

Wells Tower

## **Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned**

Just as we were all getting back into the mainland domestic groove, somebody started in with dragons and crop blights from across the North Sea. We all knew who it was. A turncoat Norwegian monk named Naddod had been big medicine on the dragon-and-blight circuit for the last decade or so, and was known to bring heavy ordnance for whoever could lay out some silver. Scuttlebutt had it that Naddod was operating out of a monastery on Lindisfarne, whose people we'd troubled on a pillage-and-consternation tour through Northumbria after Corn Harvesting Month last fall. Now bitter winds were screaming in from the west, searing the land and ripping the grass from the soil. Salmon were turning up spattered with sores, and grasshoppers clung to the wheat in rapacious buzzing bunches.

I tried to put these things out of my mind. We'd been away three long months harrying the Hibernian shores, and now I was back with Pila, my common-law, and thinking that home was very close to paradise in these endless summer days. We'd built our house together, Pila and me. It was a fine little wattle and- daub cabin on a pretty bit of plain where a wide blue fjord stabbed into the land. On summer evenings my young wife and I would sit out front, high on potato wine, and watch the sun stitch its orange skirt across the horizon. At times such as these, you get a good, humble feeling, like the gods made this place, this moment, first and concocted you as an afterthought just to be there to enjoy it.

I was doing a lot of enjoying and relishing and laying around the rack with Pila, though I knew what it meant when I heard those flint-edged winds howling past the house. Some individuals three weeks' boat ride off were messing up our summer and would probably need their asses whipped over it.

Of course, Djarf Fairhair had his stinger out even before his wife spotted those dragons winging it inland from the coast. He was boss on our ship and a fool for warfare. His appetite for action was so terrifying and infectious, he'd once riled up a gang of Frankish slaves and led them south to afflict and maim their own countrymen. He'd gotten in four days of decent sacking when the slaves began to see the situation for what it was and underwent a sudden change of attitude. Djarf had been fighting his way up the Rhine Valley, making steady progress through a half-assed citizens' militia of children and farmers, when the slaves closed in behind him. People who were there say he turned absolutely feral and began berserking with a pair of broadaxes, chewing through the lines like corn kernels on a cob, and that when the axes broke, he took up someone's severed leg and used it as a club, so horrifying those gentle provincials that they fell back and gave him wide berth to the ship.

Djarf was from Hedeby-Slesvig up the Sli fjord, a foul and rocky locality whose people take a worrisome pleasure in the gruesome sides of life. They have a habit down there if they don't like a child's looks when he slides from the womb, they pitch him into the deep and wait for the next one. Djarf himself was supposedly a colicky baby, and it was only the beneficence of the tides

and his own vicious tenacity that got him to the far beach when his father tried to wash him from the world.

He'd been campaigning for payback ever since. I guess I was with him on a search-and-destroy tour against Louis the Pious, and with my own eyes watched him climb up over the soldiers' backs and stride across their shoulders, scything skulls as he went. On that same trip, we ran low on food, and it was Djarf who decided to throw our own dead on the fire and have at last night's mutton when their stomachs burst. He'd been the only one of us to dig in, apart from a deranged Arab along as a spellbuster. He reached right in there, scooping out chewed-up victuals with a shank of pine bark. "Greenhorns," he called us, the firelight twitching on his face. "Food's food. If these boys hadn't gotten their threads snipped, they'd tell you the same thing."

So Djarf, whose wife was a sour, carp-mouthed thing and little argument for staying home, was agitating to hop back in the ship and go straighten things out in Northumbria. My buddy Gnut, who lived just over the stony moraine our wheat field backed up on, came down the hill one day and admitted that he, too, was giving it some thought. Like me, he wasn't big on warrioring. He was just crazy for boat. He'd have rowed from his shack to his shithouse if somebody would invent a ship whose prow could cut sod. His wife had passed years ago, dead from bad milk, and now that she was gone, the part of Gnut that felt peaceful in a place that didn't move beneath him had sickened and died as well.

Pila saw him coming down the hill and scowled. "Don't need to guess what he'll be wanting," she said, and headed back indoors. Gnut ambled down over the hummocky earth and stopped at the pair of stump chairs Pila and I had put up on the hill where the view was so fine. From there, the fjord shone like poured silver, and sometimes you could spot a seal poking his head up through the waves.

Gnut's wool coat was stiff with filth and his long hair so heavy and unclean that even the raw wind was having a hard time getting it to move. He had a good crust of snot going in his mustache, not a pleasant thing to look at, but then, he had no one around to find it disagreeable. He tore a sprig of heather from the ground and chewed at its sweet roots.

"Djarf get at you yet?" he asked.

"No, not yet, but I'm not worried he'll forget."

He took the sprig from his teeth and briefly jammed it into his ear before tossing it away. "You gonna go?"

"Not until I hear the particulars, I won't."

"You can bet I'm going. A hydra flew in last night and ran off Rolf Hierdal's sheep. We can't be putting up with this shit. It comes down to pride, is what it comes down to."

"Hell, Gnut, when'd you get to be such a gung-ho motherfucker? I don't recall you being so proud and thin-skinned before Astrud went off to her good place. Anyhow, Lindisfarne is

probably sacked-out already. If you don't recall, we pillaged the tar out of those people on the last swing through, and I doubt they've come up with much in the meantime to justify a trip."

I wished Gnut would go ahead and own up to the fact that his life out here was making him lonely and miserable instead of laying on with this warrior-man routine. I could tell just to look at him that most days he was thinking of walking into the water and not bothering to turn back. It wasn't combat he was after. He wanted back on the boat among company.

Not that I was all that averse to a job myself, speaking in the abstract, but I was needing more sweet time with Pila. I cared more for that girl than even she probably knew, and I was hoping to get in some thorough lovemaking before the Haycutting Month was under way and see if I couldn't make us a little monkey.

But the days wore on and the weather worsened. Pila watched it closely, and the sadness welled up in her, as it often did when I'd be leaving. She cussed me on some days, and others she'd hold me to her and weep. And late one evening, far toward dawn, the hail started. It came suddenly, with the rasping sound a ship makes when its keel scrapes stone. We hunkered down in the sheepskins, and I whispered soothing things to Pila, trying to drown out the clatter.

The sun was not yet full up in the sky when Djarf came and knocked. I rose and stepped across the floor, which was damp with cold dew. Djarf stood in the doorway wearing a mail jacket and shield and breathing like he'd jogged the whole way over. He chucked a handful of hail at my feet. "Today's the day," he said with a wild grin. "We got to get it on."

Sure, I could have told him thanks anyway, but once you back down from one job, you're lucky if they'll even let you put in for a flat-fee trade escort. I had to think long-term, me and Pila, and any little jits we might produce. Still, she didn't like to hear it. When I got back in bed, she tucked the covers over her face, hoping I'd think she was angry instead of crying.

The clouds were spilling out low across the sky when we shoved off. Thirty of us on board, Gnut rowing with me at the bow and behind us a lot of other men I'd been in some shit with before. Some of their families came down to watch us go. Ørl Stender fucked up the cadence waving to his son, who stood on the beach waving back. He was a tiny one, not four or five, standing there with no pants on, holding a baby pig on a hide leash. Some of the others on board weren't a whole lot older, rash and violent children, so innocent about the world they would just as soon stick a knife in you as shake your hand.

Gnut was overjoyed. He laughed and sang and put a lot of muscle into the oar, me just holding my hands on it to keep up appearances. I was missing Pila already. I watched the beach for her and her bright red hair. She hadn't come down to see me off, too mad and sad about me leaving to get up out of bed. But I looked for her anyway, the land scooting away with every jerk of the oars. If Gnut knew I was hurting, he didn't say so. He nudged me and joked, and kept up a steady flow of dull, merry chatter, as though this whole thing was a private vacation the two of us had cooked up together.

Djarf stood at his spot in the bow, the blood in his cheeks. His high spirits were wearying. Slesvigers will burst into song with no provocation whatever, their affinity for music roughly on a par with the wretchedness of their singing. He screeched out a cadence ballad that lasted hours, and his gang of young hockchoppers howled along with him and gave no one any peace.

Three days out, the sun punched through the dirty clouds and put a steely shimmer on the sea. It cooked the brine out of our clothes and got everybody dry and happy. I couldn't help but think that if Naddod was really as serious as we thought he was, this crossing would be a fine opportunity to call up a typhoon and drown us all like cats. But the weather held, and the seas stayed drowsy and low.

We had less light in the evenings out here than at home, and it was a little easier sleeping in the open boat without an all-night sun. Gnut and I slept where we rowed, working around each other to get comfy on the bench. I woke up once in the middle of the night and found Gnut dead asleep, muttering and slobbering and holding me in a rough embrace. I tried to peel him off, but he was large, and his hard arms stayed on me tight as if they'd grown there. I poked him and yelled at him, but the big man would not be roused, so I just tried to work up a little slack to where he wasn't hurting my ribs, and I drifted back to sleep.

Later, I told him what had happened. "That's a lot of horseshit," he said, his broad face going red.

"I wish it was," I said. "But I've got bruises I could show you. Hey, if I ever come around asking to be your sweetheart, do me a favor and remind me about last night."

He was all upset. "Go to hell, Harald. You're not funny. Nobody thinks you're funny."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Guess you haven't had a whole lot of practice lately having a body beside you at night."

He rested on the oar a second. "So what if I haven't."

Thanks to the easy wind bellying our sails, we crossed fast and sighted the island six days early. One of the hockchoppers spotted it first, and when he did, he let everyone know it by cutting loose with a long, obnoxious battle howl. He drew his sword and swung it in figure eights above his head, causing the men around him to scatter under the gunwales. This boy was a nasty item, with a face like a buzzard's, his cheeks showing more boils than beard. I'd seen him around at home. He had three blackened, chopped-off thumbs reefed to his belt.

Haakon Gokstad glanced up from his seat in the stern and shot the boy a baleful look. Haakon had been on more raids and runs than the bunch of us put together. He was old and achy and worked the rudder, partly because he could read the tides by how the blood moved through his

hands, and also because those old arms were poor for pulling oars. “Put your ass on that bench, young man,” Haakon said to the boy. “We got twelve hours’ work between here and there.”

The boy colored. He let his sword arm hang. He looked at his friends to see if he’d been humiliated in front of them and, if he had, what he needed to do about it. The whole boat was looking over him. Even Djarf paused in his song. The other kid on his bench whispered something and scooted over. The boy sat and took the oar. The rowing and the chatter started up again.

You could say that those people on Lindisfarne were fools, living out there on a tiny island without high cliffs or decent natural defenses, and so close to us and also the Swedes and the Norwegians, how we saw it, we couldn’t afford *not* to come by and sack every now and again. But when we came into the bright little bay, a quiet fell over all of us. Even the hockchoppers quit grab-assing and looked. The place was wild with fields of purple thistle, and when the wind blew, it twitched and rolled, like the hide of some fantastic animal shrugging in its sleep. Wildflowers spurted on the hills in fat red gout. Apple trees lined the shore, and there was something sorrowful in how they hung so low with fruit. We could see a man making his way toward a clump of white-walled cottages, his donkey loping along behind him with a load. On the far hill, I could make out the silhouette of the monastery, which still lacked a roof from when we’d burned it last. It was a lovely place, and I hoped there would still be something left to enjoy after we got off the ship and wrecked it up.

We gathered on the beach, and already Djarf was in a lather. He did a few deep knee bends, got down in front of all of us and ran through some poses, cracking his bones and drawing out the knots in his muscles. Then he closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. His eyes were still closed when a man in a long robe appeared, picking his way down through the thistle.

Haakon Gokstad had a finger stuck in his mouth where one of his teeth had come out. He removed the finger and spat through the hole. He nodded up the hill at the figure heading our way, “My, that sumbitch has got some brass,” he said.

The man walked straight to Djarf. He stood before him and removed his hood. His hair lay thin on his scalp and had probably been blond before it went white. He was old, with lines on his face that could have been drawn with a dagger point.

“Naddod,” Djarf said, dipping his head slightly. “Suppose you’ve been expecting us.”

“I certainly have not,” Naddod said. He brought his hand up to the rude wooden cross that hung from his neck. “And I won’t sport with you and pretend the surprise is entirely a pleasant one. Frankly, there isn’t much left here worth pirating, so, yes, it’s a bit of a puzzle.”

“Uh-huh,” said Djarf. “Can’t tell us anything about a hailstorm, or locusts and shit, or a bunch of damn dragons coming around and scaring the piss out of everybody’s wife. You don’t know nothing about any of that.”

Naddod held his palms up and smiled piteously. “No, I’m very sorry, I don’t. We did send a monkey pox down to the Spanish garrison at Much Wenlock, but honestly, nothing your way.”

Djarf’s tone changed, and his voice got loud and amiable. “Huh. Well, that’s something.” He turned to us and held up his hands. “Hey, boys, hate to break it to you, but it sounds like somebody fucked something up here. Old Naddod says it wasn’t him, and as soon as he tells me just who in the hell it was behind the inconveniences we been having, we’ll get back under way.”

“Right.” Naddod was uneasy, and I could see a chill run through him. “If you’re passing through Mercia, I know they’ve just gotten hold of this man Aethelrik. Supposed to be a very tough customer. You know, that was his leprosy outbreak last year in—”

Djarf was grinning and nodding, but Naddod looked suddenly ill. Djarf kept a small knife in his belt, and in the way other men smoked a pipe or chewed seeds, Djarf liked to strop that little knife. It was sharpened down to a little fingernail of blade. You could shave a fairy’s ass with that thing. And while Naddod was talking, Djarf had pulled out his knife and drawn it neatly down the priest’s belly. At the sight of blood washing over the white seashells, everybody pressed forward, hollering and whipping their swords around. Djarf was overcome with crazed elation, and he hopped up and down, yelling for everybody to be quiet and watch him.

Naddod was not dead. His insides had pretty much spilled out, but he was still breathing. Not crying out or anything, though, which you had to give him credit for. Djarf hunkered and flipped Naddod onto his stomach and rested a foot in the small of his back.

Gnut was right beside me. He sighed and put his hand over his eyes. “Oh, Lord, he doing a blood eagle?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Looks that way.”

Djarf raised his palm for quiet. “Now I know most of the old-timers have seen one of these, but it might be a new one on some of you young men.” The hockchoppers tittered. “This thing is what we call a blood *eagle*, and if you’ll just sit tight a second you can see—well, it’s a pretty wild effect.”

The men stepped back to give Djarf room to work. He placed the point of his sword to one side of Naddod’s spine. He leaned into it and worked the steel in gingerly, delicately crunch-ing through one rib at a time until he’d made an incision about a foot long. He paused to wipe sweat from his brow, and made a parallel cut on the other side of the backbone. Then he knelt and put his hands into the cuts. He fumbled around in there a second, and then drew Naddod’s lungs out through the slits. As Naddod huffed and gasped, the lungs flapped, looking sort of like a pair of wings. I had to turn away myself. It was very grisly stuff.

The young men roared, and Djarf stood there, conducting the applause. Then, at his command, they all broke out their sieging tackle and swarmed up the hill.

Only Gnut and Haakon and Ørl Stender and me didn't go. Ørl watched the others flock up toward the monastery, and when he was sure no one was looking back, he went to where Naddod lay dying, and struck him hard on the skull with the back of a hatchet. We were all relieved to see those lungs stop quivering. Ørl sighed and blessed himself. He said a funerary prayer, the gist of which was that he didn't know what this man's god was all about, but he was sorry that his humble servant had gotten sent up early, and on a bullshit pretext, too. He said he didn't know the man, but that he probably deserved something better the next time around.

"Cross all that water for this damn stupidity, and a flock of sheep to shave at home," Haakon grumbled.

Gnut smiled and squinted up at the sky. "My God, it's a fine day. Let's go up the hill and see if we can't scratch up a bite to eat."

We hiked to the little settlement on the hill. Some ways over, where the monastery was, the young men were on a real binge. They'd dragged out a half-dozen monks, hanged them from a tree, and then set the tree on fire.

Our hands were stiff and raw from the row over, and we paused at a well in the center of the village to wet our palms and have a drink. We were surprised to see the kid with the thumbs in his belt bust forth from a stand of ash trees, yanking some poor half-dead citizen along behind him. He walked over to where we were standing and let his victim collapse in the dusty boulevard.

"This is nice," he said to us. "You'd make good chieftains, standing around like this, watching other people work."

"Why, you little turd," Haakon said, and backhanded the boy across the mouth. The fellow lying there in the dust looked up and chuckled. The boy flushed. He plucked a dagger from his hip scabbard and stabbed Haakon in the stomach. There was a still moment. Haakon gazed down at the ruby stain spreading across his tunic. He looked greatly vexed.

As the young man realized what he'd done, his features fretted up like a child trying to pout his way out of a spanking. He was still looking that way when Haakon cleaved his head across the eyebrows with one crisp stroke.

Haakon cleaned his sword and looked again at his stomach. "Sumbitch," he said, probing the wound with his pinky. "It's deep. I believe I'm in a fix."

"Nonsense," said Gnut. "Just need to lay you down and stitch you up."

Ørl, who was softhearted, went over to the man the youngster had left. He propped him up against the well and gave him the bucket to sip at.

Across the road, an old dried-up farmer had come out of his house. He stared off at the smoke from the monastery rolling down across the bay. He nodded at us. We walked over.

“Hello,” he said. I told him good day.

He squinted at my face. “Something wrong?” I asked him.

“Apologies,” he said. “Just thought I recognized you, is all.”

“Could be. I was through here last fall.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “Now, that was a hot one. Don’t know why you’d want to come back. You got everything that was worth a damn on the last going-over.”

“Yeah, well, we’re having a hard time figuring it ourselves. Came to see your man Naddod. Wrong guy, looks like, but he got gotten anyway, sorry to say.”

The man sighed. “Doesn’t harelip me any. We all had to tithe in to cover his retainer. Do just as well without him, I expect. So what are you doing, any looting?”

“Why? You got anything to loot?”

“Me? Oh, no. Got a decent cookstove, but I can’t see you toting that back on the ship.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve got a coin hoard or anything buried out back?”

“Jeezum crow, I wish I did have. Coin hoard, I’d really turn things around for myself.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t suppose you’d own up if you did.”

He laughed. “You got that right, my friend. But I suppose you got to kill me or believe me, and either way, you get nothing out of the deal.” He pointed at Haakon, who was leaning on Gnut and looking pretty spent. “Looks like your friend’s got a problem. Unless you’d like to watch him die, why don’t you bring him inside? Got a daughter who’s hell’s own seamstress.”

The man, who was called Bruce, had a cozy little place. We all filed in. His daughter was standing by the stove. She gave a nervous little cry when we came through the door. She had a head full of thick black hair, and a thin face, pale as sugar—a pretty girl. So pretty, in fact, that you didn’t notice right off that she was missing an arm. We all balked and had a good stare at her. But Gnut, you could tell, was truly smitten. The way he looked, blanched and wide-eyed, he could have been facing a wild dog instead of a good-looking woman. He rucked his hands through his hair and tried to lick the crust off his lips. Then he nodded and uttered a solemn “Hullo.”

“Mary,” Bruce said, “this man has developed a hole in his stomach. I said we’d help fix him up.” Mary looked at Haakon. “Aha,” she said. She lifted his tunic and surveyed the wound.

“Water,” she said to Ørl, who was looking on. Gnut eyed him jealously as he left for the well. Then Gnut cleared his throat. “I’d like to pitch in,” he said. Mary directed him to a little sack of onions in the corner and told him to chop. Bruce got a fire going in the stove. Mary set the water on and shook in some dry porridge. Haakon, who had grown rather waxen, crawled up on the table and lay still. “I don’t feel like no porridge,” he said.

“Don’t worry about that,” Bruce said. “The porridge is just for the onions to ride in on.”

Gnut kept an eye on Mary as he bent over a small table and overdid it on the onions. He chopped and chopped, and when he’d chopped all they had, he started chopping the chopped-up ones over again. Finally, Mary looked over and told him, “That’s fine, thank you,” and Gnut laid the knife down.

When the porridge was cooked, Mary threw in a few handfuls of onion and took the concoction over to Haakon. He regarded her warily, but when she held the wooden spoon out to him, he opened his mouth like a baby bird. He chewed and swallowed. “Doesn’t taste very good,” he said, but he kept eating anyway.

A minute passed, and then a peculiar thing occurred. Mary lifted Haakon’s tunic again, put her face to the wound, and sniffed at it. She paused a second and then did it again.

“What in the world is this?” I asked.

“Gotta do this with a wound like that,” Bruce said. “See if he’s got the porridge illness.”

“He doesn’t have any porridge illness,” I said. “At least, he didn’t before now. What he’s got is a stab hole in his stomach. Now stitch the man up.”

“Won’t do any good if you smell onions coming out of that hole. Means he’s got the porridge illness and he’s done for.”

Haakon looked up. “Talking about a pierced bowel? Can’t believe it’s as bad as all that.”

Mary had another sniff. The wound didn’t smell like onions. She cleaned Haakon with hot water and stitched the hole to a tight pucker.

Haakon fingered the stitches, and, satisfied, passed out. The five of us stood around, and no one could think of anything to say.

“So,” Gnut said in an offhand way. “Were you born like that?”

“Like what?” Mary said. “Without both arms, I mean. Is that how you came out?”

“Sir, that’s fine a thing to ask my daughter,” Bruce said. “It was your people that did it to her.”

Gnut said, "Oh." And then he said it again, and then really no one could think of anything to say.

Then Mary spoke. "It wasn't you who did it," she said. "But the man who did, I think I'd like to kill him."

Gnut told her that if she would please let him know who it was, he'd consider it a favor if she'd let him intervene on her behalf.

I said, "I would like a drink. Ørl, what have you got in that wineskin?"

He said nothing. The skin hung from his shoulder, and he put his hands on it protectively.

"I asked what have you got to drink."

"Little bit of root brandy, for your information, Harald. But it's got to last me the way back. I can't be damp and not have something to take the chill off."

Gnut was glad to have something to raise his voice about. "Ørl, you're a sonofabitch. We been three weeks on the water for nothing, Haakon is maybe gonna die, and you can't even see your way to splash a little taste around. Now, that is the worst, the lowest thing I've ever heard."

So Ørl opened up his wineskin, and we all had a dose. It was sweet and potent and we drank and laughed and carried on. Haakon came to. His ordeal had put him in a mawkish bent of mind, and he raised a toast to his pretty surgeon, and to the splendid day, and how much it pleased him that he'd get to see the end of it. Bruce and Mary loosened up and we all talked like old friends. Mary told a lewd story about an apothecary who lived down the road. She was having a good time and did not seem to mind how close Gnut was standing. No one looking in on us would have known we were the reason this girl was missing an arm, and also the reason, probably, that nobody asked where Bruce's wife had gone.

It was not long before we heard somebody causing a commotion at the well. Me and Gnut and Ørl stepped outside. Djarf had stripped to his waist, and his face and arms and pants looked about how you'd figure. He was hauling up buckets of cold water, dumping it over his head, and shrieking with delight. The blood ran off him pink and watery. He saw us and came over.

"Hoo," he said, shaking water from his hair. He jogged in place for a minute, shivered, and then straightened up. "Mercy, that was a spree. Not much loot to speak of, but a hell of a goddamn spree." He massaged his thighs and spat a few times. Then he said, "So, you do much killing?"

"Nah," I said. "Haakon killed that little what's-his-name lying over there, but no, we've just been sort of taking it easy."

"Hm. What about in there?" he asked, indicating Bruce's cottage. "Who lives there? You kill them?"

“No, we didn’t,” Ørl said. “They helped put Haakon back together and everything. Seem like good folks.”

“Nobody’s killing them,” Gnut said.

“So everybody’s back at the monastery, then?” I asked.

“Well, most of them. Those young men had a disagreement over some damn thing and fell to cutting each other. Gonna make for a tough row out of here. Pray for wind, I guess.”

Brown smoke was heavy in the sky, and I could hear dim sounds of people screaming.

“So here’s the deal,” Djarf said. “We bivouac here tonight, and if the weather holds, we shoot down to Mercia tomorrow and see if we can’t sort things out with this fucker Aethelrik.”

“I don’t know,” Ørl said.

“No deal,” I said. “This thing was a goose chase as it is. I got a wife at home and wheat straw to bale. I’ll be damned if I’ll row you to Mercia.”

Djarf clenched his jaw. He looked at Gnut. “You, too?”

Gnut nodded.

“Serious? Mutiny?”

“No,” Gnut said. “We’re just saying we—”

“Call it what it is, motherfucker,” Djarf barked. “You sons of bitches are mutinizing my operation?”

“Look, Djarf,” I said. “Nobody’s doing anything to anybody. We just need to head on back.”

He yelled and snorted. Then he ran at us with his sword raised high, and Gnut had to slip behind him quickly and put a bear hug on him. I went over and clamped one hand over Djarf’s mouth and pinched his nose shut with the other, and after a while he started to cool down.

We let him go. He stood there huffing and eyeing us, and we kept our knives and things out, and finally he put the sword back and composed himself.

“Okay, sure, I read you,” he said. “Fair enough. We go back. Oh, I should have told you, Olaffssen found a stash of beef shells somewhere. He’s gonna cook those up for everybody who’s left. Ought to be tasty.” He turned and humped it back toward the bay.

Gnut didn’t come down to the feast. He said he needed to stay at Bruce and Mary’s to look after Haakon. Bullshit, of course, seeing as Haakon made it down the hill by himself and crammed his

tender stomach with about nine tough steaks. When the dusk started going black and still no Gnut, I legged it back up to Bruce's to see about him. Gnut was sitting on a hollow log outside the cottage, flicking gravel into the weeds.

"She's coming with me," he said.

"Mary?"

He nodded gravely. "I'm taking her home with me to be my wife. She's in there talking it over with Bruce."

"This a voluntary thing, or an abduction-type deal?"

Gnut looked off toward the bay as though he hadn't heard the question. "She's coming with me."

I mulled it over. "You sure this is such a hot idea, bringing her back to live among our people, all things considering?"

He grew quiet. "Any man that touches her, or says anything unkind, it will really be something different, what I'll do to him."

We sat a minute and watched the sparks rising from the bonfire on the beach. The warm evening wind carried smells of blossoms and wood smoke, and I was overcome with calm.

We walked into Bruce's, where only a single suet candle was going. Mary stood by the window with her one arm across her chest. Bruce was worked up. When we came in, he moved to block the door. "You get out of my house," he said. "You just can't take her, what little I've got."

Gnut did not look happy, but he shouldered past and knocked Bruce on his ass. I went and put a hand on the old farmer, who was quaking with rage.

Mary did not hold her hand out to Gnut. But she didn't protest when he put his arm around her and moved her toward the door. The look she gave her father was a wretched thing, but still she went easy. With just one arm like that, what could she do? What other man would have her?

Their backs were to us when Bruce grabbed up an awl from the table and made for Gnut. I stepped in front of him and broke a chair on his face, but still he kept coming, scrabbling at my sword, trying to snatch up something he could use to keep his daughter from going away. I had to hold him steady and run my knife into his cheek. I held it there like a horse's bit, and then he didn't want to move. When I got up off him he was crying quietly. As I was leaving, he threw something at me and knocked the candle out.

And you might think it was a good thing, that Gnut had found a woman who would let him love her, and if she didn't exactly love him back, at least she would, in time, get to feeling something for him that wasn't so far from it. But what would you say about that crossing, when the winds went slack and it was five long weeks before we finally fetched up home? Gnut didn't hardly say a word to anybody, just held Mary close to him, trying to keep her soothed and safe from all of us, his friends. He wouldn't look me in the face, stricken as he was by the awful fear that comes with getting hold of something you can't afford to lose.

After that trip, things changed. It seemed to me that all of us were leaving the high and easy time of life and heading into deeper waters. Not long after we got back, Djarf had a worm crawl up a hole in his foot and had to give up raiding. Gnut Mary turned to homesteading full-time, and I saw less of him. Just catching up over a jar turned into a hassle you had to plan two weeks in advance. And when we did get together, he would laugh and jaw with me a little bit, but you could see he had his mind on other things. He'd gotten what he wanted, but he didn't seem too happy about it, just worried all the time.

It didn't make much sense to me then, what Gnut was going through, but after Pila and me had our little twins, and we put a family together, I got an understanding of how terrible love can be. You wish you hated those people, your wife and children, because you know the things the world will do to them, because you have done some of those things yourself. It's crazy-making, yet you cling to them with everything and close your eyes against the rest of it. But still you wake up late at night and lie there listening for the creak and splash of oars, the clank of steel, the sounds of men rowing toward your home.