



# ONE MEN'S WORK

GUNNAR WAS DOWN by the sheep pens when he heard the rhythmic thumping of hoofbeats and the jingle of harness and weapons sounding distantly through the crisp autumn air. He frowned and looked up, along the track that led from the steading's gate

to the dark forest, then turned and ran to the long-house.

His parents were sitting together on a bench by the hearth, smoke from the fire rising to the hole in the thatch. A pot hung above the flames, and the smells of woodsmoke and stew wrapped themselves round him like the furs he slept beneath at night. They were laughing, and Mother was ladling stew into bowls.

Everybody said Gunnar and his father were as alike as two ears of corn, although Gunnar couldn't see it. They both had shaggy brown hair, but Father's hair and beard were flecked with grey. They both had hazel eyes, but Gunnar's were darker. And they both had strong features and broad shoulders, but Father was tall, and even at fifteen summers Gunnar was still half a head shorter. Mother's hair was golden, and Father said her eyes were the colour of the sea, changing from blue to green to grey according to the light, or her mood.

"Ah, here's our boy, just in time for supper as usual," said Father, grinning at him. Like Gunnar,

he was wearing a tunic and leggings and leather boots. Mother wore a green gown and a silver necklace, and she smiled too.

“I swear you could smell my stew from the other side of the mountains,” she said.

“Riders in the forest,” Gunnar said breathlessly. “Heading this way.”

Father stood up, his smile gone. Mother’s face clouded over.

“How many?” said Father, his voice steady, eyes fixed on his son’s.

“Hard to say,” Gunnar answered. “Six, maybe seven at the most.”

“Who could it be?” said Mother, her hand on her husband’s arm.

“We’ll know when they get here,” said Father. “It’s probably nothing, but we’d better make sure there’s a proper welcome, just in case. Ranulf! Arnor!” he shouted. Two men appeared from the shadows. “Get your hunting spears, and tell the others to do the same. Gunnar, fetch my sword.”

Gunnar ran to his parents’ curtained-off chamber

and raised the lid of the chest that stood at the end of their bed. It contained many things – clothes and furs, the best bowls and goblets. But lying on top was the sword Father had used as a young Viking, and in Miklagard as a soldier of the Greek Emperor's guard. It was in a wooden scabbard lined inside with sheep's fleece, the oily wool keeping the metal free from rust. An ivory hilt bound with age-darkened leather was topped off by a round pommel inlaid with gold and silver. The blade had a shallow groove running from hilt to tip, and was razor-sharp on both edges.

Now Gunnar lifted sword and scabbard from the chest, partially pulled the blade free, and held it up so the glow from the hearth could fall on it. Faint lines twisted and writhed in the metal, almost as if the sword were alive and the red firelight brought back memories of the day it had been born in some ancient forge's heat. Runes were carved on the blade, a cluster of spiky letters that spelled the sword's name – DEATH-BRINGER.

He pushed the blade back into the scabbard and

hurried outside. A crowd had gathered, the people of the farm coming out to see who the visitors might be. Gunnar made his way through them, the men talking in hushed voices, the women clutching their children, everyone uneasy, but curious as well.

Father was waiting with his men in front of the longhouse, Mother by his side. Gunnar handed him the sword and Father buckled it on.

“It’s time you went indoors now, Helga,” Father said softly. “And best take the boy in with you. This will be men’s work.”

“All the more reason for a woman to keep an eye on you,” snapped Mother. “But you’d better do as your father says, Gunnar.”

“No, I won’t,” muttered Gunnar. “If you’re staying, I’m staying too.”

“Would you listen to the pair of them?” said Father, rolling his eyes. “Maybe some day I’ll find out what it’s like to be obeyed by my family.”

The men around him laughed nervously. Ranulf was staring wide-eyed at the gate, holding the shaft

of his hunting spear as if he would never let it go, his knuckles white. Stout, balding Arnor stood beside him, chewing his lip.

“Here they come,” Ranulf whispered. “They’re in full war gear.”

“I can see that for myself, Ranulf,” said Father. Gunnar noticed him touching the small amulet of Thor he wore on a leather thong round his neck.

The riders thundered through the gateway and up to the longhouse, seven men on powerful, snorting horses. They seemed enormous in the fading light, the setting sun’s rays glinting off their weapons, their shadows reaching out before them. They wore chainmail and helmets with holes for their eyes, and carried spears and round shields. Swords hung from their studded belts.

“I bid you welcome to my farm, Skuli, son of Eyjolf,” Father said when the riders halted. “But I wonder why you’re so far from home on this chill autumn evening, and why you’re armed for war. If it’s bad news you’ve brought, then I’d rather you stepped into the warmth of my hall and told me over supper.”

“You have a good memory, Bjorn, son of Sigurd,” said the leading warrior, jumping off his horse. He removed his helmet and smiled, his teeth white in a bushy black beard. “We met only once, and that was two years ago.”

“How could I forget a face as ugly as yours?” said Father, smiling too.

“You’re calling *me* ugly?” said Skuli. “I’d like to know how a man as ugly as you could have persuaded such a beauty to be his wife. So this is Helga.”

Skuli cast his eyes over Mother, grinning at her, before turning his gaze back to Father. There was a ripple of muttering in the crowd by the longhouse, but Gunnar knew this was the sort of banter men liked to indulge in.

“I took pity on him, of course, daft girl that I was,” said Mother. “Now if you two boys would care to stop playing games, I’d like to go inside and eat.”

“Wit as well as beauty, eh?” said Skuli, laughing. “As it happens, I do have some news for you, Bjorn. And we’d be happy to accept your hospitality.”

The two men shook hands the Viking way,

gripping each other's forearms, and they went in, much to everyone's relief, Skuli and his men leaving their weapons stacked in the porch, as guests should. Mother had the long tables put out and food and drink prepared, and soon the hall was filled with voices and laughter, flames leaping in the hearth. Gunnar sat near Father and Skuli and listened as they talked about many things – including, at last, Skuli's news.

“There's word a band of raiders is sniffing around,” he said. “So I thought I ought to show myself – and warn the local farmers, of course. You have a fine holding. I would hate to see it looted and burned by a bunch of outlaws.”

“That's good of you,” said Father. Gunnar remembered they'd heard plenty of talk about Skuli recently. Their guest was a man with ambitions. He owned several farms, and some said he had fifty warriors at his beck and call. Some also said he had his mind set on becoming a jarl, perhaps even a king.

“Well, you know how it is, my friend,” Skuli said. “I'd like people to think I'm a man who will help



them. Just in case I need help myself some day.”

“Help to do what?” said Father, his eyes fixed on Skuli’s, a slight frown on his face. “You’re the richest and most powerful man in the district.”

“And you’re the most respected. Who knows what I couldn’t do with a man like you by my side? Don’t you want power and wealth too?”

Father smiled at him and shook his head. “I’m happy enough with what I have, and I want no more. I like a quiet life these days.”

“Are you sure?” said Skuli, leaning forward. “I’d hate to think you might oppose me in what I aim to do, Bjorn Sigurdsson.”

“You have nothing to fear from me,” said Father, his voice steady. “So then,” he went on, “what else can you tell me about these raiders?”

Skuli paused, studying Father’s face, or so it seemed to Gunnar. At last Skuli smiled. “Not much more, in truth,” he said.

“Well, thanks for the warning,” said Father. “We’ll post guards from now on. You can never be too careful.”

The conversation moved on, Skuli boasting about great warriors he had known and battles he had fought in. Father said little. Later, as Gunnar lay down to sleep, he went over Skuli's stories in his mind, wondering if he would ever stand shoulder to shoulder with a band of warriors when he was a man.

In the forest, wolves howled and shadows gathered in the darkness.