



THE SHADOW OF THE GODS

'MASTERFULLY CRAFTED AND
BRUTALLY COMPELLING'
ANTHONY RYAN

JOHN GWYNNE

THE
SHADOW
OF THE
GODS

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*For Caroline,
My love,
My heart,
My everything.
Always*

*There comes the shadow-dark dragon flying,
The gleaming serpent, up from Dark-of-Moon Hills;
He flies over the plain, and in his pinions
he carries corpses.*

The Voluspa

CHAPTER ONE

ORKA

The year 297 of Friðaröld, The Age of Peace

“Death is a part of life,” Orka whispered into her son’s ear. Even though Breca’s arm was drawn back, the ash-spear gripped tight in his small, white-knuckled fist and the spearhead aimed at the reindeer in front of them, she could see the hesitation in his eyes, in the set of his jaw.

He is too gentle for this world of pain, Orka thought. She opened her mouth to scold him, but a hand touched her arm, a huge hand where Breca’s was small, rough-skinned where Breca’s was smooth.

“Wait,” Thorkel breathed through his braided beard, a cold-misting of breath. He stood to her left, solid and huge as a boulder.

Muscles bunched in Orka’s jaw, hard words already in her throat.

Hard words are needed for this hard world.

But she held her tongue.

Spring sunlight dappled the ground through soft-swaying branches, reflecting brightly from patches of rimed snow, winter’s last hoar-frost kiss on this high mountain woodland. A dozen reindeer stood grazing in a glade, a thick-antlered bull watching over the herd of cows and calves as they chewed and scratched moss and lichen from trunks and boulders.

A shift in Breca’s eyes, an indrawn breath that he held, followed by a burst of explosive movement; his hips twisting, his arm moving.

The spear left his fist: a hiss as sharp iron sliced through air. A flush of pride in Orka's chest. It was well thrown. As soon as the spear had left Breca's grip she knew it would hit its mark.

In the same heartbeat that Breca loosed his spear, the reindeer he had chosen looked up from the trunk it had been scraping lichen from. Its ears twitched and it leaped forwards, the herd around it breaking into motion, bounding and swerving around trees. Breca's spear slammed into the trunk, the shaft quivering. A moment later there was a crashing from the east, the sound of branches cracking, and a form burst from the undergrowth, huge, slate-furred and long-clawed, exploding into the glade. The reindeer fled in all directions as the beast loped among them, oblivious to all around it. Blood pulsed from a swarm of wounds across its body, long teeth slick, its red tongue lolling, and then it was gone, disappearing into the forest gloom.

"What . . . was that?" Breca hissed, looking up at his mother and father, wide eyes shifting from Orka to Thorkel.

"A fell-wolf," Thorkel grunted as he broke into motion, the stealth of the hunt forgotten. He pushed through undergrowth into the glade, a thick-shafted spear in one fist, branches snapping, Orka and Breca following. Thorkel dropped to one knee, tugged a glove off with his teeth and touched his fingertips to droplets of the wolf's blood, brushing them across the tip of his tongue. He spat, rose and followed the trail of wolf-blood to the edge of the glade, then stood there peering into the murk.

Breca walked up to his spear, the blade half-sunk into a pine tree, and tried to pull it free. His body strained, but the spear didn't move. He looked up at Orka, grey-green eyes in a pale, muddied face, a straight nose and strong jaw framed with crow-black hair, so much like his father, and the opposite of her. Apart from his eyes. He had Orka's eyes.

"I missed," he said, his shoulders slumping.

Orka gripped the shaft in her gloved hand and tugged the spear free.

"Yes," she said as she handed Breca his spear, half-an-arm shorter than hers and Thorkel's.

“It was not your fault,” Thorkel said from the glade’s edge. He was still staring into the gloom, a thick braid of black, grey-streaked hair poking from beneath his woollen nǫlbinding cap, his nose twitching. “The fell-wolf startled them.”

“Why didn’t it kill any of those reindeer?” Breca asked as he took his short spear back from Orka.

Thorkel lifted his hand, showing bloodied fingertips. “It was wounded, not thinking about its supper.”

“What did that to a fell-wolf?” Breca asked.

A silence.

Orka strode to the opposite end of the glade, her spear ready as she regarded the dark hole in the undergrowth from where the wolf had emerged. She paused, cocked her head. A faint sound, drifting through the woodland like mist.

Screams.

Breca joined her. He gripped his spear with both hands and pointed into the darkness.

“Thorkel,” Orka grunted, twisting to look over her shoulder at her husband. He was still staring after the wounded wolf. With a last, lingering look and shake of his fur-draped shoulders he turned and strode towards her.

More screams, faint and distant.

Orka shared a look with Thorkel.

“Asgrim’s steading lies that way,” she said.

“Harek,” Breca said, referring to Asgrim’s son. Breca had played with him on the beach at Fellur, on the occasions when Orka and Thorkel had visited the village to trade for provisions.

Another scream, faint and ethereal through the trees.

“Best we take a look,” Thorkel muttered.

“Heya,” Orka grunted her agreement.

Their breath misted about them in clouds as they worked their way through the pinewoods, the ground thick and soft with needles. It was spring, signs of new life in the world below, but winter still clung to these wooded hills like a hunched old warrior refusing to let go of his past. They walked in file, Orka leading, her eyes constantly shifting between the wolf-carved path they were following

and the deep shadows around them. Old, ice-crusted snow crunched underfoot as trees opened up and they stepped on to a ridge, steep cliffs falling away sharply to the west, ragged strips of cloud drifting across the open sky below them. Orka glanced down and saw reed-thin columns of hearth fire smoke rising from Fellur, far below. The fishing village sat nestled on the eastern edge of a deep, blue-black fjord, the calm waters shimmering in the pale sun. Gulls swirled and called.

“Orka,” Thorkel said and she stopped, turned.

Thorkel was unstoppering a leather water bottle and handing it to Breca, who despite the chill was flushed and sweating.

“His legs aren’t as long as yours,” Thorkel smiled through his beard, the scar from cheek to jaw giving his mouth a twist.

Orka looked back up the trail they were following and listened. She had heard no more screams for a while now, so she nodded to Thorkel and reached for her own water bottle.

They sat on a boulder for a few moments, looking out over the land of green and blue, like gods upon the crest of the world. To the south the fjord beyond Fellur spilled into the sea, a ragged coastline curling west and then south, ribbed and scarred with deep fjords and inlets. Iron-grey clouds bunched over the sea, glowing with the threat of snow. Far to the north a green-sloped, snow-topped mountain range coiled across the land, filling the horizon from east to west. Here and there a towering cliff face gleamed, the old-bone roots of the mountain from this distance just a flash of grey.

“Tell me of the serpent Snaka again,” Breca said as they all stared at the mountains.

Orka said nothing, eyes fixed on the undulating peaks.

“If I were to tell that saga-tale, little one, your nose and fingers would freeze, and when you stood to walk away your toes would snap like ice,” Thorkel said.

Breca looked at him with his grey-green eyes.

“Ach, you know I cannot say no to that look,” Thorkel huffed, breath misting. “All right, then, the short telling.” He tugged off the nálbinding cap on his head and scratched his scalp. “All that

you can see before you is Vigrið, the Battle-Plain. The land of shattered realms. Each steppe of land between the sea and those mountains, and a hundred leagues beyond them: that is where the gods fought, and died, and Snaka was the father of them all; some say the greatest of them.”

“Certainly the biggest,” Breca said, voice and eyes round and earnest.

“Am I telling this tale, or you?” Thorkel said, a dark eyebrow rising.

“You, Father,” Breca said, dipping his head.

Thorkel grunted. “Snaka was of course the biggest. He was the oldest, the father of the gods; Eldest, they called him, and he had grown monstrous huge, which you would, too, if you had eaten your fill each day since the world was born. But his children were not to be sniffed at, either. Eagle, Bear, Wolf, Dragon, a host of others. Kin fought kin, and Snaka was slain by his children, and he fell. In his death the world was shattered, whole realms crushed, heaved into the air, the seas rushing in. Those mountains are all that is left of him, his bones now covered with the earth that he ruptured.”

Breca whistled through his teeth and shook his head. “It must have been a sight to see.”

“Heya, lad, it must have been. When gods go to war, it is no small thing. The world was broken in their ruin.”

“Heya,” Orka agreed. “And in Snaka’s fall the vaesen pit was opened, and all those creatures of tooth and claw and power that dwelled in the world below were released into our land of sky and sea.” From their vantage point the world looked pure and unspoiled, a beautiful, untamed tapestry spread across the landscape in gold and green and blue.

But Orka knew the truth was a blood-soaked saga.

She looked to her right and saw on the ground the droplets of blood from the injured wolf. In her mind she saw those droplets spreading, growing into pools, more blood spraying, ghostly bodies falling, hacked and broken, voices screaming . . .

This is a world of blood. Of tooth and claw and sharp iron. Of short lives and painful deaths.

A hand on her shoulder, Thorkel reaching over Breca's head to touch her. A sharp-drawn breath. She blinked and blew out a long, ragged sigh, pushing the images away.

"It was a good throw," Thorkel said, tapping Breca's spear with his water bottle, though his eyes were still on Orka.

"I missed, though," Breca muttered.

"I missed the first throw on my first hunt, too," Thorkel said. "And I was eleven summers, where you are only ten. And your throw was better than mine. The wolf robbed you. Eh, Orka?" He ruffled Breca's hair with a big hand.

"It was well cast," Orka said, eyeing the clouds to the west, closer now. A west wind was blowing them, and she could taste snow on that wind, a sharp cold that crackled like frost in her chest. Stopping her water bottle, she stood and walked away.

"Tell me more of Snaka," Breca called after her.

Orka paused. "Are you so quick to forget your friend Harek?" she said with a frown.

Breca dropped his eyes, downcast, then stood and followed her.

Orka led them on, back into the pinewoods where sound was eerily muted, the world shrinking around them, shadows shifting, and they climbed higher into the hills. As they rose the world turned grey around them, clouds veiling the sun, and a cold wind hissed through the branches.

Orka used her spear for a staff as the ground steepened and she climbed slick stone that ascended like steps alongside a white-foaming stream. Ice-cold water splashed and seeped into her leg-bindings and boots. A strand of her blonde hair fell loose of her braid and she pushed it behind one ear. She slowed her pace, remembering Breca's short legs, even though there was a tingling in her blood that set her muscles thrumming. Danger had always had that effect on her.

"Be ready," Thorkel said behind her, and then Orka smelled it, too.

The iron tang of blood, the stench of voided bowels.

Death's reek.

The ground levelled on to a plateaued ridge, trees felled and

cleared. A large, grass-roofed cabin appeared, alongside a handful of outbuildings, all nestled into a cliff face. A stockade wall ringed the cabin and outbuildings, taller than Orka.

Asgrim's steading.

On the eastern side of the steading a track curled down the hills, eventually leading towards the village of Fellur and the fjord.

Orka took a few steps forwards, then stopped, spear levelled as Breca and Thorkel climbed on to the plateau.

The stockade's wide gates were thrown open, a body upon the ground between them, limbs twisted, unnaturally still. One gate creaked on the wind. Orka heard Breca's breath hiss through his lips.

Orka knew it was Asgrim, broad shouldered and with iron-grey hair. One hairy arm poked from the torn sleeve of his tunic.

A snowflake drifted down, a tingled kiss upon Orka's cheek.

"Breca, stay behind me," she said, padding forwards. Crows rose squawking from Asgrim's corpse, complaining as they flapped away, settling among the treetops, one sitting upon a gatepost, watching them.

Snow began to fall, the wind swirling it around the plateau.

Orka looked down on Asgrim. He was clothed in wool and breeches, a good fur cloak, a dull ring of silver around one arm. His hair was grey, body lean, sinewed muscles showing through his torn tunic. One of his boots had fallen off. A shattered spear lay close to him, and a blooded hand-axe on the ground. There was a hole in his chest, his woollen tunic dark with crusted blood.

Orka kneeled, picked up the axe and placed it in Asgrim's palm, wrapping the stiffening fingers around it.

"Travel the soul road with a blade in your fist," she whispered.

Breca's breath came in a ragged gasp behind her. It was the first person he had seen dead. Plenty of animals; he had helped in slaughtering many a meal for their supper, the gutting and skinning, the soaking of sinew for stitching and binding, the tanning of leather for the boots they wore, their belts and scabbards for their seaxes. But to see another man dead, his life torn from him, that was something else.

At least, for the first time.

And this was a man that Breca had known. He had seen life's spark in him.

Orka gave her son a moment as he stood and stared wide-eyed at the corpse, a flutter in his chest, his breath quick.

The ground around Asgrim was churned, grass flattened. A scuffed boot print. A few paces away there was a pool of blood soaked into the grass. Tracks in the ground led away; it looked like someone had been dragged.

Asgrim put someone down, then.

"Was he the one screaming?" Breca asked, still staring at Asgrim's corpse.

"No," Orka said, looking at the wound in Asgrim's chest. A stab to the heart: death would have come quickly. And a good thing, too, as his body had already been picked at by scavengers. His eyes and lips were red wounds where the crows had been at him. Orka put a hand to Asgrim's face and lifted what was left of his lip to look inside his mouth. Gums and empty, blood-ragged sockets. She scowled.

"Where are his teeth?" Breca hissed.

"Tennúr have been at him," Orka grunted. "They love a man's teeth more than a squirrel loves nuts." She looked around, searching the treeline and ridged cliff for any sign of the small, two-legged creatures. On their own, they could be a nuisance; in a pack, they could be deadly, with their sharp-boned fingers and razor teeth.

Thorkel stepped around Orka and padded into the enclosure, spear-point sweeping in a wide arc as he searched.

He stopped, stared up at the creaking gate.

Orka stepped over Asgrim into the steading and stopped beside Thorkel.

A body was nailed to the gate, arms wide, head lolling.

Idrun, wife to Asgrim.

She had not died so quickly as her husband.

Her belly had been opened, intestines spilling to a pile on the ground, twisted like vines around an old oak. Heat still rose from them, steaming as snow settled upon glistening coils. Her face was misshapen in a rictus of pain.

It was she who did the screaming.

“What did this?” Thorkel muttered.

“Vaesen?” Orka said.

Thorkel pointed to thick-carved runes on the gate, all sharp angles and straight lines. “A warding rune.”

Orka shook her head. Runes would hold back all but the most powerful of vaesen. She glanced back at Asgrim and the wound in his chest. Rarely did vaesen use weapons, nature already equipping them with the tools of death and slaughter. There were dark patches on the grass: congealed blood.

Blood on Asgrim’s axe. Others were wounded, but if they fell, they were carried from here.

“Did men do this?” Thorkel muttered.

Orka shrugged, a puff of misted breath as she thought on it.

“All is lies,” she murmured. “They call this the age of peace, because the ancient war is over and the gods are dead, but if this is peace . . .” She looked to the skies, clouds low and heavy, snow falling in sheets now, and back at the blood-soaked corpses. “This is the age of storm and murder . . .”

“Where’s Harek?” Breca asked.

CHAPTER TWO

VARG

Varg twisted to look back over his shoulder as he ran, stumbled, almost fell and carried on running. The rocky banks were giving way to black sand and shingle as the river widened, the dense trees and cliffs that had hemmed him in thinning and retreating as he drew closer to the fjord. Already he could smell the market town of Liga, a host of scents and sounds assaulting his senses.

Another look back over his shoulder: no signs of pursuit, but he knew they were there. He increased his pace.

How long have I been running? Nine days, ten?

He touched a hand to the leather pouch at his belt, sucked in the salt-tinged air and ran on.

His legs burned, lungs heaved and sweat trickled in a constant stream into his eyes, but he kept his pace, deep breaths, long strides.

I could run for ever, if only there were ground before me for my feet to tread. But the cliffs have steered me to the sea, and it is close. Where will I go? What should I do?

Panic fluttered through his veins.

They must not catch me.

He ran on, shingle crunching beneath his tattered turn-shoes.

The river spilled into a fjord, widening like a serpent's jaws about its prey and Liga came into view, a market town and port built upon the fjord's south-eastern banks. Varg slowed to a stop, put his

hands on his knees and stared at the town: a bustling, stinking mass of buildings strewn along a wide, black-sanded beach and rolling back as far as the slopes of the fjord would allow. A stockade wall ringed the town, protecting the buildings and humanity crammed within. The town climbed the flank of a slope, a grass-turfed long-hall with carved, curling wooden beams built on the high ground, like a jarl in the high seat of a mead hall, looking out over his people. The sky above was thick with hearth smoke, the stink of grease and fat heavy in the air. Jetties and piers jutted out over the blue-black water of the fjord, a myriad ships rocking gently at harbour. One ship stood out among the others, a prow-necked, sleek-sided *drakkar*, a dragon-ship, looking like a wolf of the sea among a flock of sheep. All around it crowded slender *byrdings* and a host of *knarrs*, their bellies fat with merchant wares from places Varg had no doubt never heard of. He did not even know how old he was, but in his remembered life he had counted thirty hard winters and back-breaking summers that he had spent shackled to Kolskegg's farm, only twenty leagues north-east along the river, and in all of those years his master had never taken him to Liga on one of his many trading trips.

Not that he wanted to go. The smells repulsed him, though the blending scents of fat and cooking meat were making his belly rumble, and the thought of being so close to so many people was incomprehensible to him. He took a few unconscious steps away, back towards the river-gully he had been running through.

But I cannot go back. They will catch me. I have to go forwards. I need a Galdurman, or a Seiðr-witch.

He rubbed his stubbled head and reached inside his cloak, pulling out a thick iron collar. Another search inside his cloak pocket and he drew out a key, unlocked the collar and with a shiver set the cold iron around his neck, snapping it shut. He locked it and put the key back in his cloak. For a few moments he stood and twisted his neck, grimaced. A shuddered breath. Then he stood straight, brushed down his mud-stained tunic and pulled his woollen cloak-hood up over his head. And walked on.

A wide, rune-carved gate stood open, two mail-coated guards

leaning against one post. One grey-beard, who sat upon a stump, and a younger woman, dark hair braided tight, a seax hanging from the front of her belt, a spear in one fist. She eyed Varg as he approached, then stepped forward, barring his way.

“Your business in Liga?” she said.

“Finding rooms for my master,” Varg said, his eyes downcast. “I have been ordered on ahead.” He gestured vaguely behind him, into the river valley.

The guard looked him up and down, then over his shoulder, at the empty mouth of the river valley.

“How do I know that? Who’s your master? Pull your hood down.”

Varg thought about the answers he could give, and where they would lead, and what they would give away. Slowly he pushed his hood back, revealing his stubbled hair, his mud- and sweat-stained face. He opened his mouth. A cart rolled up behind him, pulled by two oxen; a fine-dressed merchant sat upon the driving bench, a handful of freedmen with spears and clubs in their fists.

“Let the man through, Slyda,” the grey-beard grunted from his stump.

“My master is Snepil,” Varg said, saying the first name that came into his head. Snepil was a man that he knew would not be following him soon, as the last time Varg had seen him Snepil’s eyes had been bulging and his last breath had hissed and rattled from his throat as Varg throttled the life from him. He couldn’t remember how he came to have his hands around the man’s throat, only remembered blinking as Snepil’s rattling death filtered through some red mist in Varg’s head.

She eyed him one more time, then stepped out of his way and waved him through.

Varg pulled his hood back up and slipped into Liga like lice into a beard, the scents and sounds hitting him as if he had dived into water. Timber-sided buildings lined wide, mud-slick streets, and traders were everywhere, clamouring, their trestle-benches edging the streets and laid out with all manner of goods. Bolts of dyed cloth, bone needles and combs, axe heads, knives, fine-tooled scabbards, bronze cloak pins and amulets, wooden bowls, bundles of

linen and wool, tied bales of wolf and bear skins, reindeer hides, pine marten and fox pelts. Varg's eyes widened at the sight of walrus tusks and ivory. Others were selling horns of mead and ale, bubbling pots of rabbit and beef stew steaming over pit fires, turnips and carrots bobbing, fat glistening. Quartered steaks of whale meat, smoked herring and cod hanging. He even saw a trader selling vaesen body parts: Faunir's dried blood; a troll's tooth, big as a fist; a bowl full of skraeling eyeballs; and a necklace made from the needled hair of a Froa-spirit. It was endless, and overwhelming.

A spasm in his belly reminded him that a long time had passed since he'd last eaten. He was not sure exactly how long, but it was at least three days ago, or was it four, when he had been lucky enough to snatch a salmon from the river. He strode over to a trader who was standing behind a big stew-pot and using a cleaver to quarter a boar's leg joint. The trader was a broad-bellied and wispy-bearded man wearing fur-trimmed boots and a fine green woollen tunic, though the tablet weaving around the neck and cuffs was dull and frayed.

Varg stared into the pot of stew, saliva flooding his mouth, the churning and twisting in his gut abruptly painful.

"Something to warm your belly?" the trader said, putting the cleaver down and lifting a bowl.

"Aye, that'd be good," Varg said.

"A half-bronze," the trader said. Then paused and stared at Varg. He put the bowl down and pushed Varg's hood back, looked at his short, stubbled hair. His eyes narrowed.

"Away with you, you dirty thrall," the trader scowled.

"I can pay," Varg said.

A raised eyebrow.

"I'll see your coin, first," the trader said.

Varg reached inside his cloak, pulled out a pouch, loosened the leather-draw and fished out a bronze coin. He dropped it on the trader's table, the coin rolling and falling, revealing the stamped profile of a woman's head. A sharp-nosed profile, hair pulled severely tight and braided at the neck.

"A Helka," the trader said, his beard twitching.

“Queen Helka,” Varg said, though he had never seen her, only heard snatched talk of her: of her hubris, thinking she could rule and control half of Vigrið, and of her ruthlessness against her enemies.

“Only calls herself queen so she can tax us down to our stones,” the trader grunted.

“No good to you, then?” Varg said, reaching for the coin.

“I didn’t say that,” the trader said, holding a hand out.

Faster than it took to blink, Varg snatched up the cleaver the trader had put down and chopped at the coin, hacking it in two. He lifted one half up between finger and thumb, left the other half-bronze on the table.

“Where’d a dirty thrall come by a pouch of Helka-coin, anyway? And where’s your master?” the trader grunted, eyeing him.

Varg looked at him, then slowly put a hand out towards the coin again.

The trader shrugged and scooped a ladle of stew into the bowl, handed it to Varg.

“Some of that bread too,” Varg said, and the trader cut a chunk from a black-crust loaf.

Varg dipped the bread in the stew and sucked it, fat dripping down his chin, into his newly grown beard. The stew was watery and too hot, but it tasted like pure joy to Varg. He closed his eyes, dipped, sucked, slurped until the bread was gone, then upended what was left of the stew into his mouth.

He put the bowl down and belched.

“I’ve seen hungry men before,” the trader said, “but you . . .” He whistled, gave a half-smile.

“Is there a Galdurman, or Seiðr-witch in Liga?” Varg asked, cuffing stew from his chin.

The trader signed a rune across his chest and frowned. “No, and what do you want with the likes of them?”

“That’s my business,” Varg said, then paused. “That’s my master’s business. Do you know where I can find one?”

The trader began to turn away.

Varg put the other half-bronze back on the table.

The trader looked at him appraisingly. “The Bloodsworn docked yesterday. They have a Seiðr-witch thrall.”

The Bloodsworn!

The Bloodsworn were famed throughout the whole of Vigrið, and most likely beyond. A band of mercenary warriors who hired themselves out to the highest bidder, they hunted down vaesen-monsters, searched out god-relics for wealthy jarls, fought in border disputes, guarded the wealthy and powerful. Tales were sung about them by skálds around hearth fires.

“Where are they?” Varg said.

“You’ll find them in Liga’s longhouse, guests of Jarl Logur.”

“My thanks,” Varg said. Then he dipped his hand back in his pouch and threw another hack-bronze on the table.

“What’s that for?” the trader said.

“Your silence. You never saw me.”

“Saw who?” said the trader, looking around, a smile twitching his thin beard, even as his hand snaked out and scooped up the coins.

Varg’s hand darted out, faster than the trader’s, and gripped the man’s wrist. He stared into the trader’s eyes, held his gaze a long moment, then let go; in the same movement he swept the cleaver from the table and hefted it.

“How much?” he said.

“You can have that,” the trader shrugged.

Varg nodded and slipped the cleaver inside his cloak, pulled his hood back up and walked into the crowd.

He made his way through the streets of Liga, past a quayside that heaved with activity, men and women unloading a newly docked merchant *knarr*. Its belly was wide and deep, sitting low in the water. Varg thought he heard the muted neighing of horses from deep in its hull and two more similar-looking ships were rowing into the docks. A group of strange-looking men and women were disembarking from the moored *knarr*. They wore caps of felt and fur and silver-buckled kaftans, with their breeches striped in blues and oranges, baggy above the knee, wrapped tight with *winnigas* leg-bindings from knee to ankle. Their skin was dark as weathered

leather and they were escorted by a handful of warriors who wore long coats of lamellar plate that shimmered like scales as they moved. They had curved swords hanging at their hips, the men with long drooping moustaches, and their heads were completely shaven, apart from a long, solitary braid of hair. Varg paused and stared at them as they turned and shouted at sailors on the ship, gangplanks slamming down on to the jetty, pier-cranes swinging to hover over the ship's belly.

"Where are they from?" Varg asked a dock worker who was hurrying past with a thick coil of rope slung over her shoulder.

"Iskidan," she grunted, not slowing.

"Iskidan," Varg whistled. The land beyond the sea, far, far to the south. Varg had heard tales of Iskidan, of its wide rivers and grass plains, of its beating sun and of Gravka, the Great City. Part of him had thought it just a tale, a place to escape in the mind during the cold, harsh months of winter.

Varg took one last look at the strangers and then walked on, turning into another street that steepened, climbing a slope towards the cliffs that brooded over the town, Jarl Logur's mead hall nestled at their foot. The reek of fish lessened as he climbed, replaced by urine and excrement. Steps were carved into the street that led to a wide-arched gate, beyond it the thick-timbered beams of the mead hall visible. A press of men and women were shoulder to shoulder on the steps. Varg paused a moment, looking for a way through, and then slipped between a man and a woman, trying to thread his way up the steps.

A hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Wait your turn, like everyone else," a woman said. She was dark-haired, her face hard and sharp, her eyes cold. A woollen tunic and fur-edged cloak were draped about her shoulders, a weapons belt around her waist with scabbarded seax and hand-axe hanging from it.

"I need to see the Bloodsworn," Varg said.

"Ha, don't we all?" the woman said. "What makes *you* so special?"

Varg looked at her, then at the crowd around him.

"All these, they are here for the Bloodsworn?" Varg said.

“Aye,” the woman grunted, “what else?”

“Why?” Varg asked.

“There’s an empty sea-chest and a spare oar on their *drakkar*,” the woman said.

“Empty sea-chest?” Varg frowned.

“Are you touched in the head?” the woman said, prodding his temple through his cloak-hood with a hard finger. Varg didn’t much like it. “One of the Bloodsworn has been slain, and they are holding a weapons trial to fill his place.”

“Ah,” Varg nodded, understanding blossoming.

“So, wait your turn,” she said, then looked him up and down. “Or are you in a rush to have your arse dumped in the dirt?”

Laughter rippled through those around them.

Varg just looked at the ground and waited.

The crowd shuffled up the steps. As Varg drew closer to the mead hall the sounds of shouting drifted down to him, punctuated with cries of pain. A slow, steady stream of bloodied faces filtered back down the steps, some groaning and supported by others. Others were carried unconscious.

Varg reached the top step and looked over the shoulders of those in front of him. An arched gateway led into an open space before Jarl Logur’s mead hall, a huge building of scrolled timber sitting upon thick stone footings. In the space before the hall the ground was trampled and muddied, dark patches glistening here and there. Warriors ringed the area, fifty or sixty of them, hard-looking men and women, some wearing *brynja* coats of riveted mail with swords at their hips. Varg had only seen a sword once before, when the local *drengr* had visited Kolskegg’s farm to collect the tax due to Queen Helka. Varg had suspected that sword was worth more than all the goods loaded upon a wagon and the chest of coin that Kolskegg had given the man. Varg’s eyes were drawn to a bald-headed, thick-muscled warrior, more grey than black in his braided beard. He wore a plain-scabbarded sword at his hip, a fine *brynja* of riveted mail over his broad frame and rings of gold and silver wrapped around his arms and neck. The sword and *brynja* alone were probably worth as much as Kolskegg’s

farm. There was wealth to be had in death-dealing. The bald man was talking to a raven-haired woman, a pattern of blue tattoos across her lower jaw and throat. The Seiðr-witch. Varg blinked in surprise at the iron collar around her neck, and instinctively put a hand to his own throat. The old warrior was leaning upon a long-axe as he spoke, the butt stuck in the ground, the single iron blade hooked and cruel-looking. Varg was accustomed to axes, the callouses on his hand testament to long years of use, but this was not an axe made for chopping timber. This was made for killing. Varg looked away, the sight of it setting some uneasy feeling trickling through his veins. All of the warriors in the square bristled with a mass of assorted weapons hanging from weapons belts. Big round shields were slung across their backs, some propped against the wall and steps of the mead hall. A few were painted pale blue as a winter's sky with a red sail upon it, Varg recognising that as the sigil of Jarl Logur, but most of the shields around the square were painted crow-black, each one with a splattering of red across the pitch-paint, as if someone had cast droplets of blood across each shield.

In the centre of the square two men were fighting. Or more accurately to Varg, a man and a tree were fighting. The shorter one was light on his feet, a round shield in one hand, dancing around the bigger man, who was stripped to the waist, woollen breeches tied with rope, with a red braided beard that dangled to his waist. He was thick bodied and limbed, muscles knotted and bunching like the roots of an old oak. As Varg watched the smaller man feinted right and then darted left, stepping in and slamming the iron boss of the shield into red-beard's ribs. A hook from his right hand into the stomach. A grunt from red-beard was the only acknowledgement, one arm swinging, catching the smaller man across the back of the head as he tried to duck and leap away. He staggered, stumbled back a dozen steps, his legs abruptly loose. Red-beard stomped after him.

"Name," a voice said. Varg blinked, tearing his eyes away from the spectacle.

"Name," the man said again, leaning against the gatepost with

his arms folded. He was roughly the same height as Varg and slim-built, red hair neatly braided and a trimmed beard oiled and gleaming. He was clothed in a well-cared-for *brynja* of riveted mail, fine scrollwork knotted along the scabbard of his seax.

“Varg,” Varg said. His natural response to a command was to obey unthinkingly. On Kolskegg’s farm anything other resulted in a thump or the lash.

“Varg what?”

Varg blinked.

The slim man sighed.

“This is the way it works,” he said. “I say *name*, you give me your full name. For example, I am Svik Hrulfsson, or Tangle-Hair, on account of my hair never being tangled. So, let’s start again. Name?”

“I don’t know,” Varg shrugged. “I never knew my father or mother.”

Svik looked him up and down.

“You are sure you want to do this?” he said.

“Do what?”

“Fight Einar Half-Troll.”

“I don’t want to fight anyone,” Varg said, “and especially not someone with a name like Half-Troll.” He took a deep breath. “I want to hire your Seiðr-witch.”

Svik blinked.

“Vol is not for hire,” he said, glancing at the tattooed woman talking to the bald man.

“I must speak to her,” Varg said. “It is . . . important.”

“Aye, to you, maybe. But to us,” Svik shrugged, “not so much.”

“I must speak with her,” Varg said, feeling panic begin to bubble in his belly.

“What is so important? You need a love potion? Want to hump some fine-looking thrall on your farm?”

“No!” Varg exclaimed. “I don’t want a love potion.” He shook his head. “It is more important than that.”

“More important than a hump?” Svik said, raising an eyebrow. “I did not know that could be true.”

Chuckles from the crowd behind Varg.

“I need your Seiðr-witch to perform an *akáll*.”

Svik frowned. “An invocation. That is a serious business.”

“It is a serious matter,” Varg said, fingertips brushing the pouch at his belt.

“The answer still is no,” Svik said. “Vol uses her talents for the Bloodsworn. No one else. She is not for hire. Even if Queen Helka herself marched up those steps and asked for it, the answer would be the same.”

Varg felt his hope draining away, a coldness settling in the pit of his belly.

A crunch from the square. Varg looked to see the huge warrior – Einar Half-Troll – punch the other warrior’s shield. The wood cracked, shattering and spraying in splinters.

“Why does Einar not have a shield?” Varg asked.

“To give the others a chance.” Svik shrugged. He leaned forward. “It’s not really much of a chance,” he whispered.

Einar grabbed his opponent by throat and crotch, lifted him squeaking into the air, then hurled him to the ground. There was a dull thud, the squeaks cut short, the man on the ground abruptly still. Men and women ran in and carried the unconscious warrior out of the square.

Varg looked at Einar, thick and solid and menacing, a few red marks on his body the only evidence that he’d already fought at least a score of fights. He looked back at Svik.

“I’ll fight him,” Varg said.