feasting amidst his filthy and illiterate nobles, the same evil spirit which had seduced him into defying the law of God suddenly struck him with madness, so that still in his sins, without repentance or confession, raving mad, gibbering with demons and cursing the Priests of God, he fell forward, into his half-eaten meal, and departed from life to the torments of hell; where Rothbod will witness in horror, as described in Scripture, the very bowels of the earth; millions of fiery pits vomiting terrible flames and, as the foul fires rise, the souls of wretched men clinging to the edges of the pits, wailing and howling and shrieking with pitiful cries, mourning their past deeds and present agonies; until they fall screaming into the pits, there to *regret their errors* forever.

The German people are still extremely fickle and unfaithful. Uncountable numbers of Germans who chose Baptism after the war have -- now that most of the King Charlemagne's soldiers have been sent elsewhere -- shamelessly returned to their idols and druids and sacrifices. What a loss of souls for the Church, if we fail to re-convert them!

I have been commanded by His Holiness and Supreme Patriarch, our beloved Pope Hadrian, to suppress all human sacrifices in this dark land. Incredibly, there are Germans who claim to be Christians, who took Baptism and attend Church services, who have renounced human sacrifice -- but who see nothing wrong with selling slaves to pagan druids, knowing full well that these slaves are to be drowned by the evil druids in a dirty swamp to praise false gods!

I confess that I still do not understand many of the German customs. Some Germans refrain from eating ordinary foods which God created for our meals; other live on milk and honey alone, I hear. Such is the culinary depravity of the Germans, that I have also been commanded by His Holiness to suppress the eating of wild and tame horses in Germany. His Holiness, in one of his frequent letters to his most humble and undeserving of lowly servants, called horse-eating "a filthy and abominable custom" and demanded I suppress it, as of course I am zealous to do. King Charlemagne -- an avid equestrian who, alas, is more often seated on a saddle than a church pew -- also supports the ban on eating horse-meat.

After so many long years living among these rude and savage Germans, I am sore at heart with longing for my native land of England, and our familiar traditions. Sometimes I dream of English food! A pastry baked in the true *English* way -- stuffed with parsnips and pork-bits, the crust nicely browned -- is, to an Englishman living where nobody cooks properly, a subject of longing and fantasy!

Though I am but poorly equipped as a teacher, yet I try to be the most devoted of them all, as you yourself well know. Be mindful of my devotion and take pity on an ancient man worn out by troubles in this barbaric land. Support me by your prayers to God, and help me by supplying me with the Sacred Writings. May I be so bold as to beg of you to send me the copy of *The Universal History Against the Pagans* by Orosius, which Winbert, of revered memory, my former Abbott and teacher, left to your library when he departed this life? A copy of *The Universal History Against the Pagans*, such as I need, cannot be procured in this book-poor country, because with my failing eyesight it is impossible for me to read small, abbreviated script. I ask for Winbert's copy because I know that Winbert wrote each letter and each word clearly and separately. His copy will greatly help my teaching-work here, as it proves by example and by logic that the world before Christ's Coming was full of calamities and woe and tyranny, and that the supremacy of the Church has brought wealth and peace and justice to those who truly love Him. Should God inspire you to do this for me, no greater comfort could be given me in my ancient age, nor could you earn any greater reward.

Sister Tetta, I beg you -- nay, I *command* you -- to write to me soon, in rich detail, telling me of life at Lindisfarne. I have not been to that Blessed island since your election as Abbess -- when you became "a virgin mother of virgins" -- and am curious as to what has changed at your convent, and what remains as I remember. I am also curious to read news of our lovely but trouble-filled kingdom of Northumbria, and also of the other English kingdoms. Any news is welcome, especially regarding my home-town of York; a place I miss almost as painfully as I miss you.

Meanwhile, I pray earnestly that you will remember -- as I remember well -- your ancient promise to constantly pray for me, so that the Lord, who is the Redeemer and Saviour of us all, may rescue my soul from so many threatening dangers. Pray strenuously, therefore, to the merciful defender of our lives, the only refuge of the

afflicted, the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the world, to keep me safe from harm with His sheltering right hand as I go among the dens of wolves; that, when my loins are girded as if for battle, the Father all-merciful may place a blazing torch of Truth in my hand to enlighten the hearts of the pagans to the glory of Christ. And I pray also that you may be pleased to pray for those pagans put under my authority by the wisdom of His Holiness, that the Saviour of the world may see fit to rescue them from human sacrifices and the worship of vile idols; joining them to the daughters and sons of the only true Faith, to the praise and glory of Him whose will it is that all men shall be saved and shall come to the Truth.

My dear sister, implore God with clear and incessant prayers -- as I trust that you do now, and as you have done since we last saw each other, and will continue to do, unceasingly -- that I, lover of Christ and teacher of Most Holy Scripture, may be delivered, in the words of the Apostle, "from unreasonable and wicked men," who are so prevalent here. Please, pray to the Lord God, who is the refuge of the weak and the hope of the wretched, to shield my eyes from the temptations of this passing, wicked world.

Farewell in Christ.

Alcuin

7: A FATEFUL MEETING

Halfdan turned to look at the view. Since waking this morning with a hangover and worse, he had walked up a mountain overlooking Eid. He was wearing the berserker's boots and carrying his heavy ax.

From where Halfdan had climbed, there was a good view of the fjord and the lands surrounding it. Eid could be seen -- its two main streets going roughly north-south, seven smaller streets going east-west, dozens of grassy-roofed homes and other buildings, the royal farm-fields, all surrounded by the wood wall that Halfdan had scrambled over last night. Even from this distance, he could see that King Lambi's hall had been completely burned to the ground. There was a black-scorched, rectangle-shaped smudge where the famous hall had once stood.

Halfdan looked away from that painful sight and looked west, at the brown-and-white ridges of mountains marching in rough lines to the horizon. The blue-green water of the fjord snaked between the mountains, towards the Endless Ocean.

He started walking again. Near the cold, windy top of the mountain was a patch of summer snow. His body ached from a dozen hurts, and he was getting tired of walking uphill. He scooped a few handfuls of the crunchy frost into his mouth to drink the melt. As he was doing so, he saw something from the side of his eye.

A stone's-throw away, a young woman was sitting on a rock with her face in her hands, her back to him, as her shoulders shook with sobbing.

As he approached her, an older, frowning woman stepped out from behind a rock outcrop, holding a bow. She pulled the arrow back to beside her ear and aimed it at Halfdan.

"Stop!" she shouted.

Halfdan dropped the ax to the rocky ground and put his hands in the air, saying, "I mean you no harm."

"Who are you?"

"Halfdan son of Gødrød, of the town of Os. Folk call me Halfdan the Black. I am one of King Lambi's fighters." After a pause, Halfdan said, "I mean, I used to be. Now I have no job."

"Why are you so dark?"

Halfdan briefly explained his parentage. (He did this almost every time he met someone new.)

The older woman said, "You said that Lambi is dead?"

"Yes."

The old woman's arrow was still drawn to beside her suspicious-looking face, pointed at Halfdan's chest. She said, "Who did it?"

Halfdan said, "The kings of Sogn and Førde. Their men trapped King Lambi and all of my blood-brothers inside the hall and burned the hall down. I was the only one to survive. Because I ran away."

Halfdan knew of the involvement of the kings of Sogn and Førde because when Halfdan had woken up this morning, the berserker lying on the cliff-side path had been still alive. Paralyzed, but alive and able to talk. After Halfdan had dragged him to the

waterfall and held his head under a few times, the berserker from Sogn had spent his last moments of life answering Halfdan's questions.

"Why did you run away?" asked the old woman.

Was that a flash of contempt in her eyes?

Did she think he was a coward?

Was he?

After running away from the burning of his king, what was he?

Was he anything?

Nothing?

The old woman said again, "Why did you run away?"

Halfdan's face-muscles tightened. He looked at the old woman with irritation and said, "Either shoot me or put that thing down. I said, I mean you no harm."

"How do I know?"

"You don't. So shoot me."

"I might."

But after a few moments of silence, she lowered the arrow and relaxed the draw-string.

"I will trust you."

Halfdan picked up the battle-ax, saying, "Who are you?"

The older woman was called Siv, and her daughter was called Yngvild. The two of them lived together on a farm in the town of Starheim. Both were clever and proud and sometimes too sharp-tongued.

A rabbit-fur hood covered most of Siv's sparse grey hair. She wore a blue dress decorated with green glass beads, under a light blue apron held in place by oval-shaped wax-polished wood brooches at her shoulders. Dangling from her belt was a small knife and one of the small wood boxes in which women carried personal objects.

Yngvild was a few years younger than Halfdan and beautiful in looks. She was dressed like her mother, but with more attention to fashion, and from her belt hung a bronze key, which showed she was married. Yngvild was tall, with a strong jaw and bold eyes. Her grey-blue eyes matched her mothers'. A grey head-cloth was over her long and braided yellow hair. She also carried a bow and some hunting-arrows.

Siv explained that she and Yngvild had been visiting friends in Eid for the past few days. Yesterday, Yngvild and Siv had spent the day up on the mountain-side, gathering magic plants -- Siv was a healer, and Yngvild training to become one -- until late in the night, when they had returned to the home of their friends, to find it full of horror and tragedy. Their friends both lay on the floor, dead, both of them covered with gaping cuts and stab-holes. Their serving-girl's body was tied to a bed, half naked and grossly mutilated.

Hearing violence from other houses, Siv and Yngvild had fled back up the mountain.

Yngvild was sobbing again while Siv finished telling Halfdan their story. They were in a hidden cleft of rock on the other side of the mountain, still near the peak, sitting around a small fire. Siv and Yngvild were sharing a blanket around their shoulders against the chill. That was all they had for warmth. The air was chilly so high up, especially in the shade.

Yngvild said, "Why would the kings of Sogn and Førde have their fighters kill folk who weren't fighters and not involved in politics?"

"I don't know," Halfdan said.

Siv said, "What do you know? What did the berserker tell you before you drowned him?"

"He told me that King Njal of Sogn and King Gunvald of Førde had tried to get King Lambi to join them in a raid on some new land to the west that is supposed to be very rich. When King Lambi refused to join them, the other kings worried that when they were off raiding this new land, Sogn and Førde would be left without much defence, and King Lambi might be tempted to invade and take them over. I had not heard about this, because King Lambi was not in the habit of talking about diplomacy with us regular fighters, but it makes sense. It was no secret that King Lambi lusted for a bigger kingdom. King Njal and King Gunvald had another reason to want King Lambi out of the way -- they wanted to use his ships for the raid. So, by bribing a few folk in Fjordane who loved silver more than their king, Njal and Gunvald managed to get groups of their men to Eid. They stayed in a hidden camp outside the walls, while a traitor inside Eid did their dirty-work. When I happened to be outside to piss, the traitor went to the hall, giving the dogs food to keep them quiet, and jammed the hall-doors shut, both front and back; I don't know how. Maybe magic. As he was leaving, he saw me and shot an arrow at me and left me for dead, going to a gate to let in the others. When I was running away, King Njal's and King Gunvald's men surrounded the hall, to burn it with everybody trapped inside. That's all I know."

Yngvild said, "But why would they hurt innocent town-folk?"

Halfdan said, "Sometimes, when a raid goes well, the leader will reward his men by letting them go wild. The men are allowed to steal whatever they find, drink until their minds are gone, smash things for fun, kill civilian folk for fun. And do what they want with females."

Siv looked coldly at Halfdan and said, "You are a fighter. At least, you used to be. When you did a good raid, did King Lambi reward you that way?"

"Sometimes. I enjoyed the stealing and drinking. But I did not do much of the other stuff. When I was much younger, a few times I did the things that I saw my blood-brothers doing -- but, believe me, it has not been for many years. Now I know it is wrong. So I will not hurt either of you, in any way. I vow by Freya."

Siv looked slightly relieved; she had been glancing nervously between Halfdan and Yngvild for some time, as the sky was getting darker and the air getting colder as night fell.

Yngvild looked from Halfdan to Siv and said, "By Freya, what kind of healers are we? He is hurt! In all the excitement, I didn't even think about treating his hurts."

"I will do it," Siv said. She opened the box on her belt and took out a small clay jar. There was a picture of a bee painted on the jar-lid.

"As long as you don't try to bleed me," Halfdan said. "I have bled enough. No more."

"We don't use that method," Yngvild said.

First Siv cleaned his hurts with a cloth wet with melted snow, then she smeared on a smelly orange paste from the jar. The goo tingled on his hurt flesh.

"What is it?"

Yngvild told him, "Magic herbs mixed with honey."

8: TETTA WRITES TO ALCUIN *

July 28, Year of Our Lord 792

To Alcuin of York, venerable servant of God, endowed with many spiritual gifts, evangelist to the Germans, most worthy Priest of God:

Tetta, an unworthy wretch, a lowly house-maid for Christ, sends her most affectionate greetings.

I have no words to express my thanks for the abundant affection you have shown to me in the letter brought by your messenger from beyond the sea.

When I heard Your Reverence was well and prosperous, I confess I was glad in my heart. God has indeed rewarded your life-long teaching efforts! First, the Lord inclined His Holiness, our beloved Pope Hadrian, of the Glorious See in Rome, to grant the desire of your heart by sending you on such a vital mission to Germany, with so many pagan souls at stake, so many souls starved for Truth. Now, you write that He has laid low before you *Rothbod*, that once-proud enemy of the Church. It saddens me to think of any soul, even a pagan one, sinking to the hell-horrors your letter vividly described; but cruel Rothbod, surely, is due little pity from any Christian, considering his many outrages against us.

I am concerned to read that your eyesight is worsening. Although loss of vision is a common companion to growing older, along with white hairs and lined skin, yet treatment of this malady is not impossible; the ancient physician Galen, in his treatise *On Fluids*, advised frequent blood-letting from the neck artery to relieve eye-strain. Yet perhaps religion is sufficient consolation for any physical malady. Have you ever considered that you are losing your sight for a greater purpose? I say that Most Merciful God has permitted you to be afflicted in this way so that you may gaze with the "eyes of the spirit" on those things which God loves and commands, while seeing less of the things God hates and forbids. After all, what are our bodily eyes but windows through which we observe sins and sinners, or, worse still, observe and desire them and so fall ourselves into sin?

Having read with joy that you are interested in our insignificant labours here at Lindisfarne, I will inform you, as best as I am able, through this unpolished letter. I fear writing to you, a true scholar -- your compilations *On Grammar* and *On Rhetoric* are both well-used here; I must rely on the grace of Him, Who puts Truth in the mouths of the speechless, and Who makes eloquent the babbling of children, to convey my most secret of worries to you, my most-esteemed Alcuin.

It is the usual custom for women who are in trouble and anxiety to seek the consolation and advice of those on whose wisdom and affection we can rely. And so it is with me. As I am the only daughter of my parents, and as my only natural brother has gone to his Eternal Reward, I regard you, dearest Alcuin, as my brother in spirit; for there is no man anywhere in whom I have such confidence as in you. Relying on your friendship and experience, I come to lay before you all my difficulties and vexations of mind, and I beg you to support me with your comfort and advice. My labour here seems like that of a guard-dog that sees robbers breaking into and plundering his master's house; but, because he has none to help him in defence, can only bark and complain.

Beloved brother in spirit, renowned across all of Christendom for the abundance of your spiritual graces, to you alone have I desired to impart -- and God is our only witness -- by *this tear-stained letter*, under what a load of misery and what a crushing burden of worldly distractions we are weighted down. As when the whirlpools of the foaming sea send giant waves crashing onto shore-rocks, and when the force of the wind and the violence of the storm overturn and shatter and sink ships -- so the frail vessels of our souls are shaken by the mighty engines of our miseries and misfortunes. I am worried, not only by the thought of my own soul, but, what is still more difficult and important, by the thought of the many frail souls entrusted to my authority as Abbess; all these girls and women whom I serve now, and for whom, one awful and glorious day, I shall be called to make account before the blazing throne of Christ; to account not only for my many and obvious failings, but also temptations and doubts hidden in my heart, known to God alone.

To the burden of responsibility for so many frail souls, there is added the difficulty of our internal administration, our poverty, the disputes over our lack of temporal goods, the meagreness of the produce of our fields, and the never-ending demands for money for the government -- demands usually based upon the spiteful accusations of those who envy us. Most of our problems arise from our obligations to the king, to the queen, to *Bishop Higbold*, and to the barons and counts. They see the gold and silver letters in our books, and the beauty of our tapestries, and our modern church of stone walls and lead roof, and the size of our land-holdings on the mainland, and proceed to wrongly assume that we are rich and tax us accordingly.

Yet despite all, I try to forgive them. From my own experience here, I know how difficult is to rule justly and in full accordance with Christ's teachings.

Since my election as Abbess, I have struggled to be neither lenient nor harsh in my punishments, following as closely as possible to *The Rule of Benedict*, with necessary modifications for our circumstances here. I make effort to never ignore the smaller sins -- immoderate laughter, gossip, dancing, celebration of a birthday, etc -- which, if unaddressed, inevitably lead to more serious ones. The corrosive effect of clothing fashions is a constant problem. All Nuns know Benedict's Chapter LV -- "Worry not about the colour or the texture of these things, but let them wear what can be bought most cheaply ... It is sufficient to have two tunics and two cowls" -- but few here can resist vain innovations in personal appearance. I have found it necessary to ban the following items: golden hairpins, laced shoes, fur collars, silver-buckled belts, long trains, jewelled rings, gowns cut low in front, many-coloured vestments, Nuns adorning themselves as if they were brides, many-coloured ribbons. Although every Nun knows that her veil should reach down to her eyebrows, if I do not pay attention, many Nuns will gradually let their veil rise little by little, day by day -- just so that she can display the skin of their forehead! Some Nuns last summer actually shaved their hair over their forehead, just to make their foreheads look higher! Why? *Fashion*, of course! Since you left England, this *fetish of the forehead*, as I call it, has obsessed almost all Northumbrian noblewomen; many of the girls of the convent were also infected. This forehead nonsense has been strictly dealt with here, but soon there will be some new folly, I am sure.

If your holy struggle is against the spiritual fickleness and Faithlessness of Germans, my Alcuin, then it seems that mine is against the vanity and frivolity of English Nuns! Every day, I try to remind my girls of the warning of Saint Paula of Bethlehem: "A

clean body and a clean dress mean an unclean soul." Or, I remind them of Saint Uncumber, who miraculously grew a beard on her wedding-day, to defend her virginity; or Saint Agatha, who sacrificed her beauty by cutting off her own nose with a knife, to spite a lustful kidnapper; or the Abbess Hilda, who wildly loved expensive gems as a youth, before her call to the cloister -- in particular, a red ruby on a short neck-chain -- and how, many decades later, when Abbess Hilda was old, a tumour grew inside her throat, and upon it being removed from her body by a surgical physician, it was the exact size and shape and colour of that ruby!

Bishop Higbold has criticised me for "excessive zeal" against modern fashion. It is *understandable* that he takes such a position. Brother Alcuin, please forgive me for speaking critically of a Bishop, but I cannot hide my feelings. Bishop Higbold likes to dress much too finely for a man of God. He should set a proper example. The last time I saw him, at the Court at Bambury, Bishop Higbold was wearing a fine linen shirt, under a sky-blue tunic; his neckline and sleeves were generously embroidered with silk; his shoes were trimmed with red-dyed leather; the curls in his hair on his forehead and by his temples came from a curling iron; fingers *glittering* with many rings, and ending with sharpened finger-nails -- which he sometimes actually paints!

My latest controversy involving Bishop Higbold has nothing to do with fashion, however. It has to do with oil for church services. There is a scarcity of olive oil in England, and it is almost impossible to find. We need to use olive oil for orthodox services, of course -- we are not in the days of Saint Cuthbert anymore, when fish oils were acceptable substitutes! The convent had a large supply of olive oil; enough to last all this year, and some of next. I wrote that we *had* a large supply, using the past tense; for Bishop Higbold, I am sad to report, has taken almost all of our supply -- for his own use at Bambury Cathedral. Now, we have only a few small amphorae left. I have prayed so many times to the Immaculate Virgin for the patience and fortitude to accept such treatment without complaint or obstinacy. It is not easy to remain a virtuous woman in times like ours (as I sometimes remind the Lord in my frantic prayers).

With so many problems -- which I have recounted at too great length -- my life is a weariness; it is a burden to live. Everyone who is unequal to his own task, such as I, must seek a faithful friend, upon whose counsel she can rely, and in whom she can have such confidence that she will lay open to him every secret of her heart. On account of all these miseries, I am compelled to seek a friend in whom I can confide better than I can confide in myself, who will consider my pain and sorrow and want, who will sympathize with me, console and sustain me by his virtue and eloquence, and uplift me by his most wholesome discourse. Long have I sought, and now I know that I have found in you the friend whom I have wished, prayed and hoped for.

I have sent, along with this letter, Winbert's copy of *The Universal History Against the Pagans*, as your failing eye-sight and successful scholarship require; also, a few affectionate gifts of spices: small measures of nutmeg, dill, pepper, sugar, and cinnamon -- to assist (if only slightly) in your struggles with German meals. This tribute of my heart, I know well, is a very small gift in comparison to your love and guidance; given to you, God knows, of my deep and heartfelt *gratitude*.

I have ventured to send you these little gifts -- not as if they deserved even a glance from you -- but so that you may have a reminder of my obscure insignificance, to stop my being forgotten by you on account of our wide separation, and the long time that

has passed since we were together. May the bond of our true affection be knit ever more closely for all time.

I beg you to overlook the many errors of grammar and rhetoric in this unlearned letter, and to send me a few of your own sweet words, soon, which I shall eagerly await.

I also beg you, O Most-Faithful Priest, to keep the departed sisters of Lindisfarne in your memory and in your powerful prayers. The bodies of the Nuns who have died in this holy place -- all the humble sisters who over the decades have guarded the shrine of Saint Cuthbert -- shall rest side-by-side under the dust of our grass-grown graveyard, as if merely asleep, until to rise again on the Day of Judgment, when the Lord's trumpet shall sound, and all the dead shall come forth from lonely tombs to render their accounts to Him, and the spirits of the righteous shall be lifted on the arms of angels and shall forever reign with Christ where sorrow shall vanish, envy shall fade away, and pain and lamenting shall flee before the shining faces of the Saints.

Farewell, my friend.

Tetta

9: GOADING

When Halfdan awoke near the chilly mountain-top, the two women from Starheim were already awake; Siv chopping up some freshly-gathered plants with her belt-knife, Yngvild piling twigs for a camp-fire.

The younger woman saw Halfdan and said, "You were talking in your sleep."

"What did I say?"

"I couldn't understand most of the words," Yngvild said. "Something about King Lambi."

Halfdan said, "I had a very strange dream."

Yngvild said, "Tell it to my mother. She is skilled at interpreting the meaning of dreams."

So Halfdan described to them what he could remember of the dream -- how it had placed him and his now-dead king and his now-dead blood-brothers back together in the hall, "and the walls and the ceiling were covered with fire. Swirling sheets of flames covered almost everything. We were trapped. My friends and blood-brothers were running around and trying to find a way out and screaming in anger at the gods for letting this happen. Evil magic was at work. The heads of King Lambi's foes on the shelves that were used for candle-holders came alive again, laughing and hooting at us, grinning with eager eyes and snapping their dry jaws at us, as flames shot up from the holes in their skulls. The sacred boar-pig by the king-table turned into a real boar-pig. Outside, there was the sound of hungry wolves howling for blood. When the boar-pig knocked a hole through a wall to escape, we heard it squeal as wolves outside tore it apart. The fires inside got hotter, with the tables and chairs now covered in flames. I tried to talk to King Lambi, to explain that all this was caused by the treachery of King Njal and King Gunvald, but the roaring of the fire was so loud that he did not hear me. Then I was glad that he hadn't heard what I said, because the only reason I knew what was going on was because I had ran away, and I didn't want him to know that. I wondered if I really had ran away, because if I had, how could I now be back inside the burning hall?"

Siv and Yngvild were listening closely.

Halfdan continued, "It was impossible for me to really be in the hall, since I had run away. Everyone there was doomed, but I was safe, because I had run away and wasn't really there. The flames could not burn me. The jaws of the shelf-heads could not bite into my flesh. I took out my sword and stabbed it into my own belly. It stabbed in, but there was no blood and no pain; when I pulled it out, there was no hurt. I stabbed a spear into my left hand, cutting off my smallest finger, which wriggled on the floor for a moment, then jumped back onto my hand and re-attached itself. There was no scar. Somehow I used my spear to stab my own back, and again I was not harmed. With my sword again, I stabbed myself deeply in the chest, directly over my heart, but I was not harmed. Some magic was keeping me safe.

"But not anybody else. My blood-brothers were one-by-one bursting into flames, running around the hall with fire all over their bodies, until their charred legs broke and they crumbled to the floor, making piles of ashes that were picked up in the roaring wind and blown around with the swirling smoke. The Queens and some female servants were

burning, their long and beautiful hair turned into torches, their silver necklaces and bracelets melting on blistered skin.

"I wanted to save King Lambi. Smoke was rising from his red silk gown and from his hair and beard. In a few moments, I knew, he would burst into flame and be gone forever. I thought of picking him up and carrying him through the burning walls. But I knew that the magic would only protect me from the flames, not him. Then King Lambi ran in front of me and said, 'Beer is the answer!' So I picked him up -- he was now the size of a child, and shrinking -- and carried him across the room to a big barrel of beer, somehow left untouched by the fire. King Lambi had shrunk to the size of a new-born baby when I lifted the lid of the full barrel and dropped him into the beer. The last thing he said before sinking down was, 'I'll be safe here for a while.' He sank under the surface with a frown on his tiny, baby-like face.

"By this time, I was the only one left in the hall. Except for King Lambi in the beer-barrel, everyone else had burned away and their ashes were blowing into my eyes, making them water. For a while, I walked around the hall, and it seemed that it was my hall now. I went to King Lambi's king-chair, which had not burned, and sat on it. I was breaking a rule, but nobody would know. I ate a bowl of fried onions that was on the unburned table in front of me, cooked for King Lambi. A platter of horse-meat sausages appeared on the table and I ate them too. More and more of King Lambi's food appeared on the table, and I ate them all until I felt thirsty. There was no cup on the table.

"So I went to the barrel of beer I had dropped King Lambi into, and lifted it up to my lips like a huge cup and drank. It was so cold and good that I couldn't stop myself from drinking it all. When I put the barrel down, it was empty. I had drank down King Lambi and he was inside me. So I walked to the burning wall where the escaping boar-pig had knocked a hole. The heat was terrible and all I could see was orange swirls. But my skin did not burn and soon I was outside.

"I saw dozens of grey-furred wolves outside, waiting for me. They leaped at me, their jaws gaping wide with yellow fangs, and I fought them with my own teeth -- biting their heads and backs, tossing their limp bodies to the side -- and killed them all except one, who ran away into the forest-shadows.

"I followed this surviving wolf into the woods, but soon I was lost. I wandered in the forest for a long time, until I came to a waterfall. It was peaceful there. I laid down on the mossy ground to rest, hearing the sound of water splashing into a little pool. I dreamed that I fell asleep, and I dreamed that I woke up here, right on the spot where I am now."

Siv said, "You dreamed that you woke up?"

"Yes, I've never had that kind of dream before," Halfdan said. "I dreamed that I was here, and I had to piss. I dreamed that my bladder was full from drinking the barrel of beer in the burning hall. So I got up and walked over there --" He pointed down-hill at a spot where there were some clumps of mountain-grass, a pile of grey stones. "I dreamed that I pissed there, and when I was finished, an oak-tree grew there, very quickly. The trunk and the branches of the tree were red with steaming blood and dripping with clots of flesh and brains. But the oak-leaves were all made of silver foil -- delicate, shiny, beautiful -- and in the wind the silver leaves all moved together and glittered, like sunlight on rippled water. And that was the end of my dream."

There was silence for a while.

"So what did it mean?" Halfdan said.

Siv said, "Dreams speak both of the past and the future. I think that the first part of your dream, in the burning hall, was of your past. You mourn King Lambi, and you feel guilty for running away."

"It takes little skill to figure that out," Halfdan said.

Siv continued, "Drinking from the beer-barrel means that King Lambi will live on inside you. Part of what he was is now part of you, and your future is not only your own. By drinking him, you let him possess you. When you drink in the future, you will then be especially close to what remains of him."

Halfdan said, "'What remains of him'? Nothing remains of him but ashes, mixed with the ashes of my friends. Don't try to sell me that Valhalla nonsense, about feasting in the sky with the gods. That stuff may be beautiful and poetic, but only a child or a fool thinks that life goes on after death."

"You don't have to be religious to believe in life after death," Siv said. "People live on in the memories of others."

"Okay, I agree with that. Fame is the only real immortality. That I believe in."

Yngvild said, "What about the rest of the dream?"

"Like I said," Siv said, "the second part of the dream is about the future. Wolves mean the approach of danger, which you will defeat. But one foe will escape, to return later. The waterfall is a symbol of the gods. It seems that, though you may not believe in the gods, they believe in you. You will be their tool, for purposes beyond our understanding."

Halfdan was sceptical but said nothing.

Yngvild said, "And the oak?"

Siv said, "That is obvious. Odin speaks through that magic wood, and he wants you to know your fate. The blood covering the trunk and the branches show that your life will be full of violence and loss and crime. You will suffer much, do many bad things, and die unhappy."

Yngvild, upset, put a hand over her mouth and watched Halfdan closely.

Halfdan shrugged. "I don't care," he said.

Yngvild said, "And the silver leaves? Don't they foretell wealth and success?"

Siv said, "But for who? There may be wealth and success for him, or maybe for his children, or maybe for everybody in the kingdom. The symbolism is vague. But the overall picture of Halfdan's future is very dark."

"As dark as his face?" Yngvild said.

Siv made a half-smile at her daughter's joke, then went back to chopping plants for their breakfast.

After they ate, Yngvild asked Halfdan, "Where will you go now?"

Halfdan shrugged. "I would like to go nowhere. Just lie down and wait for worms to drag me underground."

Yngvild said, "What about justice?"

Halfdan sneered and said, "King Lambi and my friends are gone. Nothing I do will bring them back."

"So you will make peace with the killers?" Yngvild said.

"No, not that."

"If you don't go for justice," Yngvild said, "you will have no choice but peace with King Njal and King Gunvald. They will rule Fjordane and all will have to accept their rule."

"Or I can leave. Go into exile. That's all I deserve. My father was exiled when I was small; I could follow him east, try to find out where he went. Maybe he is still alive somewhere."

Siv said, "The life of an exile is wretched."

"But you predicted that my life is going to be wretched no matter what I do. So I might as well live out my wretched life in some outlandish place, where there will be less around to remind me."

Yngvild said, "People may call you a coward for that."

Halfdan's oak-brown eyes flashed with fury.

"Are you calling me a coward?" he shouted.

"No, no. I'm not. But other people might."

Halfdan gripped the ax and said, "If they do, I'll cut off their heads."

Yngvild continued, "Do you have a family?"

"Two aunts and two uncle and some cousins. Haven't seen any of them since last year."

"They will hear of the hall-burning, and that you ran away from it. They will hear that your king was murdered, and that you chose exile over justice. If your uncle and aunt and cousins call you a coward, will you come back from exile to cut off their heads too?"

Halfdan glared at her. "What do you know about it? This is man's business."

"Man's business?" Yngvild said, sarcastically. "But can a coward be a man?"

Siv snapped, "Enough! Yngvild, you go too far!"

Halfdan looked ready to jump to his feet and swing his ax at Siv's taunting daughter.

He said, "Hold your snake-tongue, bitch! Nobody calls me a coward!"

"Yet," Yngvild sneered.

Siv quickly stood up and grabbed her daughter's arm, pulling her away. "We are going to talk," Siv said, pulling Yngvild by an arm away from the furious Halfdan.

They went a few steps away, too far for Halfdan to hear them, and Siv said, "What are you doing? That man -- that man with an ax -- is a dangerous fighter, if not some kind of black troll, and you are goading him without any mercy! Why? Don't you know that a maddened dog will bite even a friendly hand? Why provoke him?"

Yngvild said, "Because I want justice, for our butchered and raped friends. He can help."

"Forget about what happened in Eid," Siv said.

"I can't."

Siv said, "I knew them longer than you did, and I will just go back to Starheim to get on with my life. That is what Maris and Jann would have wanted us to do. Mourn them, then move on. Halfdan is right -- revenge is man's business."

"Then think of me as your son. For I want it. You may have known Maris and Jann longer than I, but I knew them since my earliest childhood, played in front of their fire, stole sweets from their kitchen cupboard. I just can't walk away from all those memories without a protest. And what about Wenche? She was just a serving-girl, but we were close; after my husband left, she was really the only one who understood how I felt,

because she had been abandoned too. Wenche was like a sister to me, and I can not just walk away from her fate. How many of Njal and Gunvald's men abused Wenche before the mercy of a cut neck? Do we live in a community where brutal crimes can happen to folk, and those who loved them do nothing?"

Siv said, "This anger did not begin two nights ago. You have been bitter for a long time. If you had a husband to go home to, would you feel this way?"

Yngvild was silent.

Siv said, "This will not bring Gunnar back."

"I do not want my treacherous husband back," Yngvild said. "I want justice."

"Call it revenge. And it is a dangerous game."

"Then stay out of it, mother, and let me do what I want."

When they walked back to Halfdan, he said to Yngvild, "You were right. I have decided to get revenge on King Njal and King Gunvald. Kill them both and preserve my reputation. I am not a coward and will give nobody a reason to say that."

Yngvild said, "Good for you," and smiled at him for the first time.

Siv scowled, saying, "How will you kill them?"

"I don't know."

Yngvild said, "All you need to do is get close enough to them to throw a spear or shoot an arrow. By the time anybody figures out what happened, you will be gone."

"I can't do that."

"If you aren't skilled with those weapons, let me help you. I'm a good archer, and can even hit a running squirrel with an arrow. Help me get close enough to them and I'll do it."

Siv stood, still scowling, and walked away.

Halfdan said to Yngvild, "That's not what I meant. I'm a good shot with a bow too, and can throw a spear well. But I don't like your plan. It is shameful to do a sneak-murder. Men should be killed face-to-face, so they know who killed them. And besides, kings have so many bodyguards that I would never get close enough. What is wrong with your mother?"

Yngvild moved to sit on a rock closer to Halfdan and said, "She is just moody. What making about a kind of trap, like for wild beasts? Dig a hole in the ground where the kings are going to walk, put spikes on the bottom, hide the hole."

Halfdan shook his head. "That's also a kind of sneak-murder. And it wouldn't work, because kings always walk around in the middle of a crowd. A few bodyguards in front might fall in, that's all. And how would I know where these kings planned to go for a stroll? That plan would take too much luck to succeed."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Go home to Os and get some men to join me. A group is stronger than just one man."

Yngvild said, "I said, I'm good with an arrow."

"And I said, revenge is man's business."

"The killing part may be, but what about helping you? You were seen by some of the foes, and they must have told the kings that you escaped and what you look like. Fighters will be looking for you all over the kingdom, and the kings might have offered a reward for anyone who catches you and brings you to them. Your looks are easy to

recognize. Anyone you meet could be an informer. How are you going to get from here all the way to Os without somebody seeing you?"

"I'll stay in the woods."

"What will you eat?"

"Animals, wild plants."

Yngvild thought for a while, then asked, "And how will you get across the fjord? Swim with that ax?"

"I can steal a boat."

"Easier said than done. Wouldn't you like me to come with you -- for some company in the woods, and an extra pair of eyes to look out for danger, and my bow and arrows to help you get out of trouble?"

"But you are a woman."

Before answering, Yngvild yawned and stretched both her arms back, causing her chest to bulge at Halfdan. She saw him look at the shirt-cloth tightening over her big breasts.

Yngvild said, "Yes, I am."

After a pause, Halfdan glanced down at the key on her belt and said, "Where is your husband?"

"I don't know. He left me."

"Why?"

"Because the unlucky fool gambled more silver on horse-fighting than he could afford to pay. I told him to fight a duel against the man he owed the silver to, so he could cancel the debt with spear and sword, but he was too afraid."

"You didn't want to go with him?"

"He didn't ask me. He just left and I hope the trolls get him. Anyway, listen to this. If you let me join you, I can go into the towns we pass. Nobody will be looking for me. I can buy food and ask questions, collecting information that can help you. And I can rent or buy a boat to get across the fjord."

"Do you have silver for a boat?"

"No. But you do. We can chop a piece off that."

She pointed at his silver belt-buckle.

Halfdan whined, "But this was my lord's first gift to me. I can't spend it."

"Yes you can! Because it wasn't a gift. It was a loan. Now it is time to pay it back. To revenge your murdered lord."

Halfdan said, "Why do you want me to do this? Because of your murdered friends?"

"Yes."

"And is that why Siv is so upset?"

"My mother wants to keep me out of danger." As if making herself more comfortable, Yngvild moved her legs slightly apart. That pulled the cloth of her dress up, showing Halfdan her leg up to her knee. He stared. Yngvild said, "She also wants to keep your body out of mine."

There was a silence.

"So can I travel with you to Os?"

"If you want," Halfdan said.

Yngvild smiled again, seeing that she ruled him. She said, "I'll tell my mother. We should leave soon. We have been sitting and talking up here long enough."

Halfdan said, "Siv is not coming with us too."

"I know," Yngvild said. "As a healer, she used to travel around a lot, and has friends in many different towns. We will find someplace safe to leave her."

Nothing worth describing happened until they walked down from the mountains and reached a town called Loen. Siv had friends there who would let Siv stay with them as long as she wanted.

"Don't go with that man," Siv told Yngvild in private. "Don't join your fate to his. I feel what is going to happen. If you go, I will never see you again!"

But Yngvild was stubborn. She walked alone into the woods, carrying a bag of food and blankets and other supplies, to where Halfdan was waiting for her in hiding.

News of the events in Eid had not yet reached the folk of Loen.

Halfdan and Yngvild walked along forest trails, north towards the fjord, and sometimes Halfdan's ax hacked a path through thick and unmarked woods. Halfdan did not talk much. To pass the time, Yngvild would ask him questions, like, "Who was the first man you killed?"

"His name was Knut the Loud," Halfdan said.

"Why did you kill him?"

"It was before I joined King Lambi. I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I was working for a shepherd in Os, who hired me to watch over his sheep in their grazing-land. Knut the Loud was my master's neighbour. Every day, Knut's sheep used to cross over the stream that divided the properties, and they would eat the grass on my master's side. I stopped that by throwing pebbles at Knut's sheep whenever they tried to cross, and soon they gave up and stayed on Knut's side. Knut did not like this -- nor did his wife like it, and she had a tongue like yours -- so one day he found me and tried to beat me with his walking-stick. I took the stick away from him and beat him with it, until he seemed dead, then I dragged him home to his wife. I told her what had happened, so nobody could charge me with sneak-murder. He wasn't dead after all, but died soon. My master only had to pay a little bit of silver to the widow, because the killing had been provoked."

"How many other men have you killed?"

"Over twenty. Less than thirty. One before I joined the hall, Knut, and the rest after, on King Lambi's orders."

"You don't know the exact number?"

"Sometimes you can't tell if you killed someone or just hurt them."

"What killing do you remember the most?"

Halfdan was silent for a while. Then he said, "I don't think about any of them much," and refused to answer any more of her questions for a while.

She saw that he was in a sour mood. Most men like to brag of their killings, but maybe Halfdan was different. At the next break, Yngvild told him to rest his head on her lap so that she could pick lice out of his hair and beard. There were lots of them, and fleas that hopped from her busy fingers, and one blood-fat tick. Her gentle grooming made Halfdan feel better. He closed his eyes as she worked on him, and he even smiled when she was done, saying, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Now I'll do it to you."

But he couldn't find any lice or fleas in her long yellow hair.

"How do you stay so clean?" he asked.

Lifting her head from his lap and standing up, she said, "I comb my hair every morning and, every bath-day, I soak it in a potion made from magic plants."

"I usually can't get a comb through my tangles," Halfdan said, gesturing at his puffed-out mass of black curls. "But I'd like to try that magic potion. I hate having those little beasts on me all the time."

"If I find the right plants, I'll make you some."

That night, after they ate and were sitting by a small fire, Yngvild said, "Now that it's only the two of us, I think we should talk about sleeping arrangements."

Halfdan looked at her, nervous.

"Why do we need to talk about that?" he said.

Yngvild said, "I've seen how you look at me. A fighter in a famous hall, working for a rich and generous king -- you're probably used to girls shamelessly throwing themselves at you, like cats in heat. You probably can't even remember the number of girls who have fallen for you. Probably don't think about any of them much. But that's not my fate. I'm no plaything."

"I didn't think anything like that. I know you're married."

"Yes, I am. Being abandoned doesn't change that. The proper way to handle the sleeping arrangements is for you to sleep over there --" she pointed at some shadowy bushes to her right "-- while I sleep over there." She pointed left, at other forest-shadows, far from the fire.

"Fine," Halfdan said.

"But," Yngvild said, "it is cold at night, and when the campfire goes down, having another body close makes it a lot easier to sleep. And good sleep keeps folk healthy. You don't want us to get sick in the middle of this adventure, do you?"

"No."

"It would be foolish to let ourselves get sick. We need to stay healthy. So I think we should sleep lying close together, but not touching. Just for warmth. Sharing our blankets, but nothing else. Can I trust you not to touch me?"

Late that night -- as they lay close but not touching, on a flat pile of soft spruce-branches, and under thick wool blankets made in Loen -- Yngvild whispered to Halfdan, "Are you still awake?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Thinking."

"Me too. And I'm cold."

"Do you want me to feed the fire another log?"

"I think we should sleep closer together."

"Then we would be touching."

"As long as it's innocent and only for warmth. Nothing more."

He moved closer to her. Very nervous, his heart pounding, he said, "Probably the warmest thing for you would be if I lay on top of you."

Also breathing faster than before, Yngvild whispered, "Good idea."

They stopped talking.

"You seduced me," Yngvild said afterwards, holding him close.

"I did," Halfdan said, sounding proud.

"Bad man. My mother was right about you."

Now they could sleep.

Their journey to Os took five days. Now and then, Yngvild would leave the forest to get food and information. From some beggar-women washing clothes at a stream, Yngvild learned that the new rulers of Fjordane had sent armed riders to many of the towns. Fighters from Sogn and Førde had rampaged through the towns, stealing all the silver they could find, killing anyone who resisted. "They call it tax-collecting," a beggar-woman said. They were also collecting men -- they had a list of names of nobles who had been close to King Lambi. Many of these folk were killed, and the rest were taken under guard to Eid. Yngvild asked if the "tax-collectors" had reached Loen yet. The beggar-women did not know.

"Are they looking for a fighter with dark looks, who ran away from the burning?"

One of the beggar-women had heard about that -- and that a reward of much silver had been offered for help catching or killing Halfdan.

Yngvild walked into a shore-town and tried to rent a boat to cross the fjord. As she was a stranger, and claimed to be travelling alone, folk were suspicious of her, and would not rent a boat to her. With a chopped-off piece of Halfdan's silver belt-buckle, she convinced a fisherman to sell her an old boat he did not use anymore.

They crossed the fjord at night. The wind and the waves were strong as Halfdan rowed. The wave-rocking of the boat, with the boat's strong smell of fish, made Halfdan sick; twice, he pulled in the oars and leaned over the side, throwing up oatmeal and bits of pig-meat sausage into the moon-reflecting water.

"Do you always get sea-sick on the water?" Yngvild asked.

"Usually, at first. I get used to it after a while, usually."

"But as a ship-raider, you must have sailed and rowed all over. That doesn't sound like a good job for you."

Halfdan said, "Sea-sickness was a small price to work for King Lambi. He was a great man, and the world will never see another like him."

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"You are. It's not shameful to mourn losing your king and so many friends."

"I'm not crying."

He started rowing again.

10: ALCUIN WRITES TO TETTA *

September 11, Year of Our Lord 792

To my beloved sister worthy of all honour, the Abbess Tetta, praiseworthy for your long observance of the monastic life:

Alcuin, servant of the servants of God, wishes you eternal welfare in Christ.

May the Eternal Rewarder of good works give joy on high among the choirs of angels to my dearest sister, who has brought light and consolation to an exile in Germany by sending him gifts of spiritual writing. For no man can shine light on these gloomy swamps of the German people and take heed of the traps that line his path unless he has the Word of God as a lamp to guide his feet and a light to shine on his way. As my soul thanks you for the book, so my tongue and stomach thank you for the generous donation of spices! Although hunger can make bitter things sweet, sugar from a friend is sweeter still. I assure you, Tetta, that with each spoonful of my meals flavoured with your gifts, I remember how Blessed am I to have you as a dear friend; my dearest friend, I blush to confess.

When I was in Northumbria, the nearness of your love would give me great joy. But now that I am so far from you, in this rude and savage land, the thought of you pains me day and night. Yet how weak and selfish it is for me to dwell on my insignificant loneliness! It would be more fitting to rejoice greatly that now, in these final days of a wicked world, the Lord Jesus has such women to praise his holy name and preach the Truth and seek after wisdom as you; you who gently leads a militia of marching virgins across the battlefield of souls, despite fearful temptations on every side, all of you armed with invincible weapons of piety and learning; often here, in my loneliness, I imagine your mild-hearted militia of girls and women singing sweet hymns of spiritual combat, of Christ's victory, and the eternal occupation of Heaven!

Temporal things pass away, but the never-changing will soon be here. Treasures will melt like shadows, or smoke, or sea-foam. Men who wallow in luxury know not that they are spinning fragile webs that catch only dust: "They gather treasure and know not for whom they gather it."

Lowly as I am, I have tried to avoid the sin of ostentatious fashion, and to dress in accordance with Benedict's *Rules*. It saddens and dismays me to hear that Bishop Higbold has chosen to dress like his luxurious brothers and uncles, rather than as commanded in Scripture by Our Father. He has apparently changed greatly in the years since I last visited Northumbria. Rest assured that I shall discreetly write to Rome of this, without identifying my informant.

Brave Tetta, I urge you to continue to strive with all your might against foolish distractions and superstitions in dress; these are hateful to God. Modern fashions, as some call them -- but which I call *modern foulness* -- are sent by the Antichrist to herald his coming. Through his craftiness he introduces into Monasteries and Nunneries his servants of Fashion and Vanity, soon followed by Laziness and Disobedience, then Lust and Fornication (both natural and otherwise): Tetta, your struggle is truly against the *fever of Lucifer*, the *blackest of sins*, the *ruin of souls*! So I applaud and commend you on your firmness in discipline regarding your flock. As Benedict wrote: "Nuns who are respectful and remorseful, let them be corrected at the first and second offence only with words; but

let the Abbess chastise Nuns who are wicked and disobedient at the very first offence with whips and other bodily punishments, knowing it is written in Scripture: 'Fools are not corrected with words' and 'Hit your son with a rod, to deliver his soul from death'."

As you struggle against the gentle impulses in your so-good soul, meek Tetta, to discipline your feminine flock -- to give them transitory suffering for the sake of eternal salvation -- so do I, Alcuin the scholar, struggle to deal firmly with the Germans. My "rod" is the Frankish army of King Charlemagne, which chastises any still-defiant German tribes, brings the submissive tribes to Baptisms, and protects my Priests bearing Holy Writ from one town to another.

What a challenge it is to force Truth into these ignorant minds! I have been given precise and detailed instructions from His Holiness himself, on the proper way to use logical arguments to convert German tribes and individuals. We are told not to argue about the family histories of the Germans' false gods. We are told to pretend to accept the statement that German pagan gods were given birth by other gods, after the intercourse of male gods with female gods. Then, His Holiness instructs, we are able to prove by logic that each of their gods had a beginning, since they were created by some other god. After forcing the pagan to concede that point, we are told to ask whether the universe itself had a beginning, or was always in existence. If the pagan says that the universe had a beginning, we ask: What were the pagan gods doing before that time? If the pagan insists that the universe had no beginning, we ask: When was the first pagan god born? Who were its parents? How did pagan gods gain control of a universe that existed before them? Why do pagan gods care about human sacrifices if they already possess and control everything? Why do pagan gods allow Christian men to rule the warm European lands rich in food and wine, while leaving the pagans only the frozen lands of the north? Why is the Christian world dominant, while those clinging to primitive beliefs are a dwindling minority?

These questions, and many others that it would be tedious to mention, are put to the leaders and common people of the pagans, not in an offensive and irritating way, but calmly and with great moderation. From time to time, their superstitions are compared with our Christian dogmas and touched upon indirectly, so that they might realize the absurdity of their primitive beliefs, and may be ashamed to know that their disgusting swamp-rituals have not escaped our notice.

Perhaps the strongest argument against the ancestral superstitions of the Germans was made by myself, almost a year ago, in the Hesse region. There was a so-called "*holy tree*" growing there, which the pagans claimed was personally guarded by Thor! I ordered that old oak to be chopped down, and called out for Thor to strike me with one of his famous thunder-bolts, if he existed. The local pagans who were watching from behind the line of Frankish soldiers looked up at the sky in anticipation of my doom. When nothing happened, I announced to the crowd gathered around the fallen tree: "Either Thor does not exist or he is too weak to fight against the power of Christ." A huge step towards converting this tribe!

Before I end this too-verbose letter, I wish to show my gratitude for your gifts and your friendship by supporting your important work at lovely Lindisfarne. You mentioned the shortage of olive oil in England, and the risk this poses to liturgical practice. Olive oil is scarce also in Germany, but my direct supply from Rome is secure. Separately from this letter, I have sent you five amphorae of good virgin olive oil. It should arrive at

Lindisfarne a few weeks after this letter. Do not be surprised when you find your gift accompanied by four caged hunting-falcons. They are not for you, of course, but for the King; he asked me for German falcons many months ago. When the hunting-birds arrive at Lindisfarne, please send word to the mainland and the King will send someone to your island to collect them.

Farewell, and may you continue to live a life of angelic purity, until you reign forever in Heaven.

Alcuin

11: THE NEXT MOVE

Halfdan lay on his belly on a dark farm-field, on barley-stubble left from the harvest, not moving at all. His breathing was slow. The ax was in one hand. After a long wait, Halfdan slowly lifted his arm and moved it slightly forward. Slowly, he laid it down. He did not move again until after taking many slow, steady breaths. Then he slowly moved his other arm forward. Slowly lifted a leg forward. A long pause, then he shifted his other leg forward. He lay still for a long time. A silent bird fluttered past in the dim space over Uncle Harald's farmland. Halfdan raised his head and torso; slowly moved forward, a bit. He lowered himself again to the ground and was still for a long, long time. He was heading up-wind, so his uncle's dogs would not catch his smell and start barking.

Yngvild was behind him, in the dark woods where they had spent most of the afternoon watching the farm. It was possible that King Lambi's killers knew where Halfdan's family lived; it was possible that their fighters were waiting for Halfdan to show up here, to kill or arrest him. But he and Yngvild had seen nothing to raise suspicion. Staying concealed, they had searched all of the woods that circled the small property where he had grown up. They had watched Uncle Harald limping out of the well-made oak-plank house, and had watched him set up an iron-forge behind the chicken-shed and wait for the charcoal fire to get blue-hot. There was a loud clanging sound as his hammer pounded a red-hot piece of iron. Halfdan's Aunt Anna -- the sister of his father -- had brought out a plate of food and a cup of beer, and her husband took a break. Even from a distance, both of them had looked older than he remembered. He had not been home in a long time, as earlier mentioned. Halfdan and Yngvild had watched Aunt Anna drag a heavy basket out the front door and hang rugs and drapes and wall-coverings over a pole, then use a paddle to knock out dust. When it had started getting dark, both went inside; soon a line of smoke twisted up from the hole in the grass-covered roof. Halfdan had waited for full darkness, then started a slow crawl towards the house.

King Lambi had taught him this and many other military skills. Halfdan could hear King Lambi's voice in his ears, "The way to be invisible is to move very slowly. Motion is what attracts eyes. You can avoid being noticed, even on open ground, by moving slow enough. Your body might be visible, but it won't be noticed -- until you put your iron into the foe's guts."

Halfdan was looking ahead very closely, hearing King Lambi's ghostly voice in his ears say, "Divide all that you can see into sections, and look at each section in turn, paying attention to every detail. Look at each one of the sections of your view as closely as you can, and make sure you check all of them, even if it seems impossible for a foe to be hiding there. And don't look just to the front -- when you get the chance, look backwards to see any foe sneaking from behind."

Not wanting to make motion by turning his head, Halfdan could not look behind him during his crawl across the field of barley-stubble. He only looked forward, at the familiar farmhouse and its surroundings. Yngvild was guarding his back. Her task was to watch from her forest hiding-place and, if he was attacked, to use her arrows to protect him.

It took Halfdan half the night to make it across the dark field to the farmhouse. He crouched by the door, which was decorated with a sheep's body hanging by its cut neck from a bronze hook -- a sacrifice to Freya. (His relatives were devout, but had failed to spread their love of the gods to him.) Halfdan put his ear to the thick wood of the door and listened.

Nothing at first. Then, the faint sound of Harald snoring. There seemed no other noise. It was unlikely that foes had spent all of the afternoon in the house while his aunt and uncle were going about their business outside, but possible. He strained his ears to catch the sounds of armed, awake men waiting for him: iron clinking, boots scraping on the dirt floor, whispering, burping, farting, sighs of boredom. But there was nothing but Harald's faint, recognizable snore.

Still crouching, so his full height would not be visible at the door, Halfdan raised his ax and tapped the square-end of its heavy blade onto the door.

The snoring inside stopped. After a while, there was a rustling sound on the other side of the door, and Halfdan heard his uncle say, "Is somebody out there?"

Hearing that gruff voice, Halfdan smiled. In a voice barely loud enough to be heard through the door, he said:

No life here but a lazy owl
Who's hungry but won't hunt
Good man, I beg a meal
Open your house, toss me a mouse!

Aunt Anna's voice cried out inside, "It's Halfdan!"

The sound of the door-latch raising, and the door opened to show the sleepy-looking faces of his aunt and uncle. His aunt looked delighted to see him, squealing, "Come in!" But Harald looked nervous, glancing over Halfdan's shoulder. Harald grabbed his nephew's sleeve and pulled him inside. As Anna hugged him, Harald slid the wooden latch on the door shut.

Uncle Harald said, "Too many syllables in the last line."

Aunt Anna said, "Oh, Harald, do you expect a hungry owl to follow all the rules of poetry?"

Halfdan felt the strength in his uncle's grip as they shook hands.

"I'm glad to see you alive," Uncle Harald said. He was a thick-bodied man, with a wide, grey-bearded face and watery blue eyes. People said that he was one of the best farmers in Os; he not only fed his family, but had earned and saved enough silver over the years to buy a farm for both of his two sons, and to pay a good dowry on his daughter's wedding-day, and to pay Halfdan's admittance-fee for joining the hall in Eid. He was one of the richest and most-respected men in Os. He was the closest thing to a father Halfdan had known, and had taught Halfdan a lot.

Aunt Anna was thin, a bit taller than her husband, with hands that fluttered at her sides when she talked. There was a scar from a horse-kick on the left side of her face, which she usually hid under her hair-cloth. She had been the only mother Halfdan had ever known -- treating him the same as her natural children, comforting him the many times he came home in tears over some other child calling him a "black troll," praising his earliest poems -- and he loved her greatly.

This place had been Halfdan's home for many years. The house was much the same as when Halfdan was a boy. It was a single room, windowless except for the smoke-hole in the roof, with low platforms for sitting and sleeping along both of the side-walls. A long, central fireplace with still-glowing embers gave off some light, as did the beeswax candle that Aunt Anna lit and put onto a low table near them.

She said, "Something to eat? We're all out of mice, dear, but there might be some cheese and smoked salmon."

"Yes, please," Halfdan said, sitting on the platform and resting his ax on the floor.

As she took the food from a wood chest and put it onto the little table, Halfdan told them what had happened in Eid and how he had run away.

"We heard about the hall-burning, and that only a black-looking fighter escaped," Harald said. "When the Sogn horsemen came here, they asked folk about you, but nobody told them that this is your home-town."

"Have they come here?"

"They have, demanding silver and searching the house. But they did that to everybody. I don't think that they are likely to come back, at least until next tax-time. You can hide out here as long as you need. Right, Anna?"

"Of course. Now, eat."

As Halfdan took bread and piled it with slices of yellow sheep-cheese and smelly pink fish, he said, "I'm not going to stay here and put you two in danger."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Get revenge."

Aunt Anna's happy expression changed to worry.

Uncle Harald said, "Isn't killing two kings a bit ambitious?"

"Right. So I came here to get help. There must be men around here who aren't happy with what happened."

"Nobody is happy about it," Uncle Harald. "Lambi was a great ruler, one of us. But that doesn't mean that folk are eager to get killed for the memory of a dead man."

Aunt Anna said, "And the pains in your uncle's leg have gotten worse; he can barely walk most days, never mind trying to fight. Isn't that right, Harald?"

He looked embarrassed and scowled. "Quiet. My leg is strong enough to fight, if I so decide. In the Swedish War, there were a lot of older men -- older than I am now -- who spilled their share of blood."

"Oh, Harald," she said, shaking her head.

Halfdan said, "Uncle, I don't want you to join me in this. You wouldn't be able to keep up. And I don't want to take you away from Aunt Anna. I want young, single, ambitious men. You've done your fighting; stay here and enjoy your farm and your grandchildren. How are Einar and Endre?" -- the twin sons of Halfdan's foster-sister.

Aunt Anna beamed and said, "So cute and so smart! Barely a year old, and both of them can say 'cake' and 'no' and 'up' and some other words. Endre will peacefully stare at the fire for hours, like you would, though Einar is more of an active-type and likes to crawl all over the place, putting all he can into his mouth. You haven't seen them yet, have you?"

"Not yet. I was planning to come back this summer to see them, and you two, but other things kept getting in the way and I kept putting it off. Sorry."

"I know that Lise --" Halfdan's foster-sister "-- would love a chance to show off the babies to you. It's amazing how they can make folk laugh. So cute! Maybe it would inspire some ideas in you. Yes, that was a hint. You need a woman who will make you want to settle down and have babies."

Halfdan rolled his eyes, saying nothing about Yngvild.

Harald said, "Tell me about your plans. How many men do you need?"

"As many as possible," Halfdan said. "And I'd like your help."

"You want me to go around to all the young, single, ambitious men around here -- those who can be trusted to keep their mouths shut -- and recruit them for you."

"Yes. Tell them I want to meet them tomorrow night."

"Where?"

"I was thinking about near the sacred swamp. Nobody goes there at night."

"The gods might be offended by you using their sanctuary for that. It might bring bad luck. And folk might get lost trying to get there in the dark. A better place would be at your parents' memorial-stone."

Halfdan had not been there for many years. He said, "Good. We'll meet there, pick a leader and leave. Each of them is to bring weapons, blankets, food and water-containers."

"What about horses?"

"We'll have to stay off the roads. No horses."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Fine, I'll do it tomorrow," Harald said. "Now it's very late. Let's talk about it more in the morning."

Halfdan said, "I'm not sleeping here. Too dangerous."

Harald said, "Nonsense! I told you, nobody told the new rulers that you were from around here. There's no chance of anybody showing up here tonight to search the place. You're safe here."

Halfdan said, "I mean, it's too dangerous for you. If a neighbour sees me and later tells a fighter from Sogn or Førde that I was here, they'll kill both of you for giving me shelter. We are dealing with bad men."

Aunt Anna said, "Halfdan, this is all sounding too crazy. Can't you just go into exile for a while? Come back when things have calmed down?"

"I thought about that," Halfdan said. "But if I don't do this, there will be nothing for me. Wherever I go, I'll find nothing to live for. I made a vow to King Lambi and must keep it."

She said, "Is that it, or are you just worried that people will say you weren't brave enough?"

"Don't try to talk me out of it."

"Anna," Uncle Harald said, putting a big, sun-browed hand on her thin, paler hand, "let Halfdan do what he thinks he has to do. He's not a child anymore. And he made a vow."

"To a man who is now dead. He just said some words, which the wind blew away as soon as they were spoken. Is that a good reason to risk death?"

Halfdan said:

No life can last longer
Than all-ruling fate allows
When a debt to death is due
Do not fear to disappear

Aunt Anna, unhappy, said nothing.
Uncle Harald said, "Did you make that one up?"
"No," Halfdan said.
"I know your style too well to be fooled. Whose is it?"
"King Lambi's."

Uncle Harald said, "People say that he could see into the future. Lambi probably foresaw how his life would end. That poem sounds like he did." A thought came to Uncle Harald and he scowled. "I just remembered something that I heard when I was at the market," he said. "I don't know how true it is, but someone who had come from Eid told it to me. Apparently, King Njal of Sogn went digging around in the ashes of the hall and found King Lambi's body. It was burnt and charred, but they could recognize his jewellery and sword."

Halfdan put his hands over his eyes.

"What did they do to it?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this. Well, the man said that Njal cut off the head of King Lambi's burnt body and tied it to the saddle on his horse, like a decoration. He rides around everywhere with King Lambi's fire-black skull hanging there, bouncing beside his leg."

Aunt Anna said, "Why would anyone do such a nasty thing?"

Uncle Harald shrugged.

"I can figure it out," Halfdan said, the look in his eyes turning hard. "It's proof of the change in government. And to make folk afraid. The kings of Sogn and F rde will rule by fear until one or both of them gets elected king of Fjordane and makes their rule legitimate."

"Election-time is almost a year away," Uncle Harald said. "They want to keep everybody poor and terrified until then. It makes sense -- nobody in Fjordane wants our kingdom turned into a vassal-state of Sogn and F rde, and the only way to get us to vote for Njal and/or Gunvald as king is through hard oppression. Making all Fjordane-folk too intimidated to campaign for the kingship against those bloody-handed outlander shits."

Aunt Anna said to Halfdan, "If exile is out of the question, then I hope you kill them all."

"I'll try," Halfdan said.

No more is recorded of their conversation. When Halfdan left, carrying a bag of food and the ax, he walked slowly back across the harvested farm-field; back to where Yngvild -- sitting with her back to a tree, bow and arrows still in her hands -- had fallen asleep.

Halfdan covered her legs and belly with a blanket, then crouched to look closely at her shadowy face for a long time.

In sleep, she looked beautiful, gentle and peaceful.

When early sunlight woke her, he was still awake, still looking closely at her.

Squinting, she smiled up at him and said, "How did it go?"

"Fine."

"So what's next?"

Yngvild was as beautiful awake as sleeping -- but not as gentle, not as peaceful.

"Let's go," he said.

The memorial-stone, and others much like it, were on some flat ground near a bend in a path up to the mountains. Other than an occasional shepherd bringing a herd to or from pasture, few used this out-of-the-way path. The runes on the man-sized chunk of rough grey granite sticking from the ground read:

GØDRØD OF OS ~ LEFT AND NEVER RETURNED

AASA OF NUBIA ~ DIED HERE

RUNES CARVED BY THEIR SON ~ HALFDAN

After darkness fell, the men Uncle Harald had spoken to started showing up. Halfdan and Yngvild greeted each of them with hand-shakes and explanations. Some of them he did not recognize; Halfdan had lived away from Os for eleven years, and some of these men had been children when he left. He recognized most of those who were around his own age, and was pleased to see some of the area's best brawlers.

One of these was Atli the Red, so-called because of the colour of his hair and beard. He was a very smart man, capable in most things, though not very confident or assertive. He and Halfdan had grown up on neighbouring farms, but had never been close friends, although Halfdan greatly respected Atli's wisdom and calm, stubborn character and skill at poetry. Atli showed up at the meeting because of his political beliefs: he did not want to be ruled by men who had killed Lambi, and who were terrorizing innocent folk, and who were outlanders from Sogn and Førde. "Fjordane should be ruled by a Fjordane-man."

Another good recruit was Haki the Berserker. Haki was a thick-armed and tall bully, who had once earned a living by travelling from town to town, challenging men to duels; these men could either pay Haki to cancel the duel, or fight -- in which case, Haki would kill them and become the legal owner of all the duel-loser's property. Haki had duel-challenged dozens of unlucky men, earning a fortune in land and silver, but his passion for gambling and whoring meant that he was usually broke. Earlier this year, he had been outlawed by the Fjordane Assembly for his many notorious wrongs -- which meant that anybody who wanted to could kill him without penalty, even if it was a sneak-killing. Unlike most outlaws, Haki did not go into exile, and he went around openly daring the families of his victims to try vengeance on him. None so far had dared, and Haki went on doing as he pleased. The only difference being an outlaw meant to Haki was that he could no longer force other men to duel; as an outlaw, his challenges could be ignored without shame. So he was looking for something else to do. Fighting to avenge King Lambi sounded fun and, if successful, would bring silver.

Some of the twenty-two young men who met with Halfdan that night were there for political ideals, like Atli. Others had a grudge over a family member who had been killed or raped by "tax-collectors," or they themselves had been treated badly, and were after revenge like Yngvild and Halfdan. But most shared motives with Haki: ambition

and small-town boredom. They were younger sons, who knew that an eldest brother would inherit all of their father's farm or fishing-boat or flock of sheep. Without inherited property, they would need luck to find any work that paid well enough support a wife and family -- if they were also lucky enough to find someone to marry. There were always more single men than women around here (as it was customary then to drown unwanted babies, and mothers mostly drowned daughters), so women could choose from many suitors -- usually choosing one with inherited property. Younger brothers, denied inheritance and wife, knew of Halfdan's reputation and joined him in hope of getting rich through war -- or at least getting out of Os for some excitement.

One of the last recruits to arrive was called Fisk the Bone-Chewer. Fisk was Halfdan's cousin; the youngest son of Halfdan's Uncle Gunnar (Gødrød's brother) and Aunt Ragnhild. Fisk was nineteen years of age and very skilled at hunting.

After embracing Halfdan, Fisk said to everybody, "I have news! My brother Ole just got off a ship that was in Eid yesterday, where Ole heard that King Gunvald is dead! People say that King Njal killed him -- stabbed him in the back while they were drinking together, or so folk said. Then there was a battle in Eid between King Njal and his Sogn-fighters against the fighters from Førde who had served King Gunvald. King Njal's side did better in the fighting, though lots of men on both sides were killed. After the battle, most of the surviving Førde-men went onto their ships and sailed back to Førde, very angry. Some Førde-fighters switched allegiance and stayed in Eid to serve King Njal. Folk in Eid say that there are still bad feelings between these side-switchers and the real Sogn-men, because of the battle. Things are very confused over there."

Atli said, "That is good news for us."

"There's more," Fisk said. "Ole heard a rumour -- he doesn't know how true it is -- that King Njal is not well. Whether hurt in the battle or just sick, that's not known, but people in Eid think something is definitely wrong with him. Nobody has seen him in the streets since the battle, and he used to ride around all the time, showing off King Lambi's head on his saddle-string and looking for young girls to rape in front of their parents. Of the two kings, Njal was always the worst, and folk in Eid are sacrificing lots of beasts for the gods to not let him recover."

Everybody offered their opinions on this news, asking questions that Fisk did not know enough to answer, until Haki said, "Enough! Whether we go to Eid to kill one foe-king or two, the important thing is that we go!"

Both Halfdan and Haki volunteered to be war-chief. There was a vote -- the only weapons raised for Haki belonged to Haki and his big cousin, Sten. Haki shrugged and stayed calm.

Halfdan had all the Os-men swear an oath not to abandon the feud until King Njal or they were destroyed, and all agreed that anybody who broke the oath would lose their life.

Halfdan and Yngvild went where the others couldn't hear, and Halfdan said, "You can not come with us now."

She protested, "I know healing. If a man gets hurt fighting, I can treat him. And if things get really desperate, I can help out with my arrows."

"I'm not saying that you would not be useful. But there are two reasons why you can't come. First, with one woman in a group of twenty-three young, single men -- there will be problems."

"But I'm yours," Yngvild said. "Tell them that with enough authority and they'll leave me alone."

"Some would. Some might not. For the war-chief to bring along a woman as pretty as you, while the others are alone and far from home, will lead to jealousy."

"And the other reason?"

"Because I don't want you to be hurt. Some of us will probably die soon. I do not want one to be you. After this is all done, I'll send for you."

"If you abandon me now, maybe I won't want you then."

"I hope you do. If not, that's your decision."

"You troll! Let me come with you! I'll go into the woods to cut off my hair and dress as a male, then come back here and say I'm a new recruit. Yngvar the Beardless."

Halfdan smiled and said, "And how will you hide those?" -- glancing at her chest.

"A belt under my shirt can squash me flat."

"Unlikely. You have to stay behind."

"No."

When Halfdan kissed her, her lips stayed tight and cold. He turned away, went back to the men, picked up his bag and ax.

Yngvild stood by Gødrød and Aasa's weather-worn stone, watching him lead the small army away. The fighters followed the shepherd-path south, towards the mountains and fjord.

12: TETTA WRITES TO ALCUIN *

October 27, Year of Our Lord 792

To Alcuin of York, venerable scholar, evangelist and ambassador of Rome to the barbarians:

Tetta, the unworthy and weak, sends to you, so-loyal friend, across stormy seas and foreign lands, her warmest affection.

Knowing, as I do so well, that "a friend is long to seek, hard to find, and difficult to keep," I acknowledge that reading the affirmations of your affection for me, as expressed in your thrillingly-eloquent last letter, has filled my very inmost soul with a sweetness as of honey.

Not to waste further words: not a day nor a night goes by without some remembrance of that long-ago summer in York with you, and with my departed brother, whom we both loved. And even though now we are so very distant and apart, my faithful Alcuin, yet you remain, as always, my tower of strength against enemies both without and within.

Believe me -- as a storm-tossed sailor longs for harbour, as an anxious mother watches by the shore for her son -- do I long for the sight of you. But I am so oppressed by the tyranny of my sins, and so weighted down by my countless faults, that hope of salvation from impending danger cannot be mine, and I am plunged again and again into vexation.

May I presume to ask Your Reverence's advice on a problem of great difficulty? I am struggling to find a fitting course of discipline for a very unusual Nun, who has caused me great perplexity. Let me tell you briefly of her background, and her continuing offence, so that you might offer your humble student a few words of advice, if you are willing to condescend.

Her name is *Leoba*, of the town of Melrose; of common birth, quite plain of face, and twenty-five years of age; to the eye, there is nothing indicating her strangeness. Leoba was unwillingly brought here after being caught in a shocking act of deception -- she had somehow managed to spend over two years living at the Iona monastery *dressed as a Monk* and *pretending to be a man*. I am informed that she assumed a false voice at all times; she scraped a razor across cheeks and chin every day, as if to remove beard; I blush to mention how this impostor went so far, in her unnatural scheme, as to carry around a leather device to enable her to pass water while standing.

Why did she join the Monks at Iona, rather than joining other girls and women at a Convent? She claims that her only motivation was the fact that, since the Synod of Whitby, Pilgrimage to foreign lands has been forbidden to English females. Despite that absolute injunction, backed by both ecclesiastical and royal authority, Leoba stubbornly wishes to see the Holy Land.

She was just two weeks away from setting sail for Jerusalem, on a ship full of duped Monks, when the deception was uncovered. An unmarried peasant-woman from a town near Iona became pregnant, and rumours spread that she had been seduced by one of the Monks. This peasant-woman was confronted by Iona's Abbott, brought to Iona, and the peasant-woman was told to identify which of the Monks had made her pregnant. The lying peasant-woman pointed at the disguised Leoba.

When Leoba was given the opportunity to respond to the allegation, she denied seducing the peasant-woman -- but refused, even then, to show that the accusation was physically impossible. Only when she was taken to the *miserium*, and the brown robe pulled away for punishment, was her true sex discovered, to general astonishment.

Although Leoba had joined the Benedictine Order under false pretences, she was held nevertheless to be bound by our *Rule*, and subject to monastic authority. So she was sent here -- locked in a cage suitable for transporting a wild animal -- with a short note from Bishop Higbold ordering me to "teach her how to become a proper Nun."

Easier to tell than to do! She is frequently defiant towards my authority, has tried twice already to escape the convent, and refuses to promise not to try to escape again.

There is another factor involved, which complicates my attempt to properly discipline this turbulent and difficult young woman: as a scholar, and as a visual artist, Leoba is greatly gifted by God. I am wary of the word "genius," but I am forced, reluctantly, to so describe Leoba. Her script-writing is not only highly accurate and beautiful, but also produced in very little time. Her work in the scriptorium is always a joy to behold: she blends the modern and the classic, the Roman and the Celtic, in ways that I had never before imagined -- but you can see for yourself; I have enclosed a copy of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* that Leoba produced, on her own -- she made not only the golden script, but the goat-skin pages themselves, and the painted leather cover, and the decorations on the spine -- all wonderful, as you can see, though made by a rebellious and insolent Nun!

Her first escape attempt consisted of trying to run across the sand-bar connecting our island to the mainland; but her timing was poor, as the tide washed over the sand-bar before she had gone far, and she was forced to wade back to our island, where she was soon caught and brought back to the convent.

Did she beg forgiveness? Acknowledge that she had done wrong? No, this crazed girl just snarled that Lindisfarne was a jail and that I was her jailor!

As punishment for that escapade, and for her lack of humility and obedience, I invoked Chapter XXIV of our *Rule*, and debarred her from eating at the common table. When she continued to flout my authority by tone of voice and expression of face, my next chastisement was to forbid her from the chapel. The next day, she made her second attempt to escape, by taking a small boat and trying to row away; but she was seen, and the wind (with God's Will) blew her back to shore and us.

At that time, I ordered her punished as per Chapter XXV: "Let none of the other sisters stand near her or speak with her. Let her be always alone at her work, ignored by the entire community, and not be Blessed by anyone passing by; neither let Blessings be put upon the food that is given her."

Later, seeing that loneliness was causing Leoba sadness, I followed Chapter XXVII: "Like a prudent physician, the Abbess ought to use every opportunity to send discreet and trusted older Nuns to secretly approach and console the excommunicated sister, in an attempt to induce her to repent and humbly beg forgiveness of the Abbess." Leoba was secretly told that my arms and my heart are open for prodigal daughters, such as she. Like the Good Shepherd, who left the ninety-nine sheep on the mountains, to go back and seek and find the one that had gone astray, and He was pleased to lay it on His sacred shoulders and carry it back to the flock -- so, I, most-lowly Tetta, tried to bring this lost Nun home.

But her sneering and contempt continued, and it was clear that if I did not act firmly, discipline among the others could decline. My next step was the sanction described in Chapter XLIV: "Let her, at the time that the Word of God is celebrated in the chapel, lie stretched, face down, in silence, before the door of the chapel, to be stepped over by sisters entering and leaving the chapel."

Leoba has lain on the top of the stone steps to Cuthbert's chapel for many weeks now, four times a day. She is stepped over by each of the Nuns going in and out of the chapel -- occasionally, a clumsy Nun will kick Leoba -- but she is stubborn!

Leoba has snarled at me many times, in that insolent voice of hers, that ecclesiastical law does not allow me to punish Nuns with death or to confine her indefinitely. With mockery, she says, "Sooner or later, Abbess Tetta, you will have to let me go. I can survive anything until then. When you expel me, I will be free to make my Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where the Virgin Mary has said I must go."

(Leoba claims -- falsely, no doubt -- to see visions and hear divine voices.)

I am well-aware of Chapter XXIIIX of our *Rule*: "Of Those Who Have Often Been Corrected, But Do Not Amend." If necessary, I will follow that Rule with Leoba, but I am reluctant. Forced fasting, hair-shirts, rod-strikes to her shoulders -- O, Alcuin, I hesitate! If I thought that physical pain would make Leoba into a "proper Nun," I would inflict it with tears of joy, but I doubt such a result. Leoba is so stubborn and bitter that I know that such chastisement would fail to reform her character, and it would certainly increase her fanatic lust to leave England!

In your last wise letter, which I have often re-read by bed-side candle, you commended use of the rod in monastic discipline. Does the situation I have described change your opinion at all? Does it matter that the wrongdoer is highly unlikely to be reformed by physical pain? Does it matter that she came here not as a willing applicant, but as a *caged transvestite*? And, finally, does it change your opinion to know she is an artist with God-given gifts? I fear that a wrong step on my part could deter her from using her talents on behalf of religion!

I cannot decide what to do. I will continue her excommunication in its present form until I hear from you; hopefully, that will be a matter of weeks, not months. Please tell me what to do. I will follow your advice, as I respect and revere your opinion above those of all other men. Alcuin, be my tower of both wisdom and strength; I am sure that it will greatly help towards the salvation of my soul, if I follow your commands with my whole strength.

Know, O holy oblate, that I am not sending you these gifts in the hope of receiving any earthly gift in return, but rather that I am on bended knee begging from you what is far more necessary: namely, that in these days of ubiquitous and sudden dangers, with scandals and corruption lurking on all sides, you would help me with your prayers by offering holy Masses for the immortal soul of my brother, your dear friend, our *Aethwald*, who is now watching us with joy from Christ's right side.

Farewell, Alcuin, my brother in the spirit, my beloved with pure and sincere affection, and may you continue to be strong and useful for our Lord.

Tetta

13: THE BATTLE OF THE BEACON

After eight days of travelling and training, Halfdan's army moved down a frost-dusted mountain, about a half-day's march away from Eid. They stalked in a single line through the chilly wild-land, following two scouts (the most skilled hunters in the group) who searched the ground ahead with skills earned from years of seeking deer, boar-pigs, wolves, rabbits and other wary game.

The scouts never looked straight forward as they slipped through the trees and mountain-rocks and grass-clumps, but always moved their heads and eyes from one side to another in search of hidden foes. Halfdan had insisted that all of the travelling fighters often turn to look behind themselves. This was not necessary when hunting beasts but, as mentioned earlier, King Lambi had taught Halfdan the importance of looking behind when hunting intelligent, armed foes.

Everybody's weapons were wrapped in cloth to keep them from clinking or reflecting sunlight. Halfdan had traded his ax to Haki for a thick-bladed, two-handed sword.

Haki had known the berserker from Sogn who had owned the ax before Halfdan. They had fought against each other once at a drinking-fest up north, then had travelled together. Haki was sad to hear that his friend and fellow-berserker was dead, "as he was one of the toughest men I've ever had the joy of swinging iron at." Haki was impressed with Halfdan's luck in killing the berserk Sogn-man, and now fully accepted Halfdan's right to be war-chief.

Everybody's helmet and shield and clothing were camouflaged with hanging bits of dry moss or spruce-branches or tufts of dry grass.

The skin of almost everybody's face and hands was smeared with mud, to cover the eye-catching whiteness. Halfdan did not really need to do this, for the obvious reason, but he covered his skin with mud anyway. He would give his fighters no reason to complain that he asked them to do things he would not do himself.

Soon before noon, a scout ran back to the main group and told Halfdan, "There are fighters ahead, on a little outcrop of rock. They seem to be guarding slaves, who are building something."

"Building what?"

"Seems to be a fort. Making it out of pieces of rock."

"Show me."

Halfdan always marched at the front of the main group of fighters, followed by Atli, the second-in-command. Halfdan told Atli to get the men to rest and eat, "while I go take a look."

Atli passed the order back along the column, all the way back to Haki, the rear-guard. The men quietly put down their bags and weapons and rested, sitting on rocks or stretching out on the hard, bumpy ground. Some drank water from their clay bottles or picked the tiny blueberries growing all around or leaned on their lumpy bags with closed eyes, trying for a nap.

The scout led Halfdan forward through a patch of spruce-forest to the edge of a sharp ridge that overlooked a deep and narrow valley; this scar in the mountain's face looked like it was from an avalanche. The other scout was waiting there. On the far side

of the avalanche-valley, the mountain-side rose steeply to the left, towards a bare peak of grey rock.

The thirty or so men over there were too far away to see clearly. When Halfdan held out a hand to judge distance, each of the men was as long as his thumb-nail. Too far to see faces. More than half of them had shaven heads and faces, wearing ragged clothes. These men looked like slaves. Some of them were piling square pieces of rock onto a low wall. Other men carried rocks on shoulder-packs up to the construction site from a place where a third group of slaves was using sledgehammers and spikes to break the mountain into building-bricks.

The slaves were under guard by a smaller number of men with helmets, carrying shields and spears. Their clothes looked like those popular with fighters -- bright colours, puffy sleeves -- and their hair and beards were long.

One of the guards was sitting on a horse.

"What are they doing up there?" whispered one of the scouts.

"Looks like they are building a fort," said the other.

"But why up here?" asked the first scout.

Halfdan said, "Can you see something inside the fort?"

The scouts looked closely.

One said, "Yes, there is something inside it, sticking over the wall. Hard to tell what it is."

"A pile of wood?" the other said.

Halfdan said, "It looks like a pile of wood to me too."

"What for?"

"It must be a signal-beacon," Halfdan said. "This fort is placed where it blocks the easiest way down from the mountains to Eid. They are probably building other forts like this on the other routes down."

"What is a beacon?"

"The fighters in the fort can light the wood to send a signal. If the beacon is lit, folk in Eid will see smoke -- the wood will have been soaked in a special oil, to make a thick black smoke -- or at night, they'll see the fire. That will tell them that trouble is on the way, and give them time to get ready."

"So if we attack them, they'll light the beacon and warn Njal that we're coming."

"Right."

The other scout said, "But if we go around the fort and try to get down to Eid a different route, you said that there might be other forts with beacons in other places."

Halfdan said, "They probably have arranged the beacon-forts so that it's hard to get past them all without being seen by the eyes in one of them."

"Then what do we do?"

Halfdan said, "To get to Eid with surprise, we have to destroy one of these forts, without giving the foe a chance to light the beacon-fire. This one might be the easiest to take; for all we know, the others are completely built. Look at the walls on this one -- still low enough to jump over. Let's go back to the others and make a plan."

Early the next morning, Halfdan and his cousin Fisk and two other Os-men were hiding in the broken and rocky ground just beneath the construction-site, on a part of the slope away from the tents. Their bodies and clothes and swords were sprinkled with rock-dust to blend in with the grey mountainside. They were each armed with swords, and

wearing dusty helmets; no shields or body-armour. They had spent the long, cold night slow-sneaking towards the beacon-fort, just as Halfdan had approached his uncle's house. The guards and slaves had set up tents to sleep near the work-place. Some of the guards had taken shifts to watch from the fort and make patrols, and both the slaves and the guards had sometimes left their tents to piss or shit on the rocks, but nobody had noticed the four almost-motionless men inching closer and closer all night.

The rest of Halfdan's war-band had spent the night approaching the foe from a different direction. If all had gone according to Halfdan's orders, they would now be hiding a distance down-hill from the half-built fort. They would be watching uphill and, at the first sign of action near the beacon, would burst out of hiding and charge up the open slope. Their first job was to kill the horseman if he tried to ride away to bring a warning to Eid. Their next job was to charge uphill to the beacon-fort, hopefully in time to rescue Halfdan's group.

Halfdan's advance group's task was to stop the beacon from being lit. To stop a warning-signal reaching Eid.

At sunrise, Halfdan and his three hidden companions watched the guards and slaves crawl out of their tents. After a breakfast of cold oatmeal for the slaves, and meat and beer for the guards, the same sort of construction work as yesterday began. Slaves cut stone into blocks and other slaves lifted the blocks to the half-built beacon-fort, others putting the blocks into place. From his hiding-place, Halfdan could hear some of the men talking. The slaves mostly worked in silence, with an occasional comment to another slave about the work; the guards with shields and spears often joked or gossiped to each other, or shouted threats at slaves.

Listening, Halfdan learned that the slaves were to stay up here until the job was done, but that the guards would be going back to Eid tomorrow, being replaced by other fighters. These guards were all from Førde; they had switched allegiance to King Njal recently, after their King Gunvald was killed. They complained about how the Førde-men had to work up in the mountain with slaves, sleeping in fart-filled tents while the Sogn-fighters got better jobs near the town.

Halfdan could not see inside the circular fort from his hiding-place. The half-built walls were high enough to block any view of the inside. He thought that he had heard the voices of guards from there, but was not sure. It made sense to have guards by the beacon to light it in an emergency -- but how many?

Halfdan slowly moved his head around to check that the others were in position. They were. Covered with rock-dust, lying still in the shadows of avalanche-chunks, they looked like natural parts of the mountain.

Halfdan made eye-contact with each one of them in turn -- good, none was asleep -- then nodded and jumped to his feet and yanked out his sword. The other three young men also jumped to their feet and unsheathed their sharp iron. All of them ran, as quietly as they could, uphill towards the half-built fort.

Overhead, two ravens flapped by, and a pale, low sun stared down.

Nobody noticed them at first.

The four Os-men were running uphill in a group when Halfdan stepped into a pile of horse-shit and slipped. He fell back and landed on his ass. He quickly scrambled back to his feet and sprinted after the others. But the younger men were faster and reached the low wall at the tip of the peak before him.

Still, nobody had noticed them.

Fisk was the first one to grab the top of the low wall and vault himself over. A moment later, there was a loud clash of metal hitting metal inside.

A shaven-headed slave carrying rock on his back, standing just outside the fort, heard the noise and looked around. He saw the next two Os-fighters reach the fort-wall and vault over it after Fisk. This slave stared at Halfdan running after them. But he did not yell or do anything. Halfdan reached the wall and jumped up. Unlike the others, he did not go right over it and inside; Halfdan hopped onto the half-built wall, crouching on top for a moment, looking inside.

He saw the beacon -- a man-high pile of oil-soaked wood, stuffed with bundles of birch-bark -- in the middle of the round room. A guard wearing body-armour and a helmet, not carrying a weapon, was standing by the beacon with his back to Halfdan, banging a piece of iron onto a piece of flint. Orange sparks rained onto the pile of wood and birch-bark.

Halfdan next saw, closer to where he was crouching on the wall, two guards standing over three dust-grey men lying on the ground; the guards were stabbing down with spears.

"Fisk!"

Halfdan ducked his head just as a guard inside, whom Halfdan had not until then noticed, stabbed a spear at Halfdan's face. The iron tip scraped the top of his helmet. Halfdan whipped forward his free hand and grabbed the shaft of the foe's spear to yank the foe closer. In one motion, Halfdan dropped from the wall down into the fort and swung his sword. The good iron chopped through both the spear-shaft and the guard's arm. The spear-shaft and part of an arm fell to the ground; the guard took one swaying step backwards, eyes wide at the sight of the stump of his arm and its bright-red fountain.

From the side of his eye, Halfdan saw a weak smudge of smoke twisting up.

Was the beacon lit?

Halfdan hit the ground inside the fort rolling, bouncing fast up to his feet. Warm blood from the collapsing, stump-clutching guard showered Halfdan's face, half-blinding him. Wiping the wetness away with his free hand, he moved fast towards the two guards with shields and spears standing over Halfdan's fighters.

Two of them were dead. The other, Fisk, was lying on his side, his body punctured by spear-stabs, but still alive. When he saw Halfdan approaching, Fisk twisted his bleeding body around and grabbed the foot of the distracted guard standing over him. Fisk yanked the man's foot towards his own face and bit onto the pant-cloth over the guard's ankle. Shouting in pain, the guard looked away from Halfdan and lifted his spear, its tip pointing down at Halfdan's cousin. The guard plunged the spear down into Fisk's neck. Even in death, Fisk's jaws stayed clamped tight on the ankle, and the guard had to spend a few moments kicking his leg free.

The other guard standing by the three dead Os-men lunged at Halfdan. Halfdan's sword blocked the spear. The guard pulled it back to stab at Halfdan again.

Halfdan turned and ran.

Ran towards the beacon and the unarmed guard standing there with flint and iron, his back to Halfdan, spraying sparks and blowing air onto it. Some of the birch-bark smouldered; orange lines of burning formed and grew on the dry, white bark. Faint grey smoke rose. The fire-starting guard was so intent on his work that he did not notice

Halfdan running at him, until Halfdan's sword chopped into the side of his neck. The guard's head, still in a helmet, spun into the air, blood splashing underneath; the body crumpled to the ground, pumping blood onto Halfdan's boots.

Halfdan jumped over the head and the body and swung his sword at the barely-lit pile of tinder. The blade knocked the beacon apart; bits of wood and birch-bark flew in the air. The new-born fire was gone. Looking up, Halfdan saw a few wisps of grey smoke swirling up in the clear morning sky.

Would anyone in Eid notice that?

As he paused, distracted, the foe Halfdan had fled now moved to him -- grunting as he shoved the spear into Halfdan's back.

The iron tip poked through Halfdan's shirt and skin and muscles, pushing Halfdan sprawling forward. Halfdan tripped and fell to the rocky, bark-strewn ground, scraping his face on some gravel, terrible pain biting into his back.

The guard jerked his spear-tip out of Halfdan's flesh, raising the weapon over his head to stab down.

Move!

Halfdan rolled fast to his right -- so the iron missed his torso. But it hit his left hand, chopping off most of the smallest finger.

Halfdan rolled onto his feet. Sword in his right hand -- blood pouring down from his four-fingered left hand -- he charged at the man who had hurt him. His first sword-swipe was blocked by the guard's shield-edge, with a clash of iron hitting iron.

Halfdan saw this foe-man look to Halfdan's right.

Without thinking, Halfdan jumped to his left.

The killer of Fisk had moved up behind Halfdan, and almost succeeded in stabbing Halfdan's back with another spear-tip. But he missed and, unable to stop his lunge, ended up sticking his spear into the other guard's shield.

Halfdan tried to attack both of them then, while they were tangled together, but he slipped on some blood and stumbled past them both, his sword-swipe not hitting either of them.

The guards yanked the shield and the spear apart. They turned together on Halfdan. Behind raised shields and spears, the two Førde-fighters moved on Halfdan with hard, scowling faces.

Halfdan waited, feeling suddenly weak from blood-loss.

Intense, dizzying pain blazed from his back and left hand.

Confusion. Fear.

He saw shadowy shapes, fluttering everywhere he looked.

Birds?

No: hallucinations.

Weak from bleeding, his legs went soft and crumpled under him. He dropped his sword as he fell back to sit hard on the ground, the impact jarring his spine and making his vision turn all-black for a moment.

The end?

But his sight cleared in a moment.

To show the two foes moving together at him.

Halfdan grabbed his sword-grip, lifted it from the ground. But it fell from his trembling hand. Its blade landed on a rock and the bang! echoed in the rock walls.

There were other noises, Halfdan noticed, coming from outside the fort.

What was going on out there?

The two foes now stood directly over Halfdan, who was dazed and unarmed. The one who had stabbed Halfdan's back and the one who had killed Fisk lifted their dripping weapons, about to stab down together at him.

The end.

Time to die.

Fine.

Halfdan had no hope -- until one of the guards dropped his shield and dropped his spear -- clutching his hands onto an arrow in his chest.

The guard's eyes widened, then emptied of life; he fell.

How?

A second mysterious arrow popped with a wet sound into the beard-covered throat of the last guard. He dropped his shield and his spear to grab the arrow-shaft. Blood-bubbles burst between his silver-ringed, gore-dripping fingers as he tugged uselessly at the slippery oak-wood stick impaling his neck. He stumbled forward, silently opening his mouth, and collapsed down heavily onto Halfdan's legs.

Halfdan tried to look around, but was too weak to move.

So much pain. Back. Hand. All. Shadowy shapes filled his sight. Familiar shapes of flapping black wings, everywhere.

Now we must tell of the rest of the battle.

Hiding in a clump of trees downhill from the half-built fort, holding a bow with a stringed arrow, Atli had waited for Halfdan and his advance group to jump out of their hiding-places to signal the start of the attack.

Crouched beside him, Haki said, "There they go -- finally."

Haki laughed when he saw Halfdan slip on horse-shit and briefly fall down.

Atli shouted, "Go!"

His group attacked uphill.

The slaves and guards around the construction-site were startled to hear the clash of the advance group vaulting into the fort and meeting the four guards inside -- followed soon by the sounds and sight of nineteen fighters bursting together from the trees downhill, some of them yelling and whooping as they ran with raised weapons. Unlike the advance group, these Os-men were fully-armed, with helmets and shields. Some carried spears, some swords. Haki and his cousin Sten were the only ones without shields, both carrying two-handed war-axes.

Only Atli had a bow. His task was to make sure that the guard on the horse did not ride away, to carry news of the attack to Eid. But Atli's arrows missed (he had never shot at a man before) and the horseman rode fast away.

"Odin's prick!" Atli said.

When the fleeing horseman was out of arrow-range, Atli ran uphill after Haki and the others.

The slaves dropped their tools and pieces of rock, scrambling to get out of the way.

When the nineteen Os-men -- led by Haki and Sten, both roaring -- reached the twelve Førde-fighters, a fierce battle began.

Haki killed his first man with an ax-swing under the guard's shield, chopping one leg right off and slicing deep into the other. Haki yanked his ax back and raised his brown-bearded face to roar at the sky.

No smoke was rising from the beacon yet. Atli had to get to the beacon-fort fast, to help Halfdan's advance group if they were in trouble. Stopping to shoot an arrow now and then, Atli hurried uphill.

Despite the advantage of fighting from higher ground, the outnumbered, surprised guards soon lost courage. Some started to run away to either side of the fighting and were chased and killed, or hit in the back by one of Atli's arrows. Those who did not try to run either died fighting or surrendered.

Haki -- grinning savagely, his eyes wide and glazed with the madness of a berserker -- killed those who surrendered. He also smashed his ax onto the heads of hurt foes lying on the rocks.

As battle turned to massacre, Atli hurried uphill towards the fort, arrow held to bow-string. He could not see inside, and no sounds came from inside the low walls.

Did Halfdan's group need help?

Was Atli too late?

He ran to the narrow door of the half-built, roofless building and stepped inside, arrow ready to shoot.

Then he stopped, very surprised.

Atli blurted to a young woman crouched by a body on the blood-puddled, body-strewn floor, "What in the name of Odin is going on? How did --"

Interrupting him, Yngvild said, "Halfdan is badly hurt. Where are the bandages?"

Halfdan lay on his side, eyes closed, not moving. A red stain had spread across most of his back, and Yngvild was tying a string around Halfdan's finger-stump to stop the bleeding.

Nobody else in the fort was alive.

Atli saw a quiver of arrows on Yngvild's shoulder and a bow on the ground beside her. Two of the dead guards each had an arrow sticking from chest or throat.

"Who shot those two?"

Yngvild said, "Me. Where are the bandages?"

"I don't know. I don't think we have any. But you're that woman we left behind in Os. How did you get here?"

"No bandages at a battle? Fools!"

Yngvild took out the little knife on her belt and poked its tip through the cloth of her shirt-sleeve. She started cutting off a wide strip of linen.

Atli said, "But how did you get here?"

"I followed you, obviously," she said. "Now are you going to help me heal your war-chief, or are you going to just stand there asking questions as he bleeds to death?"

Atli put down his bow and his arrows and tried to help.

When Halfdan regained consciousness, he saw Yngvild. She crouched in front of him, looking closely down at him. She said, "How do you feel?"

He weakly whispered, "Why are you here?"

"I followed you, thinking you might need help. And I was right."

"Too dangerous."

"Dangerous for who?" She held up a small, curled, brown-and-red thing for him to see. "Remember this?"

Halfdan couldn't focus his eyes enough to see it well.

"What is it?"

"Your finger."

Halfdan looked at the finger-piece, then at his left hand, which was covered with tightly-wrapped cloth. He noticed that the cloth was the same kind as Yngvild's now-sleeveless shirt.

Yngvild said, "But I'm more worried about your back. The spear almost made it into your lungs. Does it hurt?"

"Yes."

"You are going to need a lot of rest."

"No," he said.

He saw Atli standing behind Yngvild. Halfdan said, "Atli. What happened?"

Atli said, "The good news is that we won the battle."

"And the bad?"

"The horseman got away. As soon as he gets to Eid, Njal will know we're here."

Halfdan scowled.

Atli said, "There is more bad news. A lot of our men are hurt, and Vannu is hurt badly. Stabbed in the belly. Looks like he will die."

Halfdan looked at Yngvild.

She said, "While you were passed out, I went out and did what I could to heal the others. Vannu is probably not going to live. We'll know in a while."

"Fisk is dead," Halfdan said, looking over at his cousin's body.

"I'm sorry," Yngvild said.

Halfdan said to Atli, "Did you question the prisoners?"

"There are none. Haki went berserk and I couldn't control him. His cousin went berserk too. They killed everyone who surrendered. And they killed all of the hurt ones too."

"Why?"

"Because that's the kind of thing berserkers do. Haki and Sten fought bravely and skilfully, but out of control."

"So King Njal will soon know we're coming, and we have no prisoners to ask about the situation in Eid."

"No."

Halfdan said, "Tor's flea-bitten balls! What about the slaves? They might know something. Don't tell me that Haki killed all of the slaves too."

"No. He didn't kill any of them. But they all ran away."

"All?"

"All."

Yngvild said to Halfdan, "Be calm! If you move around too much, the bleeding will start again."

Halfdan said to Atli, "Get the men ready to leave."

Atli nodded and went back outside.

"You're too hurt to be moved," Yngvild said. "The healing is going to take time."

"We don't have time," Halfdan said. "Help me to stand up."

"Rest!"

"I'll rest when we've taken Eid."

"If you live that long."

"Help me stand up."

Scowling, Yngvild put one of his arms around her shoulders and helped him to stand up. He swayed at first, unsteady on his feet, until Yngvild handed him a spear to use as a crutch.

Terrible pain.

He asked, "Why did you follow us?"

"To help you. If you get killed, there's less chance of the men who killed my friends meeting justice." She paused, then said, "And if you were killed, I'd be a little bit sad, for a while."

"Thanks."

Leaning on the spear-shaft, Halfdan started shuffling towards the doorway to outside.

She said, "I hope you aren't going to ask me to stay behind again. I won't."

"I want you to be safe. Stay up here. I'll send someone to get you after the fighting in Eid is done."

"If you leave without me, I'll just follow you down."

"Fine, come. But stay out of fighting. Your only job is healing. Someone else can rescue me next time."

She helped him stagger outside. Weak sunlight and cool wind. The mountainside was strewn with red-soaked bodies. A dozen or so white-shouldered crows and a pair of big, all-black ravens were busy. The birds -- beloved by poets, symbols of Odin -- hopped among the rocks, screeching, flapping, ripping with sharp mouths at the food.

14: ALCUIN WRITES TO TETTA *

December 7, Year of Our Lord 792

To my reverend handmaid of Christ, the Abbess Tetta, in the bond of spiritual love, and with a holy and chaste kiss of affection:

Alcuin, the least of the servants of servants of God, prays that Our Lord shall in this life guard and prosper you in health and every holy virtue, and shall after death glorify and reward you in future Blessedness among shining cohorts of angels.

I apologize for taking so long to write back to you. Let me assure you, my precious friend, that when I saw the copy of *Ecclesiastical History* you sent me, I gave voluble thanks to God for having such a friend in my journeys in these distant parts; one who helps me so generously with material things, and supports me spiritually with her prayers and the divine consolation of her gentle affection. With my hands upraised to Heaven, I beg the Supreme Majesty to repay you with eternal life on high. I pray to Almighty God, the Rewarder of all good works, that He will repay you in the heavenly mansions and eternal tabernacles and in the choir of the Blessed angels and archangels for all the kindnesses you have shown me, for the solace of books with which you have relieved my distress, and, above all, for your friendship.

The book is truly beautiful to look at and to touch. You have not exaggerated Leoba's technical skill, if this example is typical of her other work. Yet, regardless of her talent, my admonitions regarding discipline fully apply. She must not be simply expelled from Lindisfarne, as she so clearly desires; to set an example for the rest of your flock, and for her sake, Leoba must suffer harsh discipline -- for disobedience is the blackest of all monastic crime.

I agree that the traditional tools in these situations would likely not be effective with such a strange personality. But I have an intuition that another type of punishment might work well. Keep her locked in a small, lightless room, and let nobody talk to her, for any reason, or even show a face to her. Her meals and water are to be put into the room when she is asleep, through a door that admits no light. No-one is to speak close enough to the room for Leoba to hear. Let her feel forgotten. Keep Leoba in silence and loneliness and darkness, until she submits fully to your sacred authority; so I advise.

My friend, I think of your love with such sweet memories, tender Abbess, that I long for the time -- even if it should be as I breathe my last -- when I may be able to caress your innocence with my affection. If only it were granted to me, as it was to Habakkuk, to be transported to you across such a vast distance at the speed of a wish, how I would sink into your purest embrace -- O, my Tetta, how much would I chastely cover, with tightly pressed lips, not only your face, but your every soft finger and pale toe; not once but many a time, in respect and friendship!

Our wish is that it may be well with you till the end of your days in Christ.

Alcuin

15: AFTER THE BATTLE

The night after the battle of the beacon, Halfdan's army reached the bottom of the mountains, to find an orange glow filling the sky ahead.

Flames.

Eid was on fire.

Flames roared and swirled everywhere in the wood-built town -- along the two main north-south streets and each of the smaller, east-west streets; from the wooden docks on the shore of the fjord, to the wooden wall that surrounded the town; flames danced on traders'-stalls in the market, on the big, fancy, expensive homes of nobles in the center of town, and on the smaller homes on the outskirts; flames roared almost everywhere, except on the empty space where the hall had stood -- sending a thick, grey column of smoke twisting up to the night-clouds.

When Halfdan's army arrived, there were no foes around. Nobody wearing a helmet, nobody carrying a shield -- just a crowd of civilians, their stunned faces red from the heat.

The blazing town was surrounded at a safe distance by most of the folk of Eid, watching flames eat their homes.

One of them told Halfdan what had happened.

King Njal had killed King Gunvald, to end the sharing of political power. King Njal's men had battled in the streets of Eid against the Førde-men. King Njal's fighters had won. Most of the defeated, kingless, loot-less fighters had sailed back to Førde. But some of them had sold their loyalty to King Njal for silver, and these side-switchers had been sent to build and guard the mountain beacon-forts.

It was true that King Njal had found the skull of King Lambi buried in the ashes of his hall. King Njal had tied a piece of string through the skull's eye-holes, to dangle it from his horse's saddle as a foul trophy. As he was riding around the town, the head bouncing at his side, "a miracle happened."

A snake had slithered across the road in front of King Njal, frightening his horse and making the beast rear up onto its hind legs. King Lambi's fire-black skull had swung up on the string, and its gaping, fleshless mouth hit King Njal's left leg -- one sharp tooth poking through his wool pants, scratching the skin.

A small scratch, which King Njal ignored, until it became infected.

When folk saw King Njal walk, they noticed his limp.

Word spread that the flesh around the tooth-scratch was growing more and more swollen. And that the disease-demons now living inside his leg were pouring out a stream of white pus, and that the flesh around the hurt was rotting.

King Njal ordered his personal healer -- a Sogn-man who had accompanied the invading army -- to heal him. The healer tried chanted rituals, bleeding, the sacrifice of beasts and magic rune-carving. Nothing worked. The infection from King Lambi's death-bite only got worse. When the Sogn-healer admitted that he had failed, King Njal showed his cruelty by ordering a Sogn-fighter to poke out the healer's eyes, "a message about the cost of failure."

King Njal had then sent horsemen to many of the nearby Fjordane towns, with orders to bring every healer they found back to Eid, willingly or not. Five local healers had been brought to Eid from various places.

By then, the pus had been green and smelly, and the pain in the leg had felt to King Njal like torture.

None of the conscripted healers had healed him. Calling them all "traitors," King Njal had ordered their eyes poked out too.

Standing by Halfdan, Yngvild's grey-blue eyes went wide with fear. She blurted out, "Was one of the healers named Siv? Brought here from Loen?"

"I don't know," the Eid-man said.

"What happened to the healers after they were blinded?"

"Some of them died. Maybe all of them did. I don't know."

Over the roaring of the nearby flames, Yngvild wailed, "Mother! No!"

Halfdan put a hand on her shoulder, saying, "Stay calm. Siv probably wasn't one of the healers brought here."

To the Eid-man, Halfdan said, "Go on."

Three days ago, King Njal had been carried on a stretcher to the docks and put onto a ship to take him to Sogn. Some Eid-folk had guessed that he went back to his own kingdom to find a healer who could be trusted; others said that King Njal wanted to die at home, where his burial-mound would be raised.

King Njal left his eldest son, called Egil the Beard-Puller, behind in Eid to rule the stolen kingdom.

"We were glad to see Njal leave, but Egil was not an improvement," the Eid-man said. "Egil is as cruel as his father. And as lustful. All of us who are parents were terrified that he would notice one of our daughters -- the beast."

Many Førde-men who had switched loyalty to the famous and experienced King of Sogn found it hard to take orders from his arrogant, over-aggressive, twenty-four-year-old son. The fighters from Sogn, who had known Egil for much longer, also had little respect for him.

The panicked horseman from the mountain rode into Eid this afternoon, with an exaggerated story about a "large group of fighters" who had attacked the fort-guards and were on their way to Eid.

Egil had commanded his father's fighters (there were almost two hundred of them in Eid) to take defensive positions on the town wall.

They refused. Not knowing that the approaching army was only nineteen men and a healer-woman, nobody wanted to risk a battle.

"Egil has bad luck," one Sogn-man had said.

"We agreed to fight for Njal, not his brat," another had grumbled.

"We have enough loot. It's time to go home."

Egil had had no choice but to follow the will of his fighters.

The defeatist foe had quickly loaded their war-ships with boxes and bags of loot stolen from Eid and other Fjordane towns. With torches and poured oil, they had set fire to each building in Eid and to each ship left behind and to the docks. Then they had sailed away, west along the fjord towards the Endless Ocean.

Atli said to Halfdan, "So there is now no government here."

"What about us?" Halfdan said.

Atli nodded.

While waiting for the fire to burn out, Halfdan told his fighters to help the crowd of Eid-folk. It was fall, and the radiant heat of the burning town hid the air's chill. When the fire died, folk without shelter would get very cold.

Messengers were sent to the farm-houses outside the town walls that had been spared the fire, asking for donations of clothes and food and shelter-making materials. They were also asked to share their homes for a few days with the homeless children and old folk.

Yngvild's only concern was for her mother. She went among the crowd of Eid-folk, describing Siv and asking if anyone had seen her. One woman said that Siv had been one of the healers brought to Eid, but this Eid-woman did not know where Siv was now, "or if she's even still alive."

Later, Yngvild found another woman who said, "You're Siv's daughter? Yes, Siv is alive -- my family has been taking care of her. She's over there" -- pointing at the base of a solitary tree, where folk had gathered.

"Thank you!"

Yngvild ran to the tree and found a stranger sitting at the base of the tree, leaning on the trunk. On this woman's lap was resting the head of a familiar-looking woman with a bandage-covered face.

"Mother!"

The bandage-wrapped face tried to turn towards Yngvild, saying in a weak and hesitant voice, "Is that really you, Yngvild?"

"Yes! Oh, Freya, what did they do?"

"They blinded me," Siv said. "With a bronze spike. Because I wouldn't heal that troll-king."

"Wouldn't heal him? Or couldn't?"

"Wouldn't. I know what is wrong with Njal, and how to heal it. But I would never heal the man who ordered the killing of Maris and Jann. Never."

Yngvild, sobbing, crouched by Siv and put a hand on her shoulder. The shoulder felt thin and fragile. Yngvild smelled the reek of infection rising from the bandages on her mother's face.

Yngvild changed the bandages over her mother's eyes, seeing the pair of sunken and scabby pits that had once held eyes just like hers.

Yngvild arranged for Siv to move into a local farmer's house, until other shelter was available.

Yngvild guided her sightless mother across a field towards that house.

"So hot," Siv muttered.

"The whole town is burning, Mother. I've never seen so much fire in one place before."

Siv said, "A town can be rebuilt. I'm just grateful that Egil and his father's men didn't kill all of the Eid-folk before leaving. I've heard a lot of terrible things about that nasty young man."

"Halfdan rules Eid now."

"The ruler of a town on fire. Give him my congratulations. The Eid-folk deserve my condolences."

"He's not like King Njal, or that Egil person. Halfdan will help these folk to rebuild Eid. He is good at heart and I care for him."

"Obviously."

At the farmer's house, Yngvild put her mother to bed, pulling the rough blankets over Siv's thin body.

"Try to sleep, Mother."

Yngvild sat by the bed, holding one of Siv's hands.

After a while, Yngvild said, "Mother? Are you still awake?"

"Yes, Yngvild."

"Do you remember the last thing you said to me, before I left you in Loen?"

"I asked you not to join your fate to Halfdan's."

Yngvild whispered, "And you predicted that if I went with him, you would never see me again."

"Yes, I remember."

Yngvild said, "Now it's happened as you said it would. You will never see me again. If I had listened to you --"

Siv reached a hand towards the sound of her daughter's voice and touched Yngvild's cheek; her bent, wrinkled fingers stroking the smooth, tear-wet skin of her daughter's face.

"Don't blame yourself," Siv said, softly. "Nobody can escape their fate."

16: TETTA WRITES TO ALCUIN *

January 4, Year of Our Lord 793

To the most venerable pontiff, Alcuin of York, shining lover of Christ:

Tetta, a humble sinner, sends greetings of enduring affection.

I have no words to express my thanks for the abundant affection you have shown in the letter brought by your messenger from beyond the sea.

As the Israelites followed the Commandments of Moses, so shall I follow your wise advice regarding how to discipline that unruly Leoba. I have disposed with her as you suggested, in a small separate building which will provide her with complete solitude and darkness, and in that cell shall she remain, pondering on her errors, until her complete submission. She shall speak to no-one and no-one shall speak to her -- she shall be seen by no-one, and shall see no-one -- her eyes shall forget the light of sun, until she opens them to radiant *Truth*.

We shall only open her cell's door when we hear her call out through the walls, in a sincere tone of voice, her repentance and request to submit to my authority.

The only exception to the strict terms of her excommunication shall be Bishop Higbold's annual inspection; when, according to the ancient custom here, he insists on interviewing each and every person at the convent. I am sure that he will insist on speaking to Leoba too, and I have not the authority to refuse.

Dearest Alcuin, I regret to write that your promised shipment of olive oil for our Masses, and hunting-falcons for the King, has not yet arrived. I will continue to wait, in the hope that your generous gifts were not tragically intercepted, but merely delayed by some incident of sea-travel.

My best beloved, please pray for *me*. Let your prayers guide the frail and lost vessel of my soul, exhausted by the tempests of this unjust world, into safe harbour. I eagerly beg, dearest confidant, to be sheltered by your prayers from the poisonous darts of the treacherous enemy of souls. Remember in your inspired prayers the *friendship* you promised me so long ago in York; a promise you have kept to date, to your eternal credit. If it is not itself sinful, to remember a past sin with nostalgia, then let us not -- now in the winter of our lives -- regret *anything* about that time in York; not even the mistakes we made in that spring garden. So long ago, my Alcuin; so long ago.

May I confess to you the deepest-hidden yearning of my heart? I fear your disapproval of worldly sentiment, but I must share with you a secret wish, known to none but Our Father: after our passings, I wish for you and I to be *buried in the same grave*. I confess, to my fear of your refusal, that I yearn for our remains to become dust together -- blended by the labours of blind worms -- sleeping side-by-side under a single Scripture-carved stone. O my spirit-husband Alcuin, do I dare dream of our spent bodies at rest together, until we wake to trumpet-blasts on Judgment Day?

Tetta

17: WAITING FOR SPRING

Winter ruled.

Snow covered the partially-rebuilt town of Eid, falling thick and often. Daylight dwindled until there was none, even at noon. Sharp wind and gritty snow lashed against furry winter jackets and thick wool hats.

Halfdan had unofficially ruled the town, and the kingdom, for almost three months.

Many local fighters had joined his army.

Life in Eid was returning to normal, after the disasters of conquest and fire.

Halfdan lived with Yngvild and her mother.

Almost every day, even when snow was falling, Yngvild and Siv would bundle themselves in furs and high boots and leave their temporary shelter for a walk. Arm in arm, they walked the shovel-scraped streets to the newly-rebuilt docks, where teams of ship-builders were working. Sometimes the women would rest on a log bench by the docks. Yngvild would look out at the pale grey-blue water of the fjord, the dancing of the waves, the sea-gulls circling.

With the sharpened hearing of the blind, Siv listened to the sounds from the docks. Sometimes she heard the rattling of oak-planks on sleds. The jokes and complaints and occasional chanted poem from the working men. Sometimes, the men grunting or panting or cursing. The loudest sounds were from axes chopping into cold wood and hammers hitting onto iron splitting-wedges and the long saws.

Sometimes a ship-builder on a rest-break would walk to the women to chat. Sometimes these men would share their bread or sliced onion or salt-milk with Yngvild and Siv, who were both well-liked and respected.

The ship-building was supervised by a local master and his crew of skilled carpenters. Teams of less-skilled, less-paid workers went on foot into the forests to chop down the biggest and straightest oaks, then stripping off the branches and bark. The inner-bark was saved to make rope; the rest was burned. Teams of horses would drag the naked logs on sleds out of the forests and to Eid, where the master ship-builder would chop them by eye-measure into the shapes of keels and stern-posts and bow-posts and ribs. Other logs would be sawed from end to end for planks.

The pieces of the war-ships were propped up on the beach and fastened together with iron spikes. After the skeleton of the ship was in place, it would be covered with overlapping layers of planks. The planks were held in place not with spikes but with bark-rope, which made the ships flexible in rough water. The outer sides of the planks were smeared with a thick layer of tar (made from boiled spruce-tree roots) to seal any gaps.

On Tyrssdays and Freyadays, Eid's central market was open. Yngvild would take her mother there, where Siv enjoyed listening to folk and smelling things. Yngvild would guide Siv through the crowds and across the slushy ground from booth to booth, describing rolls of cloth and iron tools and soap-stone utensils and walrus horns and bees-wax and slaves and sharpening-stones and furs and amber jewellery and salt and wine from the south and Frankish glass. Food-booths sold pickled herring and salt-milk and dried eels and cheese and smoked fish and root-vegetables and dried meats and barley

and dried fruit. Siv would sniff a piece of dried whale-meat, or touch a roll of cloth, or pick up a flaky-skinned onion. Wonderful, vivid smells. Sometimes Yngvild would trade a sliver of silver for two pieces of warm herb-bread.

The shortest and darkest day of the winter was called Yule. "Yule" was also the Old Norse word for "sun". It was said that at Yule, the sun had rolled so far away from the world that it might never return -- a frightening thought. To convince the sun to wheel herself back to the world, bringing spring, Norse folk would offer gifts.

Yule was the biggest fest of the year. A bronze vat of special mead -- brewed with magic herbs, and only drank on this one day of the year -- was carried by slaves into the small, temporary hall that had been built on the site of the old one. They put the vat on a table in the middle of the room, beside a carved, arm-length, walrus-horn statue. The booze was for the men, the statue was for the women. Men would wait in line for a chance to dunk their faces into the sweet brown honey-booze, gulping as much of it as they could before taking breath. Yule-mead was known to give luck to those who drank it in large amounts. Many poems were sang about men who died from drinking too much of it. Only women were allowed to touch the old walrus-horn statue, which was carved in the shape of a hard penis. Women would rub the nipple of a bare breast on the statue, while making a wish to Freyir, the god of male lust, or his sister Freya, goddess of lasting love. Yngvild wished for a divorce.

At midnight, men dressed in beast-masks and beast-costumes ran in through the front door of the new hall, carrying a big bronze statue of a boar-pig. (This was a new, smaller one than King Lambi's, which had been taken stolen by King Njal.) The disguised men -- Haki was one of them, in bear-mask and bear-furs, and Atli, in owl-mask and a suit covered with thousands of sewed-on owl-feathers -- stomped with high kicks into the hall, chanting, "Yule! Spin back the sun for spring! Yule! Spin back the sun for spring!"

They placed the fire-glittering bronze idol in the middle of the room, near the mead-vat and the walrus-horn statue and the Yule-tree. The branches of this pine -- cut from the forest near the sacred waterfall -- were decorated with bits of silver foil and shiny iron bells and sea-shells. The Yule-tree was topped by a seven-pointed star of hammered silver. The base of the Yule-tree was covered by a pile of cloth-wrapped gifts, which Halfdan handed out after midnight.

In the late morning after Yule, a Torsday, a crowd of Eid-folk gathered by a small frozen bog-lake a short walk from the town. Many of them brought children, who played around the legs of the adults and munched on sweet Yule-snacks.

This sacred part of the swamp was near where iron-ore was strip-mined.

Ice was thick over the muddy water of the little lake. Brown plant-stalks with dead leaves stuck up through the surface of the ice. Cold, sharp wind. No hint of sunlight.

Halfdan stood on the ice, blue paint smeared around his eyes, wearing thick and expensive boots and jacket. He was armed and armoured, a shined helmet over his tangled black curls. His battle-hurts had all healed, and his finger-stump was covered with skin.

He was not Fjordane's king, just a temporary war-chief, but Halfdan would rule the government and religion of Fjordane until a king was elected at the yearly Assembly this summer.

At Halfdan's boots, two men lay belly-down on the ice, ankles and wrists tied with bronze wire. Their heads were covered with grey-furred wolf-masks. Each of them lay near a hole cut in the ice. Between them on the ice lay a pair of bent and fire-blackened swords and two similarly-abused shields.

These two men were spies, captured last week near the docks. Under torture, both had confessed to coming to Eid from Sogn to get information about Halfdan's plans and, if possible, to set fire to the half-built war-ships.

Halfdan made a speech to the crowd about the evil of King Njal and the threat posed by Sogn to the traditional freedoms and rights of the folk of Fjordane.

"The outlanders want to hurt us all!" he concluded. "But they can't! Because the gods above are always on Fjordane's side! And why is that? Because in Fjordane we give generously to the gods!"

With that, Halfdan bent to pick up one of the ruined swords.

"Take this, Tor!"

Halfdan tossed the sword in the ice-hole, splashing out some freezing water and floating ice-chunks. It sank to the unseen muddy bottom.

"Take this, Freyir!"

Tossing in the other sword.

"Take this, Freya!"

Now a shield sank down into the grey swamp-water.

"And take this, Baldur!"

The other shield was tossed in.

The crowd cheered.

Yngvild and Siv were close by, with Yngvild describing the action.

One of the wolf-masked captives on the ice sometimes wriggled.

The other was still.

People in the crowd around Halfdan chanted, "Feed the gods! Feed the gods!"

It was near noon.

Halfdan shouted, "Death to Sogn! Death to Sogn!"

The crowd roared as they watched Halfdan bend and grab the back of the jacket of one of the captives, the one who was moving on the ice. Halfdan dragged him towards the ice-hole.

The noise of the celebrating crowd drowned out the sound of frantic screaming from under the tooth-grinned mask as the captive tried to wriggle away from Halfdan's strong grip on his jacket.

Children squealed in excitement.

"Wolves can't swim!" someone yelled loudly, making many others laugh.

"Give it a bath!"

"Feed the gods!"

Halfdan yelled, louder than anyone, "Take this, Odin!" as he held the face-down head of the captive over the hole in the bog-ice. The crowd went quiet, and for a moment the captive's mask-muffled screams could be heard, then Halfdan dunked the wolf-head into the ice-hole and held it underwater.

When the struggling stopped, Halfdan dragged the other captive over. This one did not resist. "Take this, Odin!" And the sacred swamp drank the life of another sacrifice, as it had done for many generations.

When the ritual was done, Halfdan handed out gifts of sweets and toys to the children.

Everybody was happy.

The dead captives were flopped onto sleds by slaves and pulled to Eid, where their meat would be cut away and boiled into Yule stew, the traditional meal that marked the end of the celebrations.

18: A SURPRISE

In the darkness of the morning, Halfdan's army (now over a hundred well-trained fighters) and an equal number of men called in from around Fjordane (much less trained, and on temporary military service) gathered in a snowy field outside the rebuilt town wall.

These unpaid recruits had been training for days in using spears and bows to support the army's core of professionals, in expectation of a spring-time war against Sogn. It was well-known that the war-ships now being built would be used in the spring for an invasion of Sogn.

To the recruits, Halfdan and his veterans were heroes. Young men from little farm-towns, some of them in the kingdom's capital-town for the first time, listened with awe to exaggerated stories of Halfdan's escape from the hall, and the fight at the waterfall, and the now-famous battle of the beacon.

Halfdan stood on a little stage in front of the armed men. Gem-covered silver rings glittered on his hands. Standing beside the war-chief were Atli, the second-in-command, and Haki the Berserk.

Halfdan shouted, "Today we are going to do something called 'wet training'. If you recruits do well at it, there will be a big outdoors party afterwards, with lots of beer for all!"

The army cheered so loudly that startled birds flew from a nearby tree.

Halfdan shouted, "Wet training is not about the right way to use your weapons. By now, you should all know proper spear-use: never swing it side-to-side, always stab forward. Today's training will not take long, but it will involve something that some of you might find hard -- learning how to kill. Most folk do not want to kill. Until I got used to it, neither did I. It can feel strange to use a weapon on somebody who seems just like you. That feeling can freeze your arm, putting yourself and all of your blood-brothers at risk. Today we are here to learn how to ignore the feeling that says not to kill. Because if you can't kill the foe, then you are the foe. My officers will chop down any coward who hangs back in battle."

The recruits were taken to the other side of the town, where the snowy field had been set up for wet training. There were dozens of man-shaped, man-sized dolls -- like those little girls played with, but much bigger -- tied to wood posts. The dolls had realistic faces painted on the front of their heads. Clumps of horse-fur, looking like human hair, were glued to the tops of the doll-heads. The dolls had been dressed in shoes, pants and shirts. From a distance, the big dolls looked like folk.

Each recruit was told to stand on the snow in front of a doll, spear in hand.

Halfdan shouted, "Imagine that this is a foe!"

The impressionable recruits did as their war-chief ordered.

"Now stab him in the guts!"

Most of the recruits, without hesitation, lunged forward and shoved their iron spear-tip into the doll. Inside each of the dolls was a pig-bladder filled with pig-blood. At each recruit's stab, the bladder in the doll burst and the pig-blood sprayed out and ran down the oak spear-shafts and dribbled to the snow.

"Good! But what about you? and you? and you?" -- pointing at recruits with clean spear-tips.

The young men who had hesitated, feeling pressured by their war-chief and the gaze of the others, all now did as they were ordered, poking into their dolls and spilling the hidden pig-blood inside.

All except one. This young farmer from Stryn held his unbloodied spear in trembling hands, as he stared with a ridiculous expression at the doll before him.

Halfdan went to him and said, "What's your name?"

"Torvald, my lord."

"Why are you not stabbing this foe in front of you?"

"I can't."

"Why?"

"It doesn't feel right."

"Don't you think that a fighter should be able to kill?"

"I'm a farmer, not a fighter."

"I rule this kingdom, and I say that you are a fighter -- my fighter. You will kill for me."

"It is wrong to kill men."

"What?"

"It is wrong to kill men."

The fighters who heard that started laughing, some mocking Torvald with girlish voices.

"Don't hurt his very favourite dolly!" one mocked.

"He just wants to kiss it!"

"Mommy, mommy!"

Halfdan said, "Wrong to kill men? That's crazy-talk. The gods want you to kill. I want you to kill. And girls, especially the cute ones, all want a man with enough balls to do his duty. Why do you think you were put on this world? You are going to stab this doll! Or be very sorry. Now!"

Torvald moved his shaking spear-tip towards the doll's belly, touching it, but not hard enough to pierce its shirt.

Halfdan said, "Stab it, don't tickle it."

Torvald was blushing in shame and emotion, but could not stab the doll.

Somebody said, "What's the problem? It's not even a real man."

"I can't," Torvald gasped.

"Then there is only way that you can serve me and the kingdom," Halfdan said.

"How?"

Halfdan turned away from Torvald and said loudly to the others, "The first man to stab this coward will get a silver piece and a job in my bodyguard!"

After a shocked moment, almost a dozen recruits rushed towards Torvald, raising spears dripping with pig-blood. They all tried to be the first to stab Torvald. As Torvald crumpled without a complaint to the snow, other recruits ran at him -- he was stabbed again and again.

The strange young farmer from Stryn lay dead in a patch of red snow, staring blankly up at the grey sky.

Halfdan congratulated Beren, whose spear-tip had been the first to pierce Torvald.

One of the other recruits, also from Stryn, was weeping into his hands.

Halfdan shouted, "Wet training is over. Time to celebrate! The party is at Baldur's Field. Most of you know the way to get there, and those who don't, follow me!"

The army cheered and banged their weapons onto their shields.

They walked away from the field to a trail into the forest, leaving Torvald's snow-sprawled body behind.

A single crow flapped down to it.

At Baldur's Field -- a flat place near the bend of the river running into Eid -- there was a surprise.

No beer.

Instead, the fighters found a huge pile of supplies: knapsacks, skis, bagged tents, iron pots, bags of food, barrels of food and salt-milk and water, weapons, bundles of arrows and more. Most of it was piled onto sleds small enough for a single man to pull.

Halfdan stood on a barrel of salt-milk and shouted, "Sorry for the disappointment! No party!"

Groans from his fighters.

"The most important part of war is tricking the foe," Halfdan continued. "We've made King Njal think that we are going to wait until spring to sail on the new war-ships to attack him. But we're not waiting for spring, not waiting for war-ships. We're going to ski to Sogn, across the glacier. Now!"

19: THE BATTLE OF THE FROZEN RIVER

On the feared glacier called Nis, which covered the mountains between Fjordane and Sogn, cold wind bit at scarf-covered faces and gnawed into layered wool clothes. The Fjordane army skied across plains of old ice, pulling heavy sleds and carrying wooden poles with iron hooks for pulling men from cracks. They sometimes stopped to pull strips of fur onto their skis for shuffling uphill.

It was much colder than down at the fjord.

The glacier was covered by powdery dry snow, swirling over pale blue ice. The brown tips of the mountains in all directions were gripped between white chaos below and low grey clouds. Brown gravel made occasional dark streaks in the blue ice and dry white snow. Some parts of the glacier were jagged and deeply cut.

The army skied in a long single line in the middle-part of the glacier. There the ice was usually flatter and safer.

Occasional boulders were somehow balanced on pillars of ice.

The blank white face of Nis was lined with ice-cracks. Snow swirled down to dark depths, some with ice-spikes waiting at the bottom. Covered with a thin bridge of snow, some of the cracks were invisible.

In some places, the winter sun had melted the ice into patterns of scooped bowls or sharp-tipped waves. Here, the surface would be too rough for skis. The two hundred or so Fjordane fighters walked slowly and in a single file across these rough places with strips of notched reindeer-bone tied to boot-soles for extra grip. Moving was very slow and took a lot of effort. Everybody was tired.

The air was so thin that even thinking took effort. Many men had constant headaches. Most faces were scabbed with frost-sores. Every day, fighters fell on slippery ice and twisted an ankle or broke a wrist.

At night, when the fighters lay in their wind-whipped leather tents, they would often hear the SNAP! of nearby ice-cracks splitting open. Sometimes they heard a thundering boom echoing from distant cliffs as the ice-field shook. Some mornings, men would step out of a tent to see that a new ice-crack had yawned open nearby.

They all wore back-harnesses to pull their heavy sleds. Each man was also roped to the men in front and behind.

Scouts led the way, probing the surface ahead with the long-handled hooks. In good weather, it was usually easy to see any cracks hidden by snow. The snow looked slightly greyish over solid ice and more blue over hidden cracks. In darkness or fog or when snow was falling, the cracks were hard to see. The safest way to move was by stabbing the snow ahead for hidden cracks at each step.

When a crack was found, Halfdan would decide whether to find a way around or jump across. Before jumping across a crack, each fighter would throw across their sled and pack and weapons. After checking the ropes attached to the man in front of him and to the man behind him, the fighter would hop over the blue gap. Occasionally, one would stumble in and have to be pulled out.

By the eleventh day, four fighters had died of injuries or sickness. Each body was put into a scraped hole in the ice, along with weapons. After a chanted prayer, they were covered with ice-chips.

Almost everybody was hurt or sick. The cold wind never stopped its screaming. Gritty snow blasted into eyes. Frost-bite ate some of their toes.

Haki lost a toe.

One night, sleeping in a little tent he shared with Atli, Halfdan awoke to the sound of laughter outside the tent. Grabbing his ice-hook, Halfdan went outside. In the darkness, a man waited. He wore a long red-silk gown, and thick silver bracelets. His thick beard hung under a cruel, sneering face. It was King Njal! One of King Njal's hands was empty; the other held the severed head of King Lambi by the beard, so it hung upside-down. King Lambi's head was not fire-burned or damaged; in fact, it seemed alive. King Lambi's face grimaced with intense emotions; he was trying to speak. King Njal barked at Halfdan, "Coward!" So Halfdan lifted his ice-hook overhead and tried to hit King Njal with it. The foe-ruler laughed, dodging the swipe of the bent and sharpened iron at the shaft-end. Halfdan swung it again and missed again. Laughing, King Njal turned and ran away. Halfdan chased him through the cluster of silent tents. King Njal led him away from the tents, finally stopping on a flat patch of glacier-snow. Stars and comets blazed overhead. Halfdan swung the ice-hook. King Njal grabbed it with his free hand. With an effortless-looking twist of his wrist, King Njal snapped the wooden shaft. The iron hook and some of the broken shaft was held in one of King Njal's hands, while King Lambi's animated head hung from the other. King Njal sneered, "How are you going to hurt me now, black troll?" Without thought, Halfdan said, "I don't need to hurt you -- you are already hurt." King Njal looked down at his leg. On his left thigh, the wool of his pant-leg started to bulge. Something swelled inside the pant-leg, growing and growing. The bulge burst, and the heads of dozens of poisonous snakes twisted out. The long brown snakes growing from the leg started biting at King Njal's body -- one reaching high enough to sink its fangs into King Njal's tongue. King Njal tried to strike the snake-heads with the end of Halfdan's ice-hook, but the vipers were too many and too strong. They lashed around as they bit him again and again. King Njal dropped King Lambi's head to the dark snow. King Njal fell to his knees, loudly panting. The reptile-reek of the snakes was disgusting. King Njal's eyes bulged from his grimacing, pain-twisted face. Then, still trying to hurt the snakes with the ice-hook, he vanished. Only King Lambi's head remained. Halfdan picked it up. It was still trying to talk. Halfdan lifted it close to his ear, straining to hear the weak whispers from the moving lips. With effort, Halfdan could hear the faint words. King Lambi was saying, "Nothing," over and over. "Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing," the head babbled, its eyes rolling around. "Nothing!" Halfdan awoke, in his tent, to the sound of Atli snoring beside him. A dream. What had it meant? He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. In the morning, Halfdan found that the shaft of his ice-hook was broken, and its iron tip was missing, just as in the dream. Halfdan told Atli about it. Atli suspected magic.

In the afternoon of the twelfth day, everybody had taken off their skis and put on bone boot-grips to walk on a narrow strip of flat ice between an ice-wall on one side and a deep drop on the other. The track was steep and narrow and slippery. It was hard for even a healthy man to keep on his feet. A small stumble would usually lead to a slide into the ice-valley, until being caught by a rope. Every time a man fell, it caused danger and delay.

Boots stomped the snow on the trail into dry grainy slush. When a fighter stumbled and tried to stand, he often fell back down again.

Sometimes a sled would fall off the side of the trail. Each falling sled would yank a roped fighter after it, down into the deep ice-canyon. It was hard and scary work to pull a dangling man and sled back up.

One time, a rope broke. The Fjordane-man fell to the bottom. His body looked tiny. A red stain spread around him on the jagged glacier.

Halfdan halted the army for prayers, before the dangerous trek continued.

On top of an ice-ridge, they saw that the ice-field was starting to slope down. Far ahead was a gap in the range of massive, bare-rock mountains. Through the gap, the sight of evergreen forest and fjord-water.

The lower parts of the glacier was strewn with scattered bits of rock. They started to occasionally see the white antlers and bones of reindeer. Occasional puddles of liquid water.

As the filthy and exhausted army trudged downhill from the ice-cap, there were more and more rocks to avoid. Brown plant-stems stuck out from the sun-pocked snow. They crossed a place where wind had blown the snow off the bare rock. After sleeping and skiing and walking on ice for twelve days, the rock felt strangely solid underfoot.

Soon, they were skiing through low bushes and thin trees.

As they approached the town of Sogndal -- capital of the kingdom of Sogn -- they met the foe, waiting for them on the far shore of a frozen river, where the river curved in a "C"-shape. Snow-burdened pines and spruces and an occasional oak-tree lined both sides of the river. The river-ice was bare in some places, covered with drifting snow in others.

Snow was falling.

Archers started the battle. Each Eid archer stood on the shore of the frozen river by a sharpened wood stake stuck into the ground to stop charging horses. These recruits had bundles of arrows stuck tip-down into the snow, close to hand.

As arrows started flying through the snow-storm, whistling across the rivers in both directions, Halfdan and his crowd of fighters jumped from the shore to the river-ice and started running behind raised shields towards the other side. Many fighters slipped where the wind had blown the snow away. Other Fjordane-men fell, clutching arrow-shafts, staying down.

The waiting foe rhythmically pounded their weapons on their shields. The river-ice shook. Snow swirled down. Bronze war-horns blew!

Fjordane arrows made gaps in the Sogn shield-wall. Most of the Sogn-men had to hide their faces behind their shields to block the stinging bits of wood.

Fighters on both sides used shield-straps to support most of the weight of their heavy shields until they got close to the fighting. Then they would shrug off the shoulder-strap and use their left arm to carry and swing the shield.

Most of Halfdans full-time fighters held three light throwing-spears in the same hand they used for their shields. When they got near the foe shield-wall, they slowed to throw these throwing-spears forward. Some of these stabbed into the foe-shields and some bounced away. Some throwing-spears missed the shields and poked into a man.

The foe threw spears too.

When the attackers had almost reached the foe shield-wall, the archers on both sides stopped shooting.

Haki -- not carrying a shield, a bear-skin fur covering his huge shoulders -- was the first to reach the foe's shield-wall. He swung his ax with power, roaring.

The wood and iron and flesh of Halfdan's ragged shield-wall hit hard with a hammering noise into the Sogn army's shield-wall; the ice under-boot shook, as the iron-bristling battle-walls grinded at each other.

Men tried to keep their shields upright and overlapping those on either side.

Spear-fighters held their long spikes overhead and jabbed forward over shield-tops at faces. Sometimes a spear-fighter would duck down to stab under the shields at boots and knees.

Sword-fighters shoved their shields forward and from side to side. When a foe's shield had been pushed aside, the sword-man would stab forward through the narrow gap between the shields. Sword-men also tried to chop at the hands and the spear-shafts of spear-fighters.

Swords and spears rattled on shields in the crowded shove-battling after the first fierce contact. Men leaned into their shields, feeling the hands of other fighter on their backs, pushing, as those at the front tried to heave their shields forward.

Haki struck down many, and stayed unhurt. Nothing touched him. Other Fjordane-men, seeing Haki's luck, followed him with roars that imitated his. (Haki's way of roaring was itself an imitation, of a bear.)

Haki's dripping ax chopped a path through legs and arms and backs, the rest of the Fjordane-army following him towards the brown river-bank of frozen mud.

Sogn spear-men charged through the falling snow at Haki. Haki danced around spear-tips and axed them both down. His Eid-forged weapon mowed through crowds of unlucky Sogn-men towards the foe's banner. It was marked with a picture of a red-tongued wolf's face.

Halfdan fought bravely in the heart of the shield-clash. He shoved forward with boots scrabbling for grip on the gritty trampled snow over slick ice, his sword stabbing at the foe shield-wall from beside his arrow-filled shield.

Men shouted insults, threats, prayers.

Others made wordless howls as they tried to kill strangers.

The smells from torn, steaming bodies.

Snow swirled in the south wind. It drifted down onto fighters and the dead, soon lightly covering the cooling dead.

For a long time, heavy and sharp iron hacked and clanged and men killed and they died. Metal-on-metal blows made clanging rackets and sometimes a shower of brilliant orange sparks. The crunchy slush turned red. The Sogn shield-wall started to stagger backwards, their bruised and sweaty faces looking grim. They were losing.

Now, let us tell of what happened in the battle to a young recruit called Venn the Gentle, a farmer from Stryn. This man had wept at the end of the wet training, because the stabbed recruit left behind on the snow, Torvald, had been his older brother. He was big and strong but, like his brother, he hated violence. Despite his normally-peaceful character, Venn hated Halfdan. During the harsh trek across the glacier, Venn had ached for revenge.

As the battle approached, and the Fjordane army skied through dim forest, Venn thought of Torvald and wondered how his parents had reacted to the news.

When he got to the top of the snow-bank over the river-bank, an officer yelled into Venn's dreamy face, "Wake up! Get your skis off and jump!"

Venn followed the mass of other fighters dropping onto the snow-sheeted ice.

As the armed mob shuffled across the ice, the strongest fighters pushed to the front, while weaker or timid men drifted towards the rear. Venn was far at the back, and slowed even more when arrows started tapping his shield. Around him, Venn saw arrows appearing in the ice and an occasional Fjordane-man.

Venn was so scared that he forgot to throw the throwing-spears. He was still clutching them when he found himself crammed and gasping for breath in the shoving crowd behind the front line and pushed forwards by hands on his back. The top-edge of Venn's shield slammed back onto his bearded chin. He dropped his throwing-spears. His left hand now only held the strap of his shield. It was too crowded for Venn to even lift the long stabbing-spear in his right hand, never mind using it. Even if he could raise the awkward stick, there were too many Fjordane-men between him and the closest foe for him to actually reach one. Venn tried to see ahead through the staggering crowd of iron-bristling men. Over the shields, Venn saw glimpses of strangers' bearded faces glaring with hate.

A red-faced Fjordane officer shouted at Venn, "Push! Push the man in front of you! Push!"

Venn started pushing the back of a man who was pushing a man who was pushing a man who was fighting at the front of the shield-wall.

Venn kept his eyes shut and pushed. He tried to stay to the rear of the shield-wall, but not so far back that he was at risk from arrows and throwing-spears. He felt sick. He had not used his spear yet. He had not tried to.

He saw dead men of both armies, sprawled on red river-ice.

Venn slipped on a piece of flesh on the snow, almost falling. He saw a piece of lung by his boots.

Venn tasted his own tears.

For some reason, the shield-wall battle split into two separate fights with an almost-empty gap in between. Venn found himself standing almost alone in the gap, with no Fjordane-fighters between himself and the Sogn camp. Two Sogn sword-men behind wolf-painted shields were also in the gap. They grinned as they strode fast towards solitary Venn. Venn whimpered and looked to each side. Every nearby Fjordane-man was too busy fighting to be likely to help him.

When the two sword-men got close to him, Venn whimpered behind his trembling shield and tried to jab his spear forward.

One of the veteran Sogn-men chopped his sword at its shaft, breaking it.

Venn dropped the rest of the spear-shaft and said, "I surrender!"

Both enemies said, "Ha!"

They lunged at him.

As they did, a spear plunged into the side of one of them. The foe gasped and fell to the blood-sprayed ice, groaning and clutching the spear.

Halfdan followed his spear-throw with a sword-charge at the other foe threatening Venn. Halfdan hacked and hacked at the desperately-defending Sogn-man.

Halfdan barked, "Stab this man!"

Venn blinked.

Halfdan said, "You! Help me!" Halfdan was hurt on his shoulder and face and back. His sword-arm was tired and his shield was almost cracked in two. He shoved the rattling pieces of the shield into the Sogn-man's shield and blocked the foe's sword-stab with the blade of his Eid-forged sword.

Venn lifted his spear and wailed a high wordless cry as he stumbled past Halfdan's back to stab at the foe. Venn's spear-tip poked into the foe's shoulder.

"Good!" Halfdan said.

The Sogn-man dropped his spear and his shield lowered.

Halfdan barked at Venn, "Finish him!"

Venn hesitated.

Halfdan said, "Now!"

Venn snarled and lunged, poking his spear into the foe's belly.

The foe clutched at the spear-shaft, slowly kneeling to the red snow.

Halfdan swung his sword up, swung it down. The foe's head spun to the river-ice under twin sprays of blood. The headless kneeling body collapsed.

Halfdan saw the almost-undefended camp of the foe ahead, and the taunting banner, and he ran forward with a crazed yell.

Venn yelled, "My lord! Do not leave me!"

Venn started running after his whooping war-chief, then tripped over the headless body and fell onto the snow, landing by the bodiless head.

He crawled towards the closest pile of drift-snow.

Later, as the battle kept on raging, Venn was still hiding there. He stank of his fear-piss.

When he finally raised his head from the snow-pile to look around, he saw that the battle had moved away. The fighting was now mainly on the far shore, at the bottom of a forest-covered hill.

Venn dropped his head back down. He started sobbing and fell to his side on the crunchy snow. Pulling legs to chest and pushing hands over his face, Venn trembled and moaned, "Torvald," his executed brother's name, again and again.

The Fjordane shield-wall soon shattered the Sogn shield-wall at the bottom of the little hill. On a tree-trunk by the top of the hill, the wolf-face banner of Sogn attracted the glory-hungry Fjordane-men.

Halfdan followed Haki's whooping, ax-swinging charge uphill through the swirling snowfall. Halfdan tried to protect Haki as the berserker cleared a path through the foes with a chipped, unstoppable ax.

Somebody threw a spear at Haki, who caught it in mid-air with one hand, then threw it back. The spear tore right through its owner's torso, then into a tree-trunk; the dead Sogn-fighter hung limply from his spear stuck in the tree.

Another foe jabbed a spear at Haki's belly. Haki jumped, spreading his legs over the spear-tip, then dropped down onto the spear-shaft, knocking it out of the foe's hands.

Haki swung his ax back over his head, killing a foe behind him, then swung it forward, chopping through the helmet and skull and jaw of another foe, scattering teeth all around.

Both of Haki's arms were bloody to the shoulder.

None of the gore was his.

Some Sogn-fighters started fleeing away over the hill-top and south.

"It is all over!" some shouted.

Near the top of the hill, Haki found a dead young man in very expensive-looking clothes and armour. The body had an arrow stuck deep in the jaw.

Haki kicked the body and shouted, "This must have been their leader! I bet it's Egil!" He ripped down the wolf-face banner hanging above the body. He snarled, "Death to Sogn! Death to everybody!" He spat out a mouthful of pink spit onto the banner. Then he tossed it aside and went back to crazed violence.

The last of the Sogn army now turned and tried to get away. Tossing aside weapons and helmets and armour and pride as they fled. Some climbed trees. Archers found them, brought them back to earth.

Haki screamed, "I can't be killed, you doomed losers!" as he chased panicked foes into the dim evergreen forest.

Fjordane won the battle.

And the war.

(Local Sogn-folk soon re-named the river "Battle River." It's still called that, even to this day, in memory of Halfdan's famous victory.)

Despite Haki's efforts, some of the hurt or surrendered foes were alive. Halfdan and Atli questioned the prisoners and got some news.

The fancy-clothed body, that Haki had found under the foe's banner with an arrow through the jaw, had been King Njal's younger son, Bjaaland the Proud.

King Njal's older son, Egil the Beard-Puller, had run away from the battle as soon as it was obvious that the Sogn forces were losing. As he had scrambled up from the river-ice to the frozen mud of the shore, a spear thrown by a Fjordane-fighter had hit Egil in a buttock. Egil had fled into the forest with a bleeding ass.

King Njal had died a few days ago, in Sogndal, from his infected leg. The tooth-scratch from the fire-blackened skull had slowly, painfully killed him. King Lambi had revenged his own death!

Atli said, "Fate is strange."

Halfdan said, "What do we do now?"

"I suggest we do the same here as we are doing in Fjordane," Atli said. "Njal is dead, one of his sons is dead too and his cowardly other son is probably in Sweden by now. The Sogn government is gone. You need to rule this kingdom as a war-chief until a king is elected. And at election-time, if you put yourself forward, you can be elected king of both here and Fjordane. If you want that. Unite the two kingdoms, under your rule."

"Could I really be elected?"

Atli shrugged. "The nobles will complain, each of them thinking he has a better right to be king than you. But the nobles are divided and don't have many fighters. As long as you rule well for the next few months, the nobles are not likely to be able to agree on single candidate or to stay united behind him."

"I don't think that I want to be a king. I'm a fighter and a poet, that's all."

"You don't have to decide or declare anything now. Rule Sogn and Fjordane well until it's near election-time, then decide if you want to try to become king."

"Fine."

The town of Sogndal fell to the Fjordane army without a fight.

"Where is he?" Halfdan said.

"Where is who?" a Sogn-man said.

"Njal!"

"He is dead."

"Where?"

King Njal's huge burial-mound of frozen dirt was twice as tall as a man and longer than a whale. Halfdan ordered slaves to build a huge fire on it. When the fire had burned long enough to thaw the mound, Halfdan ordered the slaves to put out the fire and "dig him out." It took the group of Sogn-slaves most of the night to reach King Njal's body. "Be careful," Halfdan said. "I don't want him to fall apart." King Njal's body had been buried in a war-ship. The body was sitting on a tall, decorated chair on the buried ship's deck. Also found inside the burial-mound were piles of furniture and treasure and a sacrificed slave-girl. "All I want is Njal's body," Halfdan said, standing on the lip of the open grave above the slaves digging inside. "Leave everything else down there. Let the slave-girl sleep in peace." King Njal's body was carefully dragged up from the broken grave. It was pale grey and stiff and -- a week after burial -- already rotting. It was wrapped in a red silk gown, which was ripped in parts by the shovels of the sweating slaves. King Njal's grimacing, yellow-bearded face showed unbearable pain. Held clutched in King Njal's hands was an iron ice-hook with a splintered wood shaft -- the one that had disappeared in the dream on the glacier! They questioned a Sogn-man -- learning that the night of Halfdan's strange dream had been the night of King Njal's death!

"So it was his ghost I fought," Halfdan said, holding the broken piece of ice-hook and staring at it with wonder.

Atli said, "I knew magic was involved."

Halfdan said, "King Njal predicted what I was going to do." He looked down at the foul, reeking corpse sprawled on dirty snow. He kicked its grey face. "But Njal wasn't strong enough to stop fate."

"Nobody is."

Halfdan pulled the silk wrapping away from the body's left leg. There was a sudden sickening smell, as they looked at the deep hole that disease-demons had chewed from King Njal's thigh; now filled with scabs and crusty pus and dozens of squirming white maggots.

"Look what King Lambi did," Halfdan said, pleased.

King Njal's body was thrown into a pen with seven pigs. They refused to eat it at first. But when the pigs were denied their regular feeding, the hungry beasts changed their minds. They ate all of King Njal except the skeleton, breaking open the larger bones to lick out marrow.

Slaves burned the bones, dumped the ashes in an out-house.

Then the king-fed pigs were killed. Their bodies were tossed into the hole in the burial-mound. The hole in the grave was filled in again with dirt. The anonymous slave-girl and the seven king-fed pigs would sleep together in the huge grave built for King Njal -- and they continue to sleep there, undisturbed, even to this day.

Atli said, "Why are you doing this?"

Halfdan could not explain, other than by saying, "I had to do something. I couldn't let his ghost stay in there, safe, laughing at me! No, can't allow that."

"You need rest," Atli said.

"Later."

Halfdan, very drunk, startled the shovel-carrying slaves when he raised his face to the cloudy night-sky to yell, "Lambi! Is that enough? Are you proud of me? Is it finished? Is that enough revenge? Am I free now?"

There was no answer.

Halfdan, drinking constantly, had Atli organize the occupation of the defeated kingdom. Halfdan had ordered a "no looting, no rape" policy, "to give the Sogn-folk no reason to rebel against us". Again and again, Atli had to try to discipline Haki for forbidden acts involving Sogn's treasures or girls.

Halfdan was usually drunk and distracted. He complained about missing Yngvild and Siv. He sent messengers to them and to his relatives in Os, inviting them to visit Sogn as soon as the winter ice-bergs melted and sailing was safer. Halfdan, bored and lonely, spent much time boozing and making poems with disreputable local characters in King Njal's impressive hall. The Sogn-hall looked much like King Lambi's, with long feasting-tables and a long fire-place stretching from the heavy, oak-wood front doors to the platform at the other end for the king's table. Like in King Lambi's hall, the heads of King Njal's defeated foes sat on shelves on the ceiling-posts.

(King Lambi's head was not there among them; after the tooth-scratch, King Njal had ordered the black, grinning skull tied to a rock and dumped into Eid's fjord. The head of King Lambi rests on the sea-floor and plays no more part in this saga.)

Most nights, as the winter in Sogndal slowly passed, Halfdan sat in the Sogn-hall on King Njal's throne -- which had two posts rising from the back, each carved and painted to look like Tor's laughing face -- chanting poems with new friends and guzzling imported wine until very late.

What now?

20: INTERVIEW WITH THE BISHOP *

[Complete and unedited transcript of interview between Bishop Higbold of Bambury and Sister Leoba of Melrose, April 17, 793.]

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Sister Leoba of Melrose? Please come in. Yes.

SISTER LEOBA: *[Unintelligible.]*

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Please come in. We are Bishop Higbold.

SISTER LEOBA: *[Unintelligible.]*

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Please speak louder, we cannot understand.

SISTER LEOBA: I can't see much. My eyes hurt. The light hurts after so long in the dark. Are we alone, Your Reverence?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: We are with our scribe, Brother Ecgfrith, who will write down what that we say this morning. Both of us are sworn to confidentiality. This interview is as confidential as a confessional. Sit on the other side of this desk, please. You can blow that candle out, if the light bothers your eyes.

SISTER LEOBA: Thank you, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Now, we understand that you are now being kept under a severe excommunication. You have been, for defiance and unauthorized attempts to leave, kept alone in a dark miserium for the past three months and one day? Is that right?

SISTER LEOBA: Three months? It was just after New Year when I was put there.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: It is April 17 today. Is something wrong?

SISTER LEOBA: My eyes, Your Reverence. The light hurts them.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: I see. Brother Ecgfrith, close that curtain. Is that better?

SISTER LEOBA: Yes, Your Reverence. Thank you.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You should dip that cloth into the water-jug and wipe your eyes. Wipe away that crusty mess.

SISTER LEOBA: Yes, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: We understand that before you were put in isolation, you spent a few months under a less severe form of excommunication. You must be tired of punishment by now.

SISTER LEOBA: Yes, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Well, Sister Leoba, co-operate with us in this interview, and we will see what we can do about easing the terms of your excommunication. We can tell Abbess Tetta how to treat you. Let us help each other. Are you familiar with these kinds of interviews? Do you know what kind of information we are looking for?

SISTER LEOBA: When I was at Iona, Bishop Aethred would visit us every year like this, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: And when you answered Bishop Aethred's questions in Iona, did you ever mention that your Monk's robe concealed the body of a daughter of Eve?

SISTER LEOBA: No.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: We expect much more honesty in your answers to us today. It is our duty to determine the spiritual health of the convent, and you will help us. Now, do you have any complaints about your treatment here?

SISTER LEOBA: No, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: We wish to hear about Abbess Tetta. Is she ruling the convent properly?

SISTER LEOBA: Yes, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Has she been too harsh on you?

SISTER LEOBA: No. She has to follow the Rules, and the orders of her superiors. Abbess Tetta is pious and tries to be fair, and I have grown to admire her. My sufferings come from God, not that good Christian.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Nobody is without any weaknesses or sins. There must be something about her that is not as it appears?

SISTER LEOBA: [*Unintelligible.*]

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What?

SISTER LEOBA: I do not wish to inform against Abbess Tetta.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: But you wish to provoke us? Remember that every word you speak is recorded by my scribe and will be sent to the appropriate eyes in Rome. Tell us the sins and faults of Abbess Tetta, so that we may help her spiritual improvement.

SISTER LEOBA: No, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: So you remain defiant! You wish to go back to your dark and silent miserium?

SISTER LEOBA: No, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You do not have to go back there. You can help us.

SISTER LEOBA: I will not give you evidence against Abbess Tetta.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Why do you not trust us, your Bishop?

SISTER LEOBA: For one thing, because you stole Lindisfarne's olive oil.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What?

SISTER LEOBA: I heard that you took the last of our olive oil for your own use. How can the Sisters do proper services without olive oil? Is that how to treat the keepers of the tomb of Saint Cuthbert? And what kind of Bishop, pray, wears a silk shirt with dragons stitched to it? Or does that to his fingernails? I can see enough to tell what kind of Priest you are. One serving this world more than the next.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: The Devil has possessed you.

SISTER LEOBA: [*Laughs.*] The Virgin freed me. There is nothing that anybody can offer to me or threaten me with anymore. I must walk in the Holy Land, or die, and someday I will do one thing or the other, no matter what happens here, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You could serve the Virgin Mary in the scriptorium, making beautiful books to bring her fame to distant pagans, or to adorn the best Northumbrian churches. You could design and make a work to rival even the Gospels of Saint Cuthbert. We say that is God's task for you, the reason He implanted such talent in you. Your article "On Virginity" was persuasively written, in Latin that would make Cicero jealous. I can tell you that it was perused with approval in Rome, at the very highest level. We are sure that you wish to go back to using your God-granted gifts for His eternal glorification, through scholarship and art. Tell us what we need to hear, for the good of the Church, and we will take you out of that pit and back among the other Nuns. All excommunication will be lifted. Lindisfarne might soon get a new Abbess, one more understanding.

SISTER LEOBA: No, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: If you told me something very interesting, I could arrange a special dispensation from Rome, letting you go on Pilgrimage. How does that sound, Sister Leoba?

SISTER LEOBA: No, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Sister Leoba, your position is most confusing to us. What was this vision of the Virgin you spoke of?

SISTER LEOBA: I have had many visions of Her. Since I first changed from girl to woman. Mary comes to me when I am in trouble, singing wisdom to me. She knows everything I feel and think. Sometimes I seem to be alone, but Her voice sings in my ears and I know She is nearby.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What does She sing to you about?

SISTER LEOBA: Suffering. How it leads to Redemption. When Mary sings, I know that my pains are echoes of Her own, and that always comforts me.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What does She look like?

SISTER LEOBA: She is gowned in sky-blue. Her face is under a long black veil, but it glows with a golden light like a full moon. And tears of blood fall down from under Her veil to splash on her bare pale feet as she steps towards me. She was with me in the miserium last night. Comforting me.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: And does the Virgin Mary sing to you about Pilgrimage?

SISTER LEOBA: She wants me to go to the Holy Land, so that I can walk in the same places that She did. See the same ground and mountains, feel the same biblical sun on my face. Jerusalem. That experience will transform me.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Speaking of transformations, we have been told that you are still a virgin. You might lose that precious treasure on such a long and dangerous journey. Before the decision at Whitby, there were towns in France and Lombardy where, we are told, almost every common whore was an Englishwoman who left home on Pilgrimage, before falling into traps of the Devil.

SISTER LEOBA: I hope to avoid such a fate, Your Reverence.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What about robbers and pirates? Unfriendly states? And you know that the Holy Land is infested by the descendants of Christ's condemners, the wily Jew, and fanatical Muslims. Men of these dark races will swarm around you, with evil intent and the filthy lusts of damned souls. Think about rape, slavery, murder.

SISTER LEOBA: Such suffering would bring me additional Blessings later, when I reach Heaven.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What does the Virgin want you to do in Jerusalem?

SISTER LEOBA: Walk in Her footsteps.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: How will you know exactly where the Virgin walked, 800 years ago? The Emperor Vespasian knocked down the entire city, if I remember my readings of Tacitus correctly, and Jerusalem had to be completely rebuilt. It has been rebuilt many times since then. All the old roads in Jerusalem are surely buried by now, covered up by new roads going in different directions, and you will never be able to find the exact places that the Virgin walked. But I do not wish to argue. I am here only to help you, and to help Abbess Tetta. You mentioned, with some bitterness, the controversy over the olive oil. You have only heard part of the story. Did the gossip mention that the reason I took it was because I was given a direct order from King Aethelred? It is important for him to properly celebrate Mass at Bambury with the royal family and his knights and his

Bishop, and so he ordered me to take Lindisfarne's oil if there was a chance of the Bambury supply running out. That was what happened. I had no choice in the matter. I left a sufficient amount of olive oil with your Abbess, and then, a few weeks later, when the supply ship came into port at last, I returned all of the oil I had borrowed.

SISTER LEOBA: You did? There is enough olive oil here again?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: [*Laughs.*] My dear Leoba, of course. It was just a temporary measure. I explained all that to Abbess Tetta at the time, but perhaps failed to make myself sufficiently clear. And gossips always exaggerate. However, the blame for any confusion or miscommunication is mine, and I apologize to all the Sisters here.

SISTER LEOBA: I see.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Sister Leoba, I know that for the sort of woman who is strong-willed enough to leave her family for the monastic life, it is difficult to now strive for meekness and obedience. The reason why you must listen carefully to me, must obey me, is not because I am superior and you inferior. In the eyes of our Father, we are both lowly sinners. The reason why you must obey Abbess Tetta, and why she is supposed to obey me, and why I obey His Supreme and Apostolic Holiness, is linked to the doctrine of original sin. The need for a --

SISTER LEOBA: The need for a hierarchy of authority is a consequence of man's corrupted nature, and is both punishment and remedy for our sinful nature. I have read that its other justification is the doctrine of apostolic succession: Christ gave divine authority to his Disciples, who passed it to the Apostles, who gave it to the first Priests, who passed it on to Bishops; and you happen to be a Bishop.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You are learned, yet lacking in sense. Predicting my arguments and spitting them back at me is clever, but how does it help you or anybody? To achieve good works that will shine forever in tribute to Christ, God, and the Virgin, we are told not to speak useless words, and to confess our sins to God every day with sighs and tears, and to hate our own will. Good works in this world and the next come from obeying our superiors and humbling ourselves and raising our eyes only to Heaven. Does that describe you, Leoba? You seem to love your own will. You speak more often from pride than piety. You often disobey your superiors. That is the heart of this problem: will, pride and disobedience. The ecclesiastical council of Whitby prescribed, over two decades ago, that every Nun shall remain where she has been placed. Where she has taken on the duties of God, there shall she fulfill them before God. But that means nothing to you.

SISTER LEOBA: I am sorry about my actions. I want to be a good, obedient Nun.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You do?

SISTER LEOBA: When I return to England from Pilgrimage.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: [*Laughs.*] Leoba, you are outrageous.

SISTER LEOBA: May I ask a question, Your Reverence?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Yes.

SISTER LEOBA: You mentioned that King Aethelred still rules. What happened to the pretender, Osred?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You have missed a lot of news in your excommunication. Osred's men abandoned him. King Aethelred found Osred the Magnificent hiding in a hole in the ground at a pig-farm.

SISTER LEOBA: He is dead now?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Of course. Why such interest in him? There has been no shortage of pretenders to the throne in the past few troubled years, and most come to the same end.

SISTER LEOBA: There was a rumour that Osred, as king, might have revoked the law against female Pilgrimage.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Ah. That was a false rumour, spread by his desperate supporters. I know that if Osred had somehow managed to take the throne, his first concern would have been replenishing the treasury and stopping the Mercians and South-Picts and Scots from nibbling away at our borders. No, opening up a long-resolved controversy, against the opposition of the Bishops and most of the Abbots and Abbesses, was not likely.

SISTER LEOBA: It doesn't matter now. The law will not change, at least not in my lifetime.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: True. But there are ways around the law. There are ways for us to arrange a special dispensation for you to go to Jerusalem.

SISTER LEOBA: If I betray Abbess Tetta.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Sister Leoba, you misjudge me. I am not Abbess Tetta's enemy, nor yours. My taste in clothes may differ from yours, but remember the Proverb about a book and its cover. Sister Leoba, I believe in your visions, your beautiful visions of the Virgin; I know in my heart that they are real and meaningful.

SISTER LEOBA: You believe?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: If I had never heard of similar cases, in France and Sicily, perhaps I would be more sceptical. But there is no doubt that the Virgin has appeared to women in other lands. Why is it so strange that She should now make an appearance to you in Northumbria?

SISTER LEOBA: Thank you, Your Reverence. [*Sobbing.*] Oh, thank you for believing. [*Unintelligible.*] To finally have someone in authority believe me, Your Reverence, after all this time, means so much. Even Abbess Tetta doubted me.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Thank you, Sister Leoba, for sharing your beautiful visions with us. We want you to understand that we sincerely want to help you reach the Holy Land. By helping you such, we will be surely helping the Virgin, in her mysterious ways.

SISTER LEOBA: Oh, yes.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: But for us to help you, Leoba, it is necessary for you to submit to our authority as Bishop. We cannot help a Nun who spits defiance in our face.

SISTER LEOBA: I am so sorry, Your Reverence. I wished no disrespect.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Of course not. We see that now. All we ask is that you now speak, openly and honestly, without fear or hope of favour, the truth, the complete truth, and nothing else. For the good of the Church. I am sure that you have read Saint Benedict: "An Abbess should show her flock of Nuns what is holy by her deeds more than by her words; she should explain the commandments of God to intelligent Nuns by words, but to simple Nuns by actions." That is why we have been commanded by His Holiness to learn about the actions of Abbess Tetta.

SISTER LEOBA: So you can help her?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: So we can help her, Leoba. Would you like a cup of water? I'll pour myself one too. Here you go, Sister.

SISTER LEOBA: Thank you.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: What should we know about Abbess Tetta?

SISTER LEOBA: You will ask Rome for a special dispensation for my Pilgrimage?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: If you tell us what we want to hear. We promise! Leoba, just think of visiting the Holy Land, as the Virgin wishes!

SISTER LEOBA: Well, I already told you that Abbess Tetta is kind, and pious, and runs the convent well. It takes a lot of energy and dedication, to guide us as she has.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Yes. Her many strengths will all be described when we write to Rome. But we need more than strengths to make a complete picture.

SISTER LEOBA: She has only one weakness or sin that I have seen. Excessive pride.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Ah. How does Tetta's sinful pride manifest itself?

SISTER LEOBA: In her scholarship. She gives the impression that it is not enough for her to serve the Lord as an Abbess. She has pretensions to being a great scholar as well. Which she is not. Her writings are often full of errors of doctrine, and sometimes there are even grammar mistakes too.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: It is no sin to lack genius.

SISTER LEOBA: But if, lacking genius, one attempts to deceive others into thinking otherwise?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: How does she try to deceive?

SISTER LEOBA: One example is this. Every day, Abbess Tetta rests in her office between afternoon Mass and dinner. She likes to have a younger Nun read a classic book to her while she stretches out on a little couch. Sometimes it seems that she has fallen asleep while her companion is reading. But if a mistake is made in the reading, Abbess Tetta's eyes will open and she will correct the Nun. This has happened so many times, that she has developed a reputation among the Nuns for knowing classic texts so well that she can hear a mistake even while asleep.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: I too have heard about Abbess Tetta's gift.

SISTER LEOBA: It is not a gift. It is a trick. She pretends to sleep, and pretends to wake when she hears a mistake. To impress others. A deception, inspired by her pride.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: How do you know that she pretends to sleep?

SISTER LEOBA: Because I have been the Nun reading to her, and I watched her. When she decided to pretend to fall asleep, she changed the pattern of her breathing. It became slow and deep, like a person who is really sleeping. But she missed something that sleeping people do. Their eyes move under their eyelids. The bump of the eye's retina moves around under the skin of the eyelid when somebody is really asleep. Abbess Tetta just closed her eyes and stared straight ahead.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Did she pretend to wake up when you made a reading mistake?

SISTER LEOBA: I didn't make any reading mistakes. If I had, I'm sure that she would have pretended to wake up, just to impress me, and that would have been a sin of pride and deception.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: A very minor one, if it had actually happened. Tell us something more.

SISTER LEOBA: When she was lecturing the Nuns about the Millennium, she told us that the first Year of Our Lord began with the day of the birth of Jesus Christ. I pointed out her error, in that the first Year of Our Lord began not with His birth, but His immaculate and sinless Conception. The authorities are consistent that the nine months that He spent inside Mary's womb are part of the Christian Age -- how could they not be? -- but Abbess Tetta refused to admit any error. From pride.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Anything else?

SISTER LEOBA: I can give you many other examples of her excessive pride.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Like the examples you just gave? That is not what we want!

SISTER LEOBA: What do you want, Your Reverence?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Do you understand nothing? I want evidence that Tetta is stealing from the Church! Or sneaking in lovers! Or reading forbidden books! Dumb peasant, tell me Tetta is a heretic, who thinks the Father is a different substance than the Son! We want to hear of Tetta and pagan sacrifices! Something illicit, something His Holiness would be shocked to read about. And you reveal how she supposedly takes fake naps and is, in your opinion, confused about the calendar.

SISTER LEOBA: I told you everything I know. If Abbess Tetta has other sins, they are hidden. That is the truth.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Peasant fool. Get out. This interview is over. You are useless and crazy and dull. We are tired of seeing your ugly cow-face, smelling you. Your Sisters are outside, to take you back to the miserium. Give my best to the Holy Virgin, the next time She drops by to sing ballads.

SISTER LEOBA: What about the special dispensation? To see the Holy Land?

BISHOP HIGBOLD: You broke your side of the arrangement.

SISTER LEOBA: I told the truth!

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Did we ask for the truth? Return to the dark and silence and your hallucinations. We will tell Abbess Tetta to keep you locked in the miserium until we return for next year's interviews. We hope you will be more helpful then.

SISTER LEOBA: A year in there! [*Screams.*] Jerusalem! You're no Christian! [*Spits.*]

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Sisters, come in! Grab her! Both of you, grab onto her!

SISTER LEOBA: Demon! Hypocrite! He is a demon!

SISTER WILTHBURGA: She actually attacked you, Your Reverence? Tsk. Ellen, hold her legs. Tighter. Yeah. Is this trouble-maker going back to the hole?

SISTER LEOBA: Dragon-sleeved demon! I knew it by your clothes! Deceiver!

SISTER WILTHBURGA: Shut up, you thing. [*Unintelligible.*] Twist that foot, Ellen, if she keeps kicking.

BISHOP HIGBOLD: Drag her back. Until next year, Sister Leoba. Brother Ecgfrith, stop writing.

21: A HIDDEN FOE

Now we shall tell of Venn the Coward. Shocked by Halfdan's cruel execution of his older brother, Torvald, and by the gruesome events of battle, Venn's character had changed. There was almost always a clanging noise deep in his ears. Sometimes, when he was alone, he also heard mocking voices. Venn always felt tired. He tried to avoid his fellow veterans. When somebody tried to start conversation with him, their words often seemed irrelevant and irritating. Many things irritated him. At night, trying to sleep in a Sogndal-house that had been turned into a fighters-barracks, the sound of other Fjordane-men talking sounded like the grunting of dumb, annoying beasts.

Any noise made it hard for Venn to sleep, so he was sometimes too tired to do his military duties properly. He was lucky that no officer inspected him closely, because the tip of his spear was starting to rust from lack of oiling and sharpening. Once, when guarding the caged camp outside Sogndal where political prisoners were crammed, Venn fell into a deep sleep; luckily, he was woken up by another farm-boy recruit, not by an officer.

Venn's right arm hurt, especially when he remembered the battle and belly-stabbing that Sogn-man. Sometimes, his right hand would go limp and whatever was in it would fall to the ground.

Sometimes, random laughter would burst from Venn's lips. Sometimes, he told jokes that nobody else found even slightly funny. The jokes were senseless or childish. Venn had never been popular; now, when he was so strange, some fighters started to actively avoid him.

Venn paid less and less attention to folk and the world around him -- obsessed with memories of wet training and battle and the CLANGING! in his ears and the invisible, mocking voices in his mind. And he was obsessed with Halfdan, full of wanting revenge on that ugly, black-faced, bloody-handed tyrant.

Nobody in Sogn knew that Torvald had been his brother. Nobody knew that Venn wanted revenge -- was aching to kill Halfdan. But Venn knew that there were obstacles to revenge. First, there were usually many bodyguards near Halfdan at all times. Second, even if he had a chance to strike Halfdan, Venn did not know if he would be able to do it. His disturbed mind might go blank, or his arm might freeze or go limp. Venn still hated violence, and did not know if he would be able to hurt somebody again, even his brother's killer. Third, if Venn was able to get close enough to Halfdan and was able to kill him, what then? Venn would be caught. He had heard about cruel ways of killing: the blood-worm (guts pulled out and wrapped around a tree-trunk), the blood-eagle (lungs pulled out from cuts in the back), and even worse ends.

When his mind was quiet enough for him to think, Venn would try to imagine a way to both kill Halfdan and escape slow death by torture himself.

22: YNGVILD COMES TO SOGN

When the spring-weather was warm enough to make sailing safe, Yngvild left Siv in the care of a kindly neighbour (who was training to be a healer, and was awed by Siv's fame in that art). Yngvild got onto a trading-ship for Sogndal.

Except for two armed slaves (middle-aged men with families in Eid) for protection from violence, she was alone. As mentioned earlier, Halfdan had sent messengers to Eid and Os asking his loved ones to visit him in his conquered kingdom. Uncle Harald's leg was aching too much to let him sail so far; Aunt Anna had not wanted to leave her husband behind, alone in the house; Halfdan's foster-brothers and foster-sisters (who were also his cousins) were all too busy with farms and children; and Uncle Gunnar and Aunt Ragnhild were very angry at Halfdan, blaming him for recklessly causing the death of their son, Fisk, at the battle of the beacon.

Yngvild had spent an anxious winter. Until the messenger arrived -- weeks after Halfdan and his army had sneaked away without her -- she had had no way of knowing if he was still alive or not. Her relief at hearing the good war-news had been mixed with still-smouldering anger over how he had left without telling her. It had been very rude. After all, he knew that Yngvild had been abandoned by her husband, two years ago, and Halfdan should know better than do anything that might make her worry about him doing the same. Her mother had agreed that Halfdan should have told her that he was leaving Eid, but Siv had then surprised Yngvild by defending Halfdan -- the first time she had ever done that -- by saying, "He did not do it to hurt you. He needed to keep his plans secret from Njal, and he thought it safest if he told nobody, with no exceptions, even you." By the spring thaw, when sunlight finally came back, Yngvild's fury had mostly melted away, replaced by excited anticipation to see him again.

Yngvild had heard that Halfdan was in a position to make himself king of Fjordane and/or Sogn. She daydreamed about being a queen -- powerful, finely-dressed and respected by all. Married to a famous king.

The trading-ship's deck was piled with bundles of beast-furs collected in the winter forests. The furs were covered for protection with butter-smeared tarps (the butter made the cloth waterproof). The furs would be traded in southern lands for luxury goods like gems and silk and wine.

It took two days of sailing west along the fjord to reach the Endless Ocean. The ship was beached at night, and Yngvild slept in a little tent near the tent of her bodyguards, far from the tents of the sailors. At the Endless Ocean -- known to be infested by ice-bergs even in the summer -- the ship sailed south for two days through heavier waves, approaching Sogn-fjord. As the trading-ship started to turn east into the fjord, those on board could see that three war-ships had recently left the fjord. The three war-ships were heading to the south-west -- away from the Norse shore, into open sea.

The trading-ship Yngvild had hired took three days to sail east along Sogn-fjord to Sogndal. Yngvild stepped onto the dock of the capital of the conquered kingdom, heart beating harder at the thought that Halfdan would soon be in her arms. But she was disappointed. Halfdan was not in Sogndal. He had been in one of those three ships that had left the fjord just before Yngvild's ship had reached it.

Atli was in charge of the government until Halfdan returned.

Yngvild spoke to him inside the hall. "Where did he go?"

Atli said, "This is secret, so don't tell anybody. We were having problems with our fighters. Because we didn't let them loot the town, or any of the other towns in Sogn. And we executed a couple of men for rape. There was a lot of grumbling about that, and some in the army were talking about mutiny if they didn't get rewarded for their bravery at the frozen river and for all the hard work they did after."

"So?"

"So Halfdan decided to take the complainers on an outland raid, for some action and a chance for loot."

"Where are they going?"

Atli said, "There is an old retired pirate around here who was working for King Njal when we took over. He had told Njal about some islands to the far west -- where folk have lots of wealth, but also weak men and slow ships, apparently. No Norse folk have raided over there before, but it sounds very promising. The idea of this raid was one of the reasons why Njal and Gunvald killed Lambi, because Lambi wouldn't join."

"What are these islands called?"

"Most of the folk who live in the islands are called Picts, and call their islands Pictland. But the pirate we talked with said that the Pict-ruled islands are part of a larger chain of islands, called England, that goes far to the south."

"So Halfdan is going to raid the Picts, then come back here?"

"No. After the raid, he will sail to Eid. Halfdan needs to show everybody that he still rules Fjordane's government, after being away for so much of the winter."

Yngvild wailed, "He is sailing back to Eid afterwards?"

"That's the plan."

"Freya's lop-sided tits!"

Yngvild arranged a ride on a trading-ship heading north. Because it made many stops at shore-towns on the way, the trip back to Eid took eleven days.

Siv heard familiar footsteps entering her home, then the sound of boots being kicked off. Siv put down her wool-weaving.

"Yngvild? Are you back already?"

Yngvild yelled, "That man will drive me crazy! What a waste of time! He's off on a pointless raid, just for fun! Fool!"

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23: WEST ACROSS THE WATER

Bright sunlight fell on Sogn-fjord. Dozens of noisy, grey-winged gulls circled in the warm west wind, high up over the choppy blue-green water. The air smelled of salt-water, spring-thawed soil and fish. It was the first good weather of the sailing season. The tide was flowing west.

Halfdan and seventy-four Fjordane-fighters gathered on the Sogndal docks. Nearby were three expensive-looking and modern war-ships. The ship-builders in Sogndal were more advanced than those in Eid; knowing new, better ways to carve and fasten the oak-pieces. The lines of the long-ships flowed smoothly from bow to water-line to stern. These were the best-looking ships Halfdan had seen -- the finest of King Njal's fleet. Each was longer than twelve men lying end-to-end. When seen from the front, each war-ship was shaped like the edge of a giant ax. When seen from above, the war-ships had the shapes of fast fish. Viewed from the side, each war-ship was the shape of a quarter-moon or a smiling mouth.

Piles of cloth-wrapped sail-masts and bundles of oars and boxes full of supplies covered the oak-plank decks. The tips of the bow-posts were covered with leather bags. Each of the bow-posts was carved into the shape of a crow's head, to frighten evil sea-spirits, and it was very bad luck for these decorations to be shown at home. On the deck of one ship -- it was the biggest one, with the name "Wave-Jumper" -- were two wooden cages, each holding a raven. These big, black-feathered birds sat on perches, intelligently looking around. One of the ravens watched the grey-feathered gulls screeching above. The other one caught a hornet that was buzzing in its cage, crunching the unlucky bug in its beak.

Each ship carried fire-blackened iron pots for cooking dinners on shore. While on the sea, it was usually too wet, windy and dangerous to use fire.

The men standing on the docks wore layers of heavy wool under butter-smearred linen coats. Each of them had lugged along a big wooden sea-box -- the only thing, other than weapons, that they were allowed to bring on board -- holding clothes, blankets, pillows, snacks, jars of booze, combs, jewellery, face-paint, musical instruments, chess-boards and idols.

Twenty-five men stepped from the dock onto each war-ship. When the sail of a war-ship was down, twenty of the men would row, five pairs of rowers a side. A steersman (who ruled the ship) stood at the stern. A look-out stood by the bow. The three other non-rowers would bail water from the ship-bottom and replace any rower who needed a break.

The spear-shaped oars were each longer than three men lying end-to-end. The oars for the men at the raised front and rear of the ship were the longest, because the water-line was a farther reach. For the same reason, the rowers at the front and the rear of the war-ship were usually the tallest men.

Men sat on their sea-boxes to row. When Halfdan yelled, "Open the holes!" each rower removed a wood disk from an oar-hole. During rowing, these disks dangled under the oar-holes on short leather strings. There were slits on both sides of the oar-holes, so that the blades of the oars could fit through. The rowers now all shoved their oars out and let oar-blades splash down, then float on the rippled, sun-reflecting surface.

Wincing from a hangover, Halfdan roared, "Get ready! Three! Two! One! Pull!"
Sixty men heaved back.

"Pull!"

Sixty oars carved into the swirling water.

"Pull!"

Three war-ships jerked away from the docks. The small crowd of watching Sogn-folk cheered. (It was not clear whether they were cheering at the skill of the rowers or the fact that they were leaving town.)

The almost-flat bottomed ships floated high on the sunny fjord. Even with sails down, the gusty west-blowing wind helped them move.

When out of sight of Sogndal, the leather bags were taken off the bow-posts. The carved, painted crow-heads glared at the water ahead. No evil sea-spirits would now dare to attack these ships.

In the middle of each deck was a big block of oak, solidly fastened to the keel and side-ribs below. These blocks were called "old ladies," and each had a hole for a mast-post. Half of the men on each ship kept rowing, while the others worked together to erect a mast-post and slide it in an old lady. This was dangerous, as the ships were imbalanced while the masts were being raised, and a big wave hitting a ship's side then could topple it. The base of the mast was held tightly in the old lady by another heavy, carved block of oak called a "father-in-law".

Now the raising of the sails. Each woollen sail had been woven and stitched by women, and was by far the most expensive piece of equipment on each ship. Each sail had taken a group of Sogn-women months to make. As was then fashionable, the sails on these three war-ships had vertical stripes of red and white.

Oiled ropes made of walrus-skin were attached to the sails and snaked through holes in blocks of wood attached to the deck. Men grabbed the knotted ends of the rope to yank the sails up the mast posts. The wind stretched the sails, to cheers.

"No more rowing!"

The ships sliced forward with a faster speed. Oars were pulled back in and placed onto racks to dry.

Men sat on their painted sea-boxes, resting, some drinking water or beer.

Venn, scheming, watched Halfdan.

How to get revenge and escape?

The war-ships sped west along the blue-green tongue of sea-water, as Sogn-fjord led them between the snow-topped mountains to north and south. Square farms patterned the strips of shore-land. Sometimes they passed flocks of sheep or cows or goats, grazing on green patches of new-sprouted plants. (The beasts looked thin; last fall's harvest had been bad, and the underfed farm-beasts had barely survived the winter.) Sometimes the war-ships passed a small fishing-boat. The fishermen would put down their nets and hook-lines to watch the fleet sail by. A boat full of fishermen was watching when the famous war-chief of Fjordane and Sogn, sea-sick, leaned his curly head over the side of Wave-Jumper and threw his breakfast into the fjord.

When the three war-ships reached the mouth of Sogn-fjord, they steered southwest into the open sea. The look-out on Wave-Jumper pointed to the north and yelled, "A ship to the right!" After a quick glance, Halfdan did not pay attention to the approaching civilian ship; he could not have known that it was carrying Yngvild to him.

As they sailed south-west, the familiar mountains of Norway sank into the horizon behind them. Halfdan looked at the grey and brown masses, with snow shining white on high slopes, and felt an urge to tell the steersman to turn the ship around; that it was wrong to leave home for this adventure.

Soon the highest mountain sank away, and there was nothing but water on all sides. This was the first time that most of these men had sailed out of sight of land. Halfdan had never done it before. Some of the fighters mumbled nervous prayers to the gods and/or the sea-spirits; others fingered idols hanging from neck-strings.

On their third night on the open ocean, a strong storm hit from the north. Rain pelted down; wind wailed, changing directions at random. Rain-water and spray-water and leak-water started filling the ship-bottoms. Men had to constantly scoop up water and dump it overboard. Everybody was soaked and cold and miserable. The look-out on Wave-Jumper claimed to see a group of beautiful, shining women riding on winged horses through the thunder-clouds and bolts of lightning -- "a flock of Valkyries must be following us!" Some believed him, some didn't.

Just before morning, the storm passed.

The steersmen guided the ships by the wind and sun and stars, as well as by sea-birds and sea-weed and clouds and fog and water-colour and fish-patterns.

They were still sailing south-west, as the old pirate had said. But the storm had blown them an unknown distance south.

"You're sure that this is the way to Pictland?" Halfdan asked.

The steersman of Wave-Jumper said frankly, "No, not at all. We could check for land with a raven?"

"Fine," Halfdan said.

Ravens were useful to navigation. They could fly very high and had excellent sight. They could see land from very far away, and (being land-birds) would always immediately fly towards it.

The steersman moved a raven-cage to the middle of the deck.

"AWK!" said the raven. Its smart, honey-yellow eyes glittered as it moved its black head side to side, studying at the men on the deck.

"Odin guide us," the steersman said, opening the door of the cage. The bird hopped out onto the deck. It stretched its wide dark wings. "AWK! AWK!" Then it hopped up and flapped its wings, rising high and higher into the cloudless sky, until it was a tiny dark dot. It flew straight west.

"So the closest land is that way," the steersman said. "But there's no way to know if it's Pictland or not. The storm could have blown us far past Pictland. We can follow the raven west, find out where he's going, or we can keep sailing south-west, as that Sogn-pirate told us to do. What do you say?"

Halfdan said, "Follow the raven."

24: ODIN GUIDES THE SHIPS 200

Following the raven, the Norse war-ships found land. It was a large land-mass, mostly covered with forests, with some areas cleared for farm-fields and scattered wooden buildings. The land-mass stretched north and south as far as the look-out's eyes could see. From a distance, the Norse-men saw a few small fishing-type ships near the shore. And they saw, a short distance from the mainland, a small island. There was a small settlement on it, surrounded by a stick fence -- the Norsemen saw some buildings (all wooden, except one that looked built of stone, with a strange-looking roof), walking-paths, farm-fields, and a dock with a few small boats.

"Do you think that island is Pictland?" Halfdan asked.

"No," the steersman of Wave-Jumper said. "Pictland is supposed to be made of many islands. Not one tiny island, all by itself. And the pirate did not mention any big continent" -- pointing at the mainland.

Halfdan pointed at the little island. "There are folk living there," he said. "Not enough to put up much defence, but enough to make it worthwhile. Pictland or not, let's raid that place."

The three war-ships sailed back east, to hide on the far side of the horizon until nightfall.

25: THE KILLING OF HAKI

Waiting for darkness, drifting with lowered sails in the open water over the horizon, fighters sharpened and oiled the blades of their weapons. Most of them smeared blue paint around their eyes: raiding was a very special occasion. Some young men, nervous before their first raid, rubbed fingers on soap-stone or clay idols of Tor, Baldur or Freyir, for good luck.

At sunset, men started putting on body-armour and helmets.

Halfdan opened his sea-box and took out a surprising-looking helmet. A curved bull-horn was stuck onto each of its iron sides, the horn-points sticking up.

Haki laughed and said, "What is that thing?"

"My raiding-helmet," Halfdan said.

"But why the horns?"

Halfdan said, "To look fierce."

"But they ruin the helmet. It's not practical for fighting. If a sword hits one of those useless horns, the whole thing will be knocked off your head."

"I know," Halfdan said. "But this is a raid, not a battle. In a battle, equipment needs to be good. In raiding, making panic is the main goal. This helmet will help with that."

"Let me see. Put it on."

Halfdan lifted the horned helmet and pushed it onto his curly hair. He bared his teeth and glared fake-furiously.

Haki said, "Amazing! You look just like a black troll!"

Halfdan said, "King Lambi taught me this trick. The helmet once belonged to him. He used to always wear it raiding, and folk would always scream and run away."

"Folk will try to run no matter what kind of helmet a raider wears."

Shrugging, Halfdan said, "I like the helmet, practical or not. I'm wearing it. If not to scare folk, then for good luck."

"I'd like a helmet like that, except with moose-horns. Or walrus tusks!" Haki staggered around the cluttered deck, pretending that he was wearing a helmet with gigantic, heavy horns. Everybody laughed.

Except Venn. Like always, he was glum and quiet, watching Halfdan from the corner of his eye.

Overhead, a full silver moon stared down.

The bright sky-eye was reflected in the grey ripples of the Endless Ocean.

They waited.

Dark clouds slid across the sky, westwards.

In the cloud-gaps, stars slowly spun.

A big fish splashed the surface.

They waited.

Finally, Halfdan said, "I think they should be asleep by now."

"Having sweet dreams," Haki grinned.

The steersman of Wave-Jumper called for quiet rowing towards the western horizon. The sails were kept down, to make the ships harder to see from shore. The other two ships followed.

Soon, they saw the dim island ahead.

The look-out of each ship used a length of string with a bronze weight to check the depth of the water as they moved, almost silently, through the darkness.

They could see a stretch of sandy beach on the south shore of the island.

"You want to land there?" asked the steersman.

Halfdan nodded.

A short distance from shore, the steersmen of the three ships dropped anchors -- willow-branch baskets full of stones, with wooden pieces sticking out to grip the sea-floor. The ships kept moving towards the island, with the anchor-ropes spooling out behind them. This was another of King Lambi's old raiding-tricks -- if they needed to get the ships away from the island quickly, men would pull the anchor-ropes and drag their ships to sea; it was much faster than rowing.

Halfdan stood at the bow with his Eid-forged iron sword in his right hand, his round painted shield in his four-fingered left hand, and the odd horned helmet on his head. In the moonlight, the helmet made a monstrous-looking shadow on the deck behind him.

Haki and his berserker cousin Sten were close behind Halfdan, panting with eagerness. In his excitement, Sten chewed on the edge of his shield. Haki did not have a shield. Both berserkers wore bear-skins over their shoulders and had smeared blue paint, not just around their eyes, but over their whole faces.

Behind brown-faced Halfdan and blue-faced Haki and Sten were the rest of the raiders, rowing; some of them almost as fiece-looking as their leaders.

All were silent.

Everybody had an extra pair of shoes, hanging around their neck by their laces.

The beach ahead was empty.

A cool, windy night.

Venn, sitting in the middle of the rowers, was trembling and wide-eyed with fear and hope. He feared violence, or having to hurt somebody innocent. He hoped for a chance to kill Halfdan and disappear.

The nose of Wave-Jumper bit into crunchy beach-sand.

Halfdan jumped from the ship, splashing into knee-deep water. Haki and Sten jumped down behind him, followed by all the fighters on all the ships, except for steersmen and look-outs, who would stay behind to guard the ships and keep them ready for a fast escape.

In addition to weapons and shield and armour and extra shoes, each man carried a torch and a coil of rope.

Three men carried ladders.

On the shore, everybody sat on the sand to take off their wet shoes and dry their feet on a cloth, before putting on a pair of dry shoes. They left the wet shoes behind.

Haki was grinning widely; the ax-handle trembled in his strong, hairy hands.

Other fighters wore their shields on their backs, a weapon in one hand, a torch in the other. The torches were each as long as a man's leg, tipped with blobs of pine-tar.

Halfdan and sixty-eight raiders walked fast up the dark beach to a wildflower-covered area. To their left was an area thickly covered with bushes and trees; it looked subtly different from Norse forests. To their right, over a low hill, was a dim farm-field

covered with tidy rows of small sprouting plants. The Norsemen did not recognize the growing crop. There was a path between the forest and the farm-land. They took the path.

Soon, the low wooden wall of the outlander settlement.

The smell of wood-smoke and beast-shit.

The raiders stayed in the shadows of the forest to light the torches. One man used a flint and piece of iron to strike sparks onto some charred cloth, which quickly started burning; one torch was lit from this fire, and then the fire was passed from torch to torch until all were burning.

"Go!" Halfdan hissed.

And the flame-lit Norsemen charged towards the wall.

Three ladders were leaned onto it, and three lines of men flowed up the ladders and jumped down inside.

Halfdan, Haki and Sten were the first over.

Haki was growling in his throat.

Halfdan whispered, "Quiet!"

They waited for the others to climb the ladders. The settlement was a dozen or so wooden buildings that formed an uneven square around the larger, stone-walled, strange-roofed building he had noticed earlier. The stone building had a tall spire on top of it, tipped by a decoration shaped like a " ■ ".

The symbol of Tor? Many of the Norsemen had idols in that shape hanging from their necks. Did folk here also worship the thunder-god?

The raiders ran in torch-light towards the building.

They saw nobody at first.

No open windows or doors.

No sign of fire-light.

No dogs.

Halfdan led them towards the stone-walled building, where he expected to find the settlement's leaders. Halfdan was amazed to see that the roof of this building was made of metal.

Why?

Wide and level stone steps led to a small porch in front of the stone building's round-topped wooden doors. These doors were framed by carved stone, depicting twisted leafy vines and odd-looking folk with wings growing from their backs.

There were two long and deep-set windows over the door, each about as tall as a man. One window had a square-shaped top, the other a round-shaped top.

Something covering the windows glittered oddly in the torchlight, reflecting light like ice.

No latch or key-hole on the door.

Haki was about to swing his ax at the door when Halfdan said, "Wait."

He pushed the door and it opened.

They walked into a dark, empty room. The walls were perfectly smooth and painted white. The floor was covered with wood planks joined closely together to make a smooth surface. There was no furniture. On the walls were fastened a few small metal cages that looked like they were for holding torches; the walls over them were smoke-blackened.

On the other side of the empty room was an open door.

Through this door was another room -- an amazing room! The smooth walls and the high ceiling were painted in bright colours, brighter than any paints used in Norway, depicting men and women wearing strange, flowing clothes and standing among images of clouds and blue sky and odd symbols. Some of the folk in the pictures had bare feet and had big white wings growing from their backs. All the picture-folk had yellow circles painted around their heads. Unlike most Norse-folk, the eyes of most of the picture-folk were brown, and most had brown hair. Some were kneeling. Some were raising their arms. One winged painting-man held a flaming sword in one hand, a "T"-symbol in the other.

Who was depicted here?

Demons?

The largest picture in the long room was of a blue-robed, blue-eyed woman, holding a brown-eyed baby in her arms. The baby was holding another of those "T"-symbols, in a tiny fist.

At the far end of the room was a raised stage -- like a king's feasting-platform in a hall -- covered with very odd-shaped furniture. A tall, narrow table. A giant cup made of stone. And, hanging over the stage, was another "T"-symbol -- this one taller than a tall man, made of wooden beams nailed together. Something big and white was attached to it.

Haki ran to the stage and jumped up. He said, "Odin's eye! Look at all this silver! And gold too!"

Gold was very rare in Norway. Even kings and the richest nobles rarely owned more than one or two items made of this almost-priceless metal.

Haki had never seen so much gold in his life: cups, candle-holders, statues and objects of unknown purpose.

Halfdan walked deeper into the room, saying, "There's nobody here. Let's find the folk first, deal with them, then come back here for loot."

"Fine," Haki said, jumping down from the stage (with a gold candle-holder stuffed into his belt).

Halfdan realized that the thing attached to the big "T" at the far end of the room was a statue of an almost-naked man, hanging by its hands from the tips of the cross-beam. The brown-haired, brown-eyed man's head was surrounded by a circle of bright yellow paint. The eyes of the man-statue stared at Halfdan. When Halfdan moved to one side, the unnerving eyes seemed to follow him.

Splashes of red paint looked like fresh blood, flowing down from the statue's hands. Drops of red paint dribbled down the statue's forehead.

Who was this man?

Why did this room have such a big statue of a torture-victim?

Was he a sacrifice to Tor?

Halfdan did not like this place. It made him nervous. He ordered everybody back outside.

As they stepped out of the building, they heard a loud metallic clanging noise from one of the other buildings. The sound filled the night with clanging noise.

Venn, shocked, listened to the noise in amazement. It was the exact same clanging noise that he had been hearing in his ears ever since the river-battle! But now, suddenly, everybody else could hear it too! Venn giggled. This seemed a sign that Venn had made

the right decision, volunteering to join this adventure. A sign from the gods, that revenge for Torvald was near!

Halfdan shouted, "It's an alarm! We've been seen! We're going to split into groups and each take a building!"

He ordered Haki and Sten and six other Fjordane-fighters to one of the smaller buildings, sitting a distance from all of the other buildings.

Haki's group ran with their torches and weapons to that building. The door was locked from the inside.

"No need to be quiet anymore," Haki said, handing his torch to Sten. Haki chopped twice at the wood door, breaking it into falling pieces.

Inside, a short hallway led to another door. It was also locked -- but from the outside. Haki lifted the door-latch, pushed open the door and carried his sizzling pine-sap torch inside. Then he stopped, his blue-painted face split into a wide grin.

A young, frightened looking woman with brown hair and freckles was standing by the edge of a bed. She looked about twenty-five years old. Her brown eyes were open but not directed towards Haki standing in the doorway. She wore plain grey clothes, with a grey scarf tied tightly over her head. A "T"-shaped symbol hung from a string on the grey bib covering her chest. No face-paint.

Haki turned to say to his cousin behind him, "Leave me alone here for a while. Go to the next building and wait for me there. I won't be long."

Sten said, "Halfdan won't be pleased if he hears."

"Then don't tell him. Go! Now!"

Sten and the other fighters left, and Haki in the doorway turned back to look at the young woman. She had not moved.

"Good evening," Haki said, not caring if she understood the Norse tongue.

But she did. In a heavy, bizarre accent, she said, "Who are you?"

Haki said, "A friend," and stepped into the room.

"What do you want?"

"Friendship. I'm Haki, a great hero and berserker from a northern land. Do you want to be my friend?"

He closed the door behind him. Now the only light in the room was from the flickering and smoky torch held over Haki's helmet. He stepped towards her and the unmade bed, smiling.

The young woman said, "Leave me alone, please."

Haki noticed that there were no windows. "What is this place? A jail?"

After a pause, the young woman said, "Yes. It's a kind of jail."

"Why are you here?"

After another pause, the young woman said, "They locked me here for being a whore."

"A whore! A whore?"

"Yes. So there is no need to force yourself on me. I will give you sex for free."

And she laughed.

Haki was confused. He had been expecting screams by now.

A whore?

With her eyes still not looking directly at him, the young woman said, "How do you want me?"

"Any way I want."

She took a step towards his voice, saying, "Anything to please you, you hero from the north."

She smiled; it looked fake.

She stepped closer to him, seeming to not even notice the huge ax on his shoulder.

What was wrong with her?

Haki scowled. He took the ax from his shoulder and moved the blade towards the young woman's face.

No reaction.

As the oiled, gleaming iron neared her face, she did not move or glance at it. Only when he touched the sharp edge of the battle-ax to the tip of her freckled nose did she pull her face back, looking surprised.

Haki said, "Can't you see?"

"Not very well. I have been here in the dark for so long that my eyes have forgotten light. Light hurts my eyes. Everything looks like it's in a snow-storm."

"You are blind."

"Not forever. Just until my eyes get used to the light."

"They locked you alone here in the dark just for being a whore?"

"Yes, folk here hate whores. Because we love giving pleasure to men. I was famous for my skill in sex. Should I take off my clothes now?"

Haki laughed. "Fine, whore, show me your skills."

He stepped to the bed and laid his ax onto the messy grey blankets. Holding his torch overhead with his left hand, he used his right to open his silver, beast-shaped belt-buckle.

The young woman started unbuttoning her clothes and dropping them to the floor. When her underpants fell, she was naked. Her body was thin and pale, with narrow hips framing a triangle of wild brown hair; she shivered slightly. But she still did not show much fear.

Haki, by the bed, was lowering his pants with his free hand.

His part was thin and half-limp.

The blind, naked outlander woman said -- in a childish-sounding voice -- "May I use the pottie?"

"What?" Haki didn't understand the word "pottie".

"Can I piss?"

"Yeah, of course."

She walked to other side of the small room, to a wooden bucket resting on the dirt floor. It was beside a small pile of clean hand-cloths and a small wicker box half-full of dirty ones.

Haki expected her to sit on the bucket to piss. But she bent, grabbed the half-full bucket with both hands and turned to face Haki. She walked fast towards the sound of his heavy breathing.

"What are you doing?" he said. His pants were on the floor, one pant-leg wrapped around an ankle.

On the skin of her face, the outlander-woman felt the heat of the torch that Haki held overhead.

She heaved the bucket at Haki's torch. The stale body-water flew out of the bucket and splashed onto the torch.

Complete darkness.

They were both blind now.

Haki, shocked, felt cool liquid dribbling down his left arm. The piss reeked. He shouted, "You are crazy, whore!"

The young woman hissed, "I'm a virgin. And will stay this way."

She silently moved somewhere else.

"Crazy whore!" Haki bellowed, dropping the piss-wet torch, picking up his ax from the unseen bed. "I'll find you!"

"Better to find Christ!"

"What?"

He waved his arms around, trying to touch something, trying to remember the room's lay-out.

Where was the door?

Where were the walls?

Where were the pieces of furniture: the little table and the three-legged stool?

He took a few uncertain steps forward.

Where was the girl?

She'd tricked him.

Blackness, everywhere he looked.

For the first time in many years, Haki felt fear.

"Bitch! I'll kill you!"

He thought that he heard a sound to his right. He lunged that way and swung his ax. The heavy blade swished through the darkness, hitting nothing.

Her voice said, "Scared of the dark? I'm used to it."

He lunged and swung the ax again in the direction of her voice, but again hit nothing.

She moved around the room without any noise. She had lived here in the dark for over six months (except for a brief meeting outside with a local religious leader) and she did not need her eyes to help her move around the memorized room. Her hearing and other senses were much stronger than before she had been put here. She silently circled around Haki, keeping herself just out of the reach of his clumsy and panicked ax-swings.

The famous berserker was terrified.

The outlander moved towards the small table. On it was a steel-toothed comb with an oak-wood handle. The handle of the comb was sharp enough to use to hurt. She held the teeth of the comb in her small hand, with the handle sticking down. With her other hand, she picked up the three-legged stool.

As Haki hunted her, she hunted him.

She heard his clumsy footsteps pass. She threw the stool at the sound of his feet. Haki tripped on the stool, as she had hoped, and crashed to the ground, hitting the side of his face on the hard dirt-floor, grunting in pain. His ax fell from his grip.

Before he could recover, the young woman silently kneeled by his head. He lay on one side, stunned and disoriented and so scared, with no way of knowing that she was now so close. She stabbed the sharp comb-handle over the sound of his breathing. It stabbed in his bearded cheek. She pulled the comb back and stabbed down again, this

time plunging the sharp handle deep into a rolling eye. Something warm squirted all over her hand.

Haki screamed, hurting her ears with its loudness, as he lashed his arms and legs in all directions. Seeking after her.

As the young woman crawled backwards away, part of one of his fists hit the top of her head, painfully knocking her down.

She hissed, "You forced me to this."

"It really hurts," he groaned, holding his hands over his punctured eye and torn cheek.

"Sorry," she said, in her odd outlander accent.

When she heard Haki's arms and legs stop flailing, she crawled silently towards him, the comb-handle held by the side of her head.

She heard his breathing, close.

This time, she stabbed under the sound of his breathing. The oak-wood spike poked deep into his neck and she twisted it viciously into the soft, wet flesh and Haki grunted once.

"Mother Mary, forgive me," Leoba said, dropping the comb, covering her face with both hands, sobbing warm tears into her small, wet hands.

26: TETTA WRITES TO ALCUIN *

June 23, Year of our Lord 793

To Alcuin of York, my best-beloved:

Tetta, from the depths of immeasurable distress, sends a desperate appeal.

Terrible news!

Lindisfarne has been destroyed by barbarians from the North.

God's righteous wrath, once felt by the wretched and proud sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, has inexplicably extinguished a humble community devoted to praising and obeying Him.

Why? In my pain and confusion, that question never departs. Why? Without cease, I beg God -- who is so high above us, yet stoops to hear the cries of the lowly -- to answer: *O, why?* I seek understanding in the words of Holy Scripture: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous man, but the Lord shall deliver him from them all." I read and read again: "It is through tribulations that we may enter of the Kingdom of God, so let us rejoice in our tribulations." Yet, how can I rejoice that heathens have desecrated God's sanctuaries with slaughter and outrage, poured the blood of Saints around the altar, burned the house of our hope, trampled on the bodies of Saints in God's temple like animal dung in the street.

My heart aches to remember my martyred sisters -- brutally, mercilessly butchered; or dragged in chains, naked and loaded with insults, to the ships of the north-men; or drowned in attempting to escape the island; or, most tragically, driven to the sin of suicide. The north-men came like stinging hornets and spread on all sides like fearful wolves, robbing, violating, committing sacrilege everywhere, ripping and slaughtering my flock of virgin scholars! Alcuin -- behold with pity and tears the shrine of Saint Cuthbert, spattered with the blood of the brides of God, stripped of its ornaments, trampled by the polluted steps of pagan fiends, within fire-black walls once graced by Northumbria's finest art! A place more venerable than all in England was the prey of pagan wretches. It has been nearly 350 years that we and our ancestors have inhabited England, and never before has such terror appeared here as we have now suffered, nor was it ever imagined that such an attack from the sea could be made.

Despite the distress and disorder of my mind, I owe you a duty to describe in this letter all I witnessed; perhaps you can find a meaning in these miserable events, which seem so senseless. On the evening of June 8 -- a date of infamy which shall, surely, be never forgotten -- terrible portents were seen all over Northumbria, miserably frightening the people: whirlwinds swirled across the land, immense sheets of lightning filled the skies, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. (So many credible people have reported these sinister signs that they ought not be dismissed as superstition, but as unheeded warnings from Heaven.) Blind to the approaching danger, we went through our accustomed routines; after final Mass, I made sure that all the nuns were in the dormitorium, and then proceeded with my assistant, Sister Wilthburga, to my office and sleeping-chamber. During the third hour of the night, I was awoken by Sister Wilthburga, who informed me that she had seen men outside. At the window, I saw that she was correct -- O, what horror, watching hundreds of strangers, each bearing flame, scrambling over the convent walls! These were obviously not troops of King Aethelred, or of any

Northumbrian knight -- their weapons and clothes were so strange and crude, that I have never before seen the like -- some of the pagans actually wore helmets with horns sticking up, as if to imitate the Devil! There were hundreds (if not thousands) of pagan warriors with torches and weapons, running at the home of Saint Cuthbert!

Resisting panic, Sister Wilthburga and I searched our bed-chamber for the alarm-bell. We had never had a need to use it before, and I confess to my shame and regret that I could not remember where I had put it. We searched for it frantically, until Sister Wilthburga located the bell under a pile of manuscripts. (Tetta the hypocrite -- for I had lectured my nuns many times about the virtues of tidiness and order! Alcuin, I hope that you may never learn to despise me.) By this time, the invaders had already penetrated the sanctity of Cuthbert's temple. I stuck my arm out the window and started ringing the bell. When Sister Wilthburga observed that a group of the pagans was approaching our building, I stopped ringing it.

Hearing the sound of weapons striking at the door to my office, Sister Wilthburga and I slipped fruit-knives into our stockings and climbed out the bedroom window and hid in the bushes beneath. Seeing that all of the attackers had left the area of the church, Sister Wilthburga and I ran from shadow to shadow towards it. Not daring to enter by the front doors, which were in clear view of the courtyard and most of the other buildings, we slipped inside through the side chapel-door. Two items needed to be secured, at any cost, from the unholy hands of pagans: the Gospels of Saint Cuthbert, and his remains. Silver and gold ornaments may be replaced; domestic and scholastic supplies may be replenished; even the lives of nuns, each so precious and pure, were of infinitely less worth than those sacred items from our Church's earliest history.

Except for a single candlestick taken from the altar, we found that nothing in the church had been looted -- yet. It was an instant to take up the gospel-book, but rescuing Saint Cuthbert was a challenge -- sliding the stone slab from the top of his crypt was normally a job for six nuns, and we were only two. Yet the feeble arms of elderly women, for a moment, gained the strength of Samson, and we were able to wrench the heavy slab away. Our strength was further tested, in reaching down into the crypt to grip the famous casket and lift it out.

Sister Wilthburga urged that we hide. But I guessed -- correctly, it proved -- that the invaders would search every building in the convent for valuables, and then set them all afire. We had to flee.

With the gospel-book hidden inside my shirt, both of my hands could grip the ancient pine-wood casket. It was surprisingly light, and I suspect that the spirit of Saint Cuthbert himself miraculously assisted us.

At the side chapel-door, we saw only a few of the pagan warriors outside, and they were far enough away that we might slip out unobserved. We carried the relics from shadow to shadow, and reached one of the gates of the convent wall. We had to put Saint Cuthbert onto the ground, as we opened the latch. A barbarous shout from behind us. We had been seen. Pagans ran after us!

I welcomed death, as a passage to Paradise. No, the fear that struck me then was not for my own personal safety, but for that of our precious burden. I had devoted my life to preserving Saint Cuthbert's holy remains and studying the exquisite painted pages of his Gospel. It was fear of their pollution at the hands of pagans that filled my soul with

panic and my body with a desperate energy! We ran through the gate, bearing Cuthbert's ancient coffin as if it weighed less than a basket of dry laundry.

We fled with our Saint, along a trail to the beach, hearing the fearsome sounds of pursuit behind. Barbarous yells and curses filled the dark forest! (The north-men use a language like English, but with strange pronunciation and an ugly, harsh accent. Some words were completely foreign, but I could understand most of their speech. Some barbarians were heard referring to a home-land "back in the North". I have never seen men of this kind before. Most were blonde-haired and pale of skin, but others were darker than Beelzebub. Alcuin, is it possible that these people were Germans?)

We reached the beach, heading toward the dock and the fishing-boats. But soon after we left the shadows of the forest, our pursuers burst out after us.

"We have to drop the Saint!" Wilthburga cried. "He's slowing us down."

I said, "Never! Have faith in the Lord!"

And so we ran, hoping for a miracle to save us, until Sister Wilthburga (who was behind me, holding the foot of the casket) was seized from behind. She dropped her end of the casket to the beach-sand and -- I shudder to remember! -- the sacred container broke open, spilling Saint Cuthbert's desiccated legs and hips onto the beach sand! The sacred bones and clothing-shreds of the first evangelist to England, dumped onto the sand and sea-shells before my very eyes!

With one hand, I clutched the Gospels concealed under my shirt, and with the other, I pulled the knife from my stocking and held it to my nose. I had remembered the example of Saint Agatha; like her, I was willing to spoil the superficial appearance of my face, to discourage forcible ravishment.

Surrounded by seven or eight of the armed pagans, my attention was captured by their leader -- O, Christ and Mary and the Apostles, that I never see such a man again! If it was even a man, not a devil. He wore a helmet with terrifying horns, and like the other invaders, crude purple make-up was barbarously applied around his cruel eyes. Most shocking of all -- the skin of his face and body was as *black* as the accursed hide of Lucifer, and hair hung from his head like the twisted tresses of Medusa! Was this creature a man or a devil? To this day, I cannot decide.

Devils or men, there is no doubt that they were all inspired by the Fallen Arch-Fiend of Darkness. They hurled Sister Wilthburga roughly to the sand, snatching away the unused knife in her stocking.

"Leave us!" I commanded. "By Cuthbert, leave this holy sanctuary!"

The black devil snarled, "Put down the knife. Give me whatever you have hidden in your shirt."

"Never!"

"Do as I say or die."

"Then I embrace martyrdom!"

As the evil horned-one approached me, I offered a quick prayer to Saint Agatha and briskly sliced away the tip of my nose. It fell to the beach-sand, followed by a shower of my life-blood.

The strongest proof that these invaders were devils, not men, consists of their reaction to my facial sacrifice: any man of flesh and blood -- no matter how callous and hard-hearted -- would, on seeing an aged Abbess cut off her nose in defence of her honour, surely feel some degree of pity, perhaps even regret; but these monsters *laughed*.

I saw them gripping their own bellies with mirth and merriment, howling with amusement at my action.

The leader said, "That's the craziest thing I've seen!"

Another of the Godless crowd crowed, "Odin must be laughing now too!"

They all howled with mockery.

It was hard to breathe, with so much blood flowing down into my mouth, but I managed to shout, "Back! Or I will cut off more!"

That threat only increased their devilish mirth.

I held the little knife to my cheek, and was about to slice deeply into the wrinkled skin, when one of the north-men threw a shield at me. The edge of it forcibly impacted on my abdomen, knocking the air from me; I fell.

They seized me, reached roughly in my shirt -- where no male hand had been before (except yours, so long ago) -- and they yanked away the precious Gospels of our True Faith! I tried to take it back, even in my pained condition, gasping, "Sacred! Sacred! It is sacred!" But to no avail.

A barbarian asked of their horrifying-looking leader, "Take this one to the ships too?"

"No, leave her," the leader said. "Who would want to buy a crazy old slave with no nose?"

I appealed to him, with outstretched arms, "The Gospels. Give me back the sacred Gospels of revered Cuthbert!"

"What?"

One nearby north-man said, "I think she wants that thing" -- gesturing at the Holy book.

The leader said, "She does have a sense of humour." He opened the Gospels (*upside-down*, the illiterate) and started to flip through its famous, irreplaceable pages. He frowned in bafflement. "We don't need this," he said.

I felt a surge of relief, soon replaced by outrage when I saw the leader ripping away the richly-decorated covers of the manuscript! Rejecting in his ignorance the words and Truth inside, he tore off the gems and hammered gold of the book's famous cover. He kept the front and back covers, tossing aside the pages of divine content. And then the group left, dragging away poor Sister Wilthburga by a rope to her neck, leaving Saint Cuthbert and myself both sprawled on the dark sand.

Over the tree-tops, I saw the sky start to glow orange, from the burning buildings of our lost home. I spent the night on that beach, pained greatly in my face and my abdomen, sure that I would die from my wounds before the light of dawn. Yet, by the grace of the Virgin and Son, I survived to be discovered the next day by horsemen of King Aethelred, who were searching the island for survivors. There were only 12, including me. Tragically, four of the surviving nuns died later -- two of their wounds, and two (deranged by their loss of virginity) at their own hands.

As an epilogue, let me tell you of what followed. We survivors were taken to the king's court at Bambury, where we were made to describe our ordeal again and again to the king and his knights and Bishop Higbold. From Bambury, we were transported to the monastery at Jarrow, where we have remained since.

You will be relieved to learn that the casket of Saint Cuthbert has been repaired and his re-assembled remains, with all proper rituals and blessings and dignity, placed

back in. Despite the loss of its precious covers, the Gospels are undamaged, except for a bit of water-damage on one corner, from resting in a puddle.

The doctors say that what remains of my nose is healing well. I have never been vain of my looks, but I must admit that I sometimes shudder when I look into a mirror. People sometimes point and stare at me. Only you, brother of the spirit, could see past my disfigurement and perceive the face of my youth, as I so remember your dear face from long-ago times.

News is scarce here, and I am naive in worldly things, but I will tell you what I have learned since coming here. There have been no more raids, yet the entire nation is on the highest alert. I have been informed that King Aethelred, who was greatly lacking in popularity until recently, has been hailed by all Northumbrians for his wise and decisive actions in the days following the Lindisfarne disaster. New military defences are being prepared, I am informed, to prevent any future incursions from the sea. King Aethelred has travelled around the kingdom, making speech after eloquent speech, demanding fortitude and strength, promising to deter the north-men. He said, "We must stand manfully, fight bravely and defend the camp of God." He counsels against despair or panic, declaring that if we change our traditional ways in reaction to the disaster, then the barbarians will have won.

Perhaps they have already won. Dearest Alcuin, please forgive what I must confess -- the shock of my experiences has changed my character so much that I now embrace practices I once scorned. You know my life-long contempt for primitive superstition, the fanciful "magic" of ignorant peasants. Now, I am proved a hypocrite again, for at night, when it is time for me to rake up the coals in the fire in my room -- I use the poker to scrape an "X" in the glowing ashes, in hopes that doing so will protect me from fire. I know that this archaic folk-ritual, a lingering remnant of paganism, is forbidden -- yet doing so comforts me, and I have not strength to resist. Does that make me a heretic? Is my soul in a new hazard? Is attempting magic a venial sin or a mortal one? I have nobody but you to ask, my trusted oblate.

Bishop Higbold seems, as well, to have been changed by the disaster at Lindisfarne. He was once the most worldly of priests, notorious for his gaudy clothes and feasting, but he seems to have interpreted the disaster as a personal message from God. I am told that he now lives humbly, dressing in accordance with Chapter LV of Benedict's *Rules* -- "Worry not about the colour or the texture of these things, but let them wear what can be bought most cheaply ... It is sufficient to have two tunics and two cowls" -- and I am told he now dines in full compliance with Chapter XXVI: "Let a pound of bread be sufficient food for the day ... Let all except the very weak and the sick abstain altogether from eating the flesh of animals."

Bishop Higbold preaches, even to knights and King Aethelred himself, that the only effective defences are spiritual. I am told that he insists that no Christian should handle weapons of war, it is better to throw ourselves on Christ's mercy. He quotes a passage from Saint Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong." He compares the north-men to a contagious disease, and asks if an epidemic can be avoided by flight or fought off with weapons?

"We declare that to be utterly foolish," I heard him say in the presence of King Aethelred and many knights. "None can escape the hand of God. None can predict their

hour of reckoning. Doomsday comes to all as a thief in the night. So repent, take refuge in prayer, despise this world, hope only for Heaven."

Bishop Higbold's new-found piety has apparently not endeared him to King Aethelred or the nobility. I have heard rumours that Higbold may be forced from office and replaced by Aethelred's brother-in-law, Aelbert.

In short, all is confusion in Northumbria. Our land's people are used to political crisis, and to aggression from across the borders we share with Wessex and Scotland and Pictland, but this surpasses all. It is not only I who wonders, unceasingly, why did God make this happen? Was this divine retribution, for the slack morals of our people? Look at our King: until recently, he was known mostly for his evil habits and contempt for justice. Look at our politics: so many murders and rebellions and bribery and corruption and defiance of the Church. Look at our appearance: inspired by fashion, the popular hairstyles and clothes are both reckless and unholy. Look at our bishops, owning gold goblets and huge estates of land; look at our priests, wearing silk outfits and eating sugar with a spoon; look at some of our nunneries, those that mainly exist as a refuge for noble women abandoned by husbands or widowed; look at vagabond monks selling fake relics to the gullible; look at a population that claims to be Christian, yet rarely attends church other than for sickness-cures, weddings and funerals.

Did the sins of Northumbria invite this disaster?

Did my own?

Alcuin, I have need of your wise counsel, more than ever in the past. Despite hearing the (contradictory) assurances of King Aethelred and Bishop Higbold, I spend my nights wracked in fear of another attack of north-men, with wailing captives and sacred buildings pouring out flames, here at the Jarrow monastery. How can I assume safety here? What security can be found anywhere in England, if Saint Cuthbert could not protect his own temple? If the Second Coming is at hand, will I -- most-guilty sinner -- be left behind, as I deserve?

I often think about my devastated nunnery, and often my thoughts fill with a strange, melancholy notion. As you know, the walls of our church at Lindisfarne were made of stone that had been quarried from an ancient Roman ruin. I ponder how, before our race arrived here, this land was ruled by Romans, worshipping Roman gods. Then the Romans disappeared, leaving nothing but crumbling ruins behind. Could that happen to our society here? Was the attack on Lindisfarne merely the first drop of a great torrent that will someday wash away, forever, all that we know and cherish? Is that God's plan?

I feel lost and bewildered and heart-sore! With my sisters nearly all slaughtered or enslaved, I am so lonely! Sometimes I imagine the fate of Sister Wilthburga (who was my closest confidante) and the other captured girls and women, in some barbarous pagan land, suffering unspeakable indignities, and I shudder with the deepest of revulsion and regret! I feel unable to continue my duties to God, after such calamity and woe.

O, my friend, I need you here! You have been in Germany so long, with such distinction -- serving the Church, advising King Charlemagne on a new education system, converting thousands of souls -- that surely you have earned a rest. In the light of Northumbria's need for spiritual guidance in this most trying of times, and in light of my personal desire for you, could you not ask of His Holiness permission to return home, if only briefly?

More than anything, I yearn to clasp your strong hands, gaze into your eyes, and pour into your ears all of the troubles of my tormented soul. Alcuin, only you can save me from utter despair -- *please*, return to Northumbria, and me!

If I were before you now, on bended knee and with floods of tears, my obvious and wretched need would compel your pity. Let not the distance between us keep your heart hard to my frantic appeal; let our shared past, our marriage of the spirit, draw you here with the speed of angels!

If your answer is negative, and you are unable to leave your evangelical duties to attend to a friend in distress, if all that we have shared is not enough to bring you briefly home, then at least offer your prayers for our people. Beg the All-Mighty Lord -- as I beg *you* -- from the fury of the north-men, deliver us!

Tetta

Translator's Note: If Alcuin wrote a reply, it has not been preserved. A letter from Bishop Higbold to Pope Hadrian (recently discovered in the Vatican library) suggests that Alcuin visited England in the fall of 793 or the spring of 794, returning to Germany after a few months. There is no evidence as to whether or not Alcuin and Tetta met during this time. No further correspondence between them has been uncovered to date.

27: VENN'S REVENGE

The three loot-loaded ships sailed east over the horizon, the island sinking behind them, the red-orange glow of flames staining the cloudy western sky.

Leoba had been made to sit on the swaying deck of one of the strange, narrow ships. She and nine other nuns were tied together in pairs, back to back, sitting in the middle of Wave-Jumper's deck. They were surrounded by rowing men who grunted and jerked their bodies forward and back again and again as the long oars (along with the sail) sped the ships east.

Halfdan strongly disapproved of rape, so the English-women on Wave-Jumper were mostly left alone. The captives on the two other ships were not as lucky.

When the Norse raiding-fleet had rowed and sailed far enough away, the oars went onto the racks and Halfdan gave tasks to the Norsemen. Two of the fighters were told to guard the captives, to stop any of them from slipping their ropes and jumping into the sea. One man with skill in healing was told to care for hurt fighters first, then hurt captives. Other fighters gave food and cups of drinking-water to the men, then tried to pour water in the mouths of the tied-up women; most would not drink any, though all were thirsty. Venn and a few other fighters were told to count and organize the loot. It was messily piled on the rear of Wave-Jumper's deck. The loot would be divided equally when they got safely home.

Venn sat on the rear-deck, surrounded by piles of outlandish treasure, using a chisel to pry gems out of stolen items. He chiselled gems from cups, candle-holders, "T"-shaped objects, frames and book-covers. The gems went in a small iron box, with each falling little stone making a clink! noise as it was dropped in. Except for the amber, the Norsemen had never seen gems like these before -- red stones, green stones, glittering transparent ones; they were obviously very precious. The gems and the pieces of gold were the most exciting parts of the raid-profits. A fighter sitting near Venn separated the few gold items from the many made of silver, putting the gold in a leather bag. The silver and the women were much less valuable than the gold and gems.

As Venn worked, dropping gem after gem into the iron box, his mind swirled with confused, agonized thoughts. He could not think of only one thing at a time; his mind filled with wildly-flashing images -- memories of the raid. Venn had seen many terrible things happen, to many innocent women. He had done bad things to them too. He remembered an English-woman who had refused to let him put a rope around her neck; wailing, weeping, she had cringed in a corner of a sleeping-room, slapping at Venn's hands whenever he reached for her. An officer had been watching. Venn had to do something. In panic, he had stabbed his spear into the babbling woman's belly. Watched her crumple to the floor. Watched the spreading red puddle. Watched the life in her eyes go away. The officer congratulated Venn, "doubt any of the other bitches will resist after seeing that! Good work!"

Venn saw many dead and dying women as he ran around, following orders. They were lying all over the settlement, many with clothes ripped off -- pale arms and legs and fear-twisted faces, lit by the glow of burning buildings.

Venn winced at the memories, and his lips moved silently as he tried to explain his actions to the voices he heard, always heard, over the continuous clanging noise in his ears.

The memories that stabbed into his mind were not all bad. Venn smiled in the darkness when thinking about Haki. Sten had found his berserker cousin, dead from stabs to his face and neck, in a building where Haki had been left alone with a girl. The girl was not in the room when Haki was found, but she had been caught later and recognized by Sten. Although Venn had hated Haki, and was happy to learn of his end, many other raiders -- especially Sten and Halfdan -- were shocked and saddened. When all the captives had been roped together neck-to-neck, and all the buildings searched for valuables, Halfdan told men to pull Haki's pants on and drag the heavy body from its killing-place to the big, stone-walled building. Haki's body was taken into the big, crazily-decorated room, now empty of treasure. One of the other buildings had been full of odd items made of thin sheets of beast-skin, decorated and stitched together in piles; a captive had explained that these odd-looking things recorded facts (like Norse runes carved in wood or bone) and were called "books". Haki's body had been placed on a big pile of books in the middle of the stone-walled, metal-roofed building. Chanting a traditional death-poem, Halfdan had opened a clay jar full of a strange-smelling yellow oil. He had poured all the oil over Haki and the pyre, then had touched a torch-tip to the oil-soaked books. Fire crawled across the pages. Before the thick smoke had forced the crowd of Norsemen to leave the building, the books burst into swirling flames and the flames reached up to Haki, soon blackening the bare skin and making a sizzling noise that Venn now remembered with joy. Haki was the only raider who had been killed or seriously hurt; his famous luck had finally betrayed him; Venn grinned wider; the berserk bully was now only splattered grease and ashes, far from his place of birth.

Another nice memory from the raid -- Venn had found four cages in a room, each with a small, eagle-like bird trapped inside. The birds had ribbons hanging from their scaly legs. Venn had opened each of the cages and had watched, smiling, as the hunting-birds rose into the smoke-filled sky.

"You are free," he had whispered, with envy, as the eagle-like birds flew away.

As Venn and the other raiders now did their tasks, and the full red-and-white sails sped them homewards, Halfdan questioned the captives, one by one. He still wore the odd horned helmet. Most of the nuns refused to talk to him. Some tried but were too scared to make sense. When Halfdan crouched in front of Leoba, she was the only one who faced him and met his eyes and showed little fear.

Halfdan said, "You killed my friend."

Leoba -- her thick accent sounding very odd to Halfdan -- said, "I was protecting myself."

Halfdan said, "From rape?"

She nodded.

Halfdan said, "Killing him did you no good; you still ended up here, heading for a life of slavery, as fate has decided. You should have just let him have his way, and I'd have punished him when I found out."

"I'm a virgin."

Halfdan said, "Is that why all you women were living there together? You couldn't find husbands?"

"I have a husband: Christ."

Halfdan rolled his eyes and said, "I don't want to hear any more about Christ. You English-folk babble so much about your gods that you all sound crazy."

"Our God is real and powerful, not like your filthy pagan idols."

"Pagan?"

"Somebody who is ignorant of true religion. A doomed soul."

Halfdan sneered, "Our gods are stronger than yours. If yours were stronger, they would have stopped the raid. Call your Christ to help you now. Call for his mother, his father, his cousins and father-in-law too -- where are they now?"

"This is all happening with God's will."

"If it was his will for Haki to rape you, why did you resist?"

Leoba said nothing, staring down at the oak deck.

Halfdan said, "The strongest god is Odin. We don't build temples for him -- his temples are battle-fields, and his sacrifices are the unlucky dead. I would never call on him for help in danger, because he doesn't care if we live or die. He is far away, does not care about our thoughts or feelings, and sometimes Odin goes berserk. He poked out one of his own eyes, hoping it would give him wisdom. With the eye he has left, Odin watches folk from the sky -- not out of love, but only for his amusement. He likes to see bravery and bloodshed and any kind of slaughter."

"And you can love a god like that?"

"Love? Of course I don't love Odin. He is crazy, mean and distant. He doesn't expect our love. Like I said, Odin doesn't care about how we feel down here -- just how we act."

Halfdan started questioning Leoba about the military and political situation in Northumbria. Unlike the other nuns, Leoba was both well-informed about such issues and calm enough to answer his questions.

After Halfdan had learned enough, he said, "You are different from the other girls. What's your name?"

"Leoba."

Halfdan said, "I am Halfdan of Os."

Leoba said, "Are we really going to be sold as slaves in your land?"

"I haven't decided about you, but all the other English-women will definitely be sold."

"What about me?"

"You might become a slave. But after a successful raid, our gods like it when we drown at least one captive in our sacred swamp. Since you killed my friend, maybe I will choose you for that." Halfdan stood, said, "Thanks for answering my questions," and started walking away.

Eyes suddenly full of fear, Leoba said, "Wait!"

Halfdan turned. "What?"

Leoba, desperate to talk her way out of danger, said, "You look different from the others. Where are you from?"

"Norway."

"Why are you so dark, then?"

He briefly explained his parentage.

Leoba said, "Have you met any other Nubian people?"

"Just my mother. And I know nothing about her but what old folk say."

"What do you know about Nubia?"

"It's far to the south and everybody is dark-skinned there."

Leoba said, "I know a lot more than that. I've studied geography and I know exactly where Nubia is."

Halfdan crouched again in front of her.

"So, tell me something interesting about Nubia."

"Only if you promise to set me free."

"Fine."

"Let me hear you promise. To your gods."

"I vow by all the gods that, if you tell me something interesting about Nubia, I'll set you free."

"Set me free when we reach land. Not here."

She glanced over the side of the ship. Choppy waves of blue-grey water stretched to the horizons in all directions.

Halfdan grinned. "Clever girl. Fine -- I vow by all the gods that, if you tell me something interesting, I'll set you free when we reach land."

"How do I know what you'll find interesting?"

"You don't. But I'm honest. So start talking or the deal's off."

Leoba took a deep breath and said, "Have you heard of Germany before?"

"Yes."

"South of Germany is a land called Frankia. South of Frankia is a land called Italia. South of Italia is a sea. South of this sea is a land called Egypt. South of Egypt is Nubia. Both Egypt and Nubia are part of the continent of Africa. Africans are dark-skinned, and the farther south one goes, the hotter it gets and the darker the people. Dark skin seems to protect people from the sun's heat. According to Pliny, the --"

"Is 'Pliny' another of your gods? Christ's uncle?"

"Pliny wrote books. He wrote that the sun in Africa is so strong that it burns light skin, but not dark skin. What I know about Nubia, I learned from books like Pliny's, and from maps -- pictures of lands that show you how to get there."

"There are maps in England showing how to get to Nubia?"

"There were maps in the place you raided. With the books. The maps were burned with your dead rapist friend."

Halfdan scowled. "Tell me more about Nubia."

Leoba said, "I have read of amazing animals found in Nubia. Cats as big as bears, horses with necks much longer than this ship, giants pigs that float in rivers, other giant pigs with a shell on the back like a turtle and a horn growing from the nose, and real dragons."

"What about the folk?"

Leoba took a deep breath. "Nubia is a Christian land," she said.

Halfdan stared at her.

"Your mother must have been a Christian, just like me and my sisters. Do you believe that souls live after death, watching us here on earth?"

Halfdan said nothing.

Leoba said, "Do you think your mother is proud of what you've done?"

Halfdan said, "I don't believe she was Christian."

"You think I'm lying?"
Halfdan looked closely into Leoba's squinting grey eyes.
"No," grudgingly.
She said, "Most of Africa has been conquered by the Mohammedans, but --"
"'Mohammedans'?"
"Those are followers of a new heresy from the East."
"'Heresy'?"
"A false interpretation of our holy book. My point is that Nubia is still a strongly Christian land. One of the first evangelists to England was --"
"'Evangelist'?"
"A travelling priest who tries to convince people to change religions. One of the first ones to come to England, at around the same time as Saint Cuthbert, was an African man, Saint Hadrian. In pictures, he looks as dark as you, with the same curly hair. Many of our greatest Saints --"
"'Saints'?"
"Heroes of our religion. Many of our Saints have been from Africa. The idea that nuns and monks should live apart from the rest of society in religious communities, that idea started in Africa. And one of the five capitals of our Church is in Africa: an Egyptian city called Alexandria."
"What about this Christ? Was he African?"
"No. But His parents took Him to Egypt as a child, to hide from the Romans."
Halfdan said, "Tell me more about Nubia."
"I've already told you a lot. A lot of interesting facts. What else do you want to know?"
"Is Nubia a rich country?"
"Yes, very rich. There are gold-mines and the land is good for farming. Nubia gets a lot of salt from trade with the pagan barbarians who live south of Nubia, in a great burning desert."
"Who is the king of Nubia?"
"I don't know."
"Is it possible to sail there?"
"Yes. Nubia is many miles inland, but the Nile River can be sailed upstream to get there."
"Could you guide a ship there?"
Leoba shook her head and said, "I'm not a sailor. And even a sailor would need a map."
"And there are maps like that in England?"
"Yes, many."
Halfdan stood up, saying, "I may have to return to England some day, try to find one of those maps. Thanks."
Leoba yelled, "Wait!"
"What?"
"Was what I told you about Nubia interesting enough? Are you going to set me free?"

Halfdan said, "It was interesting enough that I've decided not to drown you in the sacred swamp." Halfdan pointed at the nun sitting beside Leoba. "I'll drown this one instead."

Leoba looked at the middle-aged nun beside her and wailed in horror, "No! Don't drown anybody!"

"I have to drown somebody, or the gods will be annoyed."

"Then drown me. Not Sister Wilthburga here, not anybody else. I won't save myself by another's unholy murder."

"You are brave."

"And you are a devil! All of you, stinking devils!"

Halfdan smiled. "I was just toying with you. Yes, what you taught me about Nubia was interesting, and I will set you free when we get to Norway. I don't break my vows."

"Will you drown any of my sisters?"

Halfdan said, "The gods can go hungry for once."

Leoba's rope-wrapped body slumped in relief, and a tear slid from one of her eyes.

Halfdan walked away, deep in thought.

Late that night on Wave-Jumper, only the look-out and a few captives were awake. And Venn. Venn lay on the wave-swaying deck, wrapped in blankets and a butter-smear tarp, until an idea came to him. An idea that made him grin and tremble with excitement.

Now!

He stood up. Lying in blankets and tarps on the mid-deck around him, all the other fighters were asleep, except for the look-out at the bow. A few of the deck-sitting nuns were awake, but could not and would not interfere. The unsleeping English-women watched Venn rise, a spear in his hands, and start stepping over the sleeping fighters as he moved towards the rear-deck.

Halfdan and the steersman were sleeping by the pile of treasure; the steersman slept here to be near the steering-oar at the stern; Halfdan was here to protect the treasure from night sneak-theft.

Venn walked to Halfdan, looked in the light of moon and stars at the hated black face below him.

"For Torvald," Venn whispered. He pulled back his spear, screaming, "For Torvald!"

Halfdan's eyes popped open. Halfdan saw Venn standing over him.

Venn -- as he had done in wet training back in Eid, and in the battle of the frozen river, and in the raid -- stabbed his foe without hesitation. The spear-tip poked through the buttered tarp and the blankets, hitting Halfdan just over his belt-buckle and plunging deep into his guts.

"Die slow, you black troll! You murdering mud-face!"

Halfdan grunted from the deep, awful pain inside his body. His face twisted with hurt and shock, as he tried to free his arms from the wool blankets and greasy tarp.

Venn twisted the rusty spear-tip deeper into Halfdan's belly, feeling the soft, wet flesh inside rip and tear.

"Ha!"

Venn saw blood staining Halfdan's blankets.

Done!

Venn let go of the spear-handle, leaving it sticking up from Halfdan. Venn had to hurry, before the steersman could stand up and grab him. Venn stepped fast to the treasure-pile. With one hand, he grabbed the iron box he had filled with gems. With his other hand, Venn grabbed the heavy bag of gold items.

Venn carried the box and the bag of precious, outlandish treasure to the side of Wave-Jumper. He stepped up onto the edge of the bulwark (a wooden wall that kept waves off the deck). He balanced there -- with the sea in front, a deck of fighters waking in confusion behind him -- a box of priceless gems in one hand, a bag of priceless gold in the other -- and he laughed.

"I'm free!" he crowed.

Before the lunging steersman could grab his legs, Venn jumped, yelping, "Free! I'm free!" and splashed into the bone-chilling water, tightly gripping the stolen treasure with both hands. He sank, trailing bubbles of laughter, down into the frigid depths of darker and darker water; sinking past jellyfish, eels, sharks and sea-monsters, towards a crab-crawling bottom; down and down, drowning with joy.

28: A SAD HOMECOMING

The war-ships reached Norway's mountain-toothy coast and sailed north to Fjordane-fjord, which led them to Eid. The body of Halfdan -- stretched on a plank, wrapped from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head in blankets -- was carried by six glum raiders from the deck of Wave-Jumper and onto the docks, then borne into the rebuilt town. Folk gathered in the street by the docks to watch the arrival. The early-summer sun was bright that morning, the air nicely warm, and the arrival of the ships meant that many Fjordane-fighters (who had been away since mid-winter: crossing Nis glacier, fighting a battle, occupying Sogndal, raiding England) would soon see their wives, girlfriends, parents, children and extended families again. But there was little cheer among the returning raiders; their gloomy mood spread to the folk of Eid, when they learned of the tragic fates of Haki and Halfdan.

The temporary shelter that had housed Halfdan, Yngvild and Siv after the Great Fire of Eid had, in the spring, been replaced by a normal house. On a bronze hook beside the front door, a freshly-killed lamb hung by its neck, a gift for Freya; on the roof of the new house, the small sprouts of grass and wildflowers swayed in warm wind.

Yngvild and Siv were sitting on a sunny bench near the front door, weaving wool socks, when Yngvild saw the body-bearing procession on the street, approaching their house. The half-dozen fighters with sad, down-cast faces carried Halfdan's body into their yard, Yngvild staring in shock and horror at their cloth-wrapped load, a sick feeling deep inside her.

Siv said, "What is happening, Yngvild?"

Yngvild said to her blind mother, "Halfdan is home," and started to weep.

"Dead?"

"He is wrapped in cloth, carried on a piece of wood," Yngvild sobbed.

"Oh, no."

Both women stood and waited.

When the body-bearers were close, Yngvild said, "Is he dead?"

One of the six men was the steersman of Wave-Jumper. He said, "Yes. I am very sorry. Halfdan was stabbed in the gut by a crazed traitor when we were sailing home."

"Who did it?"

The steersman said, "A nobody. The coward killed himself after the crime. His name is not worth mentioning."

Siv said, "Did Halfdan die immediately?"

One of the other fighters said, "No. I know medicine, and tried to heal him. He lived for four days and three nights, but the infection got worse and worse, and yesterday night he left us."

Yngvild said, "Yesterday night?" and dropped back down onto the bench, bawling into her hands.

The healer-fighter said, "I fed him onions right after the stabbing. Soon the hole in his belly smelled of onion, which told me that there was a hole in his stomach. Some of his gut-tubes had slipped out, so I stuck them back inside the hole as best I could, then I put a bandage on it and carved some magic runes on a bone amulet, which I placed in his hands. I spent most of the rest of the trip by his side, chanting the most powerful magic I

knew, but his belly got more and more swollen. Three nights ago, Halfdan fell into a sleep that we could not wake him from, and he slept until yesterday night, when his heart-beat and his breathing stopped."

"Let me feel him," Siv said.

Yngvild was weeping violently and paid little attention as the men carried the body into the house and placed it on the bed that Siv and Yngvild shared.

The healer-fighter started peeling the blankets from Halfdan's head, saying, "When I saw that he was dead, naturally I wanted to plug his eyes and nose and mouth with wax, to stop evil spirits from crawling in -- but we had no wax on board."

Siv's fingers stroked the slack, greyish skin of Halfdan's face. She put a finger on his black moustache. Then she touched his neck, gently squeezing.

Siv said, "It's a good thing that you did not have wax on board."

"Why?"

"Because it would have suffocated him. Fool! This man is not dead. How dare you call yourself a healer? I can definitely feel a pulse -- a faint one, but still -- and how could you not notice his shallow breathing? Fool! Yngvild! Get inside!"

Yngvild shuffled inside, wet-faced. She said, "What?"

"Your troll-faced boyfriend isn't dead. Quit blubbing and let's get to work. The rest of you, go away."

Yngvild stood staring at Halfdan, unable to believe her mother's words.

Five of the fighters, smiling, left to spread the good news.

But the embarrassed healer-man remained inside the house. He said, "I would like to stay. To help. And learn."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Ole, son of Tryggve. Folk call me Ole the Healer."

"Ole the Incompetent would be better. Will you take orders from an old, blind woman?"

"Yes."

"Will you take orders from my daughter too? Without any complaints from male pride?"

"Yes."

"Then light the fire, Ole the Beginner-Student, and fill the biggest pot with water and get it to boil. Unless that is beyond your medical skills."

Blushing with shame, Ole said, "Thank you," and did as he was told.

Yngvild lay on the bed by Halfdan's body, frantically kissing and stroking his unmoving face. His face looked much paler than normal, and much thinner, as if most of his face-muscles had melted away.

Siv said, "Get up. Enough of that. Time for work. He might still die -- you know most gut-piercings are fatal. Find a clean knife to cut off this corpse-cloth."

His scab-crusted belly was swollen to the size of a pregnant woman's. The spear had pierced just below his belly-button. The red-black scabs were cracked, and white pus oozed out from the hurt.

Siv sniffed at Halfdan's belly.

"There are disease-demons inside there," she said, "but not the worst kind. Not like those in Njal's leg."

The first step was to wash the hurt, and the stretched skin around it, with a cloth soaked in a brew made from the boiled leaves of a plant called wolf's-bane. Then, Ole was told to collect maggots.

"Maggots?" he said, with disgust. "Why?"

Siv said, "You're here to do what we say, not question us."

"Fine. But where am I supposed to collect maggots?"

Yngvild said, "Garbage dump. Bring a bowl. We need about a hundred. Go!"

Ole left, shaking his head.

He soon returned, holding the bowl as far from himself as he could, a queasy look on his face.

"Here they are," he said.

Siv said, "Now, clean them."

"Sweet Tor. How do you clean a maggot?"

Siv said, "Rinse them in water that's neither hot nor cold. Then get a cloth and wipe each one dry. Gently. Be careful not to hurt them; they're sensitive and delicate."

For a moment, Ole seemed ready to walk out. But, after a glance at Halfdan's body on the bed, he carried the bowl to the water-mug on the eating-table and did as he was told.

Siv dumped the scrubbed maggots -- a wriggling, squirming mass of white worms -- onto Halfdan's hugely-swollen belly. Covering the pale bugs with a sheet of boiled-clean cloth, Siv explained to Ole, "Maggots eat dead flesh, never living. They'll make their way into the cut, eating some of the nasty stuff in there, while leaving the healthy parts alone."

"Thank you," Ole said. He stepped out the front door and puked on the grass, then returned.

While the maggots were working, Ole was told to watch over Halfdan while Siv and Yngvild went for a walk, carrying a bucket, to the sacred swamp. They returned with the bucket full of moist grey stuff, put it by the bed.

"Mud?" Ole said.

Yngvild said, "Magic clay."

She often checked under the cloth and described to Siv the feasting maggots. It was mid-afternoon when Siv decided that the maggots had done enough. Yngvild brushed most of them off. Some of the maggots had squirmed into the spear-hole, only their tails sticking out. Yngvild pulled these worms out, one by one, with wooden tweezers.

Ole went outside again, his empty stomach heaving.

Guided by Siv's instructions, Yngvild again washed Halfdan's huge belly with the wolf's-bane brew. After sprinkling a powder of dried toad-warts onto him, she smeared a thick layer of the magic swamp-clay over Halfdan's hurt, then loosely covered the clay with boiled-clean bandages.

Ole said, "Shouldn't we do some chanting now?"

"You can chant as much as you want," Siv said, "as long as you keep working and don't distract us."

Ole stayed quiet.

Siv told him to close all the doors and windows of the house, sealing any cracks with stuffed rags. Then bring the water-pot back to a boil, after pouring in a large cup of vinegar.

Soon, acidic steam drifted up from the pot.

"We need to fill the house with steam," Siv told Ole. "Keep filling the pot with water and vinegar; keep feeding lots of wood to the fire. The vinegar-steam should help the healing. Hopefully, he will wake up soon."

Two days later, Halfdan's long eyelashes suddenly fluttered in the steamy air, one hand clenching in a fist. He groaned and opened his eyes.

Yngvild yelped, "He's awake! You're awake!"

Siv said, "Quick. Have him drink the potion."

Yngvild opened Halfdan's lips with a finger-tip, then poured liquid from a cup in his mouth: water brewed with honey (for energy) and the fungus of a birch-tree (a strong laxative) and wolf's-bane (to kill disease-demons).

Halfdan choked and coughed. But some of it went down his throat.

Yngvild said, "Can you hear me?"

He seemed to be looking at her, but she could not tell if he recognized her.

"It's Yngvild. Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

She said, "Blink twice, fast, if you can hear me."

His eyelids twitched twice.

Yngvild laughed, clapping her hands with relief.

She said with a sly grin, "Blink three times if you still think I'm pretty and will love me with all of your heart, forever."

A pause, then three quick blinks.

29: ELECTION

The mid-summer Assembly -- when court cases would be decided by a public vote, and when a king would be elected to rule the newly-unified kingdom called "Sogn and Fjordane" -- began early in the morning, with the law-speaker standing on the Law Rock to shout out, from memory, all the traditional laws of Fjordane (which now were Sogn's laws too). The Law Rock was just outside the Eid walls, near the field that had been used in the winter for war-training.

Litigants would stand on the flat-topped, grey Law Rock to shout their cases to the crowd and to call witnesses. At the end of each court-case, the law-speaker would call for the Assembly to vote. Votes were normally "ear-votes," with folk showing their support for one side or the other by yelling and clanging weapons onto shields. (Only if the ear-vote was very close would the law-speaker call for an "eye-vote," which was the counting of raised weapons.)

The case before Yngvild's involved two men who each claimed ownership of a fancy-looking set of carved and painted bed-posts. The man who now had them, Olli, claimed that he had got them as a gift. The man who'd made them, Joran, claimed that he had only loaned them to Olli. Each brought witnesses to attest to their honesty and good character.

After each of the litigants made their arguments and presented their witnesses, the law-speaker asked the crowd to make noise for Olli's position, then Joran's. The support was much louder for Joran than for Olli.

The law-speaker shouted, "The bed-posts were a loan, not a gift. Olli is to return them to Joran in seven days, or will be declared an outlaw. Next case: Yngvild of Starheim's plea for divorce."

Joran strutted from the Law Rock with a pleased grin, while Olli scowled at the crowd as he left.

Yngvild stepped onto the Law Rock.

"Go ahead," the law-speaker said, gesturing at the crowd and stepping to the rear of the big, flat-topped rock.

Yngvild saw hundreds of faces, all men, crowding the grassy field below her. She shouted, "I am Yngvild, daughter of Siv, of the town of Starheim. Five years ago, in Starheim, I married Gunnar, son of Torgill. We had no children. We lived in a house in Starheim until he lost it, because of debts from gambling on horse-fights. He was unlucky. We moved into the house of my mother, but he kept gambling on horses and losing, his debt getting bigger and bigger. This went on for about a year, until one day he disappeared. He took all the money in our silver-box. That was two years ago, and I have not seen him since. It is clear that I have been abandoned. I wish a divorce so that I can be free of my vows to Gunnar -- that nothing, that cowardly and unlucky failure of a wretch! I wish to re-marry, to Halfdan the Black. Please grant my divorce. I have two witnesses."

Yngvild's first witness was her mother, who was led onto the Law Rock and placed to face the crowd.

Siv said, "I am Siv, daughter of Tordis, and Yngvild is my only daughter. Yngvild is an honest woman. By Freya, I attest that Yngvild does not lie and that everything she told you of her marriage is the truth!"

The next witness was Yngvild's cousin, Tone, who told the crowd of jurors much the same as Siv.

The law-speaker then gestured for Yngvild and her witnesses to move to the rear of the Law Rock. The law-speaker shouted to the crowd, "You have heard the case for a divorce. Now, is Gunnar here? Gunnar, son of Torgill?" The law-speaker called for Gunnar twice more, then said, "Then this will be an undefended divorce. Let me hear the votes of those who agree that Yngvild should be released from her marriage?"

Yngvild was very popular, both for her own qualities and for her closeness to Halfdan. The noise of her support was deafening, as most of the crowd whooped and screeched and bellowed at the Law Rock, pounding handles of swords and axes onto wooden shields. The din of deep voices and wood drumming onto wood frightened birds from nearby trees.

The law-speaker raised a hand for quiet and asked, "And who opposes the divorce?"

Silence.

Then, some joker in the crowd put his lips to his arm and made a loud farting noise.

Folk laughed.

The law-speaker said, "Yngvild, you are now divorced. Next case: Knut, son of Grettir, pleads that the Assembly order Torfinn, son of Gandalf, to compensate Knut for the wrongful poisoning of his sheep."

Nervous-looking, Knut stepped onto the Law Rock as Yngvild and her cousin led Siv off.

As soon as she stepped off the Law Rock, Yngvild untied the key hanging from her belt -- the symbol of her disappeared marriage -- and casually tossed it into a bush.

At home, Siv went to Halfdan's bedside. "I'm free."

A month after the gut-stabbing, Halfdan was still too weak to leave the bed. He looked strangely thin, with new wrinkles in his face from day after day of almost-unbearable pain. But he was getting better. His belly was much smaller than it had been at his arrival, and pus no longer leaked from the stab-scar.

Halfdan smiled at her and said, in a whisper, "Free? Not for long."

Yngvild rested her head on his bony shoulder, saying, "No, not for long. When you get better --"

Halfdan said, "We'll get married."

"Yes."

Because of Halfdan's health, he was unable to be a candidate for king of Sogn and Fjordane. So he had asked Atli -- the wisest man that Halfdan knew, also very brave -- to be a candidate. Atli agreed. When it was known that Halfdan supported Atli for king, nobody else wanted to run. Atli was the only candidate.

Late that afternoon, from the direction of the Law Rock, Halfdan and Siv heard the noise of the last vote of the day. They rested in bed -- her naked, him wearing only the bandages on his belly, her arm resting on his chest -- and they listened to the hundreds of men yelling and pounding weapons outside the town.

Faintly, across the distance from the Law Rock, they could hear many voices yelling together, "LONG LIVE KING ATLI! LONG LIVE KING ATLI! LONG LIVE KING ATLI!"

After his election, King Atli of Sogn and Fjordane immediately started handing out gifts. When the gifts were all gone, a crowd of fighters carried King Atli, sitting on top of a shield, to his hall. A big pile of wood outside the hall was lit on fire when King Atli arrived. Slaves opened barrels of beer and mead, handing cups to everybody. Folk arrived at King Atli's hall, dressed in their fanciest clothes, to celebrate with their new legal ruler. King Atli now wore a long, red gown of silk and pointed whale-skin boots. His paint-smeared face stayed calm and dignified as he sat on the shield, sipping booze from a gold-decorated horn, as his fighters carried him in circles around the fire.

"LONG LIVE KING ATLI!"

30: TO JERUSALEM

It is said that almost a year passed before Halfdan's belly fully healed, and that he was never as strong after the stabbing as he had been before. It is also said that the traitor's rusty spear-tip caused unhealable harm to Halfdan's insides; for the rest of his long life, Halfdan would complain of shitting-pains.

Early on in Halfdan's slow recovery -- a few days after the election of King Atli, when Halfdan was still too weak to get out of bed -- Halfdan told Yngvild and Siv of a strange dream.

"I dreamed of my mother last night," he said. "Aasa floated into this room, to talk to me. She looked just as the old folk in Os described: with skin blacker than the sky between stars, hair like the wool of a black sheep, and eyes just like mine. She wore a strange gown, in bright colours and outlandish patterns. And from her back --"

"What?" Siv said.

Halfdan said, "On her back were two huge wings, spreading to either side of her. One of the wings was black, like the wing of a crow, and the other white, like that of an owl from the far north."

"Like the paintings in that religious building in England you told us about," Yngvild said.

"Yes, except for the black wing," Halfdan said. "Her feet did not touch the floor; she floated to my bedside, the wings flapping slowly, just enough to keep her floating over the floor. I said, 'Why are you here?' and she said, 'You know,' and I did. I remembered that I had vowed to set free one of the slaves from England, a madwoman called Leoba. With the excitement of Venn's stabbing and your divorce and the election, I'd forgotten about Leoba and my vow. I said, 'You emerged from the shadow-world of death just to remind me to free a slave?' And my mother said, 'Yes. Leoba's life is precious to me.' I said, 'Because you are both Christians?' She told me, 'Yes.' That made me feel very angry. She had left me alone for so long, teaching me nothing about who I was or what to believe, and then I almost die and am in agony every day -- and when Aasa's ghost shows up, she is more interested in what happens to some outlander slave-bitch than her own son! It was insulting, like my life meant nothing to her. I shouted, 'That's the only reason you came? Because of Leoba?' And my mother said, 'Yes. I am following orders.' 'Whose orders?' She said, 'You know,' and I did -- I remembered seeing a statue of that Christ-god, dangling by his hands from a wood-beam, and I knew that this Christ ruled my mother. And my mother knew my thoughts. She said, 'Yes, Christ rules me. I gave my undying ghost to Christ, long before I gave the rest of me to your father, and now I dwell in glory in heaven.' 'What about Odin and Tor and my gods?' She shrugged -- it was so strange, seeing a ghost shrug like that, wings growing from behind her shoulders -- and she said, 'Your gods are getting weaker every generation. In the long-ago days, they did great things, but now, what? They do nothing but wait for the end of the world and pass the time gambling on human battles. They only hide in the clouds, useless. They are dying. It will not be long before they are all forgotten, forever, and Christ will rule all of Norway, forever.' I said, 'What does this Christ want from folk, anyway?' She said, 'Justice. Love. Forgiveness. Now I must leave.' She turned and started floating towards the door, wings flapping. I tried to get out of bed to follow, but it was

too painful and my body too weak. I called out, 'Wait.' At the door, she said, 'What?' There was so much I wanted to ask her. But my mind went blank. What did I most want to ask her? All I could think to say was, 'Tell me something interesting.' She said, 'Do you want to know about your father?' 'Yes!' My mother's ghost said to me, 'Gødrød is still alive. He went to the east, farther east than any Norseman had ever travelled, fighting for many different kings. He was made a captive after a great battle in a desert. The conquerors took him as a slave to their homeland, farther east. He is still a slave, in a land at the eastern edge of the world, building an unimaginably-long wall of stone. Gødrød is now an old man, married to a slave and their children and grandchildren are slaves. When he is too old to lift heavy stones, he will die in that odd, distant land.' I said nothing, wondering at my father's fate. Before she could leave, I asked, 'Mother, what should I do?' and she said, 'You know, my boy,' and floated out through the door, gone."

Yngvild asked Siv, "What does the dream mean?"

Siv said to Halfdan, "Set free the slave. I don't know how to interpret the rest of the dream."

"Nor do I," Halfdan said.

The next day, Ole walked to a farm near Eid and spoke to the man who owned it.

"You have a new slave-girl, one of the outlanders from the raid," Ole said.

The farmer said, "Yes. So?"

"Halfdan wants to buy her," Ole said. He held out an apple-sized piece of silver; it was much more than the normal price for a slave of Leoba's age and gender.

The farmer eyed the silver with interest but, being honest, said, "If Halfdan wants her, he should know that she's one of the most useless slaves I've ever owned. Hardly ever wants to work, always rolling her eyes at the sky and weeping. Can't dig a ditch or even clean out a pig-pen. Not even pretty. I can sell Halfdan something much better than her."

"Halfdan wants that one."

"Fine." The farmer took the lump of silver.

Some neighbours were witnesses, as Ole chanted to Leoba, "No longer a slave, now freedom is yours." He chanted it nine times, as the law required, and after the ninth repetition she was legally freed.

Leoba said to the farmer, "You will fry in Hell for what you did to me."

The farmer looked at Ole, saying, "See? I warned you about this one."

"Let's go," Ole said.

He and Leoba walked away from the farm, towards Eid. Her head had been shaved to the skin; she wore cheap grey clothes; half-healed whip-scars could be seen on the back of her neck; more pain-stripes were on her back, hidden by her rough slave-garb. Leoba looked thin and tired and her eyes were dazed. But her odd, rude and fanatical character was almost unchanged.

She said, "Where are you taking me?"

"To the docks."

"Why?"

"To put you on a ship."

Leoba stopped walking for a moment, staring at Ole in shock.

"A ship to where?"

Ole said, "Wherever you want. Come on, I have better things to do than talk with you."

"Wherever I want? Jerusalem!" Leoba raised her face and hands to the sky, shrieking, "O, Mother Mary! You heard my prayers! Blessed Virgin Mother! I am coming!"

Ole snarled, "Hurry up, bitch, or I'll speed you along with a kick!"

Leoba followed Ole to the docks. Many war-ships and fishing-ships and trading-ships were roped to the rebuilt docks, bobbing in the gentle waves of the fjord. Men walked around, carrying loads and shouting orders and making repairs and drinking in small groups and doing business.

Ole said, "Halfdan told me to arrange passage on a trading-ship for you. You can take one of the ones here, or if you want to go someplace that nobody here is going, you can wait for another ship to arrive. So, where do you want to go?"

"Jerusalem!"

"Where?"

"Jerusalem!"

"I don't know where that is, but I'll check."

Leoba waited at the foot of the docks as Ole went from trading-ship to trading-ship, chatting with each ship's owner or its steersman. Now and then, Ole gestured at Leoba or showed someone the silver.

Ole walked back to Leoba and said, "None of them are going to Jerusalem. How about Førde?"

Leoba said, "I don't know where that is."

"It's a Norse town on a different fjord, over there." Ole pointed to the south-west. "Not many outlander ships come to Eid. More of them come to Førde. Over there, you'll have a better chance of finding a ship going out of Norway. I don't know about finding one to Jerusalem -- none of these sailors have heard of the place -- but maybe you will get lucky."

"To Førde, then," Leoba said.

Ole gave Leoba a leather bag containing various items, including a small piece of silver for the passage to Førde and a much bigger piece to pay for the next step of her journey. He took her along the dock, to a ship owned by fur-traders -- it was called "Sea-Slicer" -- and she waited on the dock as he finished the arrangements.

Ole stepped back on the dock.

The steersman gazed at Leoba, looking impatient. "Get on, we don't have all the time in the world," the steersman said.

Ole said to Leoba, "You have to do as he says. No more arguing with everybody anymore. That's important."

"Goodbye," Leoba said. "And thank you."

Ole said, "Thank Halfdan. May the gods speed you away."

"And may God's Truth someday touch your soul, brother. It's not too late, for you or anybody."

Ole looked confused.

Leoba half-smiled, crossing herself. She took a deep breath of the warm, salt-scented air. She stepped onto the fur-piled deck of Sea-Slicer and out of this saga.

31: CAREER-CHANGE

When Halfdan recovered, he had to decide what to do next in life. He had missed his chance to be elected king of Sogn and Fjordane. King Atli wanted Halfdan to be his second-in-command of the army, but Halfdan was tired of fighting. No longer did the clanging of weapons and the screams of the fallen sound sweet to his ears. King Lambi was dead and revenged and there seemed no point to violence anymore.

When he talked about his feelings to Yngvild, a few nights after their wedding, she said, "We have enough silver to buy a nice farm. We can grow crops and food-beasts. A farm is a good place for raising children."

(She was pregnant.)

Halfdan said, "True. But there is one problem with farming. It's so boring!"

"You don't want to fight anymore, and you say farming is boring. I'm sure that, with your sea-sickness, you're not thinking of becoming a fisherman or trader."

"No."

"Then what do you want to do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

After a pause, Halfdan said, "I like poetry."

"You want to be a full-time poet?"

Halfdan said, "That does not sound very practical, I know."

"In your dream, when you asked Aasa's ghost what to do, and she said that you knew -- do you think that poetry is what she meant?"

"Maybe," Halfdan said. "Or maybe she wants me to become a Christian."

"That silly slave-religion?"

Halfdan frowned. "My mother was not a slave. My father, the believer in our gods, is the slave now."

"Sorry."

Eventually, Halfdan and Yngvild negotiated a plan: they would buy land near Eid and become a farm-family, but Halfdan would spend each winter away from home, earning silver as a travelling poet. That was a difficult, sometimes-dangerous job which usually paid little -- but Halfdan believed strongly in his skill at rhyming and alliteration, and he knew that his fame as a fighter and a war-chief would attract audiences. They agreed that he would work as a farmer in Eid for half of each year, and as a travelling poet for the other half. Halfdan vowed to avoid fights and to not cheat on Yngvild.

The sad news of the death of Uncle Harald was soon followed by the good news of the birth of their son, a strong and healthy boy -- darker in skin and hair than his mother, lighter than his father -- who was called Harald. (Later to be nicknamed "Harald the Messy-Haired," this boy would grow up to be a famous and cruel warrior, the hero of many sagas.)

32: DUEL!

As a travelling poet, Halfdan spent many winters travelling around Norway by ski, by horse-drawn sled and occasionally (when it could not be avoided) by ship. He visited dozens of Norse kingdoms, many of them tiny and poor.

At each kingdom, Halfdan would first ask the king's permission to stay there and practice his art. As winter-time was boring, most kings were eager to have a famous fighter and war-chief hanging around to provide entertainment. Halfdan would sleep in the hall with the fighters, sharing their feasts and endless booze-fests, collecting and saving the scraps of silver that were tossed at him after a good poem. (Bones and garbage were tossed whenever a poem was bad, or when Halfdan was too drunk to remember the words.) All went well in his new career -- with family and hard work every summer, and winters filled with art and friendships and being drunk -- until, one winter, Halfdan travelled south to Oslo for the first time.

Far to the south-east of Eid, Oslo was a small kingdom, but under its famous King Haakon it was quickly rising in power and wealth. When Halfdan arrived by horse-drawn sled, shortly after Yule-time, he was surprised to see that Oslo's king-hall was not rectangular in shape, as was normal, but circular.

There were other odd customs in the south-lands of Norway -- only women wore face-paint, not men; and folk did not hang dead sheep outside their doors to please the gods; and human sacrifices here were not drowned in a swamp, as was done in most other Norse lands, but were tossed into a hole in the ground full of poisonous vipers.

King Haakon was grey-bearded and somewhat fat, but still a fierce fighter and active sportsman. He spent much of his time playing a game with sticks and a wooden ball on the ice of a lake, and despite his age, he was often the player who scored the most goals for his team. He reminded Halfdan of King Lambi in some ways, and Halfdan immediately liked him. King Haakon seemed to think highly of Halfdan too.

But one of King Haakon's powerful followers, an officer in the Oslo army, was Egil -- yes, the son of King Njal, who had helped his father to terrorize Eid and who had run away, hurt and defeated, from the battle of the frozen river.

As soon as Halfdan had walked into King Haakon's hall for the first time, Egil had recognized him. With a group of other Oslo-fighters, Egil had angrily approached Halfdan. Halfdan had pulled out his sword. They had circled Halfdan, ready to attack him from all sides, when King Haakon from his feasting-platform in the center of the hall called out, "Stop! This man came here as a guest! Anyone who harms my guest without permission will be thrown to the snakes!"

"But my lord," Egil whined, "this black-faced troll here killed my brother Bjaaland. And he stole my kingdom. And worst of all, he desecrated my father's burial-mound. I have no choice but to take revenge."

King Haakon roared, "Then take it outside my kingdom! Here he is safe!"

Egil whined, "He might be a spy for King Atli!"

"King Atli is a good man," King Haakon said. "And, besides, there are many kingdoms and much distance separating his from mine." To Halfdan, King Haakon said, "What brings you here, and why do you look so dark in the face?"

Halfdan briefly explained his parentage, then his reason for travelling to Oslo.

"A poet? They're always nice to have around in the winter. Are you any good? Let me hear something before I decide on letting you stay here."

"Of course. What subject would you like?"

"Tell me a poem about why Egil hates you so much."

Surrounded by tables full of feasting Oslo-fighters, the darkness of winter-night exiled by the light of the fire-place and the torches on the walls, Halfdan stepped in front of King Haakon's platform and said:

Oslo-king asks me to sing
A poem about -- him?

Halfdan glanced, with a sneer and one eyebrow raised, at grim-faced Egil. Halfdan loudly went on with:

There's much to praise in brave men
But little to mention in liars

I like to chant of heroes
Like the manly King Lambi
And my berserk friend, Haki
Not waste my words on turds

I've nothing nice to say
Of him, this weakling bitch
So hear of his career
Of cowardice and crime

Bad King Njal and this brat
Schemed betrayal of my lord
Breaking vows of peace, they struck
Burning a sacred hall

By luck or by fate, I lived
To tell all of you of
My king, my blood-brothers
My queen, trapped in the blaze

Imagine! How they awoke
To choke on smoke and weep
As walls and roof danced red
Flames stroking my queen's hair

Sizzling skin! Boiling blood!
Flaming wood-beams falling down!
Hear the screams, smell the steam
Of dreams stolen by swirling flame!

Good Oslo-folk, see these tears
As I tell of my grief and guilt
And anger at the gods
Night after night of nightmares

So I sought revenge, of course
As any good man should
I vowed to kill the killers
And did, except for -- him

Revenge! At the battle
Of the beacon, it began
Foes groaned, wolves and crows fed
And the cowards fled from Eid

Back in Sogn, bad King Njal
Felt sickly from a tooth
Not his own, but a better man's
The bite of King Lambi's skull

Sweet luck! King Njal sank fast
With well-earned sufferings
Until, oops, his leg fell off
And demons dragged him to Hel

As he died, my army skied
Across the border-glacier
Our force's fury hotter than
An iron-melting forge

At Sogn we fought a battle
That'll never be forgotten
Shield-walls met with fiercest rage
On the frozen river

The clangs of cold iron!
The steam of blood-slick ice!
Storm of arrows and spears!
Bones broke, flesh tore, men roared!

Haki's heavy ax-head fell
Shields and shoulders shattered
My sword danced and sang
As I painted foe-shields red

A famous victory
For Fjordane and revenge
Dead men lay in falling snow
Wives in Sogn were widows

The red-beaked ravens stood
Over men and boys of Sogn
Bjaaland too (his brother)
Were left for laughing birds

But what of him, in the battle?
Has he not told this tale?
How did this bold-tongued babbler
Show himself in battle?

A kitten, a sheep, a rat
This wretch ran from my rage
His brother's body forgotten
Fast-footing to the forest

Ha! What a funny sight
Full of fright, weapons dropped
Sprinting with girlish gasps
A spear stuck in his ass!

Pull down your pants, coward
And show all Oslo the scar
No? Then I will go on, with
A verse on your cursed dad

I dug in Njal's great grave
And dragged out something gruesome
Rotting flesh was fed to hogs
Bones shoved down a shit-hole

King Haakon, lord of Oslo
I've told you of the feud
You have heard how and why
I hate him, he hates me

The king and most of the fighters thought very highly of the poem. The applause was loud and long, except at the table where Egil sat. Egil, humiliated, seethed with fury at the new-comer, but dared to do nothing.

"Welcome, Halfdan the Poet!" the king cried. "You are welcome to stay all winter, if you like!"

King Haakon left his chair to shake hands with Halfdan.

Halfdan spent every night in the hall, chanting poetry and feasting. To prevent a sneak-killing by Egil, Halfdan made sure to never leave the hall except with King Haakon or some trustworthy Oslo-fighters.

King Haakon had a daughter, Solvi, who was Halfdan's age and very beautiful. She was married, but her husband's mind had been damaged by a horse-kick, and now she did as she pleased. She decided that she wanted Halfdan as her lover.

So, during a night of feasting and boozing, she came into the hall and asked to speak privately to Halfdan. They went to a quieter part of the hall and sat together on a bench.

"Yes, Solvi?" he said.

"You are very strange-looking," she said, "but almost handsome. And your poetry is lovely."

"Thank you."

"I hear that, before you devoted yourself to your art, you were a famous fighter and war-chief."

"That is true."

"I see that you still carry a fearsome-looking sword."

Halfdan glanced at the weapon hanging from his belt, nodded.

"May I see it? Its blade?"

Halfdan drew that long, sharpened iron from its sheath and rested the blade on his lap.

She said, "How many men has it tasted the blood of?"

"None. I bought it new last year. My old one got too much rust."

Solvi said, "There is no rust on this blade. It's so bright and beautiful. May I touch it?"

"Of course."

Solvi put her hand onto the blade resting on his lap. She stroked her small, pale fingers along the side of shining iron. "Is it sharp?"

"Of course."

"Let me test it."

She touched a finger-tip to the tip of the sword.

"Careful!"

But she had touched the sword-tip hard enough to break skin.

She gasped, looking at her fingertip. She showed it to Halfdan, holding the finger in front of the bare tops of her breasts, which were squeezed up and together by her tight, fancy-looking dress. The finger-tip oozed a small, dark-red bead of blood. "Now your sword has tasted the blood of a woman, at least," she said.

"I should go back to my table," Halfdan said. He looked around; King Haakon was paying no attention, but a few of the Oslo-fighters were looking curiously at him and Solvi sitting together.

Solvi lifted her pierced finger-tip to her face. Her eyes not leaving Halfdan, she parted her lips and licked the blood. Then she put the finger into her mouth, sucking it, still staring at Halfdan.

Halfdan, feeling uncomfortable and unwillingly aroused, quickly stood and shoved his sword away and went back to his feasting-table.

Solvi left the hall, grinning.

The next night, a slave-girl approached Halfdan's table in the hall. She said, "Princess Solvi would like to talk with you."

"Fine."

"I will take you to her."

"No. She can talk to me here."

The slave-girl whispered, "Princess Solvi wishes to speak to you in private. About something very private."

Halfdan said, "No."

The slave-girl left the hall, looking worried.

A short while later, the slave-girl returned, whispering to Halfdan, "Princess Solvi insists that you visit her. She is waiting for you in a place where nobody ever goes, but it is comfortable. There is food and booze there. And Princess Solvi wants you to enjoy other kinds of treats as well."

Halfdan finally stopped trying to be polite. "Tell Princess Cat-In-Heat that I'm married."

"Your wife does not need to ever know."

He hissed, "Tell Solvi that she is ugly and slutty and I'd rather mount a sheep. Leave me alone."

The slave-girl left. She did not return.

Princess Solvi -- furious, insulted and outraged by the rejection -- did not ever communicate with Halfdan again.

This scheming, wicked woman started to pay much attention to Egil. Again and again, she goaded Egil in private, taunting him as a coward for not taking revenge on Halfdan.

In one of her secret bedrooms, Egil said, "I can't do anything. Your father said he would kill anyone who hurts Halfdan. And now your father and Halfdan are great friends. There's nothing I can do."

"You can be a man, not a whining coward!" Solvi said, eyes flashing with contempt. "If you provoke him into challenging you to a duel, I am sure that my father will not interfere."

"But how can I do that? He ignores all my insults and dirty looks."

"You are so smart -- you'll think of something. Be bold. Like this!" She pulled Egil into her arms, ripping away his fancy clothes; she groaned with shameless lust, dragging him down inside her.

The next night, Egil swaggered over to Halfdan's table and said, "I hear that you Fjordane-folk can't hold your booze! Is that true, troll-face?"

Halfdan said, "That sounds like a challenge to a drinking-contest, you snivelling spawn of Sogn."

"Let's do it!"

A crowd of Oslo-fighters eagerly gathered to watch. Halfdan and Egil each pulled a chair from the table and sat in the gap between tables, facing each other. Even King Haakon left his raised table to come watch.

The rules of the drinking-game were simple. Egil ordered a slave to fill a silver-decorated horn with mead, then he drank it all back in a single guzzle, without stopping to breathe. The slave refilled the horn; Halfdan drank it. The mead (made of Oslo's finest

honey) was very strong. The horn was passed back and forth; the two foes got drunker and drunker.

At one point, Egil accused Halfdan of cheating. "You didn't finish it all! You left too much on the bottom!"

Halfdan said, "There is always a little bit left at the bottom."

"No, you're supposed to drink it all! You have to do that one over again! Or I win!"

"Fine," Halfdan said. The slave filled the second horn in a row for Halfdan, and Halfdan drank it quickly back without a breath.

"Now we've both drank the same," Egil said.

Later, both men were having some problems staying on their chairs. Egil's voice was loud and slurred. Halfdan slumped on his chair, his beard and shirt soaked with drooled booze, struggling to focus his vision.

As Egil was guzzling back yet another horn of mead, he coughed. Booze sprayed from his nostrils as Egil pounded a fist on his own chest and gasped for breath.

"Is the horn empty?" Halfdan said.

King Haakon looked over Egil's shoulder and said, "Half of it's still there."

"So I win, Sogn-spawn."

"No!" Egil howled. "I went first. We've both drank the same number."

"You don't admit defeat!"

"No! You have to drink one more to win! All of it!"

"Fine." Halfdan stood up and gestured for the slave to fill the horn and hand it to him. Halfdan lifted the horn to his mouth and lifted it, pouring all of the thick, sticky liquid down his throat. Then he showed the crowd the empty horn.

"The winner is Halfdan!" King Haakon said.

Halfdan burped. He wiped sudden beads of sweat from his forehead.

King Haakon said, "Are you well?"

Halfdan shook his head. He burped again. Clutching his belly with both hands, Halfdan leaned towards Egil and opened his mouth.

Thinking Halfdan was about to say something, Egil said, "What?"

A tide of mead-puke burst out of Halfdan's gagging mouth, pumping out in sticky brown waves, splashing onto Egil's hair and face and fancy-looking clothes, completely soaking King Njal's son with dripping, reeking puke.

"Well-done!" King Haakon howled.

Egil wiped at his face and shouted drunken threats. But, with King Haakon present, he dared not do anything. Defeated and a mess, Egil left the hall, the mocking laughter filling his ears.

The next time that Egil was alone with Solvi, she said, "It is obvious that you will need help taking on Halfdan."

Egil said, "He cheated! That last horn should not have counted -- it has to stay down!"

"I don't care about the rules of your childish games," Solvi said. "I want you to show me that you are brave enough to be worthy of my passion. Or I'll have to find another, less cowardly lover."

"I'll do whatever you want."

"I know. What I want is for you to visit a friend of mine, a powerful wizard. He will know what to do. And if you tell him that I want Halfdan dead too, he will be eager to help, for this wizard is a very close friend."

Egil visited this wizard, who lived in a run-down shack on the edge of Oslo, and told him what Solvi wanted. The wizard was called Thrand. He was an old man, short and plump-faced, one-eyed, with a habit of occasionally licking his lips. He was not Norse, but an exile from Finland. Thrand knew mighty magic.

"To kill Halfdan without angering King Haakon, you must find a way to get Halfdan to challenge you to a duel," Thrand said.

"But he won't challenge me. He acts as if he has been just a poet his whole life, knowing nothing of violence. No matter how I try to provoke him, he always finds a way to ignore it or to embarrass me."

"I have a spell that can change that."

After a silence, Egil said, "There is another problem. Even though he is now just a poet, Halfdan was once the second-most-feared fighter in all the west-lands. I am not sure that I could defeat him in a duel."

"Ah," said the wizard. "Well, I can take care of that difficulty as well."

"Wonderful! What do we do?"

The wizard Thrand told Egil his plan.

The next night, Egil walked into the hall with Thrand. But only Egil could be seen, because the wizard wore a magic cloak from Finland that made him invisible.

As planned, Egil went to Halfdan's table and said, loud enough for everybody in the hall to hear, "Halfdan, I have treated you badly and wish to apologize."

"Fine."

"As a token of my good-will, please take this gift."

Egil held out a shiny silver ring, carved with strange runes and decorated with a glittering, honey-yellow amber-stone.

Halfdan looked at Egil suspiciously.

But King Haakon called out, "Halfdan! I don't know about the manners of folk in Fjordane, but here in Oslo, if a brave man offers an apology and a fine gift, it is rude to refuse."

"Fine. Thank you," Halfdan said, taking the enchanted ring and slipping it onto a finger.

Egil slunk away to a dark corner, where he spoke with the invisible wizard.

"That ring has magic in it, which I can use to make Halfdan say whatever I choose," said Thrand's voice.

"Do it now!"

Thrand's disembodied voice said, "No, we need to wait a while, and then you need to do something to provoke him."

So Egil waited, until he decided that he had waited enough, and he walked to Halfdan's table. Pretending to stumble over a man's foot, Egil staggered forward, spilling his cup of beer into Halfdan's face.

"Sorry!" Egil said, grinning spitefully.

In the corner, the invisible, watching wizard saw that the time had come to use the magic of the ring. The wizard whispered, "You did that on purpose."

And on the other side of the hall, magic-craft pulled Halfdan to his feet and the wizard's words burst loudly from Halfdan's mouth: "YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE!"

Thrand whispered, "Oslo is full of fools, and you are the worst!"

Halfdan shouted, "OSLO IS FULL OF FOOLS, AND YOU ARE THE WORST!"

Thrand: "Egil, you let yourself be used as a woman every ninth night!"

(That was the worst insult among Norse fighters.)

Halfdan: "EGIL! YOU LET YOURSELF BE USED AS A WOMAN EVERY NINTH NIGHT!"

Thrand: "I challenge you to a duel."

Halfdan (amazed to find such unwanted words flying out of his mouth) shouted: "I CHALLENGE YOU TO A DUEL!"

Thrand grinned and walked out of the hall.

Halfdan ripped the ring from his finger and complained, "I was enchanted by magic! I did not say those words!"

But nobody believed him.

"I accept your duel-challenge," Egil said, his evil eyes twinkling.

The duel was to be held the next afternoon, on a little island on a river that ran into Oslo-fjord. Grey stones were put on the snowy ground, marking a square. Neither duellist would be allowed to leave the duelling-square.

Before the fight, Egil insisted on inspecting Halfdan's weapons.

"Why?" Halfdan asked.

"Yes, why?" King Haakon said.

Egil said, "Because in the west-lands, where both Halfdan and I are from, sneaky men have been known to put poison on the iron of their weapons. I must check if Halfdan is planning such a trick!"

"Ridiculous!" Halfdan said.

But King Haakon shrugged and said, "It can do no harm to look."

According to the traditions of duelling, Halfdan wore a helmet and body-armour; he had brought a spear, a shield and a sword. As Egil inspected the spear and the sword, he secretly held a rune-covered piece of walrus-horn in a hand and touched it to both of the weapons. The piece of walrus-horn had been enchanted by Thrand, so that "any weapon that he tries to use against you will leap out of his hand, leaving you unharmed."

Halfdan did not notice Egil's sneaky action with the magic item.

"Do you want to check my weapons for poison?" Egil asked.

"No. Enough silliness. Let's fight."

The duelling-square was surrounded by King Haakon and his Oslo-fighters. Egil and Halfdan stood in opposite corners of the stone-marked square, glaring at each other with old hate.

In a Norse duel, one party strikes a blow at the other, who defends himself. Then the positions are reversed.

As Halfdan had made the challenge, Egil attacked first. He ran across the packed, crunchy snow at Halfdan and hurled his spear at him. The well-thrown spear sped towards Halfdan's leg -- Halfdan lowered his shield in time to block it. The spear slammed into the oak-wood circle and knocked Halfdan back a step, but did no hurt. Halfdan yanked Egil's spear from his shield and tossed it aside, out of the square.

"My turn," the Fjordane-man snarled at the Sogn-man.

Halfdan held his spear over his right shoulder, ran towards Egil and hurled it at Egil's head. But, just before the spear left his hand, the weapon magically twitched, ruining the throw. The spear flew high and to the right over Egil's grinning face, splashing into the grey, ice-clogged river and sinking.

"Nice throw!" Egil mocked.

Now Egil drew his sword and charged at Halfdan. Halfdan, shield held high, sword in hand for blocking, waited for his foe's sword-swing. The well-aimed blade whipped at the shoulder of Halfdan's sword-arm. Halfdan half-blocked it with the edge of his shield, but as the deflected blade swung down, it slashed Halfdan's leg. The blade tore Halfdan's pants and scraped a deep cut into Halfdan's leg.

King Haakon shouted, "First blood to Egil!"

It was now Halfdan's turn. He charged at Egil, swinging his sword at Egil's leg. Egil sneered. Just before the sword struck Egil, the enchanted weapon twisted itself out of his hand and spun away, landing just outside the line of stones.

"It's outside the square!" Egil crowed. "Out of bounds!"

Halfdan scowled. Once a weapon left the duelling-square, it could not be recovered.

All he had left was a shield.

Halfdan said, "I suspect that more evil magic is at work here!"

King Haakon looked troubled, but said nothing, allowing the duel to continue.

Egil's next sword-swing made it past Halfdan's shield, clanging off Halfdan's helmet, stunning Halfdan and painfully pulling a muscle in his neck.

"Now it's my turn," Halfdan growled.

King Haakon said, "Halfdan, you are without weapons. If you wish to surrender now, Egil will have the right to take all of your property, but I say that you will be able to leave my kingdom in safety."

Halfdan spat, "Never!" and charged.

The wizard had told Egil to touch the magic walrus-horn to all Halfdan's weapons, but Egil had only enchanted Halfdan's spear and sword, forgetting that a shield was a weapon too.

Behind his round shield, Halfdan charged at Egil. Their shields collided with a huge impact. Egil fell back, with Halfdan on top of him, pushing him down to the snowy ground. Egil let go of his sword and shield, Halfdan let go of his shield, and they rolled back and forth on the snow, wrestling furiously. Halfdan grabbed the back of Egil's body-armour with one hand, trying to pull it up over Egil's head, and with his other, Halfdan tried to scrape his fingers across Egil's eyes.

Both of their helmets had fallen off.

"Run out of magic tricks?" Halfdan grunted.

Egil grabbed at Halfdan's neck with strong fingers, trying to choke. Halfdan pushed his chin down, squeezing Egil's hands between Halfdan's chest and jawbone.

They rolled wildly, to the cheers of the excited crowd, until Halfdan was under Egil, who was stronger. (The stabbing had forever weakened some of Halfdan's gut-muscles.) Halfdan kicked one of his legs out from under Egil's heavy bulk, wrapping it around Egil's hips. Halfdan twisted himself flat on his back under Egil, managing to wrap his other leg around him too. Both of Halfdan's legs were wrapped around Egil's hips; he locked his ankles together behind Egil's back, squeezing him in a tight ring of muscle and

bone. Halfdan's hands were still trying to scratch out Egil's eyes. Then Halfdan changed tactics, trying to put his hands over Egil's mouth and nose to block his breath.

Egil wriggled and threw ineffective punches at Halfdan's sides and head.

Soon Egil was breathing hard, yanking his head from side to side to escape the breath-blocking hands. Egil's eyes were starting to bulge. He gripped Halfdan's neck again and tried, at the same time, to both choke Halfdan and hammer the back of his head onto the hard-packed snow.

Halfdan closed his eyes and kept squeezing his legs around Egil's flabby middle.

Egil pulled his hands from Halfdan's neck and pushed his left hand down onto one of Halfdan's forearms. Egil managed to pin Halfdan's right arm to the snow. Egil's free hand stormed punches down into Halfdan's face, pounding the thick lips, knocking out teeth.

Halfdan spat out the bits of teeth and tried to block the punches with his own free hand.

Drooling blood-pink spit, Egil said, "Die! Die!"

"No, thank you," Halfdan grunted.

Egil surprised Halfdan by smashing his forehead down to strike Halfdan's bloody mouth. Another of Halfdan's teeth was knocked out. Halfdan swallowed the jagged little chunk, wriggling on his back as he kept squeezing his legs around Egil's strong and twisting body.

The squeezing made it hard for Egil to breathe; now he was gasping for air, red-faced. Egil tried to pull away. Halfdan managed to pull both his arms free and to wrap one around the back of Egil's neck, shoving the other arm up into the front of the foe's throat. Egil tried, more frantic now, to pull away, but could not -- Halfdan's arms ruled his neck and Halfdan's legs ruled the middle of Egil's body.

Halfdan moved his mouth to the side of Egil's head and bit through Egil's sweaty yellow hair, his teeth finding the lobe of Egil's ear. Halfdan bit it off. Spat.

Egil screamed, panicking, wriggling!

Halfdan's arms and legs squeezed and squeezed.

"I give up," Egil finally whispered.

"I don't care."

Halfdan squeezed Egil's neck and mid-section until Egil went limp. Halfdan rolled over, so that he was lying on top of Egil now. Egil was still, barely breathing.

Halfdan grabbed Egil's beard and pulled it upwards, showing everybody Egil's pale throat.

The crowd was roaring its approval, but Halfdan heard nothing.

He closed his broken, jagged mouthful of teeth onto Egil's throat, biting hard into the flesh. Halfdan yanked back his head, pulling out a chunk of blood-dripping flesh, the dripping ends of veins and arteries dangling down his beard. Blood sprayed up from Egil's torn throat, fountaining into Halfdan's face, turning the nearby snow dark red, with steam rising in the cold air.

Halfdan spat out the meat, lowered his mouth to the bloody mess of throat, filled his mouth with the flowing blood. He raised his head to the sky and gargled the mouthful of warm gore, then drank it.

Drooling blood, Halfdan chanted a mocking-poem about Egil, roaring crude, cruel words up at the blank clouds.

King Haakon announced that Halfdan had won the duel.

Later, Solvi confessed to her father that she had been involved. For her punishment, one of her favourite silk dresses was taken away, and she was ordered to stay out of the hall.

The suburban shack that was home to the wizard from Finland was attacked by an angry mob of Oslo-men. Thrand turned himself into a bat and tried to fly away, but somebody shot at the bat with an arrow, bringing the bat to the ground. Fatally hurt, the wizard changed back to the shape of a man. Before dying, he confessed to using his outlandish magic against Halfdan -- and to many other crimes. Oslo was a better place without that nasty wizard, everybody agreed.

Halfdan left Oslo in the spring, loaded with silver and fame.

33: SAGA'S END

A few years later, unlucky King Atli fell head-first into a barrel of Yule-mead and drunkenly drowned. His end inspired many poems.

A good king.

Halfdan was elected the next king of Sogn and Fjordane.

He ruled peacefully and justly for many years, and was beloved by all.

A great king!

This is how folk say that King Halfdan met his end: as an old man, during a forest-walk with his family near the sacred waterfall, he tripped on a tree-root and struck his head on a sharp rock. He stood -- his skull broken, globs of brains dribbling down his face -- and he sang a now-famous poem:

I've walked from place to place

With my art of poetry

Describing my heart's dreams

Pouring words for all to drink

The lovely bird of life

Flew in through a window

Flapped, bright-feathered, through my hall

Then out another window

Everywhere, folk wonder

What is death? What is life?

Life is a light burden

And death weighs even less

When he finished, King Halfdan kissed Queen Yngvild and Harald and Yngbjörg (their younger son) and Ragnhild (their daughter).

Then he fell.

King Halfdan's body rests, even to this day, on the deck of a war-ship inside a burial-mound near Eid. It is blanketed by thick snow in winter, every summer sprouting wildflowers.

Though still a very young man, Harald the Messy-Haired was elected the next king of Sogn and Fjordane. King Harald and his well-led fighters soon forced the king of Fårde into exile and took over his lands. Over the following years, King Harald conquered Norse kingdom after Norse kingdom, from Hålogaland in the north to Oslo in the south, until he ruled all Norway. Never before had there been a unified kingdom of Norway with a single king. King Harald ended the tradition of king-elections; his oldest son Erik inherited his rule. Rule of Norway has passed from fathers to oldest sons ever since. Every king of Norway, even to this day, has been a direct descendant of Halfdan the Black and Yngvild of Starheim.

So ends this saga.

Time-Line of Norse History

- 751 - Election of King Lambi
- 753 - First exile of Gødrød
- 757 - Start of Third Swedish War
- 757 - Aasa leaves Nubia
- 762 - End of Third Swedish War
- 765 - Birth of Halfdan
- 767 - Death of Aasa
- 767 - Second exile of Gødrød
- 767 - Birth of Yngvild
- 780 - King Charlemagne's conquest of Germany
- 781 - Halfdan joins King Lambi's hall
- 792 - Death of King Lambi
- 792 - Battle of the Beacon
- 793 - Death of King Njal
- 793 - Battle of the Frozen River
- 793 - First Norse raid on England (start of Viking era)
- 793 - Yngvild's divorce
- 793 - Election of King Atli
- 794 - Yngvild and Halfdan marry
- 795 - Death of Harald (Halfdan's uncle)
- 795 - Birth of Harald (Halfdan's son)
- 799 - Second Norse raid on England
- 799 - Death of Egil
- 800 - Death of King Charlemagne
- 801 - First Norse raids in Ireland, Russia and France
- 804 - Birth of Yngebjørg
- 805 - Birth of Ragnhild
- 813 - Death of King Atli
- 813 - Election of King Halfdan
- 815 - Start of Fourth Swedish War
- 816 - End of Fourth Swedish War
- 818 - First Norse raids on Spain and North Africa
- 822 - Halfdan visits Nubia
- 823 - Death of King Halfdan
- 824 - Election of King Harald
- 824 - King Harald's conquest of Førde
- 828 - King Harald's conquests of Møre, Tøten, Vik, Agder, Vingulmark and Ørkdalen
- 829 - King Harald's conquest of Gudbrandsdal
- 831 - King Harald's conquests of Rogaland, Hålogaland and Telemark
- 833 - Death of Yngvild
- 849 - King Harald's conquest of Oslo (Norway unified)
- 868 - Death of King Harald
- 868 - Crowning of King Erik

868 - Deaths of Yngbjörg and Ragnhild
870 - Norse settlement of Iceland
907 - King Erik's conquest of Northumbria
912 - Norse settlement of France (Normandy)
947 - King Olaf makes Christianity the official religion of Norway
986 - Norse settlement of Greenland
1000- King Olaf makes Christianity the official religion of Iceland
1005- Norse settlement of North America
1006- Norse settlers chased from North America by Natives
1066- Death of King Hardrada (end of Viking era)
1313- *Viking Saga* written in Iceland (author unknown)
1847- First English translation of *Viking Saga*
1933- First North American translation of *Viking Saga*
2010- Mark Coakley's translation of ***Viking Saga***

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[thank you for your time, hope you liked it - m.h.c.]